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Sizzling Desert Blues

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Terakaft

Akh Issudar (World Village, 2008)

The Malian soul is rich and inescapably musical. You'd need no more proof than Terakaft's second offering of Akh Issudar out now on World Village. The mazelike, swirling desert blues offered up by Terakaft on Akh Issudar is a music landscape full of juke joint riffs against rolling, swaybacked rhythms that speak to the very soul of the Tuareg's story, their people and hardships. Pooling a collection of songs where the themes range from the familiar, about love and friendship, to songs dedicated to homeland heroes and the conservationist Pierre Gay to those that call for the people to stand up against oppression, Akh Issudar is a window into these extraordinary musicians.

Terakaft, the band's name meaning 'the caravan' in Tamashek, was founded by guitarist and vocalist Kedou Ag Ossad, also known as "Khiwaj" or "The Giant," and guitarist, vocalist and bassist Liya Ag Ablil, aka Diara. Both had been members of the famed desert blues group Tinariwen. Joined by guitarist and vocalist Rhissa Ag Ogham, who is also a painter, and bassist, guitarist and vocalist Sanou Ag Ahmed, Terakaft have become the sound that is the desert blues.

Terakaft burst onto the music scene in a live debut performance at the 2007 Festival in the Desert in Essakane, Mali. They followed up with their first recording Bismilla and European tour. Now with their second recording, the group is expanding the impossibly rich Touareg blues sound.

Opening with title track "Akh Issudar," Terakaft kicks into action with sustained vocal lines and sparking guitar licks. Falling into a plodding rhythm, reminiscent of a camel crossing the sands, this track is ripe with the group's hotly potent vocals. "Ténéré Wer Tat Zincheh" revels in smoking Mississippi blues guitar licks, punctuated by world-weary vocals, resulting in sound that makes one wonder if someone plunked down a juke joint in the middle of the desert.

The sizzling African guitar groove "Intidgagen" falls easily under the spell of plaintive lead vocals with backup vocals darker than deeply steeped tea. The faraway sound of echoing, overlaid guitar lines and rough vocals of "Soubhanallah" feels like looking out on a disappearing landscape, and when the song ends it's as if the musicians disappeared over the horizon. Other standout tracks include the loping rhythms on "Amidinine Wa Dagh Nohar Timtar," a song about friendship, and the kaleidoscope of guitar colors on "Amdagh," a song dedicated to the French zoo director Pierre Gay who has made it his mission to preserve the remaining giraffes of Niger and the wild sheep of the Adrar Mountains.

The campfire trance feel of "Iswegh Atay" is utterly hypnotic, but it is Terakaft's closing track "Tahra A Issasanane" about the pains of love that is perhaps the most touching with lacy guitar and self-reflective quality to the vocals.

The music of Terakaft's Akh Issudar feels familiar and yet remains almost impossible to classify. The term 'desert blues' doesn't quite cover the depth of groups like Terakaft, and I suppose that's okay because this music must be experienced firsthand. The edgy guitar riffs along with the revolving rhythms and the ebb and flow of Terakaft's vocals make this music uniquely captivating and richly rewarding. The caravan is ready and waiting to take you for a wild ride.

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