



Photograph by  
Jonas Karlsson

## A chair fit for a king

**1** **ALI FARKA TOURE** *Savane*  
(World Circuit) £13.99 ★★★★★

The great bluesman's posthumous album is the finest of his career. Remember him this way, urges Charlie Gillett



Ali Farka Toure never was the fastest-gunner-in-town type of guitarist, being closer to the laconic cool of James Stewart than the aggressive bravado of Jimmy Cagney. Listen to how he plays with Ry

Cooder on their landmark 1994 album, *Talking Timbuktu*, or to the generous back-seat role he took on last year's album of duets with the kora prodigy, Toumani Diabate. Supremely confident of his own ability, and with nothing to prove to himself or anybody else, Ali holds back, making room for each note and letting it last a little longer than you might have anticipated, leaving holes for the other musician to fill.

If there could have been any complaint, it might have been that Ali so rarely chose to push himself, to explore his own limits. Why try any harder when an off-hand flicker of his fingers could deliver shimmers of rhythmic melody that made listeners shiver with pleasure? Save the best for later.

But during last year came the discovery of cancer and, suddenly, time was running out. Nobody could guess what Ali would decide to do; that he would finally unleash himself and deliver the best album of his career. But that is what he has left us with, expertly and sympathetically nurtured by his long-term producer Nick Gold.

Photographers invariably pose Ali on his own with his guitar, as if that was the essence of his music, and so we see him on the cover of this album. But Ali was, above

all, an ensemble player, a singer who liked to surround his own voice with an answering chorus, a musician who liked to bounce off percussionists and other instrumentalists. His previous albums featured a few tracks with these qualities, but *Savane* is full of them, each slightly different from its neighbour, sequenced with the skill of a master film editor so that the album adds up to the definitive portrait of a marvellous musician and a unique man.

From first to last, every sound on the record is a luxurious pleasure, each one dovetailing into its companions. On the opening track, 'Ewly', the ensemble rolls and surges together, a single string violin evoking the desert while a harmonica player threads the sound of the city into the picture. Ali talks and cajoles. The focus is not on melody but on tone and timbre. How can such

timeless music feel so modern?

The second song, 'Yer Bounda Fara', is more open, Ali leading the way on acoustic guitar and sharing vocals with an answering chorus of male singers. Fragments of breathy saxophone (played by Pee Wee Ellis) and a female vocal group flavour the third song, setting up the title track, 'Savane', which introduces Bassekou Kouyate playing ngoni, a gorgeous we've-got-all-the-time-in-the-world conversation in sound that shows both men at the peak of their imagination and ingenuity.

'Penda Yoro' feels like the pinnacle of the record, driven by the steady pulse of Ali's electric guitar and deliciously spiced by fragments of harmonica played by Little George Sueref. This British blues singer has been a hidden treasure till now, but here he is revealed as a master instrumental-

ist to stand alongside Little Walter, who played a similar role in the best records of Muddy Waters.

It's always dangerous to acclaim an album as a classic before time has had a chance to give its verdict. But this surely feels like one, fully justifying Ali's own instinct that it is the best of all his albums.

When the dust of history settles on the period we are living through now, which bluesman will be seen as the epitome of our time? Clapton? BB King? Johnny Cash? Or could it be this maestro from the Sahara, who loved to tease those who wanted to know: who came first, the Malian rooster or the American chicken, and in which direction did the blues cross the Atlantic? All we need to know is, he was a master and this is his masterwork.

**DOWNLOAD** 'Penda Yoro'; 'Savane'; 'Ewly'