

# The Specialist

This month:  
Ali Farka Touré



Ali Farka Touré – who died in March at the age of 67 – always answered that he was a farmer. He was also the mayor of Niafunke, the village on the banks of the River Niger in Mali

where he lived for most of his life. Yet he was a guitarist rated by such astute judges as Ry Cooder and Jimmy Page as the finest ever to come out of Africa, and a cultural ambassador who became the first musician from the continent to win two Grammy awards. Posthumous LPs often disappoint, cobbled from incomplete cuts never intended for release. Touré's swansong, *Savane* WORLD CIRCUIT ★★★★★, suffers no such flaws. He knew he had cancer and dug deep to complete the album a few weeks before he died, convinced that he was signing off with his magnum opus.

In many ways, *Savane* is one of the most traditional records Touré ever made, but it's also one of his boldest. That's apparent from opener "Erdi", which starts with the scratchy sound of ancient West African instruments like the n'goni and njarka, before the wailing blues harp of Little George Sueref comes in. Touré then picks out a hypnotic guitar riff and begins to rap a deep-throated vocal of defiant power and conviction.

In the past, Touré's African blues has been compared to the metronomic boogie of John Lee Hooker. But here, there's an unearthly quality that has more in common with the eeriness of Robert Johnson or early Muddy Waters. On hearing the album, Ry Cooder (with whom he recorded 1994's Grammy-winning *Talking Timbuktu* WORLD CIRCUIT ★★★★★) was moved to suggest that his old partner was in an "enriched musical state". It has an emotional profundity quite different from the more melodic guitar duets the pair recorded in Santa Monica, or his second Grammy-winning LP, 2005's *In The Heart Of The Moon* WORLD CIRCUIT ★★★★★, made with the kora player, Toumani Diabaté. The



blues elements have something in common with the earthy sound of *Red And Green* WORLD CIRCUIT ★★★★★, a 2CD reissue of acoustic recordings from the '80s.

Yet he's moved far beyond that, too, adding such contrasting textures as the tenor sax of James Brown sideman Pee Wee Ellis to create a further African American connection on "Beto". The reggae lilt of the title track, meanwhile, suggests the rhythms of Jamaica also originated in Africa. It's hard to imagine how Touré could have gone out on a more satisfying note.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

ON THE CD  TRACK 10