

Mdou Moctar

Mdou Moctar immediately stands out as one of the most innovative artists in contemporary Saharan music. His unconventional interpretations of Tuareg guitar have pushed him to the forefront of a crowded scene. Back home, he's celebrated for his original compositions and verbose poetry, an original creator in a genre defined by cover bands. In the exterior, where Saharan rock has become one of the continent's biggest musical exports, he's earned a name for himself with his guitar moves. Mdou shreds with a relentless and frenetic energy that utterly sets him apart.

Mdou Moctar hails from a small village in central Niger in a remote region steeped in religious tradition. Growing up in an area where secular music was all but prohibited, he taught himself to play on a homemade guitar cobbled together out of wood. It was years before he found a "real" guitar and taught himself to play in secret. He immediately became a star amongst the village youth.

In 2008, Mdou traveled to Nigeria to record his debut album of spacey autotune, drum machine, and synthesizer. The album became a viral hit on the mp3 networks of West Africa, and was later released on the compilation *Music from Saharan Cellphones*. In 2013, he released *Afelan*, compiled from field recordings of his performances recorded in his village. Then he shifted gears, producing and starring in the first Tuareg language film, a remake of Prince's *Purple Rain* (*Rain the Color Blue with a Little Red in It*). Finally, in 2017, he created a solo folk album, *Sousoume Tamachek*, a mellow blissed out recording evoking the calm desert soundscape. Without a band present, he played every instrument on the record. "I am a very curious person and I want to push Tuareg music far," he says.

2019 brings his first recorded in a proper studio - *Ilana (The Creator)*, out Mar. 29th on Sahel Sounds. He has shared the first single, "Kamane Tarhanin," and has announced spring tour dates in support of the new record. A long time coming, *Ilana* is Mdou's first true studio album with a live band. Recorded in Detroit at the tail end of a US tour by engineer Chris Koltay (the two met after bonding over ZZ Top's *Tres Hombres*), the band lived in the studio for a week, playing into the early hours. Mdou was accompanied by an all-star band: Ahmoudou Madassane's (Les Filles de Illighadad) lighting fast rhythm guitar, Aboubacar Mazawadje's machine gun drums, and Michael Coltun's structured low-end bass. The album was driven by lots of spontaneity – Mdou's preferred method of creation – jumping into action whenever inspiration struck. The resulting tracks were brought back to Niger to add final production: additional guitar solos, overdubs of traditional percussion, and a general ambiance of Agadez wedding vibes.

The result is Mdou's most ambitious record to date. *Ilana* takes the tradition laid out by the founders into hyperdrive, pushing Tuareg guitar into an ever louder and blistering direction. For Mdou, his style is to draw on both modern and traditional sources and combine elements into new forms. In "Ilana" Mdou reaches back into Tuareg folklore for inspiration, riffing on the hypnotic loops of takamba griots, or borrowing vocal patterns from polyphonic nomad songs, and combining them with his signature guitar. You can hear the effect in tracks like "Kamane Tarhanin," where a call and response lyric lifts up over a traditional vocal hum before breaking into a wailing solo with tapping techniques learned from watching Youtube videos of Eddie Van

Halen.

As Mdou travels the world, he divides his time between two places, alternating from lavish weddings in Agadez to sold out concerts in Berlin nightclubs. It offers a unique perspective, but also means that he needs to address different audiences. At home, his compositions send a message to his people. Abroad, his music is an opportunity to be heard and represent his people on a world stage.