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World music

# Ali Farka Touré/Toumani Diabaté

★★★★★ Barbican, London

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**Robin Denselow**  
**Saturday July 2, 2005**  
[The Guardian](#)

This was a historic event that almost lived up to the very high expectations riding on it. Ali Farka Touré, the guitarist famed for popularising the ancient, blues-like styles of northern Mali, was back on stage five years after announcing that he had given up performing. What's more, he was accompanied for the first time by the kora player Toumani Diabaté, the greatest exponent of the African classical harp.

This week, the duo release an album of gently virtuoso duets, *In the Heart of the Moon*. Tonight, though, they were not interested in merely repeating the experience. These are musicians who improvise and never rehearse; every time they come together, something different will happen.

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The show started with a classic performance by Ali Farka Touré. A majestic figure in his dark hat and robes, he played languid, stately and rhythmic phrases on the electric guitar, backed by two percussionists, an electric bass, a second guitar and the quite extraordinary ngoni work of Basekou Kouyaté, who coaxed subtle and stirring solos from the tiny West African harp. Touré was enjoying himself. He spoke emotionally and at length (in French) and broke off from the slinky blues-like licks for fine stuttering guitar solos.

The second half promised to be even more spectacular, as he reappeared accompanied only by Diabaté. They started with the traditional Kaira, played more aggressively than on the album, with Touré providing simple acoustic guitar lines against which Diabaté could demonstrate his effortless and at times unbelievably rapid-fire kora work.

So far, so brilliant, but after a couple of songs they were joined by Touré's rhythm section, now sounding too heavy-handed. And Diabaté left the stage after an unexpectedly brief appearance.

Touré continued with a strong acoustic set, ending with a virtuoso display on the desert fiddle, the njarka. When he and Diabaté came together again for an encore, they called for Baaba Maal, who was not actually present. Unflustered, they launched into an improvised acoustic duet, which turned out to be one of the finest instrumentals of a memorable night.

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