Tinariwen - Aman Iman - Water Is Life (2006)



01. Cler Achel (4:27) 02. Mano Dayak (5:43) 03. Matadjem Yinmixan (5:45) 04. Ahimana (4:58) 05. Soixante Trois (4:13) 06. Toumast (4:26) 07. Imidiwan Winakalin (4:27) 08. Awa Didjen (4:14) 09. Ikyadarh Dim (3:37) 10. Tamatant Tilay (3:21) 11. Assouf (3:58) 12. Izararh Tenere (5:04) Musicians: Abdallah Ag Alhousseyni (vocals, guitar, acoustic guitar, hand claps, background vocals); Mohammed Ag Itlale (vocals, guitar, acoustic guitar); Alhassane Touhami (vocals, guitar, hand claps, background vocals); Ibrahim Ag Alhabib (vocals, guitar); Elaga Ag Hamid (guitar, hand claps, background vocals); Abdallah Ag Lamida "Intidao" (guitar, background vocals); Justin Adams (acoustic guitar, lute, background vocals); Eyadou Ag Leche (bass guitar, hand claps, background vocals); Salah Dawson Miller (congas, shekere); Sad'd Ag Ayad (hi-hat, djembe, hand claps, background vocals); Wonou Walet Sidati, Kesa Walet Hamid (hand claps, background vocals); Hamid Ekawel (background vocals); Mama Livio, Manaki Diallo.

Their name means "Empty Places" in their native Tamashek language, the tongue of a people known to most of the outside world as the Tuareg. The Tuareg, who refer to themselves as the Kel Tamashek ("those who speak Tamashek") are traditionally nomadic, occupying a vast swath of the Western Sahara that today is split between five different countries. Tinariwen formed in a refugee camp in Libya in the early 1980s; most of the members were living in exile from their homes in Mali, banished in the wake of a civil war and a wave of government repression.

You could say the group, whose membership is indefinite, but generally contains about six guitarists and a few female singer/percussionists, plays a kind of desert blues, not entirely removed from the transcendent work of Ali Farka Touré. But it's not blues in the typical Westerner sense. For starters, one chord is almost always enough in this music, but more than that, the blues is present as a sense of intense longing and defiance in the face of despair that hums in sympathetic vibration with its trans-Atlantic cousin.

Aman Iman is Tinariwen's third internationally released album, and it's the most powerful statement they've issued so far. It begins with guitars that conjure so much: the vast emptiness of the Sahel, the endlessness of a desert sky, the gradual shift of sands and the sudden violence of a sandstorm. "Cler Achel" ("I Spent the Day") is a song for the displaced, ending with the couplet (sung in Tamashek), "It's a time that separates the beloved from those they love/ And when you think of them, painful obsessive thoughts are all that come." Principle vocalist Ibrahim Ag Alhabib is echoed by a chanting choir as the guitars swirl around him in hypnotic waves, oddly spectral and earthly at the same time.

Tinariwen more fully embraces rock texture and volume on this album, opening "Assouf" (roughly, "Longing") with a ferocious electric guitar solo edged with wah-wah pedal and distortion. "Matadjem Yinmixan" ("Why All This Hate Between You?") just rocks, clomping along on a buoyant beat that sends the guitars fluttering off on flights that John Coltrane might have admired during his post-modal phase. There's tension and release in these songs, but the crescendo and diminuendo of the music never feels calculated, flowing with an open-ended spontaneity that producer Justin Adams captures brilliantly simply by refusing to manipulate or impede it.

The music of Tinariwen is at once exotic and familiar-- the scales and arrangements are as strange to our ears as the language they sing in, but there's a force operating on a more subliminal level that unites it to something rattling around inside anyone who was brought up on blues or rock & roll. It's music of longing and rebellion, weary wisdom and restless energy, and it sounds so, so good. Don't let it pass you by. --- Joe Tangari, pitchfork.com

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