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## Sandblasters

It's the most exciting music event in the world ... and it takes place half an hour's drive from Timbuktu. As the Festival in the Desert returns, Tim Cumming meets the band who made it a global success

**Tim Cumming**  
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It is past midnight on a sharply cold night in Paris, and the cluster of kebab shops have the only lights still burning. Members of Tinariwen - guitar legends of the Sahara and veterans of Muammar Gadafy's guerrilla training camps - sweep out of the Elysée Montmartre artists' entrance and start walking towards a late-night bar near the Gare du Nord. Many of them are still in their stage gear, traditional costumes of pale, flowing robes and brilliant blue turbans. Against the wet, shining cobbled side streets of Montmartre, it is an incongruous sight.

The Elysée Montmartre is one of the area's oldest theatres, the heavy 19th-century plaster heads of Greek gods gazing down from the ceiling through a fog of smoke and stage lights. It's also one of the city's hippest rock venues.

For Tinariwen, this was a rare performance outside their native Mali. They are Tamashek (or Tuareg), and although they formed in the late 1970s, only in recent years have they played anything like an official concert. To mark their Paris debut, there were Tamashek in the audience: men of civic importance from the band's home base of Kidal, a dusty town on the edge of the Sahara. Yet another arresting sight.

Fielding three guitarists, a bassist, a percussionist and two women singers, Tinariwen take to the stage with little ado, and ease themselves into an opening rhythm as fluid and clear as water. "Dropping a bucket into a deep well" is how rock singer Robert Plant described Tinariwen's music at last year's Festival of the Desert in Essakane.

The guitarists create a hypnotic sequence of interlocking riffs, minimalist explosions of notes from another world, cushioned by the call and response of the vocalists. There are phantom blues lines and echoes of James Brown-style funk in the music's rhythmic pulse, yet the sound evokes a sense of time and space independent of any outside influence.

What the group play is desert blues, the wandering, smoky lines of the music summoning up a nomadic sense of a land without boundaries. The figures of the guitarists are immobile, and so inscrutable are their veiled faces that almost the only stage movement is their hands flickering across the fretboards. It's an ambience that highlights the extraordinary dreamlike quality of the music.

The band is a loose collection of up to a dozen players; several, including founder member Ibrahim and guitarist and poet Mohamed, who featured heavily on the band's debut CD, *The Radio Tisdas Sessions*, have opted not to travel with the group to Paris. The next night, just three of the band will play a charity reception at the Cafe Royal in London.

"In a way they're not really a group, more a collection of singer-songwriters who wrote these incredible political songs during the Tuareg rebellion," says Justin Adams, Robert Plant's guitarist and producer of their first CD. "Songs that are as iconic there as *Blowin' in the Wind* or *Times They Are A-Changing*."

Recorded in Kidal in 2000, *The Radio Tisdas Sessions* was laid down between 7pm and midnight, the only hours that electricity was available in the town. "It was amazing slowly getting to meet them," recalls Adams. "The attitude's nothing like: Here we are, you're the band, let's record an album. Many cups of tea were drunk and there were many misunderstandings."

Tinariwen's founding members were not only musicians, but active in the 1990 rebellion, with Kalashnikovs in their hands and guitars strapped to their backs. The first Tamashek uprising came after Malian independence in 1963.

A decade later, severe drought saw thousands flee for the towns of southern Algeria, and by the end of the 1970s, into Col Gadafy's training camps in southern Libya. There young Tamashek men joined combatants from SWAPO, the PLO and ANC to learn about revolution, Islamism and guerrilla war. Tinariwen's founder members were among them.

"Tinariwen started as a group in the camps in Libya in 1979, but it took a long, long time to get going," explains guitarist, lyricist and singer Abdullah Ag Alhousseini. "People weren't familiar with electric guitar, or with the guitar at all. Our first instruments we made ourselves out of tin cans. And then, somehow, we got hold of acoustic guitars, and after that it was a self-taught thing."

The music they made was known simply as "guitar"; it would be years before the band picked up on rock icons such as Marley, Hendrix or Dylan, or the Moroccan rebel music of Nass El Ghiwane.

"In the early 1980s we hadn't listened to anything else at all, we were doing it purely on our own terms," says Alhousseini. "The root of the music has very much grown out of our own thing. There really aren't any outside influences. If they are integrated, then they're integrated in very subtle, subliminal ways. And the basic sound hasn't really changed. It was more or less there right from the beginning."

By the mid-1980s, Tinariwen's songs of exile had crossed the desert via home recordings made on ghetto blasters. "Our first gigs were for our fellow exiles, the people who were being trained by Gadafy. We were playing for the other people in the camps, at parties and gatherings."

By the end of the decade, the band's reputation for political protest had spread to the point where the Malian government outlawed even the possession of one of their cassettes. "The Tamashek had never experienced exile before," explains Alhousseini. "It was a completely new experience, and there was a completely new tradition of songwriting as a result. A lot of young guys would write songs and give them to the band, because everyone was experiencing the same thing."

Since 1996 and the Flame of Peace - a symbolic bonfire of weapons that marked the end of hostilities after decades of civil war - Tinariwen have seen improved conditions for their people, while former rebels have been reintegrated into Malian life via the army and government posts. "The fact that there is now a festival of the desert - and in this part of the world - is incredible," says Alhousseini. "You could never have imagined it happening even five years ago."

Their new songs, too, have changed with the times. "They are less about exile and more about the real situation of what it's like to live in the desert, about what we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, of what we go through just to exist."

In Kidal, they still live like locals, despite their star status. But will an international audience bring unexpected changes to the band and its music? Founder member Kheddou, a hero of the 1990 rebellion, played with the band at the first Festival in the Desert in 2001 - his very presence preventing the loss of the festival's sound system to bandits en route. But other band members, veterans of the Libyan camps such as Hassane Ag Attuhami, drew the line at the kind of formal recording sessions that Radio Tisdas demanded, and at the professional stagecraft that going global requires.

Amassakoul, their new album, was recorded in the Malian capital of Bamako. Advance tracks reveal the band distilling their sound into a spectral, haunting minimalism. Rock groups such as the White Stripes may have taken their raw minimal blues to the top of the album charts, but Tinariwen have forged an altogether more singular and radical sound that, once heard, is unforgettable. Nurtured in exile, raised in conflict, and driven underground, where they achieved legendary status, Tinariwen are the kind of band that generations of western rebel rockers could only dream of being.

As he walks through the steep, fogbound streets of Montmartre to the restaurant, Abdullah talks of a new Tamashek generation that does not remember the first uprisings or the drought that pushed so many into exile. "When a region has been at war with itself, it takes a long time for the wounds to heal," he says. "And it has only been seven years since the Flame of Peace."

With young Tamashek turning to music rather than to guns, Tinariwen are no longer the only group to set up

their guitars and amps in the Saharan bush. In the atmospheric conditions of places like Essakane, where this year's festival is about to start, the sound of Tinariwen's electric guitar carries for miles around, as far as gunfire, though there may be no one within earshot in the great darkness beyond the fires and tents to hear it.

- Amassakoul will be released on Wayward on February 23. Tinariwen tour the UK in March.

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