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The Rebel Music of Desert Rockers Tinariwen

BY TAD HENDRICKSON



THE FIRST TIME I heard of Tinariwen was when a news story about the first Festival au Desert appeared in 2001. The band was one of the local hosts and when pirates hijacked the festival's P.A. in the desert, members of the band wasted no time in finding the culprits and reminding them they knew where all their families lived. The P.A. was returned and the festival went on as planned.

These threats were hardly idle. The members of Tinariwen are part of the Touareg warrior tradition of the Sahara Desert. Hailing from the town of Tessalit, part of the Kidal region of eastern Mali, band members and many others fought for Touareg freedom in Mali and Niger (Touaregs also live in Niger, Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso). The band members fled to Libya and lived in camps off and on under the control of Muammar al-Gaddafi, before they were able to return to Mali in peace in 1991. Although they began playing together in 1982, the peace allowed the band to become full-time musicians versus clandestinely recording illegal cassettes, which they'd secretly distribute.

Tinariwen's music is a kind of desert rock blues that features spiraling guitar lines over clattering hand percussion and handclaps that seem to be inspired by the sound of a camel walking across a hard desert floor. Vocals are call-and-response in their native language of Tamashek, complete with eerie desert wails. Whereas past material was politically motivated, newer songs deal with a wider variety of material. It all adds up to a lonesome desert sound of hypnotic power and beauty that has even been embraced by such notables as Santana, Coldplay and Robert Plant (check out the YouTube clip of him sitting in with the band on "Whole Lotta Love").

Since the 2001 debut, *The Radio Tisdas Sessions* which the band cut at a local radio station when electricity was still available, it has toured the world. Instead of carrying guns they now carry guitars, though they still often dress in traditional garb that includes head wraps for the men (instead of the women). It's a sight to see as the band is even more raw and visceral live as they move toward ecstatic musical peaks, often inciting the audience to rock out as if they are at a sweaty blues show or rock concert.

Now, the band returns with *Imidiwan Companions*, a CD/DVD package that includes a 60 minute album and a 30 minute documentary

about how the musicians live, record and make music when they are not on the road.

The 14-song album, the first to be recorded at home since *Radio Tisdas*, opens with the title cut, which instantly recalls the classic Tinariwen sound: a simple, mid tempo, one chord riff pounded out with interlocking electric guitar fill gree around the edges. On other numbers like "Tenhert" and "Tamodjerazi Assis," direct connections to the blues, one can easily draw comparisons to John Lee Hooker and others.

While the amazing Ibrahim Ag Alhabib continues to lead the band and write most of the material, the new record features contributions from five different songwriters. With relatively straightforward arrangements, the varied songwriters give the album nuance throughout, as this type of hypnotic, drone-laden music could become tedious for the listener. While the group has a recognizable sound, there's a tremendous variety within it.

One suspects that Tinariwen doesn't sit around the campfire every night playing guitars as the film depicts, but there's no question that these types of natural gatherings are integral to the group's sound. While the rest of the film consists of interviews with band members and shots of them recording in an old adobe, the film's finale shows the band setting up in a sonic sweet spot to record in: a rocky glen in the desert that serves to intractably connect the music to its geography. For those who aren't familiar with this desert culture—Touaregs have been wandering the Sahara for at least two millennia—you'll learn as much from *Imidiwan* as you would from any travel guide.

Imidiwan: Companions is the perfect place to start your musical journey with Tinariwen. Whether you play the album or watch the movie, you're sure to feel the desert wind in your face and the grit of sand on your skin. ●