

# MUSIC

## Sand storms

Tinariwen's powerful desert blues revisits NYC **By Mike Wolf**



**BEEH THROUGH THE DESERT** Tinariwen's haunting music reflects the African roots of American blues and rock.

>Welcome to the desert," said the face wrapped in the turban, though little was visible other than an enormous smile. At first, the greeting from Abdallah (a.k.a. Alhousseini Abdoulahi), one of the vocalists of Mali-based band Tinariwen, seemed like a concise way to introduce his group to its first American audience, at Joe's Pub last October. When he repeated the same words after each song, grinning ever more widely, it became clear that "welcome to the desert" was the extent of his English. But if music isn't quite a universal language, it did the job that night: The joy of the six singers, guitarists and percussionists; the dusty allure of their music; and the warmth of the audience converged into perhaps the most memorable local concert of 2004.

"There was much that I wanted to say then," Abdallah relates in heavily accented French through an interpreter. "I can't come up with any of it now—onstage, things just come into my head unpredictably." If he was overexcited that night, it would be understandable; New York is a long way from Kidal, the group's base, situated where Mali's northeastern mountains meet the

sub-Saharan expanse. But the journey of Tinariwen's nomadic people, the Tuareg, has been longer.

As with many stories of African conflict, the Tuareg's struggle with authority, most recently the Malian government, stretches back hundreds of years. And in this case, the temptation to exoticize their tale is great. (Note Volkswagen's recent co-opting of the tribal name for an SUV, of all things.) It was the late '70s when Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, the band's principal songwriter, met two other exiled Tuareg men in Tamanrasset, a southern Algerian oasis, and the three started playing music together to pass the hours. By the time Ibrahim first picked up a borrowed electric guitar there, the influences working on him were

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legion—a mix of North African styles, traditional Tuareg music, the burgeoning legend of Ali Farka Toure. In addition, cassettes of Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix had been finding their way into the hands of the roaming Tuareg, who were displaced by years of war and drought.

From the mid-'80s until 1996, when their people made peace with the government with a ritual burning of arms in Timbuktu, the members of Tinariwen carried guns over one shoulder and instruments over the other. "For sure," Abdallah says, "guitar culture can raise awareness on a global scale better than arms."

Armed rebellion by musical nomads in the desert: Maybe there's no need to embellish this story. Besides, it isn't what's exotic about the group that makes it so magical, but rather what is familiar. Foreign as its experiences are, Tinariwen's music—bound to its land and to a life defined by suffering and survival—is recognizable as the blues. The connection isn't lost on the musicians. "When we hear American blues, it evokes the traditional music of our area," Abdallah says. "You can feel its African roots; that link with where we come from is strong."

But even after peace came, it took a few years for these links to be revealed to the world at large. A meeting with the French globalist band Lo'Jo in Bamako, Mali's capital, in 1998 resulted in a brief Tinariwen tour of France in '99. That prompted Lo'Jo's manager to suggest a music festival in the desert, which took place in 2001 near Kidal and resulted in the recording of Tinariwen's first album, *The Radio Tisdas Sessions*. A second and somehow more assured disc, *Amassakoul* (on World Village, like its predecessor), followed in 2003. But Abdallah says this relative fame hasn't changed the musicians' lives—simply that life in the desert has changed, with far less nomadism and more Tuareg finding work in towns and cities. As the region wilts under another drought, not to mention an invasion of locusts, some of this evolution can be viewed positively. "Change is always good and bad, never just one," Abdallah says. "Now our communi-

**Tinariwen plays the World Financial Center Plaza Tuesday 19 and Joe's Pub Wednesday 20.**

## Top live shows

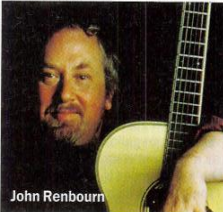
**John Renbourn and Jacqui McShee**  
Satalla; Thu 14

**Waterson:Carthy**  
Satalla; Thu 14

These back-to-back gigs gather leading lights of the British folk scene (though with separate admissions), who share an uncanny ability to enliven centuries-old musical traditions.

Guitarist John Renbourn and singer Jacqui McShee were cofounders of eclectic '60s fusionists the Pentangle, whose graceful melding of the ancient and the modern found favor with rock fans on both sides of the Atlantic. Renbourn has maintained a prolific solo career, with his sublime fingerpicking and a knack for integrating jazz elements and Eastern influences. McShee has lately applied her bell-clear vocals to an in-name-only Pentangle lineup, while reuniting with Renbourn for acoustic duo gigs. Both remain skillful, ingratiating performers, drawing upon a formidable repertoire as well as a long-standing musical rapport.

Waterson:Carthy teams singer-guitarist Martin Carthy, a towering figure in the U.K. folk revival, with wife Norma Waterson, one of Britain's finest traditional vocalists, and their singer-violinist daughter, Eliza Carthy. The elder Carthy emerged in the early '60s as one of England's foremost interpreters of traditional material. In the early '70s, he experienced rock stardom (of a sort) as a member of Steeleye Span, before joining Norma in her seminal family combo, the Watsons. Eliza, whose distinctive folk-pop blend has won her substantial solo success, adds a youthful edge to the trio's emotion-charged interpretations, making this rare local appearance a significant event.—*Scott Schinder*



John Renbourn

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