

Telegraph

Tinariwen: Imidiwan Companions, CD review

Tinariwen's 'Imidiwan - Companions' sounds as though it emanates from the rock and sand of the Sahara itself.

By Mark Hudson

Published: 9:00AM BST 25 Jun 2009



In a musical landscape where everything feels slightly second hand, where everything's a reference, an homage or a blatant rehash of what's gone before — where even the great iconic acts of the Sixties and Seventies now sound like tribute bands to their earlier selves — it's invigorating to encounter music that sounds utterly unselfconscious, that mines its own earthy terrain apparently indifferent to the fact that the rest of the world is even listening.

A bunch of indigo-robed former guerrillas from the depths of the Malian Sahara, Tinariwen have been acclaimed as possessors of the original DNA of rock and roll – the nearest thing the modern world provides to a real blues feel. Since emerging via the 2003 Festival in the Desert, they've garnered endless awards and even supported the Rolling Stones. Has success diluted the gritty integrity of their sound? Not in the slightest. Their fourth album, Imidiwan — Companions has more grainy, lonesome authenticity than we've any right to expect from a band who've spent most of the past six years hanging around chain hotels on the Western touring circuit.

If their last album, the much acclaimed Aman Iman, drew out the rock resonances in their spacey, guitar-led sound, Imidiwan — recorded in the remote oasis of Tessalit — goes deeper into their own

tradition, leaving the mournful choruses and squirming electric guitar lines gloriously ragged. It isn't so much a retreat from musical progress as a reassertion of core values.

Pitching an endlessly repeated, reverberating guitar chord against staccato clapping and a droning chorus, Kel Tamashek feels like the essence of Tinariwen; the privilege of listening in on a real desert session offset by inescapable affinities with all kinds of blues-based Western music. It sounds a little like T Rex at 16rpm.

The throaty talk-over of Tamundjeras Assis builds into a kind of invocatory walking blues, while Lulla shows the group at their rockiest, an urgent funky groove powering bruised call and response vocals. There's no drum kit, barely any percussion, just subtly shifting layers of guitar and clapping creating a rhythmic base that sounds as though it emanates from the rock and sand of the Sahara itself.

Telegraph rating: * * * *