

NICK GOLD worked with Ali Farka Touré for two decades. He recalls how they made the Malian legend's final album

# The pride of the Sahara

I first met Ali Farka Touré when he came to play in Europe in 1987. He was enormously charming, a larger-than-life character who had this incredible dignity. We worked together for 20 years, touring and recording six albums together.

His final album, *Savane*, recorded over the last two years of his life, was hugely important to him. You could say that it was Ali's last testament. It's one of the most traditional of his records, but it seems the most obviously bluesy. Though we built the recordings up over time, in Mali and London, the original sessions were recorded live.

The album's first glimmers came after a long period of inactivity. He had concentrated

his energies on irrigating land around Niafunke, where he lived on the banks of the Niger. I think he felt he wasn't doing the music justice, that his link with the roots of the music had been strained by touring. In the years following 1999's *Niafunke* album, I'd call him, and saw him in Mali. And then out of the blue some demos arrived. They were very raw, just him and a *ngoni* (a four-stringed African lute). He had heard a lot of Sonrai and Peul material from his own area that he feared would pass away without being exposed to the world, and was very keen on getting it down.

In fact, two of the demos – "Ledi Coumbe" and "Gambari Didi" – appear on the final album; they had a vibe that was unrepeatable. Then we went

back to record the other songs in the Bogolan studios in Bamako. His *ngoni* player had disappeared somewhere, so we recruited Mama Sissoko on the bass *ngoni*, and Bessekou Kouyote, whom I'd wanted to work with since the Buena Vista sessions 10 years before.

Being a farmer, Ali would rise early and go in to the studio with Mama and Bessekou and start playing a riff until the other two picked it up. From the start, he was more involved in the sessions for *Savane*; he wanted to make these pieces more complete, to open them up to people in Mali and the rest of the world.

He played with an intensity I hadn't seen before. We recorded the title song, "Savane", on the second day. He sung in



Ali Farka Touré: a 'larger-than-life character with incredible dignity'

French, which I'd never heard him do. He played a Spanish-type intro, then came in with a bluesy riff that the other two picked up with a reggae bounce. He'd played around with the lyric for a couple of years, which was also unusual, as much of his work came from traditional sources.

It was at that session that he first played "Kiara", which led to duets with the great *ko-ra* player Toumani Diabate on the Grammy-winning *In the Heart of the Moon*. Some time later we relocated to the Hotel Mande, and started with Toumani's Symmetric Orchestra, while Ali was in Niafunke being inaugurated as mayor. When he returned, we worked on the duets, and in the last few days returned to Ali's own album. Between the two sessions I'd sent tapes to him, and there were tunes missing that he'd already done twice. He didn't say anything, but he was aware that they may not

be included on the record. He'd obviously been working with them and picking up riffs within them, which made them more developed. And in four sessions we went through this material, and he was playing with a real intensity. The vibe would come out on one take – nearly always the first.

By the end of the two years of recording *Savane*, he was seriously ill with prostate cancer. He was sometimes in great pain, but he'd always say he was getting better. During our last sessions in Bamako he was unable to come to the studio, so I'd play the tapes to him, and I was aware this might be the last thing he was able to give. I think Ali was initially prompted by the music that he wanted to preserve – the awareness of being sick came gradually. But as time went on, you felt that he was doing something in the studio that you'd only heard glimpses of before, that he was really giv-

ing it on this record. And we got it. Ali helped me enormously in Africa. "Anything you need," he said, "ask me." I toured with him a lot and we were close. I remember in Mali being referred to as Ali's producer, but after his funeral the man at passport control waved me through as Lamie de Ali Farka, which made me very proud.

Ali died just as I was about to go over with one last tiny change we'd made on *Savane*. When I got to Bamako, they were preparing to fly the body back to Niafunke. During his illness he'd say, "I'm not going back home until I can go back by road." The day after he died the wind had brought up dust and sand, so we had to drive up with him in this ambulance. With *Savane* finished, he did make that last journey home.

*'Savane' is released on 17 July on World Circuit. See review on page 19. Nick Gold was talking to Tim Cumming*



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