

Africa

Ali Farka Touré *Savane*

World Circuit WCD075

Full Price (59 mins)

★★★★★

Ali's farewell is practically music's Rosetta Stone



So often albums released shortly after the death of an artist aren't very good, getting by on sentiment rather than content, and cobbled together from incomplete recordings that would otherwise never have seen the light of day. No such problems with Ali Farka Touré's swansong. Once he knew he was dying, he was determined to leave a fitting final testament. When he finished, just a few weeks before he died, he knew that he had recorded his magnum opus.

In many ways *Savane* is the most traditional record he ever made; at the same time it's also his most different. That's apparent from the first track – 'Erdi' – which opens with the scratchy sound of a couple of *ngonis* (plucked lute) and the one-string *njarka*

TOP
OF THE
WORLD
ALBUM



(fiddle) before the wailing blues harp of Little George Surreff takes up the theme. Ali then picks out a hypnotic guitar riff and begins to rap a deep-throated vocal of defiant power and conviction.

Savane is as pure and deep an expression of the blues as you will ever hear – up there with the unearthly recordings of Robert Johnson or early Muddy Waters. Yet it is also an album of wonderfully contrasting sounds and textures. 'Beto' features the smouldering tenor sax of Pee Wee Ellis to devastating effect. Listen to the reggae lilt of the title-track and you'll be convinced that the rhythms of Jamaica also originated in Africa. The rustic-sounding 'Penda Yoro' finds the *ngoni* pickers to the fore again, and you can hear where the Appalachian banjo has its roots.

And that's the most extraordinary thing about this remarkable recording. It seems to tap into some rich, deep and unfathomable spiritual source from which, in the distant mists of time, all music must originally have flowed. Right now, *Savane* genuinely does sound like the best album I've ever heard.

Nigel Williamson

