

INVISIBLE

★ ALI FARKA TOURÉ ★

JUKEBOX

Every month we test a musician with a series of records which they're to comment on and mark out of five (five, Ali!) – with no prior knowledge of what it is they're hearing.

ALI FARKA Toure has often been called "The John Lee Hooker of Africa", but it might be more accurate to describe John Lee Hooker as "The Ali Farka Toure of America". Born to a noble (though not a *griot*) family in Mali, Toure creates music which may appear to have a strong blues feel, and play Western guitars, but he is firmly rooted in the traditional music of his country – melodies and rhythms which he believes are the origin not the product of American blues. His three-fingered picking style, first perfected on the traditional monochorde guitar, also owes nothing to Western tuning and chord progressions. Toure, 53 this year, has toured extensively in Europe, America and Japan, yet still lives in Niafunke, a remote village in the Timbuktu region of Mali, where he cultivates cattle, rice, fruit and vegetables and is involved in irrigation projects. *The Source*, his third album for London-based label World Circuit, was released in June – a record he describes as his best "by a thousand times". The Invisible Jukebox was conducted in French; the interpreter was Julian Cox.

Ali Farka Touré
was tested by Philip Watson.



BOUBACAR TRAORÉ

"Santa Mariya" from *Kar Kar* (Stern's Africa)

(*Straight away, even before Traoré has begun singing*) It's "Kar Kar" (*Traoré's nickname*). It's in keeping with the Malian musical tradition, but different from the music I play because it's from another region – Bambara. It's like the difference between English and Scottish music. It's very, very good. I like it a lot because it is original, truly African, music.

To Western ears at least, Boubacar Traoré's music has a strong blues feel to it. What does the word "blues" mean to you?

I don't really know the word blues, but what you're talking about comes from a traditional feel of original music which then influenced the music that became known as the blues. If you imagine a tree, then the blues is the branches of that tree; Malian music, not African music, and not even West African music, is the roots. American blues, to me, just means a mix of various African sounds. It's not American music, it's African music imported directly from Africa, and when I hear "the blues" I don't hear America, I hear Africa.

Marks out of five?

If the top mark is five, I give Kar Kar ten. He was one of the first African artists to use and adapt the Western guitar rather than playing a traditional instrument. I respect him for this; I'm very proud of him.

JOHN LEE HOOKER

"Boogie Children" from *Blues Brothers* (Recordings 1948–51) (Ace)

Is it Lightnin' Hopkins? Or John Lee Hooker? I've listened to a quite a lot of his music, but I don't know this. Generally I don't listen to American music; I listen to French and Arabic music. The first time I heard John Lee Hooker was when a friend brought back a tape from Paris. I didn't actually think he was American. He sounded as if he came from Mali; the only difference was the language. As I was listening to him I picked up my traditional guitar and played exactly the same thing, and it was after that that I thought I should do more with my music because he was producing something second hand. I decided that I should show people where this music really came from. When I met John Lee for the first time, in Paris last year, I invited him to come to Mali to hear the origins of his music. As yet, he hasn't taken up the invitation, but I'd love to play

with him because he would learn a thing or two. He could learn the roots of his music. I'm not being big-headed about this, it's just the truth.

Marks?

Twenty. John Lee gave me the idea to take my music further. Think of it this way: I had the sugar, but he made me realise how sweet it was. And he is unique in his field because he is authentic, he hasn't moved too far away from the tradition.

BAABA MAAL/MANSOUR SECK

"Lamtooro" from *Djam Leeli* (Rogue Records)

(*Straightaway*) Baaba Maal. (*Do you know who the other guitarist is?*) No, I don't. Even though Baaba Maal is from Senegal, this is not Fouta or Senegalese music, it's 100 per cent Malian. Everything he does is taken from Malian music – this is not his composition or invention. This song is a Malian song that everyone plays. All the same, I like him very much because he is the best Senegalese musician, even better than Youssou N'Dour.

In Africa, all musicians have a line or a style in which they play. They may sound different, but you can recognise that line regardless of what they are playing. Baaba Maal is like this. He may have studied music, been to college and become a professor and a master, but the root, the line, of his music is Malian. He has taken the sounds and melodies of Malian music and changed them, changed the language. But Baaba Maal is a noble musician, and when he goes into the Fouta region of his country he is an idol of the people, a leader. Ten marks. Baaba Maal is fantastic.

BO DIDDLEY

"Bo Diddley" from *The Chess Masters* (Magnum Force).

I don't know this. I have never heard of Bo Diddley. But I liked it very much; I like the rhythm and the music even though I can't understand the words. I can tell you the origin of that rhythm (*he plays along to the record, tapping out the beat on the table*). It's a hunters' celebration dance, played on a Hari drum, which is used to welcome a chief or nobleman.

Marks?

Ten. He merits it.

BILL FRISELL

"Lookout For Hope" from *Lookout For Hope* (ECM)

I don't know who it is and I can't find anything of interest in it. Nothing. It's like the high music of the Sorbonne; it has nothing to do with Africa, and there's nothing particularly African about it.

Does this mean that music must have an African ingredient in it for you to like it?

Music must have some significance to me. It must mean something to me. This doesn't. It was just sound – it didn't seem to come from anywhere or have a message. In Mali, music is always talking about something – history, legend, family, this animal, that tree, this river, those flowers. The American music I like – John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins, Sam Cooke – says something to me even though I can't understand the words. Five.

OUMOU SANGARÉ

"Diaraby Nene" from *Women of Wassoulou* (Stern's Africa).

(*Straightaway*) That's Oumou. She may sound very different to the way she sang at the beginning of her career, but her music is still typically, typically traditional. Her words and music are very significant and educative. She sings about life, and the good and bad in all of us, be we European or African. She says that everyone's future is not in their own hand, but in God's, and destiny's.

Marks?

Twenty, because for the Wassoulou people she's an idol and hero, and for that I hold her in very high esteem.

JIMI HENDRIX

"Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" from *Electric Ladyland* (Polydor).

(*Straightaway*) Jimi Hendrix. Listen (*he blows his cheeks out*), he sounds like a toad (*he makes toadish sounds to accompany Hendrix's wab-wab guitar*). I like Hendrix very, very, very, very much, but this track is a little too strong, a little too heavy for me. He doesn't always move my heart, but I respect the fact that every guitarist in the whole world has tried to imitate him at some point. I have even met Africans who have tried to copy him – and they have made themselves ill doing so. They have tried to use his tricks (*he makes a thinner, weedier sound*). People have never been truly able to imitate Hendrix because it's God which gave him his unique talent.

Marks?

Thirty. The reason I'm giving more marks

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to him than I gave to Kar Kar, Oumou and John Lee is because Hendrix has had a greater influence on *generations* of musicians. He's a black American who's never been to Africa, but he's a phenomenon. He speaks with the guitar; he makes it do exactly what he wants.

ROBERT JOHNSON

"Kindhearted Woman Blues" from *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (CBS).

I don't know him, but he sounds as if he's the same generation as John Lee Hooker. (*No, he's a little earlier; this was recorded in 1937*) This is not, and will never be, American music. It is African, truly African. When black Africans were taken to America they had an African spirit, and a spirit of African music, but then they became immersed in another language. Then, when they were liberated from slavery they had to find a way to earn a living and a lot of them did that

busking. This maintained their connection with Africa because that lifestyle of playing on the streets or in bars to earn a living is similar to what people do in Mali. I like this because it's rare to find a black American who sounds like he knows his roots and where he has come from. I'll give it fifteen. I don't know Robert Johnson, but John Lee Hooker is more popular so he gets more marks.

SALIF KEITA

"Kuma" from *Amen* (Mango)

Hearing this make me want to go back home. Do you want to know how many marks I'm going to give this? Forty. Salif is our Jimi Hendrix. He's the idol of Mali. He is a nobleman. God has given him his voice and his music and there is no one to compare with him. We both started playing music at roughly the same time – and I was an engineer on some of Salif's first records – but Salif always played in the clubs whereas I would play in the studio with the National Radio Orchestra of Mali.

How do you feel about Salif's more recent albums?

I don't like them. Now he is producing music that is primarily influenced by European and American music, not African. I'll give Salif 40 marks for the first records he made, but, to me, Salif's music today has no significance. He has lost his way. You have to keep to the path and not deviate; you have to know the direction you're going in. It's important that we don't play European music because otherwise we will lose the original, the roots will be lost forever. And there are always problems when African artists collaborate with Americans or Europeans. On my last album I recorded with Taj Mahal and there were many difficulties because Taj couldn't really keep up or understand what I was doing. I have the way I play; I have my own tuning. I like playing with black American musicians, but they don't always understand the tradition, they haven't learnt what I know. To me, Salif doesn't play African music any longer. And I've told all this to his face. (*And how did Salif respond?*) Salif certainly told me what he thought, but that is between him and me.