

Tinariwen review – desert blues with soul and prowess

4/5stars4 out of 5 stars.

Electric, Brixton, London

The captivating Tuareg rockers have the audience ululating with joy at their wonderful musicianship

Arwa Haider

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After more than 15 years as a global touring outfit, and four decades since their inception in the southern Sahara, Tuareg rockers Tinariwen have established their unmistakable, mesmerising desert blues grooves, and their stage presence, shrouded in traditional robes and tagelmust turban-veils. Over that time, these wandering stars have retained a free-flowing spirit, playing in fluid lineups, and shifting from headlining arts centres and world music festivals to more intimate club venues, such as tonight's packed south London setting.

It is longstanding member Abdallah Ag Alhousseyni who commands the set's early highlights, including the intricate guitar and rousing refrains of Chet Boghassa (translated from Tamashek as "The girls of Boghassa", from their 2004 album, Amassakoul). But it is the appearance of original founder Ibrahim Ag Alhabib that draws the crowd's most joyful ululations. Although Ag Alhabib does not routinely play live with Tinariwen nowadays, his earthy vocals and dudeish demeanour bolster the band's performance. His personal story – as DIY guitar prodigy, young exile and rebel fighter – also underpins Tinariwen's legacy, and their influence on a new generation of Tuareg musicians.

We're a long way from Tinariwen's current base of Tamanrasset in Algeria, but they are in their element as an international band, working with European and US collaborators and studios for years (including on their Grammy-winning 2011 album, Tassili). Tonight's set list beautifully melds older tracks with material from their new album, Elwan.

The female voices who have featured in previous Tinariwen lineups are missed here, especially given that many of these latest numbers celebrate female strength, including the spirited Assawt (The Voice of Tamashek Women). The venue's sound is also muddy at points, but it doesn't obscure the band's wonderful musicianship (notably Eyadou Ag Leche's lithely funky bass) and captivating pacing. Tinariwen keep things moving, with great soul and prowess.

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