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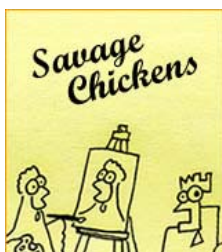
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Tartit

Abacabok

(Crammed)

US release date: 24 October 2006

UK release date: 30 October 2006

by **Deanne Sole**

Email Print Write to the editor

I heard Tartit for the first time on the live *Festival in the Desert* compilation released in 2003. The name of their song on that album is "Tihar Bayatin". The singing is led by a woman who sounds, at the beginning, as if she wants to cough, but the cough turns into a focussed exhalation, a grunt, which is followed by other women grunting and exhaling in turn. They are joined by a drum. Everyone seems to be taking their cue from the off-beat of the person next to them. The grunting and drumming overlap, pulling in two different directions, and the effect is so disorienting that the world boils down to a hot bubble that rolls back and forth inside your head until the song comes to a close.



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Nothing on *Abacabok* has quite the same effect as that "Tihar Bayatin". This has more to do with the way the two albums were recorded than with the musicians themselves. On *Festival in the Desert* some of the singers and drums were brought dramatically to the foreground and others pushed back, making the different parts of the song sound more disjointed than they must have done onstage at the festival. *Abacabok* locks the instruments and voices together. Yet a number of the songs on this album follow the template of "Tihar Bayatin"'s overlapping grunts so neatly that any of them could have sounded like the song on *Festival* if they'd been recorded in the *Festival* way, particularly "Tihou Beyatene", a mixture of gasps, claps, hisses, trilling ululation, and tremolo voice that rolls into your ears like a low-key storm. The similarity between the two titles makes me wonder if they're versions of the same song with a slight change in the transcription.

If the mesh of grunts and claps in "Tihou Beyatene" seems too intense, then fear not because the next track comes to meet us with the familiar noise of an electric guitar. This is typical of *Abacabok*, which has been cleverly arranged so that we're never allowed to feel overwhelmed by any one sound. The title song with its tangle of strings and chorus is followed by the simple "Al Afete", which is nothing more than a flute joined by a voice or two chanting "a prayer for peace", while the urgent yelps in "Tabey Tarate" disappear into the laid-back introduction of "Ansari", its guitar twanging at a gum-chewing pace.

The guitars are a reminder that Tartit is being sold under the umbrella of a minor genre called desert blues, a fairly recent invention that has been nudged into popularity by a European tour coupled with two large compilations from World Network (this German label, which should not be confused with the UK's World Music Network, also released Tartit's previous album, *Ichichila*) and the successes of Tinariwen and Ali Farka Touré. A series of smaller triumphs has buttressed it from below. These include the resurgence of the Malian guitarist Boubacar Traoré after the trauma of his wife's death, and the arrival, earlier this year, of a warmly-regarded debut album from the Nigerian group Etran Finatawa. Those of you who like to sniff prissily at the phrase 'world music' will either smile at the thought that a small part of it is being more specifically defined, or, more likely, huff that 'desert blues' is a neo-colonial imposition on musicians who don't all live in a desert, and don't all play blues. Whatever rocks your socks, sweetheart.

As with Tinariwen and Etran Finatawa, the members of Tartit are Tuaregs, also known as Tamashek. (The naming of the Tamashek is one of those Gypsy vs. Roma situations in which you have one well-known name that was invented by outsiders and another that comes from the group itself.) During the 20th century these Saharan nomads saw their territory divided between five different countries as a consequence of France's colonising efforts in West Africa, with the majority of them ending up as citizens of Mali. Over the past few decades there have been attempts by the Malian Tamashek to rebel against the nation's government, which is based to the south in the capital, Bamako. Recently the rebellions have died down but the residual tension made the appearance of the southerner Oumou Sangaré at that 2003 *Festival in the Desert* more significant than it might have appeared from abroad. If not reconciliation, at least it was a kind of recognition.

Comparisons between Tartit and the better-known Tinariwen seem inevitable, but, really, there's no reason why one should be confused with the other, or why you shouldn't like both in different ways. Tinariwen is more heavily into the blues-sounding guitar-reliant side of its music; Tartit uses the guitars sparingly and prefers to focus on the trance-chanting of the women. The Tamashek are Muslims but the women leave their faces

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bare while the men cover up, a happy factoid that has been picked up by whoever is handling Crammed's PR. "Look at this," the factoid implies. "Friendly, unoppressive Muslims who don't subjugate their wimmins!" (On a side note, it reminds me of the marketing of Cheikh Lo: Look, Muslim with dreads! Rasta Islam! Yeah!)

Their guitars suggest Ali Farka Touré, but the chanting and clapping push them closer to the collective ritual music of a group like The Master Musicians of Joujouka, a comparison that occurs to me because I was listening to the Master Musicians' *Boujeloud* earlier today. (The Tamashek are Berbers; likewise the Joujoukans, although their lives are not similar.) If you gave the Master Musicians electric guitars and replaced their flutes with voices you might end up with something that sounds a little like *Abacabok's* "Al Jahalat". But then you've got tracks that are something else altogether, such as "Al Afete", and also "Inbahwa", a solo performance on a single-string violin known as an *imzad*. The *imzad* is ancient, and yet when Tartit's Mohamed Issa ag Oumar strikes up with a modern guitar you'll notice him playing with the same dry, monotone inflections that you hear in "Inbahwa". No matter how it sounds to us this is not really a blues guitar: it's an *imzad* guitar.

Tartit's dryness means that *Abacabok* comes across as a relaxed and understated album in spite of the large number of people who put in guest appearances with the band, and despite the busyness of their clapping, trilling, singing, calabash-playing, *njurkle*-plucking and chanting. They sing with a nasal burr, the accent that you can hear on other Malian musicians—on Mariam from Amadou and Mariam, for instance. This is an album that invites you to kick back and sink into its forest of noises. Admire the Saharan handiwork; get down with the *imzad*.

Multiple Songs" [MySpace]

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