

# SONGLINES

## Interview with Idan Raichel

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The Israeli pianist talks to Clyde Macfarlane about his latest collaboration with Vieux Farka Touré



When Ali Farka Touré travelled to Los Angeles to record with Ry Cooder, it was very much an exploration of the remarkable similarities between these two guitarists. Ali, a Malian, had frequently seen his music categorised as 'blues', so this album was in essence a reverse roots trip. Pick a random track off 1994's *Talking Timbuktu* and Ali and Ry's guitar parts sound indistinguishable. Something so instinctively human as to pluck a string under tension, they demonstrated, predates the ancestral displacement in America's musical history.

Motivations aside, it was perhaps the Grammy award-winning quality of *Talking Timbuktu* that inspired Ali's son Vieux to embark on his own cross-cultural project.

He met his eventual collaborator, the Israeli pianist Idan Raichel, by chance whilst waiting in an airport. When does

modern life present a better opportunity to bump into someone suitably unfamiliar? A 'crazy hippy', was Vieux's first impression. From Idan's perspective Vieux Farka Touré, presumably sitting with his tell-tale guitar case, was more than just a fellow musician. "I grew up listening to the great Ali Farka Touré," Idan tells me proudly. "My piano playing is hugely influenced by *Talking Timbuktu*. Later I'd invent piano parts to Ali's earlier works, and try to imitate the *kora* as closely as possible."

In 2010 Vieux travelled to Israel to record *The Tel Aviv Session* with Idan. Whereas *Talking Timbuktu* saw Malian and American blues melt into one, *The Tel Aviv Session* could have been recorded in Mali by an all-Malian band. This is in every way a compliment to Idan's excellent *kora* imitation, made by plucking the piano strings with an appropriate speed and grace. Idan explained why absorbing influences comes naturally to an Israeli.

"With the dominance of Vieux's guitar and the fantastic calabash playing of Souleymane Kane, the session had a deep Malian feel. I see my role as an artist taking music from all over the world and giving it a twist. I don't see the project as Israeli music but more a collaboration with an Israeli musician. This is the essence of who we are and what we do in Israel. We have a recent history of immigration from all over the world, so it's difficult to define Israeli food, Israeli cinema or Israeli music. Every few years there is a new immigration that changes the face of our society. *The Tel Aviv Session* is Malian music as interpreted by an Israeli who instinctively knows how to blend sounds and emphasising melodies."

This is the most like Ali that Vieux has sounded to date, thanks largely to a decision to go completely acoustic. Without Vieux's trademark electric riffs Kane's calabash is indeed fantastic; from the hypnotic opener 'Azawade', the session is a flawless display of Malian percussion. Also present is Israeli bassist Yossi Fine, who produced Vieux's second album *Fondo*.

"With acoustic music there is nothing to hide," says Idan. "The album sounds like what it is – four musicians sitting in a living room having a jam session at 2am. It was a bold concept for Vieux, as he always records with an electric band. He's been toying with the idea of going acoustic for many years, and I'm glad to have led him in this direction. Going acoustic gave us a higher dynamic range to explore."

A late highlight to the album is 'Ane Nahatka', featuring Tigris vocals from the Ethiopian Jewish singer Cabra Casey. Her offering represents a passion that goes back a long way for Idan.

"I worked as a councillor in a boarding school for Israeli immigrants. There were many Ethiopian Jewish youths who had come from Addis Ababa, or from refugee camps in Ethiopia's Begemder region. I saw how they retained the music of Ethiopia to keep alive their identity as new immigrants in Israel. I would walk along the little streets around our boarding school, and this strange, incredibly loud music would come from open windows above."

"In class I asked the Ethiopians where I could hear this music live. They took me to some concerts in a downtown area of Tel Aviv. It was just a magical world for me, and its soundtrack captured my heart. I was hugely impressed by Ethiopia's great vocalists like Mahmoud Ahmed and Gigi, and their acoustic instruments like the *krar* and the *masenqo*. Cabra Casey is the lead singer for my main group **The Idan Raichel Project**, and both Vieux and I were extremely grateful when she agreed to take part in *The Tel Aviv Session*."

The **Tel Aviv Session** will be released by Cumbancha Records on the September 3 and is a Top of the World in the current issue (October 2012 #87).

