

The next generation

Vieux Farka Touré's famous father was always going to open doors for him, but the young Malian guitarist already had the key, as **PHIL MEADLEY** discovers with the musician's self-titled, debut album

It must be tough being the son or daughter of a famous musician, especially when you aspire to follow in their footsteps. Unfortunately for Vieux Farka Touré, he's the son of the late, great Ali Farka Touré, a veritable guitar hero of Malian desert blues music (and mayor of his home town, Niafunké), who died recently from cancer. But fortunately for him, he's a promising musician in his own right and has been creating quite a buzz with his self-titled, debut album.

When Ali Farka Touré passed away, he was fiercely proud of his 25-year-old son (one of 11 siblings), but it wasn't always the case. After many wrangles with record labels, Farka Touré senior had developed a huge distrust of the music business. It wasn't until he joined up with Nick Gold's World Circuit label that he felt he'd got a just deal, and so when his son showed signs of early musical talent (playing drums and calabash) he was understandably concerned, and tried to dissuade him.

"It was difficult," says Farka Touré, "but I persisted with my music cautiously and quietly, and eventually my father was convinced that my desires and passion were greater than his worries about my following him into that world."

He makes it sound like a relatively easy ride, but in reality his father was determined that he would join the Malian army. But he balked at the idea and openly defied his father's wishes, eventually heading off to Bamako to attend the prestigious National Institute of the Arts (INA).

Farka Touré started playing drums in his teens, joining Afel Bocoum and the rest of his father's musicians in Niafunké. "Afel would bring me along to their sessions," he says. "I was too shy to pick up the guitar (now his preferred choice of instrument), as my father cast an enormous shadow and I didn't want to fail to live up to him. But the guitar was always my secret desire."

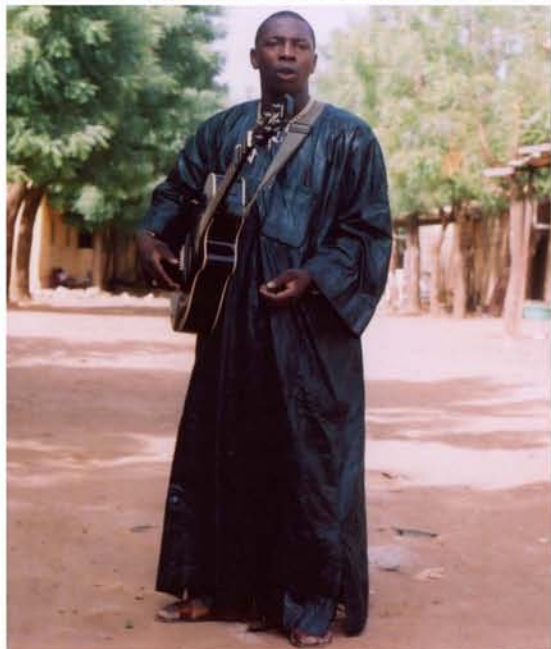
The son of Fatoumata, Ali Farka Touré's second wife, he was brought up by his uncle in a town called Yuwaru, near Mopti on the banks of the Niger river. "I was there until I was nine, so I only saw my parents a few times a year until I was a teenager," he says, explaining that he was deeply in love with music at a very early age, but didn't start playing until he moved back to Niafunké with his parents.

His move to Bamako to study guitar at the INA proved pivotal. "It's the best place to get an overall education as a young musician," he says. "Nowadays, there is also the conservatory [where Toumani Diabaté teaches] where you can get a doctorate in music. The application for INA was difficult because you needed to demonstrate that you had the skills and the brains to advance as a professional musician."

It was here that he ran into North American musician Eric Herman, who now runs Modiba Productions, Vieux's label. "We actually met at my compound in Bamako, but we ran into each other at INA too," Vieux says. "We began playing music together and became friends immediately."

Herman says: "Vieux is one of the few examples of sons of legendary musicians who actually inherited the necessary magic to follow in his father's wake. He's an enormous talent on the guitar, his vocals are crisp and haunting, his song-writing is natural, gorgeous and original, and he has a dynamite stage presence and charisma. Of course, the fact that he's Ali's son has opened a great many doors for him, but I am confident he would have opened them on his own if he'd had to."

But it wasn't all plain sailing at the institute. "Everyone knew my father was Ali Farka Touré, and would talk about it. It was difficult because there was a lot of jealousy from other students."



He'd got to know internationally acclaimed kora player Diabaté around the time he became his father's griot (teacher). Diabaté encouraged the young Farka Touré to pursue his musical goals, and agreed to play on his debut album, but Farka Touré was given by the astute, worldly wise musician, saying that it's between himself and Diabaté. But such is the bond between the two that the song "Diabaté" is dedicated to him and his entire family.

Aside from his father, he cites other guitar heroes as Afel Bocoum, Kar Kar (Boubacar Traoré), Amadou Bagayoko, B B King and Jimi Hendrix. The latter two's influence is most noticeable on the funky, blues tinged "Courage", featuring Issa Bamba – a song about the positive attributes of Malians.

Walking in his footsteps: Vieux Farka Touré (above) and his father Ali

Farka Touré wrote all the lyrics on the album, and says that it is a discipline that comes naturally to him. "I never struggle to write lyrics," he says. "Either they come out or they don't. If they don't, I just move on to another song." He goes on to point out that he likes to pass on the wisdom he's learnt from his elders through his songs. "I am mostly concerned with continuing the work my father started; to spread the wisdom of our culture throughout the world and also give back to my home town and country at large," he says. "Many people in Niafunké now look to me for the help my father used to provide for them, and I won't let them down."

Ali Farka Touré died last year while the album was still in production, although he was able to hear some of the final tracks, and all of the rough mix. "He would listen to the rough mix often and was very pleased with it," says his son. "He would often play it to his friends and boast." He also appears on two tracks, playing lead guitar on "Tabara" and "Diallo". "These are the only recordings he and I played on together," Farka Touré says. "I'm immensely proud of them and love listening to them. They inspire me to continue to work towards walking the path he forged."

The album was recorded at Studio Bogolan in Bamako, by Yves Wernert, an award-winning French producer/engineer who's best known for his work with Issa Bagayogo. "He's a terrific engineer; a real magician," says Farka Touré.

The resulting album is a timeless piece of work that is sure to end up on many critics' end-of-year polls. It subtly bridges the gap between old and new, adding hints of reggae and rock, but always maintaining a profoundly Malian feel. "My music differs from my father's work only because we are of different generations," Farka Touré says. "I am just expressing myself in the same way he did."

Ten per cent of the album's proceeds go to Bée Sago, a Unicef-affiliated organisation that's attempting to fight malaria in Niafunké. "It's the most important aspect of what I'm doing," says Farka Touré. "I am doing this for my people and my father's legacy... and, of course, because I love to do it, and can't imagine doing anything else."