



"I'm feeling relaxed, but I'm intimidated, too," Vieux Farka Toure says of his US welcome. (Scott Lewis for the Boston Globe)

## His musical inheritance

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### The son of a guitar legend, Vieux Farka Touré is drawing attention as he comes into his own

By Siddhartha Mitter, Globe Correspondent | February 23, 2007

NEW YORK -- It isn't customary for a 25-year-old West African musician with just one brand-new album to his name to make his American debut before a sold-out house including his nation's ambassador, record label executives, and Harry Belafonte.

But the tall young man in the grand silver-blue traditional robe wielding the black electric guitar at the downtown venue Joe's Pub earlier this month is no ordinary first-timer. He is Vieux Farka Touré, son and musical heir to Ali Farka Touré, the peerless Malian "desert blues" guitarist who died of cancer last March. And his lineage, validated by a nearly flawless first album, makes his maiden North American tour, which comes to Johnny D's in Davis Square Thursday, a major event on the world-music circuit this year.

It would be artificial to consider Vieux -- as everyone calls him -- in isolation from his father, one of the great icons of 20th-century music, in whose haunting, sinewy style many find the clearest evidence of the African origins of the blues. Yet although he inherits from the elder Touré technique, material, and even that black guitar, Vieux plays with less austerity and more of an age-appropriate energy and appetite for experimentation, abetted in this by his American producer, bassist, and buddy Eric Herman.

The two tell the story during a Sunday afternoon visit to the house in Queens that the group has turned into tour headquarters, strewn with suitcases, musical instruments, and boxes of promotional gear. The informal setting -- the scheduled interview time found folks in the kitchen, Vieux browning cubes of beef for a stew, Herman building a turkey sandwich, and percussionist Seckou Touré (no relation) badly overcooking a pot of rice -- suits the affectionate, joshing vibe that prevails in particular between Vieux and Herman, who speaks French with impeccable West African accent and colloquialisms.

Paradoxically, despite Vieux's august musical origins, it took the arrival of Herman, first in 2003 as an exchange student from Wesleyan University, and later as a fledgling record producer, to launch him as a recording artist. Until then, Vieux still thought of himself as a student and a novice.

Ali Farka Touré had originally opposed his son's becoming a musician, wishing for him a more stable career (he suggested the military). When Vieux persisted, the elder Touré allowed him to enroll at Mali's National Arts Institute, and at the same time entrusted him for career and personal guidance to Toumani Diabaté, the kora maestro and Ali Farka's dear friend.

When Herman, who had returned to Mali with plans to produce a compilation of local artists, heard how far his friend's

playing had progressed, he suggested it was time for Vieux to stop holding back. The challenge came to Vieux as something of a revelation.

"I was thinking, he really wants us to work together," Vieux says. "And at that time I didn't really have confidence in myself. I wasn't mature, I was still in school, I hadn't yet thought to do a record. So it was a surprise for me."

"And Toumani at that point wasn't even aware of how good you were," Herman says.

"He knew I played, but not like that," Vieux says. "Because I'm a guy who doesn't like to stand out. It's not my way of being. So until then nobody had seen my real talent. I used to hide." But when Herman asked him to record a sample to bring back to the United States and shop around, Vieux says, "I was forced to really put my talent into it and show who I was. And when he played that for Toumani, Toumani was surprised."

They laugh, imitating Diabaté's stunned reaction on hearing Vieux on tape.

"Toumani said, 'I didn't know Vieux in this way!,'" Vieux says. "He said to me, 'I heard something today, was that you? Here, take my guitar and play something.' And even then I took the guitar but I held back. I just didn't want to play in front of them."

Still, the secret was out. And it was around this time as well, Vieux says, with a record project now clearly coming together, that his father finally opened himself fully to him.

"That's when my father said to me that I was ready," Vieux says. "And that was a big encouragement. Because before he would say nothing, show nothing. But when he saw it was really getting serious, that's when we started playing together. He started teaching me things. I think if it wasn't for this project, he wouldn't have done it."

Events moved quickly from that point. For by the time the group was assembled and ready to record, Ali Farka Touré had been diagnosed with terminal bone cancer and was fading. The two songs on Vieux's album that feature the elder Touré, father and son trading resplendent guitar lines, constitute Ali Farka Touré's last recordings.

"I knew what was wrong with him and how he could go at any moment," Vieux says. "So every day I'd come and spend time with him, run his errands, talk to him. We'd usually talk at night, before going to bed. He'd show me certain things about life, about music, everything. Directives and advice. And that's how today, thank God -- I'm just a kid, but I know all the things that he told me. So I have all that in order to stay on the right path."

The death of his father has placed on Vieux a new set of responsibilities. In Niafunké, the family's village on the confines of the Sahara Desert, near the medieval city of Timbuktu, Ali Farka Touré helped support many kinfolk who now look to Vieux and his siblings for assistance. Whenever he goes there to see his mother, he says, people are waiting for him.

At the same time, he sounds much like his father when he says he sees no reason to live elsewhere than Mali -- the only choice being whether to base himself in Bamako or Niafunké. (Right now Bamako has his favor because of easier Internet access.)

"There are a lot of artists who leave Mali as soon as they have a little success," Vieux says. "And then they go and sit somewhere overseas, and they start to lose their style. Other music influences them and they begin to lose their own. I can say today, I'm going to base myself in New York. Who can stop me, if I get the visa? But what would be the point? I'd rather stay there, be with my family, and hold onto my cultural heritage."

It's easy to picture Vieux, especially when he slings on an acoustic guitar and plays solo, as an African elder 50 years from now, perhaps the mayor of Niafunké as his father was, with a half-century of musical and spiritual maturation behind him.

But these are early days in Vieux Farka Touré's career, and for now he is just a young guy with a new album and some music to play. For now, his record label is Herman's upstart, activism-minded Modiba Productions, not one of the powerhouse majors. For now, he's weaving reggae, rock, and blues into his tunes, not hewing to the orthodoxy of cultural preservation.

"I'm feeling relaxed, but I'm intimidated, too," he says of the buzz that has greeted him. "Because there are so many musicians who never came out -- in Mali, in Africa -- who never left Africa. And these are people who started playing long before me. So I know that I am lucky."

Vieux Farka Touré is counting his blessings. The future can wait. ■