

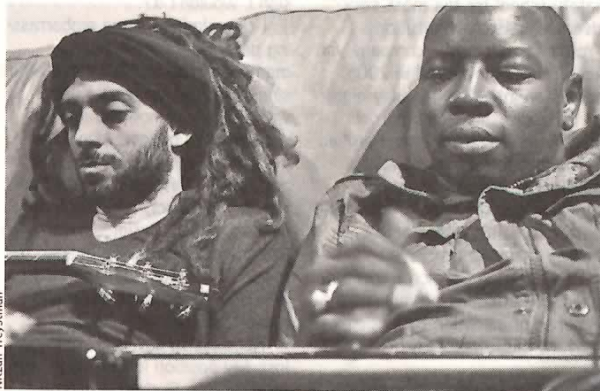
# Jamming on Common Ground

By JIM FUSILLI

When Israeli pop superstar Idan Raichel ran into Malian guitarist Vieux Farka Touré in a Berlin airport in 2008, it was as if a destiny were fulfilled. A gifted pianist, Mr. Raichel is a proponent of African music and an admirer of Mr. Touré as well as Mr. Touré's father, the late Ali Farka Touré. At the time, the younger Mr. Touré was entering the global marketplace via his self-titled debut album. The two men pledged to play together.

Two years later, they did: Mr. Raichel joined Mr. Touré's band on stage at the Tel Aviv Opera House; the next day, they gathered in a nearby recording studio and made what became "The Tel Aviv Session" (Cumbancha), the just-released disc by the Touré-Raichel Collective. Culled from a lengthy jam session that also included Israeli bassist Yossi Fine, who produced Mr. Touré's second solo album, and Malian percussionist Souleymane Kane, the deeply affecting, at times hypnotic album rises from simmering grooves enriched by Mr. Touré's stinging solos on acoustic and electric guitars and Mr. Raichel's cascading piano. It's not so much a cross-cultural exercise as an exploration of common ground.

The heart of "The Tel Aviv Session" is its impromptu feel. The disc's programming gives listeners a sense of what it was like in the recording studio: In the opening numbers, "Azawade" and "Bamba," the lead musicians tread gingerly, as if looking for the right moment to strike. But by the time Mr. Raichel kicks off



Mizan Freytsman

Israeli pop singer Idan Raichel and Malian guitarist Vieux Farka Touré have just released a new album, 'The Tel Aviv Session.'

the third track, "Experience," there's a sense that they're on solid footing. The pianist lays down a modal groove so assertive that it seems a challenge to Mr. Touré, who responds with fiery confidence.

"It came out of the heart," Mr. Touré said by phone. "It was entirely a jam session and at the time I thought that's all it was. We were having an exchange. But Idan said, 'There's an album here.'"

"We played for three hours," Mr. Raichel said in a separate phone conversation. "I knew there was a diamond hidden in those three hours."

He said, "In the Collective, everything was very open. Simple melodies, relying on a groove, funky—but not a kind of Western funky or James Brown style. When I tried to follow Souleymane, it was something very different." Mr. Kane played a variety of percussion instruments, most notably a calabash, a hollow gourd.

"The connection is innate," Mr. Touré said. "We never prepared anything for the session. I kind of hesitate to call them songs. They are riffs, musical ideas."

When Mr. Raichel returned to the studio, he decided the sonic palette could be expanded without losing the music's essence. Though he's an unabashed devotee of the still-evolving Touré legacy—"What the Buena Vista Social Club was for Cuba, and Edith Piaf for France, Ali Farka Touré and Vieux Farka Touré are to Mali," he said—when it came time to review the recordings, he became disoriented while listening to the playback.

"I'd find myself drifting to the desert of the Sahara," he recalled. "It would be uncomfortable for me, but then it would take me to another way of living."

To add a touch of the Middle East, Mr. Raichel brought in two members of his band to augment the original recordings: On "Kfar," Yankale Segal plays tar, a

long-necked string instrument from Persia; and Cabra Casay, an Ethiopia-born Israeli, sings "Ane Nahatka" in Tigris. (Mr. Touré sings "Alkataou" in Songhay.) Other guests included the Beninese bassist Patrick Ruffino; French harmonica player Frédéric Yonnet, who contributed to the song "Touré"; and Russian émigré Mark Eliyahu of Israel, who added a kamanche, a bowed string instrument, to "Alem."

Though the contributors bring color to the music, Mr. Raichel succeeded in preserving what makes the Collective special. In his own band, Mr. Touré often sings and plays with a forceful rhythm section that blends Malian and Western influences. In the Idan Raichel Project, the leader's keyboards can be overlooked amid whirling multicultural pop. Here, the two are both out front without much cover. At times, Mr. Raichel mutes the piano strings to evoke the sound of the kora, a traditional West African harp; otherwise, he's reacting to opportunity, largely on acoustic piano. At the same time Mr. Touré, who hasn't featured much acoustic guitar on his solo discs, plays without enhancing effects. Both musicians sparkle in the different environment.

"It was something I wanted to do for my soul," Mr. Raichel said. "I wanted to bring something of my Israeli melodies to Farka's more organic sound. But I think this was really about the groove."

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