

Singer Plant helps Mali musicians

Singer Robert Plant has set up a bus for blind musicians in Mali as part of a project to keep alive the music and culture of the country's nomadic Tamashek people.

The former Led Zeppelin front man, who has forged a successful solo career since the band split at the start of the 1980s, performed at the Festival In The Desert in Mali - the most remote concert in the world - earlier this year.

Plant was so inspired by the number of projects under way to help the Tamashek, or Tuareg, that he has set up his own - the bus, which carries around disabled musicians in Mali's capital, Bamako.

"[They] are now roaring around in a super bus, singing the praises of some guy they've never even heard of, which is superb," Plant told BBC World Service's The Music Biz programme.

"I can't wait to get out there and see how they're getting on."

Pride

Many of the Tamashek projects have been set in motion by some of the artists who have performed at the Festival In The Desert.

"I spent some time with [Musician] Ali Farka Toure, digging wells in his village which is alongside the Niger," Plant said.

"So now he's created a huge garden for the people in his village. Now there are various groups working on that sort of thing."

A mix of European and African artists performed at the Festival In The Desert.

It was at a site literally in the middle of the desert - a 10-hour drive from nearest town or settlement.

"Once you're there, the microphones sound great, they're singing in their own language, singing to their own people," Plant said.

"They've got monitors in front of them that make them sound great, because they are great.

"And they had an audience that was going nowhere. They had ambassadors from various countries who were gathered together there to commit themselves to an ideology of improving things for the Tamashek people.

"So there was a great deal of pride. The awareness of the outside world for the Tamashek and for their story was propagated on a daily basis, and that was every reason to be committed."

Plant stated that he had become involved in the project through his friend Justin Adams, who he played with in the group Strange Sensation.

Adams had appeared at the first of the festivals, now in their third year.

"He's an absolutely, totally committed guy to advancing the cause of the Tamashek music," Plant said.

"When I said, 'look, I'm putting a band together and I need a guitarist who doesn't think that Freddy King and Eric Clapton are where guitar finishes, they said 'well you need Justin Adams!'."

'Middle of nowhere'

The music recorded there makes up the end of Plant's latest retrospective, '66 to Timbuktu.

Plant said that there had been "a certain amount of astonishment" that the concert had even gone ahead.

"This whole scenario had been created by some people who were so committed to it working - for aesthetic reasons rather than profit," he said.

"These people walked in, and although there were members amongst them who knew what it was all about, most people must have been flabbergasted.

"I know I was, and I'm used to seeing events appear in the middle of nowhere."

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