

African musicians - Ali Farka Touré

Ali Farka Touré was a Malian singer and musician, perhaps the most famous musician from Mali. His real name, when he was young, before he was famous, was Ali Ibrahim Touré.

He was born on 31 October 1939 in a small village called Kanau near Timbuktu, in Mali. His village was on the Niger River.

When he was a young child, Ali Farka Touré moved to a village called Niafunké. His family were from the Arma group of people in Mali. The Arma people came from Morocco and Spain in the 16th century.

He was a singer and guitar player, and he played many other musical instruments too, like calabash and bongos. He also played the njarka – a special musical instrument from Mali. It has only 1 string.

He was one of the most famous musicians from Africa. The American magazine 'Rolling Stone' put his name in the list of 'The 100 Greatest Guitarists of all Time'. His most famous CD was called 'Talking Timbuktu'. He made the music with American musician Ry Cooder.

Ali Farka Touré was a very good singer, and he could sing in different languages. He wrote songs and sang songs in languages like Bambara, Songhay, and Tamasheq. He also sang in English, but only sometimes, not very often.

People liked his music in Mali, but also in other countries. People in America liked his music because they also liked American Blues music. People thought that his music was similar to the Blues – it was a 'cousin' to the Blues. People could hear the connections in his music between the music of Mali and the music of the Blues.

Some people believed the history of the music we call 'Blues' was in Mali. They believe that American Blues music started in the music of Mali a long time ago.

The famous film director Martin Scorsese made a film about the Blues, called 'Feel Like Going Home'. This film showed the history of the Blues music and its roots in the music of West Africa.

When he was an old man, Ali Farka Touré went back to live in his village in Mali.

He became the mayor of the village and spent his personal money to make it a better place. He bought a generator to bring electricity to the poor people.

You can hear his music in films too. His song 'Berebere' is in the popular film Black Panther. The name of the song means 'to help each other' in the Bambara language.

Ali Farka Touré died on 6 March 2006 in Bamako. He had cancer for a long time.

His son, Vieux Farka Touré, is playing music now. He was born in the same village of Niafunké in 1981 and he made his first CD in 2005. Father and son made some new music together just before Ali died in 2006, and this new music is on a CD of music made by his son in 2011 – the last time we can hear Ali Farka Touré play and sing.

New words for this article

1	njarka	a musical instrument from Mali – with only 1 string
2	roots	the beginnings of something – like the beginning of a tree
3	generator	a machine to make electricity
4	cancer	a very bad sickness

Comprehension Questions

- 1 What was the name of Ali Farka Touré's village?
- 2 Which magazine wrote about him?
- 3 What is his most famous CD?
- 4 Which languages did he sing in?
- 5 How did he help his village?

- 1 His village was Kanau, near Timbuktu
- 2 Rolling Stone magazine
- 3 His most famous CD was called 'Talking Timbuktu';
- 4 He sang songs in languages like Bambara, Songhay, and Tamasheq
- 5 He bought a generator to bring electricity to the poor people

Comprehension questions

Answers