

Meditation Ground

Idan Raichel and **Vieux Farka Touré** roll tape and let the mood define their direction. BY BILL MURPHY

Sometimes you have to toss out the rules and go with your gut. That's what Israeli producer and musician Idan Raichel was thinking when he booked an impromptu jam session with Vieux Farka Touré, who in late 2010 performed in Raichel's home city at the Tel Aviv Opera House. Raichel and Touré had played together before, but those occasions had been in the context of a rigidly rehearsed live show. This time, the idea was to hang out in a small recording studio and see what happened.

"I was trying to keep my eyes and ears open—just to capture the moment," says Raichel, describing how he prepared for what became *The Tel Aviv Session*—a free-spirited exploration of the meditative power that can emerge from improvised music. "If you come in and start jamming on a song from the past, you have to learn the changes, the verses, the chorus and all this learning process will damage the spontaneous feeling of the session. For us, it was better if I just dropped

an idea on the piano. And if it came naturally, Farka would repeat it, and we would start from there. Or if Farka was playing two bars of something that he knows from Mali on the guitar, we would try to catch it."

Considering the caliber of the musicians involved, stolen moments like these are the album's bread and butter. Even so, Raichel was a bit hesitant at first to consider the session as anything more than a memento for private consumption.

"I came back to the recordings after about six months," he explains, "and I started to feel that it's a—I don't know how you say it in English—a diamond with a lot of mud. You

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need to clean it, to produce it in a way that will emphasize the melodies and the mix. I went back and forth with it for over a year until I realized that this is it. It's an album that made me very proud and excited. I'm a very song-form producer and artist first, and with this project, suddenly, the music is just there and it has its own magic."

With Raichel on piano, Touré on acoustic guitar (and occasional vocals), Yossi Fine on bass and Souleymane Kane on the percussive calabash, the foundation of *The Tel Aviv Session* is defined by an intimate, even séance-like ambience. "Alkataou" coalesces into a steady rhythmic pulse around Touré's subdued and haunting voice (reminiscent of his famous father, the late Ali Farka Touré), with Raichel flexing his Middle Eastern chops in response. "Hawa" ripples in the bluesy delta-ness of Touré's native village of Niafunké, while "Touré," which opens with Raichel tapping the piano's muted strings, slowly builds into a raucous juke-joint jam headlined by guest harmonica virtuoso Frédéric Yonnet.

There are other guests, like Ethiopian singer Cabra Casay, who spices "Ane Nahatka" with lilting phrases sung in the Tigris language while Touré cuts loose on electric guitar, and Mark Eliyahu, who gives a voice to the stringed kamanche on "Alem." But it's the shared experience of Raichel and Touré—the relaxed but almost physical push-and-pull between them—that quietly drives the music forward.

"You just empty your mind and play," Touré explains when asked how he geared up for the session. "There is no big secret. If the connection is good between the musicians, the music will be good, too. Idan and I have a very similar mentality, especially when it comes to music. We are both interested in exploring the music of other cultures, so we make a very good match."

As the two ready the Touré-Raichel Collective for a series of American tour dates in April, Raichel is optimistic about what a collaborative effort like this means for future interpretations of "world music," and how elastic the term has become in the last decade.

"There's always the question of what world music is," he says. "If I try to define [world music], for me, it reflects the soundtrack of the place that an artist comes from. The biggest compliment that I ever got was from *The New York Times*, when they said my music sounds like an Israeli soundtrack. That helped me see myself as the Ry Cooder for this kind of session." 🎧

