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Music miles from nowhere

Mali's Festival of the Desert is a truly tough ticket

Jonathan Curiel, Chronicle Staff Writer
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(01-11) 04:00 PDT Essakane, Mali -- To get to this village on the edge of the Sahara Desert, visitors must drive for hours across sandy dunes and rocky terrain. From Mali's capital, Bamako, it takes days of unforgiving travel, but that didn't stop scores of people -- from Mali, Europe, the United States and elsewhere -- from making a pilgrimage to the most remote music festival in the world.

The Festival of the Desert is the only event on Earth where top-name Western musicians (like Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin) perform on the same stage as nomadic groups with guitars, where Muslim government leaders and devout adherents of Islam sit in the same audience as jeans-wearing men with tattoos, and where camels and donkeys are as common a sight as people.

During the three-day event, everyone sleeps in tents, including the musicians and visiting dignitaries. The festival is not without glitches. At the first one three years ago, gun-toting bandits stole the public address system that had been flown in. They returned it -- reluctantly -- only after a former rebel leader who now plays guitar with a celebrated local group named Tinariwen negotiated the equipment's release.

This year's festival, which ended late Wednesday night, had no problems, and if there was one concert that symbolized its success, it was the finale by Ali Farka Toure, the Malian guitarist and singer who won a Grammy with Ry Cooder for "Talking Timbuktu." During his performance, Toure moved the audience with songs about his homeland, about peace and about forging ahead in difficult times. For many of the musicians who performed here, the songs aren't just entertainment but musical proverbs about long-held traditions, such as those practiced by the Tamashek people of the Sahara.

The Tamashek are more commonly known as Tuareg, an Arabic term (meaning "abandoned by the gods") that has branded them for centuries. The Tamashek group Tinariwen, whose debut CD, "The Radio Tisdas Sessions," was one of last year's most critically acclaimed world music albums, was a major draw of this year's festival.

Members of Tinariwen helped start this event to make the world more aware of the Tamashek people, who live in Mali -- a landlocked country in West Africa -- and the region around the Sahara.

"This festival is important for Mali," said Ibrahim Ag al-Habib, the guitarist and singer who leads Tinariwen.

During the Tamashek's violent campaign in the 1980s and early 1990s to attain more autonomy from Bamako, al-Habib was jailed in Mali and Algeria, at a time when Tinariwen's rebellious music was banned and anyone caught with the group's cassettes was subject to beatings by authorities. A peace accord has held for several years, which means Tinariwen has been able to focus strictly on music (and lyrics that talk of reconciliation). The band

recently opened for Plant in London and plans to make more appearances outside its home in Mali, just as Toure did for many years before cutting back his schedule drastically so he could devote more time to farming.

Oumou Sangare, who may be Mali's best-known singer, performed on the first night of the festival. More than 30 groups or artists took the stage over three days. Among them were a French rap group (Kwal), a Native American group from Arizona (Blackfire) and Plant, who performed with Toure one night by the snack bar, in addition to his regular concert.

Many of the groups came from across Mali, representing the myriad ethnic and tribal groups that make up the country.

During performances, some Muslim audience members interrupted their enjoyment of the music to pray toward Mecca. Many local tribespeople attended on camels, watching concerts from atop their animals. They could do that because sand surrounded the open-air stage. (The Sahara stretches out in every direction from Essakane.) There were no seats, really -- and that was fine with everyone. The natural setting of the festival was an attraction for many, even if it meant putting up with large sand beetles that roamed the grounds.

The Festival of the Desert has set a standard for what is possible in the middle of a remote area. Essakane has fewer than 200 residents, guides say. The nearest city is Timbuktu, which for centuries represented geographic distance and inaccessibility. (Timbuktu is three hours away by four-wheel-drive vehicle.) If there is ever a paved road built to Essakane (which is unlikely), the atmosphere of the festival could change as more people attended.

Toure's concert was watched by fewer than 700 people.

"I hope it stays in a noncommercial way, with a friendly atmosphere," says Denis Pean, a harmonium player with the French group Lo'Jo, which performed here and who also helped start this festival three years ago. "All the artists who participated did so in a positive way. The world needs that."

E-mail Jonathan Curiel at jcuriel@sfnchronicle.com.

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