

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## A Saharan band talks about exile

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Everything revolves around tea. Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, his wiry hair greying now that he has turned 50, is squatting on his haunches, watching a red enamel kettle simmer and hiss on a hotplate. When the brew is ready, it is poured into tiny thumb-deep glasses, the kettle raised high so that the liquid pours out in a long brown stream. This is Touareg tea, heavily sweetened, strong and dark. When the tea is drunk, we can begin.

Ibrahim fronts the band Tinariwen, the originators of the gritty electric desert blues known to its nomadic practitioners as, simply, “guitar”. Their fourth album, *Imidiwan: Companions*, was released this summer, coinciding with their appearance at the Glastonbury Festival.

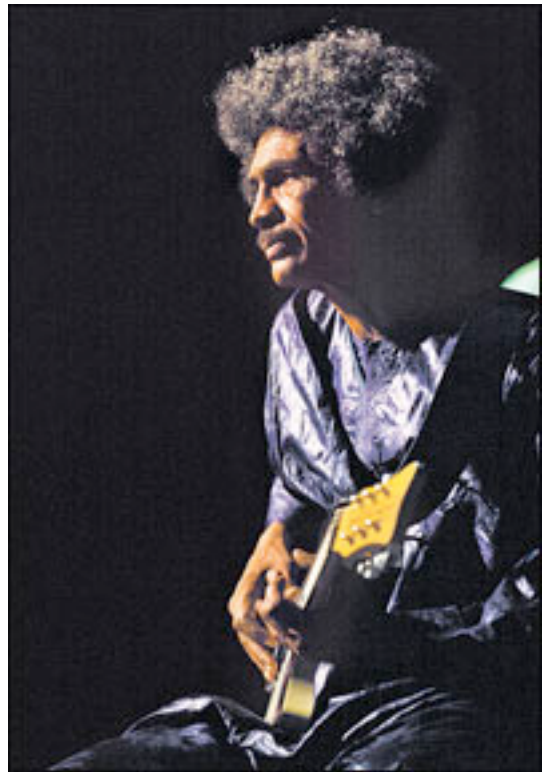
For any rock/fusion band – and Tinariwen, despite singing mostly in Tamashek, are one of the best – rehearsal can be a matter of endless, almost imperceptible adjustments. Jaja, their French sound man, makes them run repeatedly through “Tenhert”, clapping in and out underneath Abdallah Ag Alhousseyni’s guitar, until he is satisfied. Ibrahim, who does not play on this song, sits impassively on the floor. Everyone can gauge when it comes right, because he starts to shake his head in time with the music and wave his foot.

He reminisces in whispered French about the early days of the band. Tinariwen’s members are Touaregs, from the Adagh region of northern Mali. The group was born in exile, in the Algerian desert, during the Touaregs’ long estrangement from the Malian state, which began in 1963 and only really ended in the 1990s.

Ibrahim became the master of the home-made guitar: he had been making them out of plastic water cans and sticks since the age of four. He teamed up with another Touareg, Inteyeden Ag Ablil. “We played together and songs started to come.” Both were 19, and had been in exile in Algeria since the first uprising, during which the Malian army had killed Ibrahim’s father.

They took the name Kel Tinariwen, meaning “boys of the desert”. Others drifted into their orbit, including Hassan Ag Touhami and Inteyeden’s brother Diarra. “There were no instruments but lots of people wanted to play with us and sing.”

Things became more formalised in 1985, at the guerrilla Camp 2 Mars near Tripoli, where Colonel Gaddafi had assembled the Touareg fighters, with the women and children sequestered in a nearby village. “We were designated musicians, so we didn’t have to fight.” Instead, Tinariwen recorded songs directly into a cassette player, later to be duplicated and passed from hand to hand in the desert. “There were lots of songs about exile, about living *sans papiers, sans cartes d’identité*, urging people not to forget their roots.”



In the camps, Ibrahim and his fellows listened to a diet of Moroccan 1970s classics and western sounds: “Jimi Hendrix, Marley, Dylan, James Brown. Santana later, and Dire Straits. And a lot of Bollywood. But none of that is in the songs directly. When I make a new song it comes from me. It comes naturally, like breathing.”

Trouble in the region flared up again in 1990, and the musicians turned briefly into fighters. In 1992 an uneasy peace was agreed, and Tinariwen returned to their homes in the desert. “When we started, there were no other bands, so everyone who played guitar said they were in Tinariwen. Anyone who turned up was in the band. And there were many girls.” The women’s high, sharp ululation cuts across the low growl of guitar. Inteyaden fell ill and died in 1994, but the band continued.

A decade later, they played at the Festival in the Desert, an annual musical gathering held near Timbuktu, the first time their music came to wider attention. After that, their rise was rapid. In 2001, they made their European debut at the Womad world music festival, playing late at night in a small tent, luring in the handful of festivalgoers not watching the Skatalites. The sound was screwed to a severe torque, tight repetitive guitar phrases set against precision clapping from the band. Clad in white robes and concealed behind black head-dresses, the band took their applause with ghostly impassivity. Haunting and intense, it was perfect for a hot night.

Over the following years, Tinariwen have steadily built their following in Europe, to the point where they are now a big draw at Womad and similar festivals. As Andy Morgan, their manager, says, they are probably better known in England than in southern Mali. “We get no coverage on TV,” agrees Ibrahim. “That’s reserved for the Bambara and the Manding [the ethnic groups whose music forms Mali’s mainstream].”

The older generation have settled down. When not on tour, Ibrahim says he lives “well but simply. I have a house in Tessalit and a garden. I like to be with my friends and to help them. For the youth, because there is nothing for them in Tessalit, I have started a restaurant.”

Several other Touareg bands have now emerged, many (such as Terakaft and Toumast) built around Tinariwen alumni. “For me,” says Ibrahim, “it’s good. When I was young, we had no way of expressing ourselves. There were old traditional singers but it wasn’t something for a young person to do. Now, every band playing guitar is a continuation of Tinariwen. I can hear the same licks.”

Given his eagerness to cultivate his garden and his unpredictability – he is adept at silently disappearing when he chooses – touring might be a chore. But he says not. “It’s a job, sure. But I am 100 per cent a musician now. If you took my guitar away, it would feel like being in prison.”

Tinariwen have now reconciled themselves to concert halls with seated audiences. They have played some magnificent concerts in these settings, notably a fiery, tight set in Salisbury last year that ended with Ibrahim collapsing on stage. But the outdoors feels like their natural home. Ibrahim agrees. “I don’t feel free in a room. I like festivals – they feel almost like the desert. Almost.”