

# Showtime in the Sahara

When six fans of West African music, including Jimmy Buffett and Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, head for Timbuktu, in Mali, anything can happen: an impromptu reunion of the Super Rail Band; a Buffett duet with top female star Oumou Sangare; a mind-blowing festival in the middle of the Sahara, capped by the revolutionary band Tinariwen. One of the posse, former MTV chairman TOM FRESTON, offers his travelogue from a land where the electric guitar helped power a democratic rebellion

## BEYOND TIMBUKTU

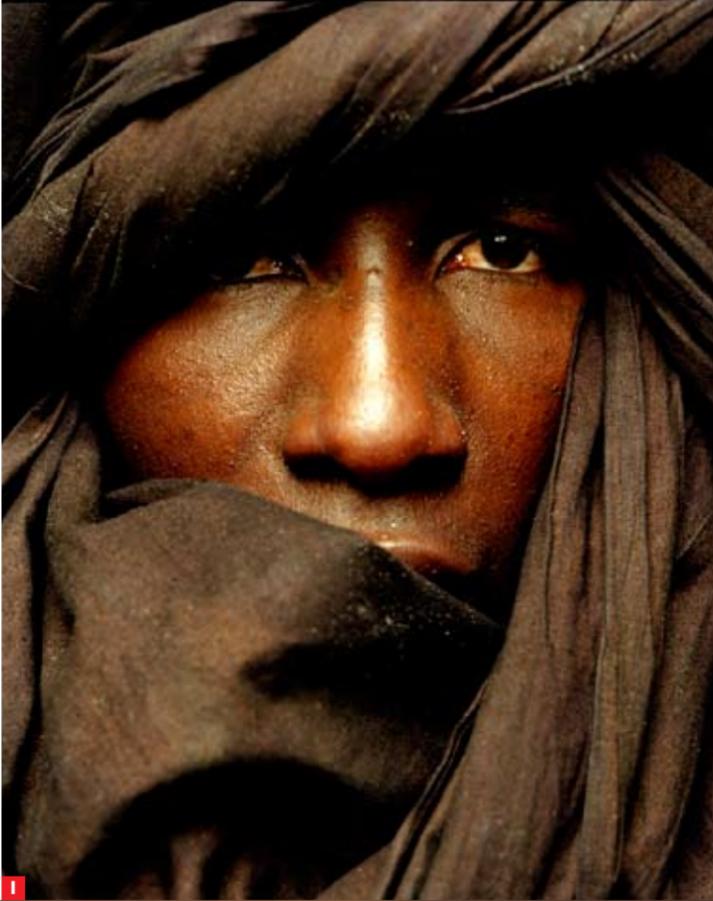
The guitarist Habib Koite at an oasis called Essakane, in Mali, a longtime meeting place for Tuareg tribespeople—and the site of the three-day Festival in the Desert, the great annual showcase of West African music.

Monday  
TO BAMAKO

**T**he city of Dakar lies at the westernmost tip of Africa, on the big continental bulge that juts out to the left on the map. We flew over it at night, on a flight from the Cape Verde Islands. The city was ablaze with lights, and then—wham!—it was total darkness out the window for the next two hours, until we hit Bamako, the capital of Mali, and our destination.

We are six friends looking to check out Mali's renowned music scene. Over the years we've all been captivated by West African music. We'll be in Bamako a few days, and then off to Timbuktu, in the North, and ultimately beyond Timbuktu and into the Sahara for the Festival in the Desert. It's often called the "world's most remote music festival," a claim that should hold up.

Who's "we"? We are: Chris Blackwell, a Jamaican and the founder of Island Records (Bob Marley, U2, Cat Stevens, and many African artists). Chris is traveling lighter than any man I've ever seen—flip-flops, African-print cotton clothes, and what is basically a purse. He



DESERT BLUES

(1) Face in the crowd: a man from the Bella tribe at the festival. (2) A large portion of the audience, mostly Tuareg tribespeople, arrive at Essakane by camel. (3) The musician Adama Yalomba, famous for his flips from a standing position. (4) The main stage at the oasis. (5) The musician Baba Salah in Bamako, Mali, on the street where he lives.



The level of musicianship in Mali is extraordinary. Music comes at you from every angle.



has no visas and seems to just talk his way into countries. There is Jimmy Buffett, troubadour of the Caribbean, accomplished traveler, and aficionado of all things tropical. He's got a G.P.S. device, a bag filled with walkie-talkies, and a guitar. There's Kino Bachelier, from the French West Indies, a doctor on St. Barth's until he met Jimmy there in the 1970s. That put an end to the doctoring. He has toured with Jimmy now for almost 30 years. There's Bill Flanagan, a writer, novelist, editor, executive at MTV Networks, and commentator on all things musical for CBS. You will not find a man more knowledgeable about popular music. And, finally, there is Jonathan Brandstein, from Los Angeles, an adventurous manager of comedians and a world-music nut. He has been to Mali before.

Music is easily Mali's most famous export. The level of musicianship here is extraordinary—there's even a traditional musician class known as griots. Throughout Africa, music holds this incredible power; in a place where life can be hard, it is one of the greatest joys. A visitor quickly notices that music comes at you



## Echoes of Africa

YOUSSEU N'DOUR'S PERSONAL PLAYLIST

Youssou N'Dour, 47, a native of Senegal, shot to world-music superstardom in the 1980s, boosted by a soaring voice, a signature "Afro-pop" sound, and a collaboration with Peter Gabriel. For *Vanity Fair*, N'Dour compiled this guide

- "LI MA WEESU," BY YOUSSEU N'DOUR.** This song is about the mirror of memory.
- "SENEGAL FAST FOOD," BY AMADOU & MARIAM.** The "blind couple of Mali" serves up a slice of life in Dakar (Senegal's capital), where a certain frenetic street energy can make New York or Los Angeles seem sedate.
- "SAVANE," BY ALI FARKA TOURÉ.** No one was more responsible than Ali Farka for making clear the links between West African roots music and its New World progeny (blues, jazz, and rock).
- "JIIN MA JIIN MA," BY ORCHESTRA BAOBAB.** It represents the round-trip through which Afro-Cuban music returned to our shores. Orchestra Baobab inspired me very much when I was a teenager.
- "AFRICA CHALLENGE," BY TOUMANI DIABATE'S SYMMETRIC ORCHESTRA.** An African groove from this master of the kora (the African harp)!
- "SAA MAGNI," BY OUMOU SANGARE.** The Malian queen of the Wassoulou sound introduced a strong woman's social and political perspective to our music.
- "CHET BOGHASSA," BY TINARIWEN.** Africa has a knack for coming up with things profoundly new. What else to say about this marriage of the electric guitar with the deep desert by these Tuareg soul rebels?
- "M'BIFO," BY ROKIA TRAORÉ.** Traoré gracefully transforms her modernist spirit and ideals into a vehicle for hope, connection, and community.
- "SOU," BY CHEIKH LÔ.** *Mbalax's* gentlest poet spins another winning moral tale from his Baye Fall Sufi heart. He is representative of the unique Senegalese religious ethos.
- "INIAGIGE," BY SALIF KEITA.** Through Salif, our epic identities breathe in all the world's capitals. *Amul moroom:* There is no one like him.
- "MIYAABELE," BY BAABA MAAL.** Graceful, pure, thoughtful, committed, learned—Baaba Maal is a kind of glue for our diverse musical cultures.
- "JAMAN MORO," BY AFEL BOCOUM.** Nick Gold at World Circuit Records has unveiled another genius and a worthy heir to Ali Farka Touré.
- "SIGUI," BY DJELIMADY TOUNKARA.** Comfort music: this tranquil offering is a balm for my soul from the guitarist of the original, great Super Rail Band, of Bamako (Mali's capital).
- "DEBE," BY ALI FARKA TOURÉ AND TOUMANI DIABATE.** Heavenly melodies played by divinely inspired hands. Any commentary would be superfluous.
- "ALLAH," BY YOUSSEU N'DOUR.** "He laid forgiveness onto your wrongs and covered you with His favors." Religion is not meant to be sad, or morose. It is meant to be joyous, and connected to human promise.

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from every angle, like some exotic mix tape. Mali and Senegal are perhaps the two leading places to go for West African music, but it comes in many variations. The good news is that they're all good. There is the hypnotic "desert blues" sound from the North, exemplified best by Ali Farka Touré, who died last year. There are the more danceable and rhythmic sounds of the South: Salif Keita and Amadou & Mariam are names you might recognize. You've heard this music. Snatches of it are in movie soundtracks and TV commercials. Western artists such as Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder and Robert Plant have done collaborations with African artists that have sold well.

Our plan is pretty loose; nothing is really set. We clear immigration and customs (Chris gets a visa), and head off to town. It's 10 P.M. The streets are quiet, and everything seems engulfed in smoke. We cross a long bridge over the Niger River and roll up to our hotel, the Kempinski El Farouk. It's right on the river and, as it should in a former French colony, has a decent wine list.

### Tuesday ON A ROLL

**B**amako is low-rise and a bit gritty—nothing fancy here as, say, in Dakar. Many streets are jammed with traffic. I see a lot of vans and mini-buses with the doors taken off. The women wear bright, wonderfully mismatched blouse, skirt, and head-wrap combinations. The men wear caps and caftan-like garments called *boubous*. Lots of T-shirts too. Nike's "Just Do It" seems to be a big seller. Every other person is on a cell phone, or buying or selling one.

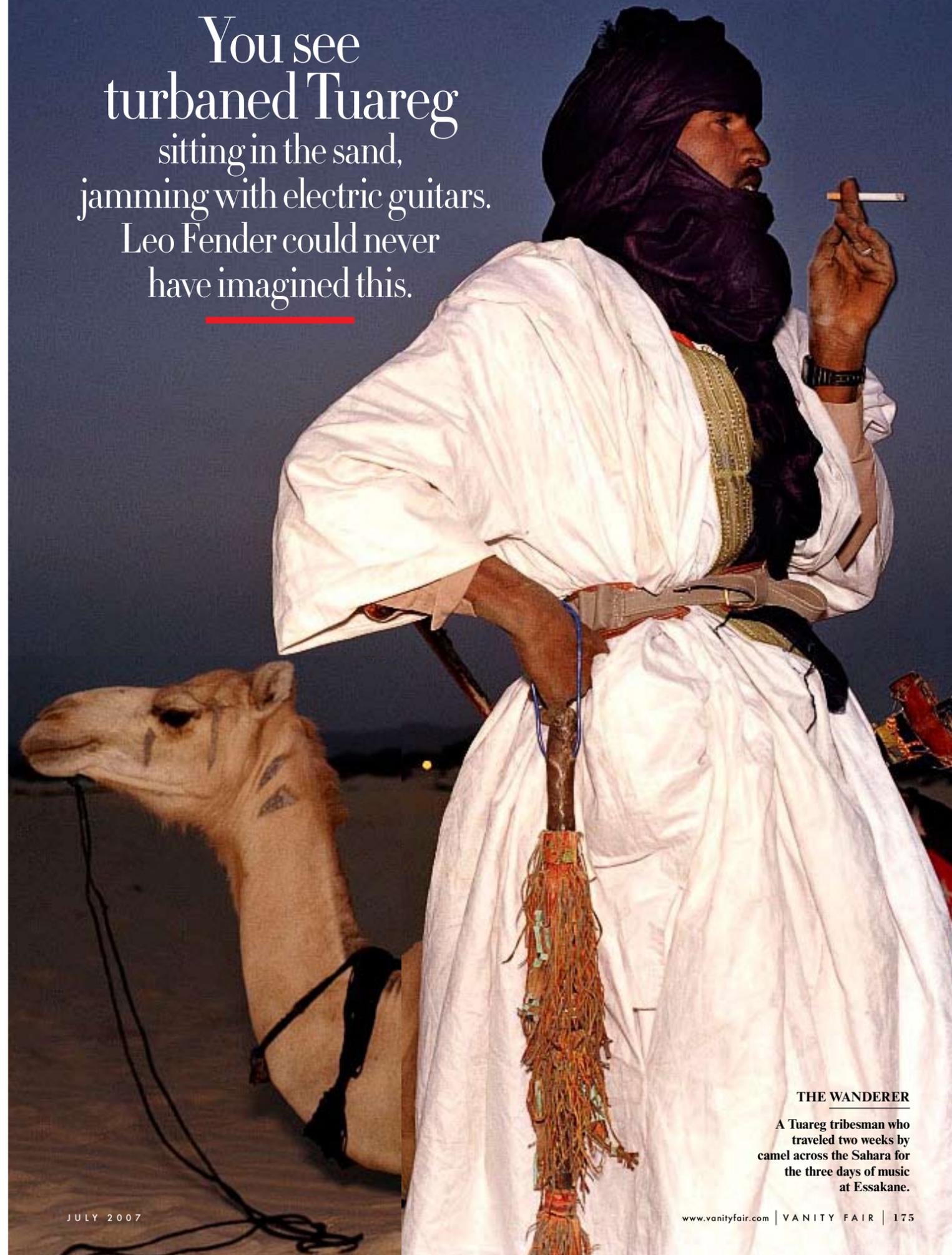
I wanted to see the famous railroad station, built by the French. The hotel right next to it, the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, was the venue for the music scene that exploded in Mali after independence, in 1960. The hotel had a bar and a club on an outdoor terrace. There was a small stage, and back then lanterns were hung across the dance floor. The Buffet Hotel de la Gare was the Malian version of Max's Kansas City.

In the 70s, Mali's government, like many others in Africa, funded large bands to express the culture and vitality of the new nation. The Super Rail Band, which played at the Buffet Hotel, was one of them. It became the hottest group in the country—Mali's Beatles. Some of its members, such as Salif Keita and Mory Kanté, went on to African superstardom and international fame. The Super Rail Band created a new sound, mixing Afro-Cuban dance rhythms and varieties of traditional Malian music. It was wildly infectious.

Today, it's obvious that the good times have moved on. The place is in serious disrepair. But as we stand outside, imagining what had been, a man approaches us, curious. He is an older fellow, and through him we meet an actual member of the Super Rail Band. We propose a "reunion show" for that night. He says it is possible, and we negotiate a fee and ask him to bring an audience too. We set the show for nine P.M.

On a roll, we decide to try to contact Toumani Diabate, an international star who, at 41, is widely regarded as the world's top kora player. (A kora is a 21-string harp-like instrument that creates a defining African sound.) He was once on Chris's label, and we had heard that he was back in Bamako. Incredibly, he, too, is available, and agrees to play for us with his big-band ensemble, the Symmetric Orchestra. We settle on a *CONTINUED ON PAGE 220*

You see  
turbaned Tuareg  
sitting in the sand,  
jamming with electric guitars.  
Leo Fender could never  
have imagined this.



### THE WANDERER

A Tuareg tribesman who traveled two weeks by camel across the Sahara for the three days of music at Essakane.

a public meeting on land mines,” says Lord Deedes, “and she really knew what she was doing. She wasn’t just a royal observer.”

She wasn’t just a royal anything. That was the beauty of it. Had she lived, losing her H.R.H. might have turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened to her, just as her mother had said. Yes, she was losing most of the perks and protections of the royal cocoon. But the power of her magic touch with the media and the public was some-

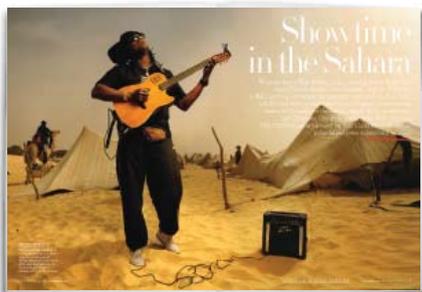
thing no one could take from her. And what she was gaining was freedom—the freedom to act without the constraints and limitations of palace and political bureaucrats, the freedom to embrace causes of her own choosing regardless of their potential for controversy, the freedom to make a difference on things that mattered and to see results.

In Ottawa, Canada, not long after her walk through the minefields, 122 governments agreed on a treaty banning the use of anti-personnel land mines. The Nobel committee

awarded the campaign the Nobel Peace Prize, coupled with the name of the leading American campaigner, Jody Williams. In the House of Commons, during the second reading of the Landmines Bill, in 1998, the British foreign secretary, Robin Cook, paid handsome tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales, for her “immense contribution to bringing home to many of our constituents the human costs of land mines.”

Diana was not there to hear it. She was alone on an island, in her grave at Althorp, the Spencer-family estate. □

## Desert Music Festival



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 000 price, a place (the Hogon Club), and a time (11 p.m.). Word would go out, and the club would be filled. We were now two for two.

Then, to top it off, Jonathan gets a call from Oumou Sangare, Mali’s most popular female singer and its greatest champion of women’s rights—a true diva. Oumou has played Carnegie Hall. As is common here in West Africa, she also runs her own club and hotel, the Hotel Wassoulou. She would “love to see us” later tonight, she says.

At nine p.m. we arrive at the Rail Station. No sign of a band, but an audience has begun to build. To placate the crowd, Jimmy takes out his guitar and does a short acoustic set in the bar. Buffett at the Buffet. Meanwhile, the Rail Band does arrive, sets up, plugs in, and begins to play on the stage outside. There are eight players, including three front men. Some are in bouabous, others in Western clothes. It’s dark, and there are no lights. Jonathan gets a taxi to come into the courtyard, and the band plays to the headlights. Jimmy has the driver put on the blinkers too. “More disco-like,” he says.

They play a spirited set for two hours. Then we duck out for the second show, at the open-air Hogon Club. Toumani (in a black T-shirt) and the maître d’ (in a tuxedo) meet us outside. “Hey, man, where’s Chris?” Toumani asks in an English accent. He is a handsome man, the latest in a line of 70 generations of kora players, and a real virtuoso. The Symmetric Orchestra is ready to go. Toumani sits in the center. There are two electric guitars,

a bass, drums, keyboards, a xylophone-like bafolon, and a wide assortment of percussion instruments. When they kick it off, it’s like being shot from a gun.

Unfortunately, we have to sneak out again. It’s 2:30 A.M. when we arrive at the Hotel Wassoulou, where Oumou Sangare is singing. Oumou came on the music scene back in 1990, at age 21. She hit it big from the start, owing both to her vocal skills and to her ability to generate controversy with lyrics that condemned polygamy and arranged marriages, and pushed for women’s rights. She was the first of a kind in Mali. Tonight, to a packed house and with a killer band, she roves singing among the audience and then implores Jimmy to join her on guitar. A brave man, he takes the stage, and together they knock out a rousing version of Bo Diddley’s “Who Do You Love?”

It’s well after four A.M. when we stumble back to the El Farouk. Chris tells me it’s “the best single night of music” he’s ever had—this from the man who gave us Steve Winwood, Bob Marley, and U2.

### Wednesday THE NORTHERN FRONT

Timbuktu is a place I have always wanted to see. Once, in the early 1970s, I was in the Sahara in southern Morocco and saw a sign: TIMBUKTU—45 DAYS. That was for camel caravans, which ply the Sahara even now. Eons ago the big export from Timbuktu was salt, and the caravans made Timbuktu a wealthy city. In the 1500s it was home to a university and famous mosques.

Timbuktu used to sit on the edge of the desert. Today, with desertification, the sands have passed it by on their journey south. The city is inhabited largely by Tuareg, who are nomadic, very independent, and ethnically different from those who live in southern Mali. There are people in Timbuktu from the Fula and Songhai tribes as well. The Tuareg have risen up regularly—against the French in colonial times and against the Malian government today. There was a bloody rebellion more than a decade ago, with a lot of fighting in Timbuktu itself. It ended in 1996, with promises of better representation for the Tuareg in the government, and more freedom of movement.

Since then it’s been mostly quiet on the northern front. Today, Mali is a functioning Muslim democracy. On some levels, it is a study in success. The country is tolerant, diverse, optimistic, and stable. But it’s also, and very obviously, one of the world’s poorest countries.

From the air Timbuktu looks like a sandcastle village of little brown squares. It’s a grid, dusty brown, and it morphs into the surrounding desert. There’s a new, empty airport terminal, but not another plane in sight. Here the city is spelled “Tombouctou,” which I file away, thinking it might be a good way to introduce myself to people here when the situation merits. Three young Americans, all with military buzz cuts and identical wraparound shades, meet us. Turns out they are looking for Jimmy Buffett. Parrotheads in the Sahara. They tell us they are with “the D.O.D.” I was unsure what that was, and they clarified (“Department of Defense”). We’ll run into them again, but never quite figure out why they’re here. Outside, in the streets of Timbuktu, sand blows continually. My companions and the few other West-erners I see have largely switched to Tuareg turban-like headgear. (I just can’t.) We are here for a dose of Tuareg music—that “desert blues” sound—but this afternoon all the shops are blasting out 50 Cent on the radio. I turn on the small black-and-white television in my hotel and see Sigourney Weaver in an Arabic-dubbed version of *Alien*.

### Thursday to Saturday MIDNIGHT AT THE OASIS

The Festival in the Desert takes place some 70 kilometers to the northwest of Timbuktu. We have a breakfast of bread, water, and Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee (Chris’s stash). Afterward we drive into the desert in three S.U.V.’s in tight formation. There are no roads, just endless braids of tracks in the sand. The ride shakes us to the bone.

After four hours of this we realize we are lost, which is a bit of a disappointment. The guide from Timbuktu has failed. His head hangs down. A nomad materializes, and we ask him, in effect, “Hey, have you seen a festival around here?” And he answers, in effect,

## Desert Music Festival

"Why are you paying this idiot? You should pay me." We did. He hopped on the running board and got us to the festival an hour later.

The festival is at an oasis called Essakane. Clean white sand dunes, a few trees, camels everywhere. Essakane has been a meeting spot for Tuareg tribespeople for many years. The festival, which began in 2001, has been held here for the last five years. It is largely a Tuareg event, and it must be the only festival where a large part of the audience arrives in camel caravans. They come from all over the Sahara, some traveling for weeks.

Tents of many kinds and sizes undulate across the dunes. I observe a makeshift "Bar & Restaurant" and, three dunes away, a concrete stage built into the sand. Here and there you see turbaned Tuareg sitting in the sand, jamming with electric guitars, putting out a raw, bluesy sound through small, battery-powered amplifiers. For security, there's a jeep with a mounted 50-mm. machine gun nearby. Leo Fender could never have imagined this.

There are 45 acts at the festival, representing music from all parts of Mali as well as from neighboring countries. We run into Manny Ansar, the festival organizer and a Tuareg himself, dressed elegantly in a bou-bou, a turban, and shades. The festival is his baby, but it actually represents his second (and nonpaying) job. In his other life he's in charge of "human resources" for an electrical company in Bamako. Manny congratulates us on our bravery for defying the recent U.S. State Department travel advisory warning U.S. citizens to stay away from the festival. Needless to say, we know nothing about this. The advisory cites "banditry, factional rivalry, and car jackings" in this "lawless area." It sounds more like L.A. If you paid attention to all the State Department advisories these days, you'd end up going almost nowhere.

Our tents are simple—a patchwork of animal skins tied to wooden poles and trimmed with decorative tassels, but with no door or flap. I went to sleep one night as a sandstorm raged outside, and awakened to find a foot of sand inside my tent. (Jimmy told me later that he had to zip himself tight into his sleeping bag and breathe through a rolled-up magazine he stuck through a small opening.) My neighbors are "the Libyan Delegation." As Bill and I head to a dining area, we see a group of four men behind my tent holding down goats and slaughtering them one by one. After dinner we hike over the dunes to the stage. It's dark now. Campfires burn everywhere, and camels stand in silhouette atop distant dunes.

The first group we see after coming all this way is . . . a bunch of Americans! They call themselves the Pangea Project, after the hypothetical landmass that the world's seven continents once formed. All students of West African music, the members of the Pangea Project are actually quite good. They turn in an energetic set and gradually win over the locals. Next up is Adam Yalomba. A happy man in a shiny Western suit, he sings lead vocals and plays an electric kora in front of a big band. The audience is on its feet for him. At one point he drops his kora, performs some Motown-style dance steps, then does a full-front flip from a standing position—a real showstopper.

**T**he festival goes on for two more days. The highlights include a tribute to Ali Farka Toure, Mali's biggest star ever, featuring an impressive list of artists, Oumou Sangare and Toumani Diabate among them. An electric-guitarist from Bamako, Baba Salah, who is called "the Jimi Hendrix of Africa," blows the house down. The festival closes with a rousing set from the group Tinariwen.

Tinariwen is the stuff of legend in these parts. It is basically a rock band—six electric guitars, three female singers, and a percussionist—with a rebellious political flavor. The

classic Tinariwen image: turbaned soldier-musicians on camels with Kalashnikovs and Stratocaster guitars crossed over their shoulders. Their story says much about the power of music in Africa, and about the recent positive turn of events in Mali.

Tinariwen was formed in 1982 after a young man named Ibrahim Ag Alhabibe abruptly fled the country. Years before, his father had died at the hands of Malian soldiers; now, after a period of nomadic wandering throughout the Sahara, he was lured with two friends to southern Libya, where Colonel Muammar Qaddafi had established military training camps to help the nationless Tuareg. There he discovered not only a refuge but also—who would have guessed?—electric guitars! The young men practice, they write songs about revolution and freedom, and they marry these lyrics to a new electric sound. On top of that, these young Muslims create a band that has (gasp) women in it. Then, in this land of no media, no Internet, the music of Tinariwen travels all over the Sahara by cassette and inspires an entire generation of young people. The music is officially banned in Algeria and Mali, which only adds to its allure.

In the 1990s, Tinariwen joins with the Tuareg rebellion. It's as if the Rolling Stones went off to war. Ibrahim, the leader, becomes an obvious target. He is shot and wounded 17 times—twice as many times as our own 50 Cent, and surely a record for gunshot wounds by any living musician anywhere. Peace comes. The band moves back to Mali, signs an international record deal, gets down to business, and becomes even more popular.

Tinariwen's story parallels Mali's more hopeful scenario. Swords turn to guitars, democracy blooms, and music helps bring a sense of national unity. I'm not sure I ever understood what those American soldiers were doing in Mali's desert. But I do know that the American invasion that really made a difference here was one of electric guitars. □

## Congo Pilots



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 167 for down-and-locked on the cockpit display; upon touch-down the airplane had gone crooked careened off the runway. This is nothing

against the design of the airplane or the maintenance that had been done: Fousseyni believed that the old machine had finally just decided to give up.

**H**e led me back to the latest willing beast, past the cassava leaves in the cargo hold, and into the cockpit for the engine start—delayed for a moment by a door-ajar light. His co-pilot was an affable middle-aged Congolese named Albert Ependa, the son of an ambassador to Spain, Great Britain, and Morocco, whose early enthusiasm for this career had been dampened by three serious accidents, and who as a result had slowed down and had only recently begun to train for an airline-transport pilot license (U.S.), hardly more than a store-bought ticket but

a requirement for command. He later told me he earns \$2,000 a month, three-fourths of which he sends to his wife and three children, who live in Montreal; the company provides him with a car, and pays the fare to Canada when he breaks to see his family. He was competent in the cockpit, though placid, as co-pilots learn to be; he read a checklist to Fousseyni as we back-taxed on the runway, wallowing through the holes. I sat in a jump seat behind the two men, as I had flying in. Fousseyni pivoted the airplane tightly, lined it up, and immediately brought the engines to full takeoff power. The airplane shook and trembled as he held it there, checking for signs of trouble. He released the brakes, and we rolled, wallowing again, then slamming down the left side of the runway, pick-