

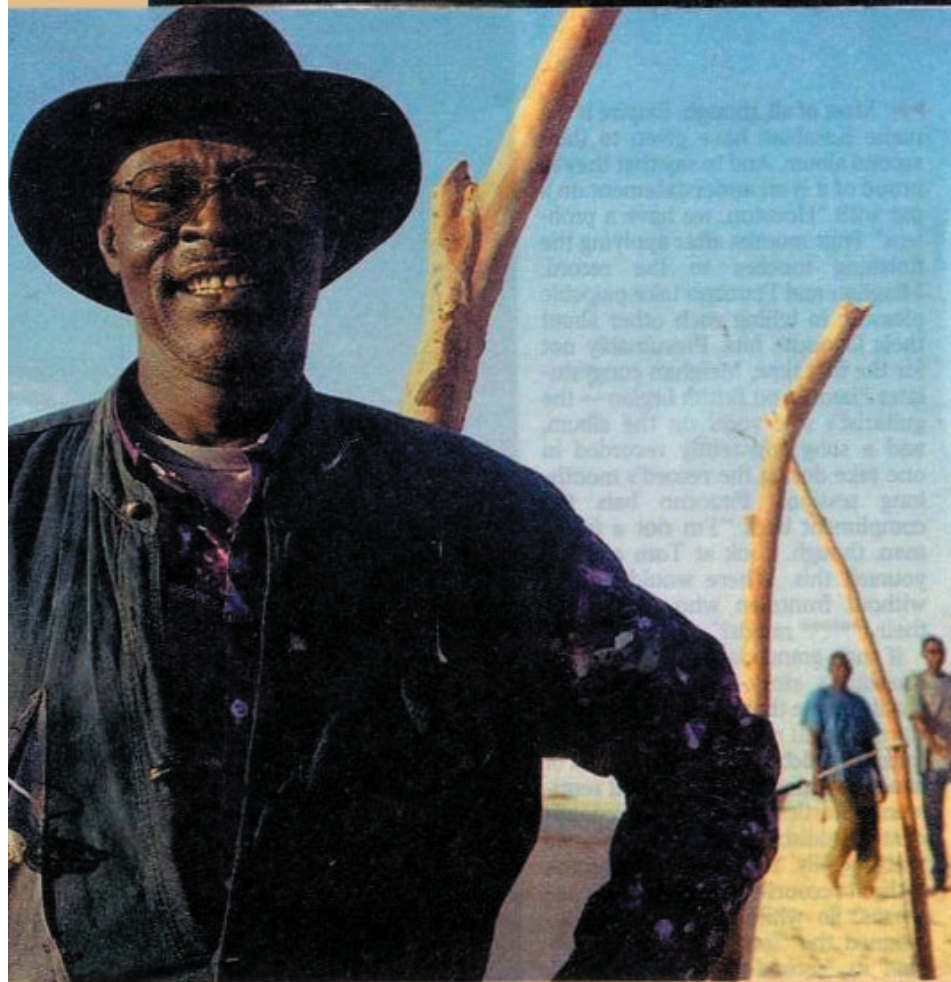
THE  TIMES

The Knowledge

Your critical guide to

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WALES/
WEST ENGLAND



THE BIG CD

Ali Farka Touré

John Mulvey on *Savane*



★★★★☆

For those of us who are dabblers in African music rather than experts, the best recent albums from the continent have all seemed to come from Mali. It's probably a whim of the Western music business that so many have arrived together, but the range and potency of these records is striking: the exuberant pop of Amadou and Mariam; the bewitching desert psychedelia of Tinariwen; the meditative duets between the kora player Toumani Diabaté and the guitarist Ali Farka Touré. Those duets,

which were collected together on the excellent *In the Heart of the Moon*, won the pair a Grammy award.

Touré, though, has been on the world music radar for two decades now, long before the current Malian fad. He came to prominence in the 1980s with a series of raw, plaintive electric guitar albums. Many who heard them became magically qualified as musicologists and ethnographers. Here, they claimed, was proof that the blues could be traced back to the traditional music of West Africa. How else could a farmer from Mali have such a kinship with John Lee Hooker?

The answer, of course, was because Touré had been listening to Hooker's records since the late 1960s. The assumption that his music had been created

in splendid isolation was both patronising and naive. Up until his death earlier this year, Touré made subtle art out of recognising and manipulating the affinities between the indigenous music of Mali and the Western records that he had absorbed.

Superficially, this lovely album — recorded by Touré at the same time as *In the Heart of the Moon* — feels like one of his most traditional. *Savane* opens with *Erdi*, a celebratory big-band piece in which the sound is thick with Malian njarka violins and massed *ngonis (a kind of lute). Listen closer, though, and there is a siren-like blues harmonica and the tenor saxophone of Pee Wee Ellis.

These are songs that reference ancient ritual, but also praise modernisation. Touré may have channelled a lifetime of diverse cultural influences into this music, but the results are far from complex: these songs are direct, instinctual and wonderfully entrancing.