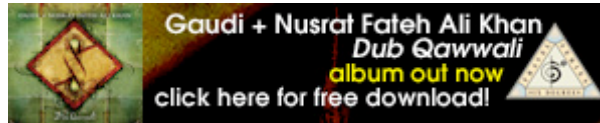


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Vieux Farka Touré

By [Derek Beres](#)[Print Page](#)[E-mail to Friend](#)[E-mail to Editor](#)

Published

September 19, 2007

Vieux Farka Touré's smile lit up a darkened Joe's Pub. Candles were still unlit, and the stage lights remained dull as his backing musicians scampered about the stage, checking cables, strumming chords, hitting a snare. Touré was gazing upward. But when he spotted me, he was quick to offer an embrace, a gesture of old friendship even though we'd only met once before. This attitude seems to extend into every aspect of his being.

When the performance began, a gold spotlight flashed on the stage, turning the musicians into bronze Egyptian warriors. The atmosphere in the room turned eerily mythic as the sound of Touré's electric guitar punctured the silence. The crowd exploded. They knew this song it had broken his father, the legendary Ali Farka Touré, through to Western audiences. And on this New York City night, on the son's first American tour, everyone reminisced, hearing the father's sounds and textures in every second of "Ai Du," played through the fingers and voice of Vieux Farka Touré.

Ali did not want Vieux to be a musician. He dreamed his son would enter the military and emerge in business attire. When Vieux left the family's home in Niafunke to attend the National Arts Institute in Bamako, his father was livid. Only with the prodding of friends such as Afel Boucum, who had been playing with Ali since age 13, and kora legend Toumani Diabate, did Ali realize the industry—with which he'd struggled for years before American guitarist Ry Cooder lent a hand—might treat his son differently. As Ali lay sick with bone cancer in early 2006, an illness that would take his life on March 7, he listened to rough recordings of what would become Vieux Farka Touré. He played it over and over again. "It is very competitive in Mali," said Vieux backstage. "There's so many great artists, and everyone wants to get the most international celebrity. There were a lot of undercurrents of competition at the Institute."



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Still, Vieux had an obvious edge. If his father's genes had made it to his fingers, and into his vocal cords, there would be no stopping the man. But almost as if he wants to inherit his father's nickname, Farka—which means “donkey”—Vieux wears stubbornness as a badge of honor. He began his musical life caressing a calabash and pounding the drum kit, and was heard to dismiss the instrument of his father, saying “everyone in Mali plays guitar.”

Perhaps there's a bit of the soldier in his blood, too, as his poetic spirit is channeled into social responsibility. “Music, for Africa and the world in general, is about transmitting wisdom and finding a medium to communicate,” says Touré. “Unless you're making pop music with trash lyrics, it is a vehicle to share yourself with. It's my responsibility to transmit the wisdom that has been passed to me by my elders. It's important to speak out about global issues, as well as personal issues, like how to respect each other. It's important that we speak out on things like the war in Iraq. Even though I am not from there, we need to let the world know it's not right.” Ten percent of all album sales will buy mosquito nets for a malaria-stricken Niafunke, a plan the label devised upon Vieux's insistence. This is the role of the poet, to understand global concepts and apply them to current situations.

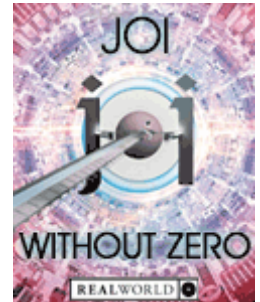
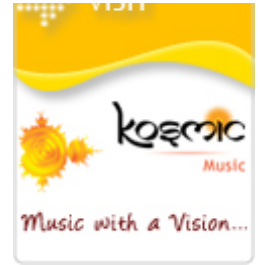
The connection between Mali, an expansive desert land bordering the Sahara, and America's soulful homeland hugging the Mississippi was made long ago by blues musicians. And the blues is about jumping inside and tearing apart every organ to see how each functions, and then putting them together anew. While the head may remember scales, this music is all about heart.

And that's something that jumps from all 50 minutes of his debut. His two collaborations with his father, the gorgeous instrumental “Tabara” and the calabash-driven “Diallo,” have a timeless quality. Joining on two other tracks is Diabate, whose collaboration with Ali, In The Heart Of The Moon, won last year's Grammy for Best World Music Album. “Toure De Niafunke” is tranquil and restful, but the closing nine-minute “Diabate” will bring tears to your eyes. The minimal play of acoustic guitar and kora invokes maximum feeling.

This is the tradition from which Vieux arises the other six tracks showcase his own, new sound. He doesn't disown his training, but enhances it in a way few others have done. (His tutor, Afel Bocoum, recorded Mali Music in 2002 with Gorillaz/Blur frontman Damon Albarn.) A tinge of reggae adds sparkle to “Ana,” the first single, while a flurry of calabash dominates “Sangare” and “Ma Hine Cocore,” a crowd favorite in his live shows.

Full disclosure: I was given a copy of Touré's self-titled debut CD last fall, and asked to compile a remix album. Drawn in by the passion channeled through the sparse instrumentation, I convened a group of DJs that included names famous on these pages, such as Cheb I Sabbah, Karsh Kale, Nickodemus and Yossi Fine. The resulting album, UFOs Over Bamako: Vieux Remixed will be released in May on the Modiba label. The team at Modiba, including business mastermind Jesse Brenner and producer/musician Eric Herman, was nervous about Touré's reaction to the electronic reworkings of his songs. There are clubs in Bamako, but he doesn't frequent them. So instead of letting him hear them on an office or home stereo, they waited until the first night of his American tour, where remixers were assembled to perform alongside Vieux in what turned out to be a hugely successful party at New York's Pacha nightclub.

As the crew traveled the Northeast and Canada for the following three weeks, most everyone grew tired of the remixes, except one man. And for that reason they continued to be played in the van. Vieux couldn't get enough, listening to the long history of Malian soul being renewed and revitalized for modern ears. Standing at the crossroads of past and future,



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