

Music, Culture and Conflict in Mali

A report for Freemuse

Andy Morgan



PART 1 - MUSIC

An overview of how music and musicians in Mali are faring after the rebellion in the north, the Islamist takeover and the military coup in the south.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. Destroy the mystery**
The Sidi Yahia story
- 2. AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar ud-Dine**
The triple headed Islamist occupation of the north
- 3. “We don’t want Satan’s music”**
Scenes of musical life under Shari’a law
- 4. DJs, Mosques & Maquis**
Economic crisis, law and order, and the religious backlash in the south
- 5. Music in the Red Zone**
The Festival in the Desert and the advance of Islamism in the north
- 6. “Ali Farka would return to his grave”**
The end of music in the north
- 7. “Not like the parties we had at home”**
Music in exile
- 8. A musical Mecca in crisis**
Economic and political meltdown in Bamako
- 9. Get Up, Stand Up!**
Malian musicians protest and survive
- 10. When the going get’s tough, the rappers get going**
Mali’s Facebook generation steps up
- 11. Conclusion – Without music, Mali will die**
The musicians and cultural activists speak for themselves

Appendix – List of Interviewees

1. Destroy the mystery

The Sidi Yahia story

At the end of fourteenth century, when western Europe was still recovering from the Black Death and the Hundred Years War was only in its third decade, the learned men of the University of Sankoré in Timbuktu bemoaned the distance they had to walk to the great Mosque of Djinguereber, which was then the only major place of worship in town. After a few hours spent teaching or reading treatises on Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy, mathematics, history and geography, plucked from the largest collection of books assembled anywhere in Africa at that time, they found it irksome to step out into the hot dusty streets several times a day, cross the river and brave a long ramble under the Saharan sun.

Someone had a dream in which the Prophet appeared and ordered a new mosque to be built, at a convenient distance just south of the Sankoré *madrassa*. This man, whose name was Sheikh al-Mokhtar Hamalla, answered the summons from on high. The construction of the new mosque dragged on for forty years and even worse, when it was completed, no one wise and respected enough could be found to take charge of the building and become the new imam. But the city fathers trusted that God would eventually send them the right person, so they simply locked the mosque's beautifully ornate front doors and waited.

Not long afterwards, so the legend goes, a man arrived from Walata, a city whose crown of splendour and importance was then in the process of being stolen by Timbuktu. He asked for the keys, opened those great doors, sat down in the cool interior of the mosque and began to hum verses from his Quran. This was the holy man sent by God. His name was Sidi Yahia and he led a rich life full of piety and miracles, revered and respected by his many pupils and followers. After his death, Sidi Yahia was buried in a vault underneath the mosque, which became one of the three great centres of devotion and learning in Timbuktu. Its great doors were closed and the belief arose that if those doors were ever to be opened, it would signal the end of the world. Only judgement, heaven or hell would remain.

Truth? Legend? Superstition? Religious mumbo-jumbo designed to keep the masses of West Africa in the dark ages? Fairy-tales stoked by colonial oppressors to prevent Islamic civilisation from regaining its rightful zenith? There are plenty of scientific materialists in the West who might agree with at least some of those assessments of the Sidi Yahia story. In so doing, they would make very strange philosophical bedfellows with the men who arrived in their 4x4 Land cruisers with picks and hammers on Monday 2nd July 2012 and proceeded to smash the doors of the Sidi Yahia Mosque into a pile of jagged timber and metal, shouting "*Allah u akbar!* God is Great!"

A group of onlookers stood by aghast. Some were crying. When the sound of splintering wood and ripping metal died down, one of the young vandals, his head covered in regulation khaki cheche, offered 50,000 FCFA, about €80, to the present day imam of the mosque, Alpha Abdoulahi, for repairs. Sidi Yahia's successor refused to take the money, telling the aggressor that it was too late. The damage was all done. "They wanted to show that it wouldn't be the end of the world," one of Abdoulahi's family members told the Agence France Presse news agency. "They wanted to destroy the mystery," said the imam himself.

2. AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar ud-Dine

The triple headed Islamist occupation of the north

Who are these people who want to destroy the mystery? Who, in the name of Islam, might want to pulverize something so holy and ancient, so cherished by amateurs of Mali's millennial culture and so revered by the people of Timbuktu?

The vandals of the Sidi Yahia mosque were mujahedeen from an Islamist militia called Ansar ud-Dine. They might also have belonged to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).¹ The truth is that the lines between the three Islamic armed groups that controlled northern Mali from April 2012 to January 2013 are blurred. They each have their own back story, ethnic mix, leaders and agenda, but there's evidence of considerable coordination and sharing of resources between them. How did they gain control of a slice of desert the size of France and the UK put together? How did an apparently stable African democracy like Mali, which had long practiced a moderate African / Berber form of Islam, become the fief of warlords driven, outwardly at least, by a fundamentalist approach to religion and morality?

The Salafist² philosophy that rules the north can be traced back through Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the founders of Al Qaida, to Hassan Al Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and his fellow Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, the theorist-in-chief of late 20th century Islamic radicalism; through Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, the father of the Islamic revival in northern India, to an austere ultra-conservative 18th century preacher from Najd in Saudi Arabia called Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. But how did this essentially alien form of Islam, born in Saudi Arabia and bred in Egypt, Pakistan and Afghanistan, take control of a vast slice of the Sahara desert, bringing its population to a state of cowering submission?

On January 17th 2012, a rebellion by the Touareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) broke out in the Malian town of Menaka, which is situated in the far east of the country near its border with Niger. Although dramatic and distressing, this event was neither surprising nor without precedent. The Touareg of north-eastern Mali first rebelled against the government in Bamako in 1963 and again, on a much larger scale, in 1990 and 2006. All these rebellions form part of a continual Touareg resistance to central government rule that has lasted for more than half a century. Theirs is a classic nationalist struggle motivated by a desire for political self-determination and the preservation of their unique Berber identity and nomadic culture.

¹ In general, I use the more common French acronyms for these various armed groups. The only exception is AQIM rather than the French AQMI.

² Salafism comes from the Arabic word *salaf* meaning 'originator' or 'ancestor'. It describes a belief that Muslims should return to the pure and rigorous moral habits and religious observances of the original followers of the Prophet.

In the last days of March, just when the MNLA seemed to be on the threshold of defeating the Malian army and realizing their old dream of an independent state called Azawad, their uprising was hi-jacked by a coalition of armed Islamic groups, in a move whose deft brilliance the 19th century philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz would both no doubt have applauded.

The oldest of these Islamist groups was Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. It was created in 2007 when a recalcitrant Algerian jihadist organisation called The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) decided to align itself with the wider global jihad and become part of the Al Qaida 'franchise'. The GSPC had itself emerged back in 1998 from the most brutal and hard line of all the Algerian Islamist terror groups, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

The GIA were responsible for the darkest violence of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. Its acts of terror were so savage and indiscriminate that Osama bin Laden himself expressed concern that its activities were bringing the name of jihad into disrepute. Apart from countless soldiers, policemen and entirely innocent civilians, including women and children, the GIA were also responsible for murdering journalists, writers, intellectuals and musicians, including the star of 'soft' romantic raï music Cheb Hasni, who was gunned down near his home in Oran in 1994.

The GIA's successor AQIM is lead by the university-educated Abdelmalik Droukdel aka Abou Wadoud, who runs a jihadist network spanning the whole of the Maghreb and the Sahel from his base in the Kabyle mountains of Algeria. AQIM's Timbuktu branch is under the merciless control of an ex-smuggler from Debdeb in eastern Algeria by the name of Mohammed Ghadir, aka Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, the most feared Islamist *emir* or brigade leader in the southern Sahara. So far, Abou Zeid is the only AQIM emir to have actually carried out a threat to murder a western kidnap victim when his demands weren't met. His *katiba*, or cell, is currently holding 11 European hostages somewhere in the Malian desert.

The second armed Islamist group was the MUJAO. Lead by an ex-jail bird from Mauritania called Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, MUJAO began life in 2011 as a jack-in-the-box terror offshoot of AQIM. Its name popped up first near Tindouf in western Algeria in connection with the kidnapping of three Spanish aid-workers, then a few months later and a few thousand kilometres to the south east in Tamanrasset, where it blew up a police training centre. Mujao took control over the eastern Malian city of Gao in July 2012, ejecting the nationalist MNLA after fierce gun battle in the city centre. The French army, with some support from the Malian army, finally managed to eject MUJAO from Gao on January 26th 2013. As I write, the jihadists are fighting back with suicide bombers, IEDs and shoot-outs in the streets of the city.

MUJAO is a nebulous alliance of Arab or Moorish jihadists, with a strong following amongst the disaffected youth of the Polisario-run refugee camps in western Algeria, the Arabs of the Tilemsi valley north of Gao and Mauritians angered by their

government's pro-Western policies. Some say MUJAO was created after a bitter power struggle at the top of AQIM between Abou Zeid and his arch rival Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of the most prolific and notorious dons of the Saharan smuggling trade and a senior emir in both the GSPC and AQIM. Having completely fallen out with Abou Zeid, Belmokhtar, so the theory goes, decided to set up his own terror organisation with the help of Ould Kheirou and pursue his own interests independent of AQIM control. Others believe that AQIM itself set up the MUJAO purposefully as a kind of 'foreign legion', whose mission it was to take violent jihad into the whole of West Africa and link up with other jihadist groups already active in the region, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The third group were the lynchpins of this whole affair. Ansar ud-Dine means the 'Defenders' or 'Followers' of the 'Way'. For 'Way' you can also substitute 'Path' or 'Faith'. The group's founder is one of the most remarkable men in modern Saharan history. His name is Iyad Ag Ghaly and he comes from a sub-clan of the Ifoghas, a dominant 'aristocratic' Touareg tribe who have effectively ruled the far northeast of Mali since the early 20th century.

Reportedly a brilliant military and political strategist, Ag Ghaly was once the overall leader of the Touareg rebel movement. In June 1990, against desperate odds, he led a small group of poorly-armed Touareg rebels in an uprising against the Malian state and six months later signed a peace accord with the Malian government which secured numerous promises of devolution and development for the northeast. Most of these promises were never honoured.

For a while, Ag Ghaly was seen as a hero of the Touareg cause, their 'Che Guevara'. He was and still is considered by many of his own people to be the only Touareg leader capable of dealing with the complexities of both late 20th century geopolitics and modern desert warfare, and as such, is revered and respected by Touareg nationalists throughout the Sahara. Others however suspect him of having sold the Touareg cause down the river by bringing the rebellion of 1990-1 to a premature close, well before the ultimate goal of independence had been achieved. He has a reputation for taking decisions without proper consultation, of being distant, autocratic and too concerned for his own advancement, as well as that of his tribe the Ifoghas, to the detriment of others. His dealings with the Algerian and Malian governments and security establishments are suspected by some to have compromised Touareg interests. In short he enjoys a streaky reputation.

Sometime in the mid to late 1990s, Ag Ghaly came into contact with preachers from the Tablighi Jama'at, a peaceful Islamic proselytising movement from Pakistan whose *da'wah*, or 'summons', was being heard throughout the southern Sahel at the time. The Tabligh' preached a return to pure and fundamental Islamic principles, untainted either by western values or deviant local beliefs. Other Touareg leaders and notables fell under the *da'wah* spell for a while, but few embraced it as wholeheartedly as Ag Ghaly. Between 1998 and 2001, he spent six months at a Tablighi Jama'at centre in Lahore and went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, leaving behind the looser life of women, music and bonhomie that he had been happy to live until then.

People close to him relate how he became almost monk-like in his habits and obsessive in the austere simplicity of his devotion. He also forbade his wife to shake hands with men and eventually prevailed upon her to wear a face-covering veil, which was unheard of in Touareg female society until then.

In 2003, at the invitation of the Malian government, Ag Ghaly was sent to negotiate the release of 15 European hostages who were being held in northern Mali by a militia belonging to the GSPC. That's when he made contact with the emirs of Algeria's violent jihad for the first time. His work as a chief political fixer and hostage negotiator of choice continued over the ensuing years, bringing him considerable wealth and ever more influence.

In 2006, despite having little to do with its inception, he managed to gain control of a new Touareg uprising and in 2008 he persuaded the Malian President, Amadou Toumani Touré, to send him to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, as a special advisor to the Malian consulate. After eighteen months in the post he was expelled from the country for consorting with 'extremists'. By this time, Ag Ghaly had become an important node in a vast network of power and influence that stretched from Jeddah to Nouakchott, from Tripoli to Niamey and included presidents, ministers, military chiefs, secret service agents, jihadists, tribal leaders, war lords and mafia. In short, he was a man who could not be ignored.

As the Ghaddafi regime crumbled into dust during the summer and early autumn 2011, Touareg deserters from the Libyan army flooded back into their native Mali, laden with the kind of heavy weaponry that northern Mali had rarely if ever seen during fifty years of Touareg revolt. In camps near Kidal, they formed joined up with local Touareg who had deserted from the Malian army and formed the MNLA and young Touareg activists who were adept at communicating their message via the Internet. This alliance set about preparing for the rebellion to end all rebellions. However, for ethnic and historical reasons, they made the expensive mistake of trying to sideline Iyad Ag Ghali and exclude him from their project.

In response, he formed his own militia and called it Ansar ud-Dine. Its stated aim wasn't an independent Azawad but rather Shari'a law for the whole of Mali. Ag Ghali then embarked on a rapid recruitment drive, luring young Touareg fighters away from the MNLA with money from his seemingly inexhaustible war chest. Much of it probably came from Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, which had become incredibly wealthy thanks to the proceeds of kidnapping and trafficking over the previous five years. Some of it may have come from other sources, possibly from the black ops budgets of Algeria or Qatar, or from wealthy Saudi donors, who were all too keen to see hard line Sunni Islam gain ground in West Africa. Speculation about Iyad's foreign backers is endless, but hard evidence is almost non-existent.

Money wasn't the only thing that Iyad Ag Ghali and Ansar ud-Dine had to offer the young men of the north east; it was membership of a well-equipped and well-funded organisation lead by the most admired military brain in modern Touareg history. Although the MNLA's secular, nationalist and Berber outlook was far removed from

the Islamist internationalist and Arabist stance of Ansar ud-Dine, the MNLA leaders felt that they needed Ag Ghaly and his troops in order to defeat the Malian army. So, throughout February and March, the two organisations fought side by side, taking most of the smaller towns in the region by mid March. This devil's pact was to cost the MNLA dear.

The poorly equipped and badly mismanaged Malian army was sapped of its morale and effectiveness by the military coup that took place in Bamako on March 22nd 2012. A group of soldiers, infuriated by the poor conduct of the war in the north and the sufferings of the average recruit, stormed the presidential palace, ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré and installed a junta headed by Major Amadou Sanogo in its place. On March 31st, Timbuktu, the last bastion of Malian state control in the north, fell into rebel hands. The next day, the MNLA issued a communiqué that declared the independence of Azawad. Mali lost the northern two-thirds of its territory and the country was split in two.

At that crucial moment, Iyad broke ranks with the MNLA and joined his allies in AQIM and MUJAO to swoop down and snatch control of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, the three main urban centres in this vast desert region. After a month of tense and painful coexistence, the MNLA were finally driven out from all three cities by the Islamist triumvirate. In basic terms, MUJAO became the masters of Gao, AQIM of Timbuktu and Ansar ud-Dine of Kidal. Ansar ud-Dine with its 'local' Touareg face, however, became a convenient 'front' organisation for the mainly foreign forces of AQIM and MUJAO throughout the territory. The three organisations divided up the spoils. The Salafist take over of northern Mali was complete.

The religious 'utopia' that these desert-hardened men then attempted to impose on the people of the north has given rise to many atrocities. With God on their side and their black Salafist flags flying high, the mujahedeen foisted their own form of Shari'a law on a shocked and frightened population, what you might call 'jungle' Shari'a although that would unjustly belittle the harmonious beauty of the tropical rainforest.

Even if you do happen to be in favour of Shari'a law, it's clear that the usual safeguards that ensure that serious punishment is reserved only for the worst crimes, securely proven with due process, were laid to one in northern Mali. There was a racist element to the Islamists' application of Shari'a. Almost all the condemned were black Songhoi or Bozo men. Those judging them were almost always 'white' Arabs, Touareg or foreigners.

Men found guilty of theft on the flimsiest of evidence have a foot or a hand, or sometimes both, hacked from their bodies. Adulterers or the parents of newborn children born out of wedlock, tried without proper procedure or witnesses, are stoned to death. People caught smoking, drinking alcohol, watching television, playing football, holding hands, walking the streets late at night, wearing jewellery or failing to wear a veil are whipped. All these sentences are carried out in public, in front of grieving men, women and children, often in mass punishments involving

many victims. Dancing is forbidden. Gathering with friends is forbidden. Bars and restaurants are forbidden to sell alcohol. The tombs of holy men are destroyed with picks and hammers in broad daylight. Monuments to the martyrs are desecrated. Amulets and talismans are forbidden. People protest and are driven off the streets with sticks, whips and gunfire.

Maybe there was an unexpected truth hidden in the legend of the Sidi Yahia doors. Granted, the world itself has not ended. But perhaps a particular world, all too familiar to people who have visited or lived in Mali, a world of tolerance, community, humorous cohabitation, music, dancing and religious freedom has perhaps come to an end.

The deeper causes of the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali and the fall of a once admired African democracy are bafflingly complex and beyond the scope of this report. So are the current attempts to rid northern Mali of the last remaining Islamists, who linger in the remote Togharghar Mountains north of Kidal, in villages around Gao and along the Niger bend up to Timbuktu. It's a struggle that is likely to drag on for month's even years and involve a patchwork of different military entities – French Army, Malian Army, ECOWAS, AU, EU, UN etc.

The aim of this book is to focus primarily on the effects of the Touareg rebellion, the military coup in the south and the Islamist takeover of the north on the music, musicians and cultural life of the country. This choice does not intend to belittle the general or 'non-cultural' suffering of the people of northern Mali in any way. That suffering has been acute and widely publicised. Nonetheless, it's true to say that Mali is a country whose culture is renowned throughout the world. It is a source of pride, stability and wealth, both human and economic, at home. Culture is Mali's greatest Ambassador abroad.

Puritanical doctrinaire Islam is a threat to Malian culture. But unlike other parts of the Islamic world, where hard line Salafism has drained local culture of some of its life and colour, Mali has proved resistant. It is endowed with such deep and well-rooted cultural traditions and habits that the Islamist occupation seems to have been unable to dislodge them to any great extent. In some ways, Malian cultural life has emerged with a greater sense of defiance and honed purpose from the experience. Nonetheless, the nation is still in crisis, and its culture still has a battle on its hands.

3. “We don’t want Satan’s music”

Scenes of musical life under Shari’a law

On Wednesday 22nd August 2012, the following announcement was made by Osama Ould Abdel Kader, a spokesperson for MUJAO based in the city of Gao:

“We, the mujahedeen of Gao, of Timbuktu and Kidal, henceforward forbid the broadcasting of any western music on all radios in this Islamic territory. This ban takes effect from today, Wednesday. We do not want Satan’s music. In its place, there will be Quranic verses. Shari’a demands this. What God commands must be done.”

In Gao, a group of teenagers sat around a ghetto blaster listening to Bob Marley. A Landcruiser pick-up loaded with tooled-up Islamic police came by and seeing the reggae fans, stopped and accosted them. “This music is *haram!*”³ said one of the MUJAO men as he yanked the cassette out of the blaster and crushed it under his feet. “Listen to this instead,” he barked, handing the startled reggae fans a tape of Cheikh Abderrahmane Soudais, the highly revered Quranic chanter from Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

In Timbuktu, a young teenager received a call on his mobile phone while he was standing on a street corner in the town centre. As the tinny ringtone sent out a looping riff lifted from a song by local singer Seckou Maiga, it was overheard by a group of Ansar ud-Dine soldiers who were standing nearby. One of them, not much older than the teenager with the phone, broke off from the group and strode over. “Hey! Give me that here!” he ordered. The youth handed over his phone slowly, his face blank and grim. Giving his shoulders an impatient shrug to better seat his AK47, the Ansar ud-Dine fighter opened the back of the phone, picked out the SIM card, and ground it into the dust with his feet. He then gave the phone back in pieces. “None of that Godless music, understand?!”

In Kidal, a group of women gathered on the dirt airstrip to the east of the town. They sat close, at least thirty of them, in a large huddle of shimmering indigo robes. One woman started to beat the *tindé* drum, whilst another sprinkled water on its goatskin to keep it taut and resonant. Their chanting ululating rose up to the hazy skies and sent old poetry out to the flat horizons; calling, responding, propelling, forward, me, you, us, all, together. The *tindé* is the mitochondrial DNA of all Touareg music. Its horizontal trance-beat powers the communal joy of major feasts and gatherings in Touareg lands. Like so much traditional Touareg music, it’s played by women and only women. The *tindé* is an essential ingredient in the glue that binds female society together and gives it power and confidence. But as the men gathered around to watch, as they had been used to doing for as long as they could remember, Ansar ud-

³ Forbidden by Islamic law.

Dine militiamen with black headbands and AK47s strapped to their chests sliced into the crowd and shattered it into angry fragments, shouting at the men to keep away from the women and go home. Then they ordered the women to stop what they're doing and go back to their homes as well. The mood burst, and the joy eked away to be replaced by surliness and frustration.

On the outskirts of Gao, a local *takamba* musician was stopped at a checkpoint on one of the major roads out of town. Takamba is the sound of Gao. With its loping rhythms, sensual dance, skyward vocals and raw cranked-up *teherdents* (lute) and guitars, it has long been the preferred style of musical entertainment at weddings, baptisms and Tabeski feasts in the town and the surrounding country. It's a style that also unifies the Touareg and Songhai people, often at odds with each other, as it is performed and consumed by people from both ethnic groups. Gao without takamba would be like Rio without samba; hard to imagine.

Our musician was on his way to a wedding in a village outside Gao, his car laden with instruments and equipment. At the checkpoint he was ordered to step down from his car by a MUJAO militiaman who then proceeded to search it. All the instruments are taken out and piled up by the side of the road; guitars, teherdent, amps, speakers, calabashes. The pile was doused in petrol and set alight. The musician was too scared to shout out, or cry, or flee. There were guns everywhere. He just stood and watched as his livelihood went up in flames. If he made a scene or showed any emotion, he knew that his own life would be in danger.⁴

In Timbuktu a posse of local Islamist militiamen turned up at a radio station and took out four large hessian rice bags. They proceeded to fill them up with music cassettes, hundred and hundreds of them, an entire archive of local musical culture, painstakingly collected over a decade or more. The station manager stood by, distraught, knowing that all this music, that has been a gift to the world and an ember of pride in local hearts, will be lost forever.

In Gao a family watched a programme called 'Mini Star' on television. It's a Malian adaptation of the X-factor idea, in which young up and coming singers and musicians imitate the greats of Malian music; Salif Keïta, Ali Farka Touré, Mangala Camara, Sekouba Bambino and others. The performances are judged by a panel and each week a group is eliminated by popular vote. TV is an important means for broadcasting new music in Mali. TV is the family's window onto the world. The weather is hot in Gao and all the windows of the family home are open. A patrol of Islamic policemen heard the sound of music coming from the TV as they pass by the house. They doubled back and entered the premises, grabbing the TV and smashing it out on cracked paving stones of the yard with the butts of their rifles. The family were warned that next time they'll get the whip.

⁴ All these incidents were reported to me either by the people involved or by third parties living in Mali. I have deliberately not used anyone's real name to protect the subjects and their families.

In Gao and Timbuktu the dusty streets ring with the synthetic sound of babies laughing, a strangely joyless sound. Forbidden to use musical ringtones on their mobiles, the local population have adopted this ironic alternative. The effect is often eerie.

These are just a few snapshots of musical life in what was the most literal and brutal Shari'a jurisdiction in the world.

The MUJAO declaration of August 22nd 2012, was disingenuous for several reasons. First, music had been effectively banned in the north for several months already. The declaration only gave that ban a rubber stamp. Secondly, when the declaration spoke of 'western' music, Satan's music, it did in fact mean all most form of music; modern, traditional, electrified, acoustic, foreign and local. Only Sheikh Abderrahmane Soudais and his ilk were deemed entirely *halal*.

4. Mosques and maquis

Religion, extremism and law and order in southern Mali

Some outsiders make the mistake of thinking that the hard line Salafi presence in Mali dates back to the beginning of 2012, or to a few years before that. It goes back a lot further. AQIM and its predecessor the GSPC have been hiding out in the northern Malian deserts since at least 2003, kidnapping foreigners, smuggling arms and taking kickbacks and protection money from high-stakes traffickers. But that's not all. A Salafist presence has in fact been growing in the major Malian urban centres, including Bamako, for more than half a century.

The Wahabi strain of ultra-conservative reformist Islam first made its mark on Malian society and religious discourse during the colonial era. It was popular amongst well-educated urban traders, businessmen and students, many of whom had travelled on the *hajj* to Saudi Arabia and brought back the rigorous teachings of Al Wahabi and his acolytes, which, by the mid twentieth century, had become the spiritual cornerstone of the House of Saud and the new kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Some of these fervent hajjis concluded that Mali's religious traditions were in dire need of reform. They saw only obscurantism and backwardness in the old syncretic practices of popular Islam in Mali with its *gri gris*, talismans, saints and spirits. The way Sufi orders such as the Tijjaniya and the Qadiriya was manipulated by the French colonial authorities and subsequently 'tamed' was regrettable, or so these 'progressive' Islamists thought.

Back in the 19th century, at the dawn of the colonial era, it was the Sufi brotherhoods that had presented the most concerted and effective opposition to both animist idolatry and French colonial domination. Now the modernists felt that these same brotherhoods were too pliable in the face of foreign influence, content to promote local 'folkloric' forms of Islam over more 'progressive' Middle Eastern ones. From the 1960s onwards, Saudi petro-dollars were used to promote the Wahabi position by funding mosques and schools in Bamako and other major cities. The traditionalist vs. modernist, Sufi vs. Salafist debate was especially heated when it came to education, with the Wahabiya championing Arabic as the most forward-looking language of instruction, and the Sufi brotherhoods happy to educate their children in a mixture of French and local languages.

But this Wahabi strain was a minor, almost 'cultish' presence in the prevailing landscape of Sufi moderation in Mali. Indeed, the way some Malians talked about the Wahabiya made them sound exactly like a cult, an Islamic equivalent to the Seventh Day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses, who go about trying to lure weak and gullible youth into their ranks with all kinds of mind-scrambling inducements. They were considered weird and fanatical by 'normal' people, shunned and even feared. As early as 1957, there were anti-Wahabi riots in Bamako and Sikasso. The Wahabiya

were iconoclasts, meddlers, who never tired to telling their fellow Malians that to revere saintly men or allow women and men to mix was utterly sinful. The Wahabi prayed with their arms cross over their chest, unlike the Malians who followed the Maliki school of law and prayed with their arms hanging by their sides. Wahabi influence grew as they built new schools and mosques. Wahabi run-education was conceived on western lines, with rigorous enquiry rather than the old Quranic school tradition of just learning by rote and learning dominated in every aspect by religion rather than the secularism of the state education system.

Meanwhile the overwhelming majority of Malians continued with their syncretic and comfortably West African forms of Islamic observance. The Sufi brotherhoods remained central to religious and social life, and as people grew disillusioned with socialism and secular politics, religious organisations became more powerful. A good illustration of this trend is the southern Malian religious movement called Ansar ud-Dine, a Sufi organisation with over a million followers that came into being during the great 'democratic' renaissance of the early 1990s. As the old dictatorial ways were swept away and Mali rediscovered its entrepreneurial flare, thousands of new political, social, educational but also religious organisations came into being.

Ansar ud-Dine south, born in that fervent period of hope, is quite distinct from the armed group started by Iyad Ag Ghali in the northeast. Its leader is the charismatic Chérif Ousmane Haidara, also known as 'Wulibali' or 'the truth speaker'. His sermons sell by the thousands on video and cassette and his devotees regularly fill the enormous *Stade 26 Mars*, Mali's largest stadium, which is more than any music star can manage today. Haidara's message is essentially one of peace, morality in daily life, clean politics and national renewal, themes that find an easy resonance in the hearts of the many ordinary Malians whose patience with the country's rapacious and self-serving political elite ran out long ago. It's also a message that's delivered in Bamana, the local language. As well as being an inspirational spiritual leader, Haidara is also a patriot who isn't afraid to champion Malian culture and Malian spirituality in the face of those, like the Wahabiya, who claim that Arabic is the only legitimate language for Islamic ritual and discourse.

Some have suspected that links exist between Iyad Ag Ghali's armed Salafist movement in the north and Haidara's peaceful spiritual association in the south. The truth however is that Ag Ghali and the other Al Qaeda affiliates probably chose the name Ansar ud-Dine to try and draw on some of the widespread popularity and trust that the southern movement enjoys. It's more to do with religious 'branding' than anything else. Indeed, after the Islamist takeover, Chérif Haidara was quick to condemn the brutality and intolerance of the northern imposters. "Our aim is to raise people's awareness and get them to know that Islam is tolerance. That group they've just created in the north is also called Ansar ud-Dine, but we have nothing to do with them," he told the French magazine *Jeune Afrique* in April 2012. "Shari'a is for Muslims. Here, in Mali, everybody knows that there are Muslims, Christians, Jews and unbelievers. How can he [Iyad Ag Ghali] bring shari'a and his new Islam to the Malian people? We don't agree with Iyad's shari'a, we reject it."

Hard line Wahabiya dislike the 'cult of personality' that surrounds figures like Chérif Haidara or Mohammédou Ould Cheikh Hamallah Haidara (no immediate relation), also known as The Chérif of Nioro of the Sahel, head of Hamallist Sufi brotherhood. They also distrust the wealth that these hugely popular religious leaders seem to have accumulated. Wahabiya dislike anyone or anything that presumes the position of a conduit to God, or a symbol of God on earth. For them, men can only have a direct relationship with God, without any kind of intercession. But the Wahabiya voice is weak in comparison to the majority. Men like Chérif Haidara and the Chérif of Nioro are not only hugely popular spiritual leaders, they also wield a great deal of political influence. It is said that the Chérif of Nioro often visited the barracks in Kati to talk to coup leader Captain Amadou Sanago in an attempt to temper his excessive and whimsical political machinations.

The High Islamic Council (HCI), lead by its vociferous imam Mahmoud Dicko has also gained considerable power in the past two decades. The HCI managed to derail an attempt to reform Mali's repressive Family Code in 2010, ensuring that the laws governing marriage, divorce, women's rights and so on became more conservative and 'Islamic' than they had been before. Meanwhile, more and more women were seen wearing some kind of head covering or veil in the streets. The HCI's power in Malian politics was recently cemented by the appointed of one of its senior leader, Dr Yacouba Traoré, to the new post of Minister for Religious Affairs and Worship in the government of national unity that was proclaimed in August 2012.

The reaction of ordinary Malians to the events of September 11th 2001 differed from that of the average European or American. The murder of 3,000 innocent people was not widely condoned, nor was the stark brutality of the attacks in New York and Washington. But thanks to his bold defiance of the West, Osama Bin Laden became a kind of folk hero in Mali following 9/11, his unsmiling face beaming beatifically from T-shirts, posters and calendars. Of course this didn't mean that all Malians had suddenly become rabid jihadists and Al Qaida sympathisers. Not at all. It just demonstrated a different angle of view on the Islamist struggle, one in which the empowerment of dispossessed Muslims in Africa and Asia and the humiliation of an arrogant Christian West was seen as both positive and inevitable in the long run.

In 2005, following the defeat of Mali by Togo in the preliminaries for the football Cup of African Nations, there were serious attacks on bars and nightclubs in Bamako. The finger was pointed at the HCI and self-appointed Salafi moral vigilantes stoked up by local preachers and mosques, although nothing was ever proved in a court of law. A decree was passed in 2006 forbidding the presence of drinking dens next to places of worship. Between 2000 and 2011, the number of mosques in Bamako tripled, a rate of expansion that exceeded the vertiginous growth of the general population in the city. Often a rich businessman would buy a large plot of land, build himself a fine house and add a mosque or religious centre next to it for good measure. The number of bars and shebeens, or *maquis* in the local argot, also grew rapidly.

In 2008, a music venue and *espace culturel* called Le Hogon was closed, and a mosque was built in its place. Le Hogon had become world renowned as the place where Toumani Diabaté, the kora virtuoso who is possibly one of the most famous Malian musicians in the world, would perform every Saturday with his group the Symmetric Orchestra. It was a place of pilgrimage for music fans from all over the world. Following its closure, the newspaper Bamako Hebdo published an article under the title ‘Rampant Islamism continues to gain ground in Mali’, which claimed that a Malian petrol millionaire by the name of Babou Yara bought Le Hogon with the express intent of giving it as a gift to the descendants of El Hadj Oumar Tall, one of the most famous names in modern West African history.

Tall was a mid 19th century reformer and religious warrior belonging to the Sufi Tijanniya brotherhood who led a jihad through West Africa and established a short lived Toucouleur empire that covered much of modern day Mali, as well as parts of Senegal and Niger. Bamako Hebdo implied that Babou Yara wanted to please the powerful imams of Bamako by converting a place of fun and entertainment into one of purity and devotion. The leader of the HCI, Mahmoud Dicko, told the paper that in his opinion “transforming an *espace culturel*, a bar or a night club into a mosque is something to be welcomed because those activities sully the earth.”

Some musicians and music fans in the capital were shocked by Le Hogon’s mutation into a place of worship. The celebrated Malian musician and record producer Cheikh Tidiane Seck told me that the news of Le Hogon’s closure was like a knife wound. “Islam in our country has always been moderate,” he said. “Now, if we’re going to open the door to some kind of Afghanistanisation, or Pakistanisation of our religion, then we’re all screwed. The architects of all that must stop calling themselves Malians, because there’s never been a more tolerant people than the Malian people. Le Hogon should have been protected. That rich guy could have done what he wanted somewhere else in Bamako, but Le Hogon was symbolic, a place where the music, art and culture of Mali was being developed. ‘We must not sacrifice it!’ That should’ve been the attitude of the government at the time.”

Toumani Diabaté himself, now a devout and practicing Muslim, refutes the Bamako Hebdo story, claiming that the sale of Le Hogon by the ex-pat Malian family who owned it was just another straightforward real estate deal with no subplot, in a city where real estate was beginning to make fast fortunes. Toumani even tried to buy the place himself but couldn’t afford the exorbitant price that was being asked. However, he agrees with Tidiane Seck that the Malian government has never cherished and nurtured the country’s cultural wealth as it should. He points out that other ‘musical laboratories’ where the country’s musical culture was incubated, such as The Motel de Bamako and the Buffet de la Gare, have also been allowed to disappear.

The singer Rokia Traore, another global Malian music success story, also regrets the lack of respect and support paid to the music sector by Malian politicians and leaders. “There’s this disdain on the part of the government towards the population and I think that artists suffer from the same thing,” she says. “Even if the force of things means that we can’t be totally ignored and the leaders are obliged to take note of the important role that artists play for Mali, they often say it just for form’s sake.

They still have to demonstrate that they take artists seriously and aren't treating them as simplistic folk who know how to sing and that's all."

Apart from the story of Le Hogon, which has perhaps more symbolic value than anything else, there has been a tangible seepage of religion into the social life of Mali's urban centres. It's no coincidence that this trend has coincided with an explosion in nightlife; an exponential growth in bars, nightclubs, restaurants, hotels and other places of entertainment, from the swishiest *boîte de nuit* to the most raw and rudimentary *maquis*. Small clusters of clubs and bars have grown up in certain districts of Bamako such as Lafiabougou, ACI 2000, along the Route de Koulikoro and in poorer outlying areas like Yirimadjo and Kalaban Koura. None perhaps yet deserves the dishonour of being called a fully-fledged red light district but a certain amount of prostitution and drug dealing has inevitably attached itself to the wilder and less regulated nitespots. Drunkenness has increased, dragging petty violence and disorder in its wake. Some kind of backlash was inevitable. Hedonism and religiosity often dance a kind of dialectical waltz together. The *maquis* and the mosque are both protagonists in Bamako's complex social evolution, opposite, but also strangely interdependent.

In an article entitled, 'Journey to the heart of Wahabi Bamako' published by the French magazine *Jeune Afrique* in October 2011, the ransacking of a small nightclub in the Kalaban Koura district was the starting point for a general assessment of the growing Wahabi influence in the cultural and political life of the city. The article related how a group of people shouting "Allah Akbar! Astaghfir Allah! (Seek Forgiveness!)" had raided the nightclub of the Hotel Flamboyant in the wee hours of a Tuesday morning and torched the place. When I posted the story on my Facebook page in October 2012, some Bamako residents were moved to comment that these kinds of acts are isolated and that in any case, the level of drunkenness, noise, disturbance and licentiousness in some areas of the city was becoming a major problem. You didn't have to be an extremist to disapprove, just a concerned citizen.

This reaction hints at a wider law and order debate that has been alive in Mali for many years, just as it has in every country in Europe or the world for that matter. How much freedom can individuals possess to break old moral codes and boundaries, to express themselves and to have fun, possibly at the expense of 'decent' society? Are the youth lacking in respect for their parents, their religion and their society in general? Is the government being too lenient in its dealings with drugs, prostitution and petty crime? Are people becoming too lax in their attitudes towards alcohol and dress? Is the country going down the moral drain? All these questions stoke the national debate in Mali as they do in France, Britain or the USA? But in Mali, the debate takes on a religious tint faster than it does in the secular West.

That's not to say that those who proclaim the need for respect, decency, law and order in Mali are all die-hard Wahabiya. Far from it. It's just that these concerns give impetus to a general drift back to core religious values and, in a small minority of cases perhaps, to extreme religious positions. The trend is also helped along by the general disillusionment of the population with the corruption, mendacity and

selfishness that has encrusted itself onto the political and social life of the country. Some have even concluded that large religious associations like the HCI or Ansar ud-Dine South are the new de facto political power in Mali. They are the only quasi-political organisations who enjoy the genuine trust and faith of the people.

This concern with law and order and the debate about identity and moral values that accompanies it are nationwide phenomena. In the north, it's clear that no one asked for the reptilian response to the country's moral dilemmas offered by AQMI, Ansar ud-Dine and MUJAO. No one should doubt that the application of shari'a law from April 2012 was deeply unpopular in the north and nothing can justify the brutality that has accompanied its arrival. It may have been an 'Islamic' solution, although many doubt even that, but it was also simply alien. It just isn't Malian.

On the other hand, there is a law and order sub-text that cannot be ignored, even in the north. It seems that one of the main reasons that the MNLA lost their grip on the northern cities after the defeat of the Malian army in April 2012 was that their brief period of control was simply too chaotic, too full of petty pilfering, looting, violence and even rape. Many were moved to say that at least the Islamists imposed some kind of law and order when they took over Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. The local population might never have expected or wanted shari'a, but it did want an end to the growing insecurity and criminality that had afflicted the region not only in the previous months of the uprising, for a number years before that. The irony was of course that this insecurity existed in large part due to the criminal activities of drug lords and trafficking dons with close ties to the Islamist groups.

Mali is experiencing the growth pains of modernisation and this experience is provoking Malians to ask fundamental questions about religion, morality and society, all of which have bearing on the musical and cultural life of the country. Should our life be more governed by religion? Should we be more laissez-faire and secular? Should we resist the influence of Western culture? Should we embrace it? What is our national identity? These topics are hotly debated every day, in the press, in conferences and radio studios, in living rooms and on street corners.

A few years ago, when, on the one hand, Bamako was swinging like it never had done before and on the other, preachers like Haidara and Dicko could draw far greater crowds than any musician or politician, a new style of music rode this return to religion. It was called *zikri* and its leading light was Mahmoud Diaby, whose hit song 'Zoul Koura Nain' topped the ORTM⁵ hit parade for several months in 2010. Its sugary melodies and skyward gaze expressed a need for solid truths and divine grace in the midst of struggle and conflict. The music seems to say that the time had come for Malians to reach back to the core of who they are and what they believe in.

Meanwhile, even before the cold shower of rebellion and war that rained down from January 2012 onwards, the problems facing musicians in southern Mali were piling up. Those problems were primarily economic in nature. Piracy, a curse that had been

⁵ L'Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Mali (ORTM) is Mali's national state-owned broadcasting company.

around for decades and which successive governments had effectively ignored, was putting the Malian recording industry into intensive care, if not the morgue. The Internet, but more specifically in Mali's case, mobile phones and their ability to Bluetooth music from one handset to another accelerated this decline. Oussou Bocoum, the boss of a record company in Bamako called Jamnaty Production, told Bamako Hebdo in September 2012 that "in the old days, despite classic piracy, albums could sell around 40 to 50,000 copies. But today, we have trouble shifting 1,000... I have to admit that if nothing is done to protect intellectual property and creativity, record production runs the risk of disappearing altogether."

The sources of income available to musicians were dwindling down to weddings, baptisms or other festive occasions, gigs in hotels, bars and *espaces-culturels*, or tours abroad. In Mali, just as in the rest of the world, DJs, amps and speakers were increasingly taking the place of live musicians, not only in bars and nightclubs, but also at family gatherings and festivities. The cost of hiring a live band, especially an A-list live band or famous singer, was becoming more and more prohibitive.

Even though the dream of performing abroad was still a driving force for many Malian musicians, the chances of launching a successful international career were becoming scarcer for the very same reasons that music in Mali was suffering; the collapse of the international recording industry due to illegal downloading and the lack of money to invest in new artists. Added to those were the costs of putting a Malian band on the road in Europe or America and the increasing difficulty of obtaining visas and work permits.

So life was far from sweet for Mali's musicians before 2012's descent into conflict, chaos and uncertainty, both in the north and the south. However, at least there were still lively music scenes in Bamako, Ségou and Mopti. Up north, the picture had already been grim for years.

The generally accepted notion that Mali is essentially a tolerant country, welcoming, open and mild in its religious faith and habits is essentially true. Salafism, Wahabism or even just a nameless drift back to stricter more rigorous forms of Islam still play a relatively minor role in the nation's religious life. But they exist and reflect something more general; a gut reaction to globalisation and insecurity, a need for solid moral certainties, a questioning of identity in a changing world and a deep disillusionment with mainstream politics. That doesn't mean that Mali was craving for the violent jihad that swoop out of the remote deserts and into the towns and villages of the north in early April of this year. That jihad was nurtured in an entirely different mental landscape, one that had been hardened and brutalized by years of guerrilla conflict in Algeria and fuelled by an extreme and pitiless worldview more common to places like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen and Saudi Arabia than Mali. The population of the north craved for security but not religious fanaticism. However, in the end, they had no choice in the matter.

5. Music in the red zone

The Festival in the Desert and the advance of Islamism in the north

“The first time I heard the word *Wahabiya*,” remembers Manny Ansar, director of the Festival in the Desert, “was when I was a child in the 1970s. People talked about them as if they were some kind of scary sect. I remember that adults would say to us ‘Hey, children, be careful. Those people give children money to lead them astray. Don’t take it and don’t listen to them.’”

A scary sect. If only it had stayed that way. Before the mid 1990s, political Islam and violent religious extremism hardly blipped the cultural radar of northern Mali. There was conflict in the north of course, but it all related either to the nationalist ambitions of the Touareg, or Kel Tamashek, as they prefer to be known, or to inter-ethnic strife between Touareg and Songhoi, Touareg and Arab or even between certain Touareg tribes clans, often stoked by manipulative politicians and leaders.

If there was a political philosophy that guided Iyad Ag Ghali and the Mouvement Populaire de l’Azawad (MPA) when they fought the great rebellion of 1990 it was a kind of Berber version of Nasserist Arab nationalism, which had been nurtured in Libyan training camps during the 1980s. Mainly, it was just a deep desire for autonomy and the right to defend Tamashek culture, the Tamashek language, Tamashek rights and the freedom that the nomad will always carry in his heart. It was a fight for earth, history, family and identity. Islam was part of all these but not the overriding or defining part.

After the Tamanrasset accords of January 6th 1991 that put an end to the rebellion, many Touareg musicians began to ‘resurface’ and reintegrate into normal civilian life. Members of Tinariwen who had taken part in the rebellion found themselves in Bamako or Kidal, playing music, hanging out, doing what they could to earn a living and survive. Manny Ansar was Tinariwen’s manager at the time. He remembers a whole group of Touareg musicians, ex-rebel leaders and *ishumar*⁶ who spent time together, in each other’s houses, out in the bush or, if they were in Bamako, out along the banks of the Niger, where it was quiet and the nature and solitude reminded them of home. Life was convivial. There was music. Women felt free to come and go. Some people smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol. The bonds between them, their music and their culture seemed strong and unbreakable.

No one quite knows why some senior Touareg figures from the northeast, including Iyad Ag Ghali, began to succumb to the message of Pakistani preachers belonging to Tablighi Jama’at. Perhaps it was due to a general disillusion with the nationalist

⁶ A Tamashek adaptation of the French word ‘chomeur’. *Ishumar* was the collective noun for the young Touareg men who left their homes in Mali and Niger in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to drought and lack of opportunity to find work in Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso and beyond. It was these men who became the foot soldiers of the rebellions of 1990.

cause, fuelled by the bitter in-fighting and recrimination between different Tamashek tribes and clans that followed the Tamanrasset Accords and the National Pact of 1994. Perhaps they were sick of petty politics and yearned for something loftier, purer, and more holy. Perhaps the very notion of dividing up Muslims into nation states seemed suddenly ungodly. The Wahabi have always preached that national boundaries are a Western imposition, designed to divide and weaken the Islamic *umma*, which should by rights exist in one borderless and divinely ruled polity.

“The Pakistani Salafists came through Bamako,” Manny remembers. “People saw them with their beards and their white robes. They were nice people. Then they went up to Kidal and that’s where certain Touareg leaders came into contact with them.” It’s hard to establish the precise date when all this happened, perhaps sometime in 1995 or just afterwards.

Manny remembers that everything happened very slowly and gradually. “There was a kind of psychological preparation, done in a really friendly way,” he says. “Then certain friends started to distance themselves bit by bit from our circle, people who had liked partying and beautiful women. They were still friends and we would still meet and talk about the situation of the country and the Touareg, but one felt that they were drifting away. They started to disapprove of my lifestyle, the travelling, my friendships with westerners, the festivals, musicians, alcohol, the life of pleasure. They still had respect, esteem, even friendship towards me but my lifestyle didn’t suit them any more. They left very gently.”

When they came back from their trips to Pakistan and Mecca, the dedication of these daw’ah devotees deepened. “They were really like monks,” Manny remembers, “dressed in white, very simple, eating the minimum, praying all the time, unconcerned about life’s problems except spreading messages of peace, togetherness and, of course, God. The first thing that shocked us is that they asked their wives not to shake hands with men any more. Suddenly you would stop seeing their women at all. They would stay in another room where they entertained their women friends.”

Meanwhile, Manny had helped to launch the Festival in the Desert in January 2001 at Tin Essako, a tiny little village to the east of Kidal. The festival was born thanks to an immense team effort involving Manny and his EFES association, Tinariwen, the French group Lo’Jo and various other French and Malian funders and supporters. The only threat felt during that first edition was that of petty criminality and banditry. The year before some Dutch tourists had been attacked and murdered up near Tessalit, north of Kidal. On the way up to the festival itself, the truck transporting a small PA system that had been flown in from France was stopped by armed bandits. It took the verbal skill and courage of Kheddou Ag Ossade, one of the core members of Tinariwen who later went on to form the group Terakaft, to dissuade the muggers from taking the equipment and thereby ruining the festival.

A smaller event took place a year later in Tessalit, but it was the third Festival in the Desert in January 2003, and the first in the silky white dunes of Essakane which were to become the festival’s permanent home, that really established the event’s

worldwide reputation. The number of visitors, both local and international, had tripled or even quadrupled. Well-known names like Robert Plant were present. The stage looked like a proper stage. The sound was of the same professional standard as a festival in Europe. The festival had 'arrived'.

And still no sign of any Islamists. A month after the festival, the GSPC kidnapped 32 European hostages in the Tassili region of southern Algeria, between Illizi and Djanet. It was the first major crisis involving the kidnapping of western tourists that the Sahara had ever known. Fifteen of the hostages were sent down into Mali, where they were held prisoner while the chief of the GSPC *katiba* or cell, Amari Saïfi aka Abderrazak El Para, negotiated a ransom with the Malian, Swiss and German governments. A team of northern 'notables', including Iyad Ag Ghali and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, were sent to speak to El Para and his men. Links were forged and promises were made then that lead eventually through many a twist and turn to the Islamist takeover of 2012.

But it wasn't until four years later that The Festival in the Desert began to really feel the Islamist presence in the north. "2007... that's when the red lines were first drawn," Manny remembers, "and the Foreign ministries in Europe and America began to issue all kinds of warnings against travelling to the north of Mali." It was also the year when the GSPC changed its name to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Their presence in the Malian Sahara began to be more overt. "The Al Qaida people were wandering around the desert at that time," Manny continues. "But they weren't aggressive. They visited the camps near Essakane and said, 'don't worry, we're Muslims like you.' But then later, their argument began to change. The first alert was when they said, 'we've got nothing against you. We just have the same enemy, which is the West, the non-believers.' That's when I understood that things were going to get difficult, because our festival was based on people coming from all over the world, without distinction."

And then, in 2008 the kidnapping started again with the capture of two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia. In January 2009, four more tourists were seized on their way back from another music festival called Tamadacht that took place just after the Festival in the Desert in Anderamboukane, a small town up against Mali's eastern frontier with Niger. A Swiss couple and an elderly German woman were eventually freed after many hellish months spent in a makeshift Al Qaida desert camp.

The fourth hostage however wasn't so lucky. Edwin Dyer had lived in Austria for over three decades, but had retained his British passport out of loyalty to his the land of his fathers and to the royal family. It was to be his death warrant. The British government flatly refused to negotiate with Al Qaida or pay any kind of ransom. They also rejected Al Qaida's demand to free the Jordanian preacher and jurist Abu Qatada, who was then imprisoned in a British jail. The Al Qaida emir Abou Zeid had Edwin Dyer beheaded on May 31st 2009.

“Things got much worse after the assassination of Edwin Dyer,” Manny tells me. “I remember it well. Plenty of people got Tamadacht and the Festival in the Desert mixed up, and thought that Dyer had been to our festival.”

“I never received any direct threats from Al Qaida,” Manny asserts. “But through third parties, we learnt some people, Touareg and Arabs who were sympathetic to their way of thinking, were beginning to have an aggressive attitude towards us. ‘What you’re trying to do is haram,’ they told people I knew. ‘In the middle of Islamic lands you invite non-believers who come and drink alcohol and commit sins on our dunes.’ Once there were even some who came to the Festival site to express their opinion in one of the conferences, or just walk around. But people told me to take no notice. ‘They’re just trying to make themselves important. Let them talk and they’ll go away,’ I was told.”

Other objectors went up to senior figures in the Kel Antessar, the Touareg tribe that Manny belongs to, and said “Your children are going too far.” The Kel Antessar are a revered clan in the Timbuktu / Essakane region, who can trace their lineage back to the Prophet and who have provided the southern Sahara with many of its marabouts and holy men. “Our clan are considered to be the defenders of Islam,” Manny tells me. “They brought Islam to this part of the world. I remember one of the clan leaders saying to me, ‘You know people are complaining about you. They’re saying that you’re spreading debauchery, that you’ve created some kind of Sodom and Gomorrah in Essakane. Just be careful. I know what you’re doing is beneficial to for the Sahara. But take care of our image.’ But it was just about morality and good behaviour, not really about jihad or any anti-western sentiment.”

Manny had to increase security measures year on year. More soldiers would encircle the Essakane site, camping out beyond the dunes. And each year, Manny called people he knew in the Touareg rebel movement to ask if it was safe to stage the Festival. They were people with wide connections, who knew the currents and pressure points of Saharan politics. Their answer was always affirmative.

All this was taking place amidst in a zeitgeist of fear and antagonism between the West and the Muslim world. The Festival in the Desert was right on the front line. “Everything was connected,” Manny says. “The international community, the warnings, Afghanistan, Al Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria. It was getting worse and worse internationally, and one also felt that the pressure was increasing locally. Al Qaida was getting closer to Essakane. Old friends in Kidal were distancing themselves and becoming radicalised. Mali was getting worried. There was trafficking. Slowly, the screws were tightening.”

Then, in the summer of 2009, Manny received a phone call from President Amadou Toumani Toure himself, asking him to move the festival within Timbuktu city limits for safety reasons. The foreign ministry warnings were getting ever more strident. In 2010, Hilary Clinton issued a signed document advising all Americans against travelling to Timbuktu and especially, Manny quotes, “*not to the world-renowned*

Festival in the Desert.' I kept it because it's such a good piece of publicity," he says with a chuckle.

And yet, no one involved with the Festival was kidnapped or murdered. "That was strange," says Manny. "The Festival existed in the same red zone as all the trafficking, and all the other stuff. But they left us alone. I think that Al Qaida didn't want to affront the locals. This festival was considered to be a Touareg festival so to attack it meant attacking the tribes that lived in the area. They knew that the organisers belonged to a much respected tribe and it was a bad idea to attack their guests. But there was never any kind of agreement between us, never even any word from the Islamists along the lines of 'don't worry, we won't attack you.' There were even those who said that, as we're a family of marabouts, we made prayers and benedictions to block off the road to the festival and keep the Islamists away."

In January 2012, at the last Festival in Desert, Bono asked Manny to call off the soldiers who were protecting him. "I said to the military, 'Look, if he wants to go off like that, just let him do it.' He used to wander off in the dunes; we would take tea there. People think I had some kind of divine force to protect my visitors. And finally, I almost ask myself if it isn't true. Imagine, Bono kidnapped!"

On March 30th 2012, Timbuktu was overtaken by Ansar ud-Dine, AQIM and some units from the MNLA. The takeover effectively evicted The Festival in the Desert from its desert home. At first Manny was very pessimistic, and wondered if it wasn't time to lay the whole enterprise to rest. Then, as musicians from the north started to turn up in Bamako, often with their entire families, begging Manny to find them work, and after talking to his team of co-workers, his friends and his international backers and supporters, he realised that this wasn't the time to give up. Quite the opposite:

"As I'm a pacifist through and through, against all arms and violence, which I wouldn't even use against my greatest enemy, I understood that my only way to resist was to continue to be involved in music, to continue promoting festivals. It was my way of fighting back and showing that you can't kill music just because Timbuktu has been occupied, that Touareg and Malian music will be heard even more and even further afield. If they've closed the doors of Timbuktu we'll open up the rest of the world. We'll go and sing in Tokyo. We'll play *igbayen*⁷ in Rio de Janeiro, we'll sound the tindé drum in Dubai and dance the takamba in Toronto, right up until the day we return to Timbuktu. That's our message. To say that, no, you want us to stop... well, on the contrary. Before our music was heard in Essakane, at the Tamadacht Festival or in Essouk. Today it'll be heard in all the big festivals in the world. So it's the opposite of what you, the Islamists, want. It's our victory and your defeat."

I ask Manny for his reaction to the MUJAO declaration banning music. "The MUJAO can exist," he answered, "but not among this people. Everything is transmitted in Mali through music, through poetry. So instead of making me panic,

⁷ A form of traditional Touareg music from the Timbuktu region

at least that declaration told me that we're dealing with people who don't know what they're doing and who won't win. They don't understand the culture that they're operating in and they don't try to understand it either. Mali without music is impossible. Life would have no meaning for the people, because music is their daily reality. It's the only thing that many have to distract and amuse themselves. They have no television. They have no Internet. They don't play chess. They don't gamble. Music is the only thing that makes live worth living."

6. “Ali Farka would return to his grave”

The end of music in the north

The 22nd August 2012 declaration by MUJAO came as little surprise to many musicians from the north. “I didn’t even need to hear the announcement,” a well-known Touareg musician called Rhissa (not his real name) told me. “I didn’t have to find out if music was banned or not. Their presence said it all. That’s their identity, so whether they say they’re banning music or not, it comes to the same thing: Music is forbidden.”

“For the moment there’s no music from the north, that’s for sure,” the guitarist Vieux Farka Touré told me in October 2012. Vieux is the son of late great Ali Farka Touré and native of Niafunké, a sizeable town south west of Timbuktu on the Niger River that was then under control of AQIM / Ansar ud-Dine. “Even just to listen to the radio, or switch on the TV is forbidden. To play music live is even worse.”

Afel Bocoum, a singer and guitarist from Niafunké who used to be Ali Farka’s oldest and most trusted musical sidekick tried to imagine what the legendary musician would have made of the current situation in the town of his birth. “I know that if you were to wake Ali out of his tomb today, he would just go straight back into it,” he said whilst the Islamist occupation of Niafunké was still complete. “Knowing his ideas about how to develop Africa, Mali and Niafunké, the place of his birth, I think he would just climb back into his grave, such would be his grief, his disappointment with what’s happening today. And I’m sure his life would be in danger if he was alive today, because there was a stubborn man who would want to carry on playing music whatever happened.”

“There’s a total lack of joy,” said another Kidal based musician called Jamal (not his real name). “There are no more parties. No one is dancing anymore.”

After Ansar ud-Dine took control of the town, Kidal’s Radio Tisdas, the Tamashek⁸ radio station where Tinariwen recorded their debut album *The Radio Tisdas Sessions* back in December 2000 started to broadcast a stark and unleavened diet of Quranic chanting and Islamic moralising. One can only hope that someone managed to stash the station’s unique cassette collection of Touareg guitar music in a safe place.

After Ansar ud-Dine was ejected from the town by the MNLA and the French army in January 2013, Radio Tisdas was renamed Radio Azawad. The Maison de Luxembourg, formerly Kidal’s premier music venue and *espace culturel*, which was set up and funded by the Duchess of Luxembourg after she fell in love with Touareg music and culture at the first Festival in the Desert in 2001, lay empty and shuttered

⁸ The language spoken by the Touareg. They refer to themselves as Kel Tamashek or ‘the Tamashek speaking people’.

during Islamist rule. All the hotels, where alcohol was once available and La Grotte, the town's solitary *maquis* or drinking den, also closed down.

Ismaiel 'Massiwa' Ag Ibrahim, who used to organise the annual Camel Fair in Tessalit, told that it was impossible to play any music in the village during the occupation. Until 2009, his small community event welcomed tourists and musicians from as far afield as Britain, France and Arizona. After April 2012 travellers arriving in Tessalit are greeted with a black banner that said "Please be welcome! Obey Islamic law. It is forbidden to enter with cigarettes. Women must be accompanied by a man to whom they are legitimately related."

"Even traditional music doesn't happen any more," Massiwa continued, when I spoke to him in October 2012. "Perhaps when you're at home, with the doors closed, then you could listen to some music. But if they find you listening to music on your telephone, then it isn't good. I heard of a group of youths who were caught listening to music on their telephones in Aguel'hoc and they were punished but later released."

Tessalit is also the home village of the two of the most famous Touareg musicians in the world. Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, aka Abaraybone, the lead singer of Tinariwen, was born in a nomadic camp not far from the village in 1960 and returned to settle and create a garden by the dried out river bed in the late 1990s, after many years in exile abroad or living in Bamako and Kidal. His fellow band member, Hassan Ag Touhami aka 'The Lion', was also born in the region, and moved back to Tessalit in 2007 ago to build a house made of stone and settle down.

After the rebellion broke out in January 2012, Hassan fled over the border to Algeria with his family and took refuge in Bordj Baji Mokhtar. Ibrahim Ag Alhabib has spent most of the time since then out in the bush in the environs of Tessalit. There's been very little word of him since January 2012. Rumour has it that even Abaraybone, the most famous and revered Touareg musician alive, has at times had cause to fear for his safety due to the Islamist presence and has been spending more time over the border.

For ten months, the north of Mali wasn't only devoid of music; it was devoid of musicians and in some places, almost devoid of people. Everyone with the means to travel and take refuge elsewhere fled the country to Algeria, Niger or Mauretania, either to stay with relatives or to languish in a refugee camp. Others, either unwilling or unable to travel so far, left the towns and villages to find safety in the nearby bush, away from the Islamist whip.

On August 10th 2012 the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that 435,000 had been displaced by the conflict. Following the French intervention and Operation Serval to retake the north, the number is said to have exceeded half a million. It continues to rise every day, especially with the exodus of lighter skinned Arabs and Touaregs from northern towns, fearful of revenge attacks and reprisals by the Malian army. All in all, this has been the largest single migration of people that the southern Sahara has ever known.

What was left behind was a vacuum bereft of humanity and joy. Even though there was food in the markets and the rains were plentiful for once, the weeks of gratitude and ease that normally followed the rainy season, when the animals graze on fresh green pasture and the nomads relax and make music, were silent and melancholy for those left behind in the towns and villages in September 2012.

“Almost the whole of Kidal is out in the bush at the moment,” Jamal told me in October. “Or in Tamanrasset. Most of the men who’ve stayed in Kidal have joined Ansar ud-Dine, just to avoid any problems. 90 percent don’t have their heart in it at all. But there’s nothing else for them. There’s just this one lifestyle and you’re obliged to follow it. So they pretend to get into the system but they’re not really into it. Everybody’s under a kind of spell. It’s strange.”

In towns, music became a clandestine pleasure. “When you’re at home you can listen to your music without being hassled, but you can’t turn the volume up,” Jamal told me. “You have to close your windows and doors and do it very quietly, just to avoid problems.”

Some like Ibrahim Ag Ahmed, aka ‘Pino’, the bassist with the Touareg band Terakaft felt compelled to come all the way to Europe in search of work. “In the north, with the Islamists it’s impossible to play,” he told, back in October 2012. “No one is left in Kidal and those who are still there don’t dare say they’re a musician. In the south, you can’t play because no one would go and listen to Touareg music. It would be like deciding to become kamikaze if you put on a concert. So most Touareg musicians have left the territory to go to Algeria for example. They do a few small gigs there, in the street, or at weddings and baptisms. With the exception of the well-known bands, all the other Touareg groups have dispersed. It’s as if Touareg music hardly exists any more. At times, it looks like it’s coming to an end.”

Out in the open desert however, far from sedentary towns and villages, the remoteness that has always cushioned Touareg culture and traditions from the world and offered it a form of protection, continued to preserve old liberties. “When I’m out in the bush, at my family’s camp, no problem!” Jamal told me. “I turn the volume up full blast. Out in the bush, people can do more or less what they want. You can smoke, play music, relax, no problem.”

Manny Ansar corroborated this freedom that can still be enjoyed out in the bush. “I was talking to someone who lives out in a nomad camp near Essakane and I asked him how his life was right now. ‘We’re living normally,’ he said. ‘We get together quietly in the evenings and tell poems or sing our songs’. ‘But what about the Islamists,’ I asked. ‘They don’t come by,’ he answered. ‘They go to Timbuktu. We see them driving along the *pistes*, but they don’t come to us.’ When the Islamists do turn up, out of respect or fear, all the music stops. They hide their guitars, their teherdents, their flutes. They hide their charms and amulets. Everything that might upset an Islamist is put to one side, until they’ve gone on their way, and then it all

comes out again. So, you see, it's just a game of hide and seek. There's no acceptance whatsoever."

Listening to music was one thing. Playing was quite another. Ahmed Ag Kaedi, the lead singer and guitarist of the Kidal based Touareg group Amanar already began to feel the sharp edge of the brewing conflict at the end of 2011 when he was reproved by pro-MNLA friends for speaking out in favour of Malian unity and failing to sing poetry about the rebellion. "They took me for a pure Malian Touareg," he told me, chuckling at the memory. "They didn't agree with what I was doing but they didn't do anything to me."

When Ansar ud-Dine began to flex its muscles in the town in March 2012, however, everything changed. The time for talking was over. Whilst Ahmed was away on a trip in Niger, a Landcruiser came to his house and seven Ansar ud-Dine militiamen pitched up to his front door. Four were people he knew well. The other three, including a light skinned Arab who seemed to be in charge, were strangers. Ahmed's sister opened the door to them. "Where's your brother," they demanded to know. "Away," came the answer. "Well when you speak to him next, tell him that if he ever shows his face around here again we'll cut all those fingers he uses to play that guitar clean off." With that, they proceeded to ransack the house and drag all the musical equipment they could find out into the courtyard. Amps, speakers, mics, a drum kit belonging to the Regional Youth office, a mixing desk and several guitars were heaped into a pile which was then doused in petrol and set alight.

When French and Malian troops finally took back Gao, Timbuktu and then Kidal in January 2013, musical life quickly revived. From the fall of Gao on January 26th, to the visit of the French President François Hollande to Timbuktu and Bamako on February 2nd, the citizens of northern Mali rejoiced for a brief period of respite during which the pleasures of dressing up, listening to music, dancing, flirting, smoking were tasted openly again.

Nonetheless, as the President himself said, the road ahead is still long, still fraught with dangers, still completely uncertain. Musicians in Mali have been on the front-line of a war between two different religious philosophies, two divergent conceptions of how to lead a blameless and moral life. It's a war that is raging, often unseen, throughout the Muslim world and it turns musicians, writers, poets, dancers, artists, film directors, actors into cultural combatants, whether they like it or not. But especially musicians because they are, or are perceived to be, the conjurers of love, of sensuality, of joy and abandon, in other words, of all the emotions and states that the Wahabi and Salafi most revile and fear. We in the west call this the war on terror. In Mali itself, and in the Muslim world more generally, it's more of a war on culture, on a way of life, on freedom. In some sense, it's not a war on terror, but a war on love.

7. “Not like the parties we had at home”

Music in exile

Ahmed ag Kaedi, the Touareg musician from Kidal, told me his terrifying story about Ansar ud-Dine’s violence and threats, over the phone from his refugee camp in the Nigerien capital Niamey, where he continues to perform occasionally for his fellow Touareg in exile. His tone was melancholy and resigned rather than bitter or angry. “Those Ansar ud-Dine foot soldiers in Kidal had nothing before all this,” he explains. “Now they’ve been given money, roles and titles. They use the vacuum that exists up there to feel powerful, to feel like they have a life at last. But they’re not doing it for God. I don’t think so.”

Music doesn’t die when it goes into exile, but somehow its energy, joy and confidence diminish. Fadimata Walt Oumar, aka Disco, the magnetic and outspoken leader of the Tartit Ensemble, a group that has done more to educate the world about traditional Touareg music than almost any other, spent most of the Islamist occupation in a refugee camp in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. “Here in the camps life continues,” she told me. “When there’s a wedding or a baptism, people celebrate with what they have. If they aren’t any musicians, they switch on the radio, or put on a cassette by Tinariwen, Tartit or any other band. People dance. Life doesn’t stop. But it’s not the same life that we had at home. There isn’t the same enthusiasm. Women don’t make themselves as beautiful as they once did. They’re deprived, tired and sad. You go to a party but in truth it isn’t really a party, not like the parties we used to have in Timbuktu or Goundam or Gao.”

In exile, there’s also the problem of functioning as a working band. When the members of the Tartit Ensemble were scattered by the conflict that raged around their home near Timbuktu in early 2012, Disco ended up in Ouagadougou, another member of the band made it to Bobo Dioulasso and others went west to refugee camps Mauritania, thousands of kilometres away. Then the group were invited to play a few concerts in Europe in the summer of 2012 and were inevitably confronted with the problem of obtaining visas, a process that in its own cold and bureaucratic way poses the most basic questions about statehood and national identity.

Were the members of Tartit still Malian nationals? If so, why weren’t they travelling to the French consulate in Bamako to submit their visa application as they always had done in the past? Because Bamako isn’t safe for Touareg from the north, that’s why. Well, if Tartit weren’t Malian nationals, then what were they? Did they have refugee status? Were they officially recognised as displaced persons by the country that has given them safe harbour? Did France and, more importantly, the French consular officials on the ground in Niamey and Nouakchott recognise Touareg persons from northern Mali as displaced persons with no fixed nationality and therefore deserving of special treatment? Did they bring all their important

documents – birth certificate, identity card, previous passports etc – or did they leave them behind in the rush to flee the war? Could their managers or agents in Europe contact them whilst they're in the refugee camp, or staying with friends or family in some remote village?

Disco and other members of the band managed to get their visas in Burkina Faso, with the help of friends of the French embassy. But guitarist Mohammed Issa, who was living at the Mbera refugee camp in Mauritania at the time wasn't so lucky. The consulate in Nouakchott wouldn't show understanding or the flexibility necessary to deal with his special status. So in the end he missed the tour.

Similar problems have been afflicting most of the Touareg bands from northern Mali, including Terakaft, Tamikrest and Tinariwen. The bureaucratic maze that their team now has to crawl through just to get them to Europe is nightmarish in itself. In this way, important opportunities for Touareg musicians from northern Mali to earn money, support their network of friends and family back home in a time of extreme necessity and speak to the world about their plights and their dreams are lost in flows of paper and procedure.

8. Bamako – a musical Mecca in crisis

Political and economic melt down in Mali's capital city

The rebellion, the military coup and the Islamist takeover in the north delivered a flurry of blows to the music scene in Bamako, which was already being pounded on the ropes by piracy, the internet, recession and the trend of replacing live music with DJs. The precise toll of the decline in musical activity since March 2012 vary depending on which musician you talk to.

“Life for musicians in Mali is very difficult at the moment,” Amadou Bagayoko, one half of Amadou & Mariam and President of FEDAMA (the Federation of Malian Artists) declared in October 2012. “Musicians used to play in night clubs and *espaces culturels* but as people aren't coming to Mali anymore to listen to music, it means that hotels, bars, restaurants are working less well and so musicians can't earn a real living any more. If it was 80 percent capacity before, I would say it's about 40 percent now.”

“Musical activity has diminished by 98 percent... NINETY EIGHT PERCENT!” was Toumani Diabaté's emphatic lament. “I was the leading musician here in Bamako who continued to play in the small *espaces culturels*. Because even when activity was at 100 percent, it wasn't everybody who agreed to play in those places. But I made the choice to play every live weekend with my band. It gave people an opportunity to hear live music here in Bamako. After March 26th 1991, when democracy arrived in Mali, many nightclubs stopped hiring bands and so we started to play in *espaces culturels* instead. It was only there that you could hear live music, because the nightclubs were just playing CDs and cassettes. But today the truth is that music has gone; entertainment has gone. The coup d'état was months ago, but we haven't performed since, because people don't have the head for having fun at the moment. They don't have the money. They're suffering. There were all those problems between the Red Berets and the Green Berets⁹, which means there's a lack of security. So if you don't have the money and you feel insecure, you're not going to leave home are you. We musicians have been dealt a big blow by all of that. A big blow!”

Bassekou Kouyaté told me that Le Diplomat, the *espace culturel* to which Toumani Diabaté and his Symmetric Orchestra moved their regular weekend residency after the demise of Le Hogon also closed its doors. “And there's L'Hotel Amitié,” he continued, “350 people have been made redundant there. All the large hotels are suffering. No tourists are coming to stay, or very few anyway. We put on little events, but there aren't many places to play now. They've closed because of the crisis. People don't have a lot of money. There isn't much of a clientele who go out at night. What people earn they use to feed themselves, not to have fun.”

⁹ Different fractions in the Malian army who were in conflict after the military coup.

Adam Thiam, one of Mali's leading journalists and a regular contributor to *Le Republicain* and other papers, also said that musical life dropped markedly in intensity, although not to the statistical extent claimed by Toumani Diabaté. "Our big artists have tried to maintain their usual commitments as much as possible," he told me. "Oumou Sangaré is still playing at her hotel, the Wassoulou. Balla Tounkara is still a regular fixture at the Espace Kora and Salif Keïta has started a residency at the Mouffou for his fans. But these places are less and less full. People don't go out much, because of all the security issues, even if it must be said that Bamako, despite the current problems, still seems to be a safer city than Nairobi or Abidjan. But people aren't used to meeting soldiers in the streets, so they tend to stay at home."

Simply put, political strife and social unrest robbed many people of any desire to go out and be entertained. "The life of musicians in Mali is like the life of the population in general," said Cheikh Tidiane Seck, "in reality we're all being held hostage. Going out to unwind and listen to music... well, people aren't necessarily in the mood for doing that anymore."

This slump in *joie de vivre* was a catastrophe for musicians. Music is to a city what mosses and lichen are to a forest; a sign of vitality, resilience and a strong healthy eco-system. A music scene thrives when the economy prospers, when people feel safe and optimistic. Conversely, when a country is laid low by social and economic crises, music and entertainment suffer. Musical life is the barometer of social well-being.

"The truth is that in Mali," says Rokia Traore, "artists that don't have an international career find it hard to live properly, and by properly I mean enjoy a good career and a decent retirement. You can easily understand that what is difficult for a European musician is just hell for an African musician at the best of times. Life was already precarious even before the crisis. So it's not too hard to imagine the situation of those musicians in a time of war."

Rokia's own NGO, *La Passerelle*, has had to cut its projects by half and send far fewer artists out on the road. The organisation is still pursuing an ambitious project to build a concert hall in Bamako, but the pace of work has slowed, even though Rokia and her team are making every possible effort to continue paying its workmen.

Most of the people I interviewed knew cases of fellow musicians falling below the breadline and being forced to beg for money, or selling their instruments for a song, just to eat and buy a few essentials for their children's schooling. "It's dramatic," Rokia Traore says, "the number of artists who came along and who hadn't eaten for three days, who had kids who go to school and who hadn't been able to buy what they need, who were ill and hadn't been able to get treatment. It's just a catastrophe."

During the Islamist occupation of the north, a huge influx of refugees from the north, with musicians inevitably amongst them, piled extra pressure on Bamako's existing problems. "All the musicians have left the north," *Vieux Farka Touré* lamented back in October. "They're all in Bamako, Mopti, or elsewhere. There's no point staying if

they can't play. There are weddings in Bamako, or baptisms, and a bit of work in bars. But it's only if you're lucky enough to know people."

"Musical life has stopped in Bamako," said Afel Bocoum. "Everybody is scared of going to Mali now and it's tourists who make musicians play. Hotels give us our livelihood. But none of that exists anymore. On top of that crisis there's another crisis. Every Bamakois has a relative in the north, and now they have the job of feeding those relatives. They don't even know where they're going to find the money to look after them."

In times of loss and distress, it's not only the ability to perform that suffers, but the urge to write new songs can also weaken and disappear. "My job is playing music, but with all these problems, you don't even have the inspiration to write new songs," Afel Bocoum told me during the deepest days of the crisis last September. "You don't even feel like touching your guitar. You're just thinking about home all the time. My father lives there. My mother lives there. And you hear that they're raping young people. If they aren't yours then they're your neighbour's. The heart is wounded."

However, there seemed to be three essential struts of the local music scene in Bamako that continued to exist in a relatively healthy way, despite the crisis, although they didn't exactly thrive in comparison to former times. One was the traditional djembe-driven street dancing sessions, also known as the *sounou*. "It's when women pool their money and invite a couple of musicians down to have some fun," Adam Thiam explained to me. "Those are carrying on. They aren't events that are promoted in advance or anything, and they haven't really been affected by the crisis. But the frequency of these events has diminished."

"The *sounou* are still happening," agreed Violet Diallo, former British Consul and long time resident of Bamako. "You hear them. It's quite funny, the other day I heard some noise going on in a street I was driving towards and I thought, 'that's nice, it's a *sounou*.'" But when I got there it was some kind of Islamic preaching outfit. You don't quite know what you're getting into."

The other solid bedrock of musical life in Bamako were the weddings, baptisms and other festive family occasions. Sundays continued to chime to the klaxons of wedding corteges as they made their raucous way through the streets, holding up the traffic at the main downtown intersections.

"There are fewer big weddings happening than there were before," Violet explained. "One thing is that they're expensive. A big name like Babani Koné will set you back two or three million FCFA (€3,000 – €4,500). And there aren't that many people with that kind of money to fling about any more. So most musicians are turning their eyes abroad for salvation. I've had several coming to be asking for help to fill out visa application to the US or Europe."

"Weddings are still happening, every Sunday," the world-renowned bandleader and ngoni player Bassekou Kouyaté told me. "But now even weddings are beginning to

cut back on the live music. People just buy a CD player, bring some loudspeakers, and dance to the CDs instead. They play the music by artists they would love to invite but don't have the means to do so."

"It's the rappers who are still playing everywhere," said Toumani Diabaté. "And a few griottes who sing at weddings. Despite all the problems people are still getting married. And baptisms continue to happen because babies are still being born. So that keeps a few griottes employed, but even with that there are many, many difficulties."

Lastly, there were the nightclubs and bars, the places that ditched expensive live shows some time ago and now survive on CD turntables and pumping speakers. "People still go to the clubs, that's for sure," said Vieux Farka Touré, "Many people frequent Le Savannah, or the Parc des Princes, or the Domino and places like that. Every Saturday, there's stuff happening there. There are plenty of musicians who try and take advantage by going to those places and playing a bit, earning a crust. But it's not really a living."

Many an eyewitness report of the Bamako mood during the crisis of 2012 remarked on the resilience of daily life in the capital and how it refused to succumb to panic and fear. In an article entitled 'In Bamako, the war is far way', Slate Afrique claimed that "whoever chooses to tour around Bamako by night will find it hard to believe that this is a country that's supposedly cowed by current events and whose fate is being discussed by the United Nations. The party goers haven't changed their habits and the bars, restaurants and nightclubs are still open for business."

However, the article also went on to admit that any business dependent on tourism was suffering. Furthermore, if you believe the gloomy assessments that emerged from the mouths of musicians, it seems clear that whilst Bamako club life might be resilient, even defiant, it no longer provides local musicians with a livelihood. Like everywhere else in the world now, music appears to survive without musicians.

There were still some voices of optimism in Bamako in September 2012. "The period we've been through isn't the tourist season," said Lucien Roux, director of the French Cultural Centre in Bamako. "There were tourists who used to go to Le Diplomat to listen to Toumani Diabaté, but they were never the main bulk of the clientele of cultural and artistic life in Bamako. I've been told... because I don't go much myself... that the nightclubs are full every weekend. The youth are keener to party, without a doubt, perhaps to relax and take their mind off all the problems for a while. On the other hand, for the traditional artisans and jewellery sellers, the lack of tourists is of course a serious problem."

9. Get up stand up!

Malian musicians protest and survive

During the long months of when Mali was divided into two battered halves, Malian music was on the ropes, but it was never defeated. In fact, if anything, the crisis bought out a fighting spirit Malian musicians. It galvanized certain sectors of Mali's creative community into a mood of uncharacteristically active defiance, musicians among them. A certain mild contentedness, an easy faith in melody, good grooves and providence that had always guided Malian music in its essential conviviality and gentleness gave way to more urgent passions.

On May 23rd 2012, a press conference was held at Mouffou, Salif Keïta's *espace culturel*, to announce two major events to raise funds for humanitarian disaster relief in the north. The first was a telethon and VIP soirée organised by the Malian Red Cross and Salif Keïta's UAAPREM (Malian Union of Artist, Producer and Music Publisher Associations), which took place at Bamako's International Conference Centre on 21st June. Many headlining Malian names were there including Bako Dagnon, Nayini Diabaté, Vieux Farka Touré, Oumou Dédé Damba, Babani Kone, Khaïra Arby, Baba Salah and Salif Keïta. The interim Prime Minister, Cheikh Modibo Diarra was also in attendance. Entrance to the VIP gala was 20,000 FCFA, about 30 EUROS, a fortune in local terms. Members of the public also donated in their thousands over the phone and the Internet. 36.6 million FCFA (c. 56,000 Euro) was raised before the curtain came down at one o'clock the next morning.

The second event was a huge concert that took place in the Modibo Keïta Stadium on June 28th. From 6pm in the evening until 6am the next morning, a carnival of Malian rappers and play back artists paraded on stage, with all proceeds going to help the people of the north. Salif Keïta and Oumou Sangaré were otherwise engaged and could not attend. Zongo, a famous comedian who is half Ivorian and half Burkinabé, took the stage to the great delight to the crowd. The singers Bako Dagnon and Tata Bamba Kouyaté were hailed with the biggest cheers.

Bako Dagnon took the opportunity to urge Mali's soldiers to show their courage and take the fight to the Islamists in the north. "When you're courageous, nobody dares defy you," she said. "Mali is a courageous country. No person dared to defy Mali before. I pray to God that they [the soldiers] are not fearful and that they liberate Mali!" Proceeds from the concert were donated to the Malian Red Cross for the relief of the distressed population in the north.

On the 22nd September 2012, the 52nd anniversary of Malian independence, Cheick Tidiane Seck organised a 'Gathering for Peace in Mali' at the *Palais des Congrès* in Montreuil, the eastern suburb of Paris that is home to the largest population of Malians outside Mali itself. Manu Dibango, Oumou Sangaré, Baba Salah Amadou &

Mariam, Lokua Kanza, Vieux Farka Touré, Oxmo Puccino, Fantani Touré, Jean-Philippe Rykiel and over thirty more artists came to perform and plead for peace and reconciliation. “It was a moment of communion,” Seck said, “We got together on the anniversary of Malian independence to denounce what’s happening out there, without any disavowal of the politics involved. Because, well, you need a bit of everything to make a world. But the opinions of this or that person aren’t important to me. What’s important is the rediscovery of our country that my ancestors took time to create, back in the time of Sundjata Keita. Because there was never a more peaceful country than Mali.”

“No Malian artist can sing right now with singing about what’s happening,” the journalist Adam Thiam declared to me back in October 2012. “Artists are reacting to the crisis. Those reactions can be inclusive like Oumou Sangaré, who has done a song called ‘La Paix’ (‘Peace’) for her forthcoming album. Or they can be aggressive, like some of the younger generation who accuse the Touareg of being at the root of all that is happening to Mali.”

The promisingly titled *Association for Changing Behaviour* brought together 18 girls and boys aged from 8 to 12 years old from all over the country, representing all the major ethnic groups, to perform a song entitled ‘A Call to the Leaders of Mali’. It was sung in eight different national languages – Arab, Bambara, Dogon, Peul, Senoufo, Soninké, Songhai and Tamashek – by the children, most of whom were the sons and daughters of griots and many of whom had already proven their worth on the hit Malian TV show *Mini Star*, in which young up and coming singers and musicians imitate the ‘greats’ of Malian song. The Bambara passage of the song went “*We may be hungry, thirsty, poor, but we have our dignity. But if there is no peace, we risk losing that dignity. We invite all the ethnic groups to reach out their hands and develop Mali.*” The chorus went “*Mali will never be divided.*”

The arrangement of the song mirrored Mali’s ethnic kaleidoscope and included passages of Malinké *mandan*, Bambara *bara*, Songhai and Tamashek *takamba*. All the children were clothed in the various traditional garbs of their ethnic group. The idea for this rainbow band of Malian youth came to Adama Diarra, the president of the Malian Red Cross, as he was leading a mission to Timbuktu to create a humanitarian corridor in the north. He was especially struck by the suffering of children embroiled in the conflict, and felt that their voices weren’t being heard. On 22nd September, Independence Day, the group performed at the French Institute in Bamako and later they played in front of the interim President Dioncounda Traoré. An album is being planned with all proceeds going to help children affected by the war.

This kind of expression of national unity through music has a long pedigree in Mali. In the early years of independence, both President Modibo Keita and his successor Moussa Traoré attempted to bind their young and scattered nation together using the *Semaines de la Jeunesse* (‘Youth Weeks’) and Cultural Biennales, in which music, dance and theatre troupes from all over the country would travel to different regions to perform, compete and rub-shoulders with their counterparts in other ethnic

groups. In the hands of the country's politicians and leaders, music became a tool to change social attitudes and create pride in a single nation with many different rhythms, languages and cultures.

Whereas in other socialist countries, quasi-militaristic youth organisations like the Young Pioneers were similarly used to create nations with a common sense of identity, in Mali this process was engaged through music. Even though recurrent waves of Touareg separatism show that the policy was never entirely successful, the relatively peaceful co-existence of Mali's other cultures proves that it wasn't a failure either, far from it.

The Festival on the Niger in Ségou, one of the most successful and stable of Mali's large annual music festivals, has also been reacting to the crisis with inspiring courage and dedication. In an interview for Voice of America radio, the festival's founder and director Mamou Daffé told the anthropologist and writer Heather Maxwell that Ségou had become Mali's "zone of confidence; its artistic and creative zone."

The Festival on the Niger Foundation and the Kôré Cultural Centre which it runs, have been staging regular events in the town since the military coup in March, attracting not only most of Mali's well known musicians, but artists from other creative disciplines including visual art, dance, puppetry, multimedia and traditional crafts. "Ségou is profiting from the situation to strengthen its reputation as the cultural capital of West Africa," Daffé told Heather Maxwell.

The theme of the 9th edition of the Festival, which was due to be held in February 2013, was to be Timbuktu. This was partly in reaction to the MUJAO's declaration banning all secular music in the north but it also a way of creating a warm welcome to the homeless Festival in the Desert, which was to be invited as an honoured guest. In mid January, as the French air force was bombing Islamist positions all over the north, and French ground forces were battling an AQIM counter attack in the town of Diabaly, up towards the Mauritanian border, Mamou Daffé was still holding out hope that the Festival would take place. But on January 23rd, he issued a press release which imparted the sad news that, given "the barbaric aggression from terrorists, drug traffickers and separatists", it would be impossible for the Festival to go ahead.

The news was sadly inevitable. The Islamists had advanced as far as Konna, a town on the main tarmac'd road between Mopti and Douentza. Ségou was only 300 miles further down the same road. Daffé and his team had shown admirable courage and mighty perseverance in the months leading up to the Islamist attack, but there had to be a limit. Musicians are on the frontline of the cultural war, but the war of RPGs, AK47s and helicopter gunships is best left to the soldiers.

A few days later, on January 25th, the Festival in the Desert also announced that it was postponing its 13th edition, which had been due to take place at the end of February 2013 near Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. It also announced the postponement of the two Caravans of Peace, one of which had been due to travel

down from the refugee camps in Mauritania to Bamako, then East to Ségou and finally on to Ouagadougou, and the other from Tamanrasset in Algeria, down through Niamey, the capital of Niger and finally to Ouagadougou where it was going to rendezvous with the first Caravan in a great desert carnival of music and defiance. It was not to be.

“As you are like aware,” the press release started, “Mali has entered a State of Emergency. This week, the government has requested that we temporarily postpone the Sahel portion of the Festival, as insecurity in the region could jeopardize the safety of tourists, technicians, artists, journalists etc. The February caravan in the Sahel will be postponed most likely until late fall, after the rainy season.” The communiqué then went on to speak about the Festival-in-Exile, which, so the plan goes, will have a global as well as a Sahelian dimension.

The cancellation of two of the highest profile musical events in Mali’s cultural calendar should not be taken either as a sign of timidity in the face of the Islamist assault on culture and music or one of surrender. The spirit in which the teams behind both Festivals battled against all odds to try and keep their events on track was bold and redoubtable. Both kept the hopes of musicians and fans alive for as long as possible. Both rose to a challenge that had mutated into something epic and essential and embraced the fact that they were now part of a struggle of far greater resonance than mere musical notes; a struggle between the cold dream of religious utopia and impossible perfection on the one hand, and a simple faith in humanity on the other, a faith which gives men and women the space in which to indulge their senses and search for a beauty that reflects the divine, even if it also gives them space to err, sin and be human while they’re at it.

That same spirit of defiance motivated other initiatives both great and small. The great afro-reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly, himself no stranger to persecution and war, both of which have ravaged his native Ivory Coast, recorded a special song called ‘*An Ka Wili*’, which means “Mobilisation and Galvanisation” in Bambara. It was released just after New Year’s Day 2013 and given away for free in Mali.

“I’ve released this single to support Mali in its time of need,” he told *Jeune Afrique*. “The single is a call for general mobilisation. Mali has known great men, great empires and it is unimaginable to allow the country to be cut in two as it is today. Malians must count first and foremost on their own forces.”

The musical statement that dominated the headlines throughout January and early February 2013, achieving the widest global reach of all the Mali crisis initiatives, was ‘*Mali-ko*’ (Peace), a song recorded at the famous Bogolan studios in Bamako by Mali music’s roll of honour: Toumani Diabaté, Khaira Arby, Tiken Jah Fakoly, Baba Salah, Habib Koité, Bassekou Kouyaté, Oumou Sangaré, Amkoullel, Vieux Farka Touré, Amadou & Mariam, Kasse Mady Diabaté, Afel Bocoum, Doussou Bakayoko, Sadio Sidibé, M’baou Toukara, Fati Kouyaté, Soumalia Kanouté, Master Soumi, Iba One, Mylmo, Djelimady Tounkara and last but indubitably foremost in this hugely successful endeavour, Fatoumata Diawara.

Fatou, as she's known to many Malians and a swelling number of fans throughout the world, is a young singer, songwriter and actress who only really began to make a dent on the global consciousness in the first half of 2011. In many ways, she could be a poster-girl for a Malian generation that is coming of age and coming into its own just as their country faces the blackest moment in its short history as an independent nation. She's beautiful, smart and talented in the extreme. But 'Mali-ko' also revealed Fatou as a fighter, a motivator, a federator and an organiser. Since its release in January 2013, Fatou's has been permanently locked onto the airwaves of the world, giving interviews, performing the song, explaining the background and teaching the world about Mali.

There always has to be a silver lining and there it is, right there. Mali's battle against the bearded joy killers has focused the attention of the world on its miseries, its complexities and its music like never before. It took the French intervention and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's assault on the gas works at In Amenas in Algeria for the West to reach a state of full alertness, but when it did, the effect was immense. Mali, that dusty forgotten ex-French colony, which had never once hit the headlines in Britain or the USA in fifty years of existence on the margins of the world's conscious, was suddenly at the top of every political to-do list and media agenda from Washington to Tokyo and all points in between.

Energised by Mali's agony, Malian musicians have ridden the wave with grace and resolve, none more so than Fatou. She's appeared on the kind of prime-time TV news and chat show that never in a month of blue moons would have considered inviting her before the world woke up about Mali. Not because she's unworthy of such exposure, but simply because mainstream TV producers had such a narrow concept of what might inspire and intrigue their audiences. The result is that awareness of Malian music, far beyond the faithful realm of the world music fan, has surged exponentially. Whether the effects of that surge will last, no one can tell. But in amongst the fear, the anger, the frustration and desperation, Mali needs a few positive news stories and this is one.

In some respects, music, seemingly so battered and abused during Mali's darkest hour, has done the country a great service. Without that immense musical wealth, the global reaction to Mali's crisis would no doubt have been equally sympathetic and widespread but possibly not as enchanted and empathetic as it has been. Somalia also has a rich and ancient tradition of music and poetry but because its worldwide musical output has never been as prolific as Mali's, the Somali civil war has been a tragedy without a soundtrack, without poetry to distil the national agony, with a few notable exceptions of course. News editors, for all their faults, are often delighted and immensely relieved to have a musician on their show to explain the crisis in some distant country, rather than a politician, a general, a security expert or a professor of international relations. It adds an accessible and attractive touch to the coverage. That huge reserve of music, which successive Malian politicians have been content to patronize and generally ignore, has proved once again to be the country's primary asset, its saving grace.

Could Mali's musicians and musical activists have done more? No doubt. But their reaction to the worst crisis in the history of their nation has been unusual in many ways. Malian music has never been a stranger to politics or social commentary, but its unwritten rules of engagement have generally been pacific and disarming. Head on confrontation was often softened or even avoided with lyrics that were full of metaphor and allusion. Collective action, with many artists coming together as one to raise a single united voice on some pressing issue has never been a prominent part of Mali's musical story. A sense of brotherhood and sisterhood amongst Malian musicians and artists has always existed, but the need to proclaim it and unfurl it as a rallying flag has rarely been felt. Telethons, benefit concerts, songs, multi-ethnic choirs, all these show that Mali's musicians are capable of 'fighting back', especially when their art and their livelihoods are under direct threat.

In terms of plain-talking however, of bare-knuckled protest rhyming, none of the initiatives outlined above has come even close to what the Malian rappers have doing to since the crisis began.

10. When the going gets tough, the rappers get going

Mali's Facebook generation steps up

Malians have no trouble finding role-models in their own history to help them feel proud of who they are: Sundjata Keita, Mansa Musa, Sunni Ali, Mohammed Askia, El Hadj Oumar Tall, Cerno Bokar, Samory Touré. The last name in that list was a thorn in the side of the French army for more than two decades at the end of the nineteenth century. He's also the subject of many Malian songs that laud his strength, wisdom, bravery and endurance. During the long months of Islamist occupation of the northern two-thirds of their country, many Malians were asking where those qualities had disappeared to, just when they're needed most.

Samory Touré's warriors were called *sofas*. Hence the name of one of the most radical and outspoken musical organisations to have sprung up in reaction to Mali's current tragedy; Les Sofas de La République. The group – Les Sofas aren't your classic 'band' as such, think of them more as a rap posse, a self-help association, a pressure group, a political party, an educational charity and a think tank, all rolled into one – came together in Bamako's Badalabougou district the day after Captain Sanogo's military coup on March 22nd 2012. At its core were the rappers Ramses aka Sidi Soumaoro, son of the famous Idrissa Soumaoro and Dixon and Djodama from Tatapound, the band that revolutionized Malian rap in the 1990s. Joining this trio were a small tribe of musicians, bloggers, web designers and other activists and 'hacktivists'.

Les Sofas de la République released two songs; 'Ça Suffit!' ('That's Enough!') and 'Aw Yé to An Ga Lafia' which means 'Leave Us In Peace!' in Bamana, the Bambara language. Both of them blasted an impassioned plea not only to Mali's political and military leaders, but also to the people, who, in the eyes of Les Sofas, were guilty of sleep-walking into the crisis thanks to their passivity, their cynical acceptance of corruption and their willingness to let the country's precious democratic system putrefy and go bad. At the heart of Les Sofas' message was a invitation to the nation to look deep into itself and examine the root causes of their present fall from grace, with intelligence, honesty and courage.

On the video of 'Ça Suffit', Les Sofas start by expressing their respect for all the soldiers fallen on the field of battle, and their solidarity with the people of the north currently suffering from aggression. Later in the song, Dixon raps out the line "*Coup d'États in Africa, corrupt soldiers, opportunistic politicians – THAT'S ENOUGH! Demagogic politics, populist and corrupt, inactive citizens – THAT'S ENOUGH!*"

'Aw Yé to An Ga Lafia' was released following the extraordinary attack on the interim President Dioncounda Traore in Mali's 'White House', the Koulouba Palace in Bamako, by a mob of protestors aroused by Sanogo and opposition parties, on May 21st, 2012. This attack seemed to sully all that was sacred in Mali's troubled

democracy and shocked public opinion to the core. “*Maliens against Maliens, fiercer and fiercer yeaah,*” rap Les Sofas, “*Taking up arms and making blood flow yeaah. Making tears flow and making us loose time, bothering us with stupid details... Our relatives are dying up in the north while we try and agree on who will take the tiller.*”

Both of these songs as well as the video of ‘Ça Suffit’ were banned by Mali’s state broadcaster ORTM, who deemed that the moment wasn’t propitious for inflammatory rap tunes. Both nonetheless became hits on You Tube and iTunes.

Like the rappers of the *Y’en A Marre* (‘We’ve Had Enough!’) organisation in Senegal, who made such a huge impact during the controversial Presidential elections of 2011 or the Tunisian MC El General who helped to ignite the so-called Arab Spring, Les Sofas de la République embody a new generation of political thinkers and activists, a youth that has all the communicative power that the internet and digital mobile technology can give but no stake in the official political institutions of their nation, a generation born way after independence and thus immune the historical justifications used by politicians to stay in power well past their sell-by-date, a peer group who have reached levels of dissatisfaction with the mendacity and corruption of their political leaders that are truly explosive but who retain a passionate faith in African democracy and the need to make it work.

Fifteen to thirty year-olds comprise more than half of the total population of Mali. And yet, thanks to the overriding duty to respect one’s elders that is inculcated into all Malian children from birth, fifteen to thirty year olds have had little say in the running of the nation’s affairs. The level of education and general awareness of world affairs amongst Africa’s ‘Facebook generation’ is high. Their frustration with their parents’ generation, who won independence, suffered dictatorship, then won back their democracy only to waste it, is extreme. But deep at the heart of this dissatisfaction lies a realisation that, as the old adage goes, people get the politicians they deserve. It’s Les Sofa’s ability to criticize themselves and their fellow Malians that makes their discourse so refreshing.

“If we elected an inept government,” spokesperson Mohamed ‘Ras’ Bathily told anthropologist and blogger Bruce Whitehouse, “it’s because in the run up to elections we weren’t interested in the credibility of the men for whom we were going to vote. Nobody was interested in their social platform, their morality. We just wanted the cash and the t-shirts they were giving away. Even though they took advantage of our ignorance, our poverty and our vulnerability to offer us trifles, we never had this civic reflex to vote for a platform, not for a man.”

Music isn’t their only weapon. Les Sofas de la République have been organising demonstrations, debates, awareness-raising campaigns and issuing statements about controversial political decisions. Like many rappers in West Africa, most of the group’s members are middle class, and some are university educated. Their grasp of political and legal issues is acute, often more so than that of the politicians they criticise. This is reflected in their concerns, the most urgent of which is the need to

create a proper civic society in Mali, in which each person is conscious of his or her rights and responsibilities as a citizen in a democracy and the need to fight to defend democratic rights. Les Sofas' latest awareness drive focuses on voter registration, especially amongst the youth.

Ichiaka Bah, aka Amkoullé, is another Malian rapper who believes that music and words should take up arms to defend democracy and promote civic society. "Following the coup d'état, I had some friends, people I've known for years who weren't that militant about what's happening in society," he told me, "but the coup gave them something like an electric shock. We decided to get together and create this collective to take action and express our opposition to the coup. We had this feeling that a real blow had been dealt to democracy and it had been done during a period of popular disillusion. There was a danger that people would accept this coup d'état as something normal, and that's very dangerous, because it was as if, in the collective consciousness, democracy was a failure in Mali. Whereas that's not true. It's the representatives and political figures who had been the problem, not the system itself."

Amkoullé formed another rap and direct action collective called 'Plus Jamais Ça' ('Never Again!'). It comprised of rappers, students and friends whose aim was to stimulate the debate around democracy and spread the message that democracy itself had not failed the people, the politicians had failed the people. One of their first events was to create a human chain around the Monument de l'Indépendance in central Bamako, which is situated at the end of one of the city's main thoroughfares, the Boulevard de l'Indépendance. It took place on April 25th, a month after the coup and attracted over 1,500 people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds.

"We created the human chain to demonstrate the unity of Mali and say that Mali is indivisible. We organised all this on Facebook and by SMS," Amkoullé explains. "Our phones were bugged at the time. We set up Facebook pages, but ones that other people couldn't use unless they had been invited. We'd organise an action and then everyone went away and told the 20 or 50 or 100 people they know."

Back in the summer of 2011, Amkoullé had written a song called 'SOS' which he recorded with another up and coming Malian rapper called Mylmo, aka Mahamadou Soumbounou. Originally turned onto hip hop by Tatapound, Mylmo won the title of best lyricist at the 2010 Mali Hip Hop Awards. In February 2011 he released an album called 'Vérité' ('Truth'). L'Indépendant newspaper credits him with starting a new trend which they called RAM, or *Le Rap Moraliste* ('Moral Rap').

"'SOS' talks about the disastrous situation in the country," says Amkoullé, "When I wrote it, you could feel this energy, this rage, this frustration in the air. Everyone in Mali, especially in Bamako, felt that something was going to happen. People were unhappy with all the corruption. There was no more trust. It was all going to crack."

Eight months later, in response to the coup and the dire situation in the north, Amkoullé quickly made a video for 'SOS' using news footage of the Islamist takeover

supplied by a friend who worked for Reuters. He rush released it on iTunes, Amazon and Soundcloud at the end of May. All proceeds from sales were donated to the Malian Red Cross to relieve the suffering populations in the north. Then came the backlash.

“Once the video was finished, I sent it to the ORTM as usual and they rejected it,” he says. “I sent them messages to try and find out why. I mean, in the video, I’m not aggressive against anyone. What’s more, the lyrics had been written eight months earlier, so they weren’t talking specifically about the situation after the coup, but rather everything that lead up to it. Finally, the ORTM sent me a message saying that it wasn’t the right moment to broadcast that kind of video. The junta still controlled ORTM back then. People were frightened to act. When I sent them the video they told me that the Minister of Communications and official government spokesperson had to vet the video first. As if a Malian Minister of State hasn’t got anything better to do than look at one of my videos!”

But that wasn’t all. Amkoullél began to receive death threats by phone. “Someone phoned and said, ‘Yes, we’re watching you and we know very well where to find you, so you’d better calm down or otherwise take the consequences.’ That was the first message. The second one wasn’t from the same person. I get the impression that it was autonomous groups of people who were sending me these messages on their own initiative, rather than following the orders of the junta. This guy said, ‘Yeah, you’re talking too much. Shut up otherwise you’ll disappear and won’t even understand a thing.’” That was a lot clearer! I thought, ‘Ok, right, this is really serious!’ But then when I got a third message I began to think, “Yeah, yeah, ok, it’s the third time now. So are you going to do anything or what??!”

If anything the threats ratcheted up Amkoullél’s defiance. “They’re nutcases, and you realise that in this country no one is controlling anything. You have to be as mad and as extreme as they are if you’re going to stop them. You mustn’t just leave them to do what they do. It’s out of the question. No one wants to die, but I said to myself that in a way, if they did me over, it might help my struggle even more.”

The ‘Plus Jamais Ça’ Association has also met obstacles in the shape of bureaucratic sabotage. The governor of the district where the association was based refused to hand over the authorisations and paperwork that the association needed to become a legal entity. Without them, it can’t fundraise or promote events or demonstrate legally. Nonetheless, Amkoullél and his posse carried regardless, going out into on the poorer neighbourhoods and speaking to the youth about democracy, dictatorship and justice.

“The worse thing in all this is that I came away with the impression that human beings are capable of getting used to anything,” he says. “After five or six months we’re in danger of accepting the status quo as normal. Like, as long as they’re not shooting or beating people up in the streets, then we’re ok, you know? In the north it’s different. But we’re both imprisoned in our own territory, for different reasons. In

the north they've been taken hostage by jihadists, nutters and God freaks. In the south we've been taken hostage by our own army."

With their intellectual power, their courage and their grass roots engagement in the national struggle to keep Mali's diseased democracy alive, Amkoulel, Mylmo, Les Sofas de la République et al represent what might be called the 'conscious' end of the Malian rap scale. Theirs is definitely a *Rap Moraliste* approach. There also exists a younger generation of Malian rap stars, who represent the more mainstream and 'teenie' hip hop end of the spectrum. They also attract a far larger mass-market audience than the Rap Moraliste activists. Amongst these younger MCs, two names stand out; Iba One and Sidiki Diabaté, the eldest son of no lesser person than kora virtuoso Toumani Diabaté, one of the most famous Malian musicians in the world.

"Today Malian rappers, including my son Sidiki Diabaté, can fill stadiums," Toumani tells me with obvious pride. "His rap group were nominated the best beat makers in Malian hip hop. He himself plays the kora and so he makes traditional music mixed with hip hop. He's a pupil at the Malian music conservatory. For the feast of Tabeski they did a gig in the biggest stadium in Mali, the *26 Mars*. Thank God there are still musicians who can fill stadia."

"You can't imagine a rap movement that has the power and the force of the rap movement in Mali today," Toumani continues. "Iba One and Sidiki Diabaté, they're the number one rappers in Mali. Amkoulel and Tatapound are guys that I know and respect. They're intellectuals. But the messages of Iba One and Sidiki are even clearer and sharper than theirs, more direct. Their lyrics talk about the ills of our society, the problems but at the same time their music is very rhythmic, in the true spirit of Malian music."

Sidiki and Iba One did a track with Gaspi and Memo All Star called 'On Veut La Paix' ('We Want Peace') with a swinging ragga feel, honeyed R&B vocals and a delivery that is noticeably mellower than either Amkoulel or Les Sofas. This is perhaps the reason why the posse were invited to perform the song live over playback on ORTM, prime time! Sidiki's kora tinkles like a soothing fountain in the background. The gestures are as globalised as a Big Mac. Nonetheless the messages hit home; *'Mali is one and indivisible!'*, *'We make peace not war or hate!'*; *'We want peace!'*

Conscious rap, teenie rap, Bambara rap, Tamashek rap, Songhoi rap, Manding rap; rap in Mali is huge and varied. The simple beat and flow, the very simplicity that scares the musical old guard shitless, is rap's strength, allowing the genre to propagate in places where money to buy instruments or the opportunity to learn millennial musical techniques and oral poetry don't exist. All you need is mic and a beat box and you're in business. A sharp flow of words captured on a mobile phone and uploaded to the net and you're in business.

Africa has embraced that immediacy, that simplicity and is turning it into a weapon of social consciousness and awareness raising. And if the role models are Jay-Z, Tupac Shakur, Eminem, Notorious B.I.G and Beyoncé, with all their ghetto fab

conceits, Africa has taken their rap and made it its own; a raw and youthful voice that can travel far and wide using the Internet and the mobile phone, tools that the elders have barely begun to understand.

The rage and sincerity in the delivery of Ramses or Master Soumy from Les Sofas de la Republique, of Amkoullel or El General and the MCs of Y'en A Marre, is the only stamp of authenticity that their young listeners really need, an authenticity that they so rarely feel in the speeches of their political leaders. The new manifestoes of Africa's emerging generations are rapped in rhyme and as such reach so much further than cold words on a page.

That's what the Islamists don't understand. Without music, how can you rally people, communicate with them, send out messages, nurture social consciences or raise awareness in Africa. "Iyad Ag Ghali has gone too far," says Ahmed Ag Kaedi, the guitarist from Amanar, whose equipment was burned by Ansar ud-Dine. "And if he really wants to impose his Shari'a, I think he would be better off using and artists and musicians to get his message across... ha ha ha. It's hard to get a message heard in Mali without music."

11. Conclusion – Without music, Mali will die

The musicians and cultural activists of Mali speak

I was prepared to pen an emotional and incisive conclusion to this examination of music in Mali under fire. But then I realised that in almost every one of the 24 interviews I conducted during my research, the passage in which every interviewee excelled in terms of passion and eloquence occurred when I asked them to respond to the MUJAO band on music in the north, issued by decree on August 23rd 2012. So here are those responses, which told to me in October 2012, in the darkest days of the Jihadi takeover of northern Mali. I hope you'll agree, they say it all:

Cheikh Tidiane Seck: “Music guides the whole of our society. The proof is that the griot became so institutional. He was like a judge, a lawyer, a federator, who calmed quarrels in the old days. Everything in Mali involves music, even funerals. Music regulates the life of a Malian, from ancient days until today. When I heard that the MUJAO had declared all music forbidden except Quranic chanting in the name of Islam, I wanted to go up there myself. We musicians... go up there, and sacrifice our lives. They can't take that away from us.”

Rokia Traore: “I try not to think about it too much. It just would get me nowhere. Right now, I have to work and do as much as I can, because I reckon that the mere fact I can still work is a great fortune. Under shari'a, it would mean that people like me could no longer live in Mali. Obviously, I'm a Muslim. I've always been a believer, but shari'a law is not my thing. I don't believe in it and if it has to exist in my country, I could no longer work in Mali. I would cease to exist in one way or another. And at the same, Malian culture would cease to exist. I hope that Mali won't be another global catastrophe in cultural terms.”

Manny Ansar (Director of the Festival in the Desert): “Everything is transmitted in Mali through music, through poetry. We enjoy life through music. The MUJAO can exist but not among this people. And I don't see how, in the 21st century, they'll manage to occupy this entire territory without the support of the

people who live there. So, that declaration of theirs, instead of making me panic, at least it tells me that we're dealing with people who don't know what they're doing, who aren't serious and who won't win. Because they're aiming for utopia. They don't understand the culture that they're operating in and they don't try and understand it either. And most importantly, they're not in harmony with the population."

Ahmed Ag Kaedi (from the group Amanar): "When I heard about the MUJAO ban, I was scared for music. Because modern Touareg music wasn't born that long ago, and I was scared it was going to die. If it dies, I'll die with it, because playing music is the only thing I can do."

Amadou Bagayoko: "It's as if they were trying to annihilate Malian culture generally. Already, when a child is born, on the seventh day there's the baptism and the griots come to sing praises. That's happened since time immemorial. And at weddings there was always dance music. And when people went into the fields, there were also musicians who accompanied the farmers. There's also music for the hunters. So that's why I say that banning music... it isn't a possibility. Because if one forbade music, it would be like eradicating Malian culture itself."

In the life of nations, there are always moments of hardship and catastrophe. I consider this to be one of those moments, something that has happened, spontaneously, to come and stop the onward march of life. But I don't think it's a situation that will endure, because the country has been secular for a long time. Mali isn't just a country of Muslims, there are also Christians and Animists. So it's not by strong-arming that one can stop all of that. I don't think so. As for the idea of stopping music... well, ha ha, that would be very complicated! There would be no weddings, no baptisms. We don't speak Arabic. What would we do? What would we say? We can't only listen to what is said in Arabic, we must listen to things that are said in our own language, in our own tradition. That's very important."

Adam Thiam (Journalist): "As a Malian who believes in freedom, I was shocked by the declaration of the MUJAO. It was even hard to believe. But I grew up in a very Islamicised family. My father was a marabout, devoted to the Quran. So I'm rather familiar with that kind of restriction. But as a modern Malian, I was shocked. Up in the north, music is one of the rare pleasures in a very hard environment, with a very poor economy. For example, in Gao, the takamba is like the blues was for the blacks on the plantations of the American south."

If we lose the musical productivity that we have now, we will have lost Mali's biggest ambassador outside the country. Malian music has driven the marketing of the

country, its image, these past twenty years. So any law that represses musical creativity in Mali today deprives it of its biggest weapon for marketing and promotion in the world at large.

I also think that music is the first ingredient of our social capital. In Rwanda, for example, I noticed that apart from a few bands that were more or less set up by humanitarian organisations, people don't sing. It's different in Mali. If MUJAO came to Bamako and deprived the people of their sounou or whatever else, they would really be depriving them of them of the most effective tool of socialisation."

Bassekou Kouyaté: "If there is no music, there will be no Mali. Mali is known through its music. It's a cradle for music. What are we going to do if there's no music? Just sit here all day looking at people go by? In my opinion, those people want to destroy this country and all that we have achieved since ages. They're bandits. Honestly, we can't go on like that. We have to find a solution. We need the Western countries to come and rescue us and get rid of those people. They aren't even Malians. They can't come and colonise us all over again. We want our democracy. We really want it back."

Toumani Diabaté: "It's sad what's happening, it's sad and unacceptable and unimaginable too. One trusts in God and prays for this problem to go away. Mali has never known this before. I ask the whole world to become ambassadors of Mali and to help bring peace back, because it's not just a problem that concerns only Mali. It's also a problem for the rest of the world. So we must never give a possibility to people who call themselves the emissaries of God or whatever. We are all religious and it's not for anybody else to give us lessons about religion. Religion is faith. We were born into it, with parents who were Muslims. So we don't need to be told what to do by anybody coming from the outside. We're a peaceful people with a cultural tradition that is very big and very powerful. That culture is our petrol. That culture is our diamonds, our mineral wealth. So we'll never accept that people come and try and destroy history, try and hide and destroy the heritage of your country. We'll never accept that.

I'm taking this opportunity to thank the entire European, American, Asian music business for its support for the cause of Malian music. And the people who come and learn music here, or even people who buy tickets to go and see the different Malian musicians in concert, I take this opportunity say thanks and bravo to you all, and may the struggle continue.

I'm not stopping. I'm rehearsing with my band right now and I'm making use of this fallow time to prepare a new record, which I'll begin to record very soon. I'm a musician in a line of 71 generations of musicians, kora players, from father to son, so the only thing I can do in life is that. It's my breadwinner. I'm not a footballer. I know

that I'll never play in the Stade de France or at Wembley. The only thing I do, which is my destiny, is to play music. And I'm an ambassador of my culture, of the culture of my country. I represent a culture and a tradition that is very old, over seven centuries old. So it's out of the question that I abandon all that to do something else. I can only do that and I will continue doing that work, as will my children and my family. I sincerely hope that we'll continue doing the work of music, by the grace of God."

Rhissa (not his real name – musician from Kidal): "Look, it's not complicated. What Iyad, MUJAO and the others who are in Timbuktu are imposing hasn't pleased anyone, to tell you the truth. There are those who go along with it because they have to, or because they haven't understood it. That's what's happening. So many people have left that they can do what they want. You have to study religion to know it well. It's not something you can use for your own ends. And if you want to impose it on people, you have to do it with them, you have to be kind to them. But in their case, they just arrived and that boom! There's nothing left to discuss. They've consulted no one and sought the opinion of no one. It was forced on people. Tamashek culture without music isn't possible. I can tell that today, it's just a form of chaos that has arrived. And I don't think it'll last long."

Amkouelle: "I don't give a f**k what they say. Unfortunately they're in a position of force to impose what they've declared on part of the country, but that, I hope, will only be temporary. We won't let them get away with it. What they think is their own business. And we never waited for them in order to be Muslims. Mali is secular country, tolerant, where everyone declares their religion according to their feeling, and in any case, they know that a Mali without music is an impossibility."

Even before the Almoravid invasions, with the penetration of the Muslim religion here in Mali, the culture of tolerance already existed in the old rituals, what we call the Animist religions, even if I don't like that term very much. But in the old religions there was respect for the other. Because, in Mali, when you're little you're told that if a stranger comes to your house, they're worth more than you. If you only have one bed in which to sleep, you must sleep on the floor and give your only bed to the stranger. So there's nothing more tolerant and open and respectful of others than Malian culture. And it isn't religion that brought all of that. It was there before. It mixed with Islam when religion arrived. And basically religion is tolerant.

The problem is that those Islamists who come, their aim is to destroy all reference, all memory and history. That's why they attack the mausoleums. That's why they have to destroy culture and music. Because when you destroy all the references of a people, its memory which is preserved in its museums, its monuments, its music and culture, well then, it's like they don't have a past any more, and then you can replace what it had with what you're proposing. That's the first stage of alienation, but the

problem for them is that it's going to be very difficult because we live in a world in which new technologies have developed. They're in a country in which there are artists who are committed to protest, who speak up. There are rappers and also others, so there are many ways in which to fight against those people."

Yehia (from the group Takambo Super 11): "Music is so important in Gao. The people of Gao love their takamba. They don't have another style that they love so much. So if they're forbidden to play and listen to takamba in Gao, really, they have nothing left. And many of us live only from playing music. Imagine, you live from your guitar but if you bring it with you eastwards past Mopti, they'll take it and destroy it."

Vieux Farka Touré: "Really and truly, I don't think those guys have anything to do with Islam. You can't even call them Islamists. They're jokers, you know. For them it's all about weapons and drugs. They're just opportunists, not Islamists. By trying to destroy music they want to break people's spirits, so that they can control them better. But I don't think it's possible. Music is something very powerful in the human spirit, so it's not just by shaking your finger that you can destroy it. Music has a big impact on all of use because it provides a place for us to come together. It's our meeting place, where we're happy, where there's friendship and companionship. Everything happens around music. It's life. It's as if they're attack part of our life."

Nina Walet Intallou (Female member of the Transitional Council for the State of Azawad): "An attack on music is an attack on women in our society. Because music is so often a women's affair. For Tamashek women, everything happens around music, the tindé, the violin, *iswat*¹⁰ at night. The young girls, when they perform *iswat*, that's when the youth come and find their partners or their future fiancées.

It's an attack on the soul of our society. When the MUJAO declare that all music is forbidden except praise singing, it's a way to kill our culture. No one agrees with that. They're killing our culture and abusing us. The Arabs don't want us to talk about that, saying that we're racists, but we'll do everything to keep the only real wealth that we possess, which is our culture. It's an attempt to oppress Amazigh culture. And all those Islamists, as they couldn't do it by inter-marrying etc, they're trying to do it with Islam. To kill our culture."

¹⁰ Iswat is a form of poetry sung by both women and men in Touareg culture

Cheick Ag Tilia (from the group Tamikrest): “Unless I’m much mistaken, music is not forbidden in Islam. It isn’t a sin for you to play music, or sing to express your truth. The Touareg people without music would be like, to give you an example, someone whose face has been completely burnt, or someone who doesn’t have a face at all. He doesn’t have a personality. It’s like a people without any personality or soul. But we’re still playing music. We’re going to rehearse at Tinzawaten, at the frontier between Algeria and Mali. We’ll carry on. At all the gigs we’ve done in Tinzawaten, people have come from everywhere, crossing the border from Mali to see us. But I also know young people who are supposedly in Ansar ud-dine who still listen to their music when they’re alone, no problem. The smoke their cigarettes as they’ve always done... but only amongst themselves.”

Fadimata Walet Oumar aka ‘Disco’ (from the Tartit Ensemble): “I felt that this is the end. The game’s up. Because for us, the Touareg, music is an essential element in our lives. And if we’re told that we cannot make music it means that a part of ourselves has been cut out. For us, it’s an impossibility. Music is something that touches the deepest part of us, and it’s as if they’ve cut off our capacity to breathe. Because traditionally, every evening we play tindé, we play the imzad, we play the teherdent. We live like that. It’s our life. It’s our roots. So if they cut that off from us, it’s as if they’ve cut away everything. There’d be no point in carrying on living any more. And if I shout out about it the MUJAO will cut my tongue out... ha ha ha!!!

In reality, it’s not just music, it’s the freedom of women that they want to destroy. Because as you well know, in our culture, women are almost freer than anywhere else on earth. So that’s why they want to forbid music, dancing and all that. We’ll never agree to it. They’ll have to kill us first. When they arrived in the desert, they saw how we lived. In fact, they already knew how we lived. We’re Muslims. We pray, we believe in God but that doesn’t stop us partying. That doesn’t stop us dancing or singing. But then we’ll say our prayers. And we will wear a veil, but not in the way they want us to. They’re trying to impose laws from the 18th century on us. Maybe they’re acceptable in Saudi Arabia or some place else but we’ve never accepted those laws. And we never will accept them. I think they want to rob us of the ability to be free women, to be women that can speak and be heard, to keep us like they keep their own women; locked up without any rights.

Without free women, without strong women, there’ll be no Touareg and there’ll be no Tamashek culture. It would mean that our culture ends right there. And our life as Touareg would end too. Because it would be another life for us, a completely different one to the life we’ve known. For millennia we’ve lived like that, millennia! Since time was time we’ve always lived like that. And it’s not a little group of MUJAO who’ll change that life we’ve lived. We’ll never return to the country if it stays like that. We’ll remain in exile for the rest of our lives.”

Ismaiel Ag Mohammed aka 'Massiwa' (Organiser of the Camel Fair in Tessalit): "Tamashek culture without music isn't possible. But I hope that it's all a nightmare that will go away. People have hope that it'll pass. Because it's very difficult for a people to live like that. Music plays a very important role in Tamashek culture, and in daily life. Music is a large component of society. It's true that they've said that all music is forbidden. And people are obliged to follow what they're ordered to do, because they no choice. But the people aren't happy at all. They don't want that. It's very difficult, very difficult for the people.

Ibrahim Ag Ahmed aka 'Pino' (Bassist with the group Terakaft): "Music cannot be disassociated from the image of the Tamashek people. Why? Because in this huge expanse of desert, man is nostalgic. He's homesick. He has the sky and the stars for a roof, and he has the whole desert for his house. So, on his dromedary, he covers hundreds of kilometres looking for water and all that. Music has to be part of his daily life. So he makes a traditional flute out of wood. He helps to create the tindé. The Touareg guitar comes from the tindé. So that's it. He can't live without that. It's not possible. You feel that everywhere. You hear it even. When you stop in the desert, what you'll miss is music, of course. In a moment of nostalgia, women poets can't help themselves from singing about that sadness, that arid bitter desert. It gives them the best of themselves. They're at peace in that. They see nature. It's their circle of life. You can't take it from the Touareg, it's not possible."

Jamal (not his real name – musician from Kidal): "Well, that's what I'm telling you, music is banned everywhere. In any case, we're in the shit. No one wants it, but that's how it is. We have no choice because we're dealing with people who are armed, who are deep into the system. You don't know what to do any more. All you can do is observe."

Cheick Oumar Sissoko (Film Director and former Malian Minister of Culture): "Music is the most important part of our heritage. Because music is memory. Music is tradition. There isn't a single tradition in our country that isn't magnified by music. That music is represented at weddings, baptisms, circumcision ceremonies, funerals, harvest ceremonies... and social cohesion, national cohesion. Music provides the rhythm of our lives so if there isn't any music, it means death.

But there is resistance to all they're trying to do today, even in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. Like yesterday in Douentza, people went into a bar to drink, perhaps even alcohol. In the end, they were arrested and whipped. The owner of the bar fled. But if there were no resistance, that wouldn't be possible. And people continue to claim their right to watch TV, to smoke cigarettes, to listen to the music of their choice. It's that spirit that will lead to a mobilisation in the towns when there is an attack from

the outside. Because the youth up there are organising themselves you know? The youth have even confronted them, even if just with their hands and sticks, to say it's too much. And often we received messages that we broadcast through our Free Radios that we're sick of what's happening. And that's risky because we know that the Islamists have their representatives here in Bamako and they could send back the names of the people concerned."

Afel Bocoum: "Yes, but isn't Quranic singing also music? Malian musicians also sing for the Prophet Mohammed. We sing about religion. We sing about men. We sing about the animals. We sing about the earth. But isn't singing for a religion also making music? What about singing for the animals. Because the Muslims up there in the north cannot live without nature. They can't live without their animals.

Their ambition isn't Islam. It's something else. My view of it is that it's a chaos that has been born. I don't see it as a religious movement, in the name of God, or in the name of one or another religion. We're not a religious country, we're a secular country. Why start telling us about religion now, today. The old people of Timbuktu have no need to go to school now to learn about Islam. It's just a chaos, an uncontrollable chaos. It's an occupation that has nothing to do with the Muslim religion."

APPENDIX – List of Interviewees

Adam Thiam (Journalist)

Afel Bocoum (Musician from Niafunké)

Ahmed Ag Kaedi (Musician, leader of the group Amanar from Kidal)

Amadou Bagayoko (Musician, half of Amadou & Mariam and President of the National Federation of Malian Artists)

Amkoullé (Rapper and founder of ‘Jamais Plus Ça!’)

Bassekou Kouyaté (Musician)

Cheick Ag Tilia (Musician, member of the group Tamikrest from Kidal)

Cheick Oumar Sissoko (Film director and former Malian Minister of Culture)

Cheick Tidiane Seck (Musician and producer)

Fadimata Walet Oumar, aka ‘Disco’ (Musician, member of Tartit Ensemble from Goundam)

Ibrahim Ag Ahmed, aka ‘Pino’ (Musician, member of the group Terakaft from Kidal)

Ibrahim Ag Mohamed, aka ‘Massiwa’ (Organiser of the Camel Fair in Tessalit)

Lucien Roux (Director of the French Cultural Centre, Bamako)

Manny Ansar (Director of the Festival in the Desert)

Nina Walet Intallou (Member of the Transitional Council for the State of Azawad)

Rhissa (Not his real name. Musician from Kidal).

Rokia Traore (Musician and head of the NGO ‘La Passerelle’)

Toumani Diabaté (Musician)

Vieux Farka Touré (Musician)

Violet Diallo (Bamako resident and former British Consul)

Yehia (Musician, member of the group Takamba Super 11 from Gao)

Andy Morgan

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“If music dies, I’ll die with it”

Ahmed Ag Kaedi, musician