

Electric wadi land

His raw, rock'n'roll take on traditional Tuareg music has won him a global audience (and a hip American producer). **Andy Morgan** meets Bombino in the desert dunes of south Niger

A small white car, branded with the words "Groupe Bambino" and a crudely drawn electric guitar, is revving its wheels deeper and deeper into the soft sand of a side alley somewhere on the ragged outskirts of Niamey, the capital of Niger. The driver cuts the engine and smiles. "I should have taken the turn at speed in second gear," he says. "But I had to answer my phone. No bother. We'll just leave the car here and dig it out later."

While he and his band unload their gear - guitars, battery-powered amp, *djembe* (a large west African drum), teapot and stove - a gaggle of kids gather to point and stare. They recognise our driver, 33-year-old singer and musician Bombino (born Omar al-Moctar), and giggle with excitement. He beams at them before sauntering off into the scrubland, his purple robe shimmering in the evening light. "There's no better place to play music than in the desert," he says; escaping the noise and stress of Niamey has become a daily ritual.

Until recently, Niamey was a laid-

back place sprawling along the banks of the Niger, with plenty of greenery to break the monotony of shantytowns and dusty suburbs. But the Malian civil war is now raging only half a day's drive to the north, and a pall of paranoia has descended. When I receive an invitation to join the band for a jam, a smoke and a round or two of Tuareg tea up on the dunes, it feels

like something heaven-sent.

We wander along a dry riverbed in the twilight hush, past mud and reed villages where women pounding their grain stop to salute Bombino. His mobile rings again; it's his manager calling from the US. Bombino's new album, *Nomad*, recorded in Nashville and produced by Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys, is set for imminent worldwide release. North American and European tours are in the offing, and the grinding carousel of promotional duty beckons. Auerbach has helped Bombino perfect a youthful, almost urban sound, characterised by raw and rolling dance grooves, and long, dazzling displays of guitar work.

"Dan found these really great old amps, which sounded like those old concert videos," Bombino recalls. "He's not too interested in complicated new technology."

Since the release of his 2011 album, *Agadez*, and Ron Wyman's accompanying feature-length documentary, *Agadez: Music and Rebellion*, Bombino has gained an international fanbase. Fans of Tuareg music, or of roughneck indie-guitar energy in general, were delighted to discover a talent hewn from the Tinariwen motherlode, only younger and wilder on stage. "There's no resisting his headlong, six-string rave-ups," wrote the man from NPR radio in the US, of *Agadez*. "Bombino moves unlike any Tuareg guitarist I have ever seen," said *Songlines* magazine.

Wyman's film featured powerful footage of a 2009 gig in front of the grand mosque in Agadez (Bombino's hometown), an event that marked the return of peace after two years of bitter fighting between Tuareg rebels and government troops in northern Niger. For Bombino, it was a triumphant



return to the city where he'd first picked up a guitar and made his name, as a cutely boyish fixture at local weddings and celebrations. (His nickname Bambino, Italian for "little kid", later mutated into the more explosive Bombino.)

The level of recognition Bombino has achieved at home is in many ways more extraordinary than his international success. He is now a star not just among the Tuareg, who live mainly in Niger's northern deserts, but among the nation's youth - including other major ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Jerma and Toubou. This is something no other Tuareg artist has managed. Since their ancestral homelands across the Sahara were carved up in the early 1960s, the Tuareg have been a marginalised minority in Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya and Burkina Faso. They possess a

deep and rich culture, but never before have they enjoyed any kind of cultural hegemony.

With the youth of Niger behind him, Bombino wants to convince the world that the Tuareg are a peace-loving people who are only trying to protect their culture and freedom. At the end of 2011, a small clique of Malian Tuareg leaders sought an alliance with al-Qaida-franchised terror groups in northern Mali. Recently, no less an expert in west African affairs than Jeremy Clarkson was moved to describe the Tuareg as "running guns from Libya to Mali and fighting there alongside hardline Islamists", in an episode of Top Gear.

"That man has no right to say that," retorts Bombino when I tell him this. "The Tuareg have never behaved in that way. Because of two or three people, our entire community is suffering. It's very serious because the future of our people hangs in the balance. France should have intervened five or 10 years ago, when the terrorists first arrived in our desert. Now it must finish the battle it's fighting in Mali. Because if it doesn't, things will explode."

Bombino isn't alone in thinking that only the French army stands in the way

of all-out ethnic war in northern Mali. Reports of Malian army attacks against Tuareg and Arab civilians have been mounting in recent weeks. But I get the impression that writing profound, poetic lyrics isn't Bombino's natural vocation. Many of the songs on Nomad are Tuareg classics by groups such as Tinariwen and Terakaft, the original lyrics stripped back to whoops and catchphrases. "I like to play an old song which still moves people," he explains. "And at the same time give it a new shape, just a bit faster and more energetic than before."

He still needs his daily fix of tranquillity on the dunes, and cares deeply about his desert home. "We've already suffered enough," he tells me. "We don't want to be like Afghanistan. We only want peace. I don't think that's a lot to ask."

Night has fallen by the time we get back to the car. Extracting it from the sand proves no problem for the band, hardened desert travellers that they are. They load up the gear, fix a punctured tyre, and Bombino and band are on their way.

i Nomad is out now on Nonesuch

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Dazzling displays ...
Bombino;
(right) with
his band

PHOTOGRAPH ANTHONY PIDGEON/GETTY

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