



ESSAKANE FILM & THINKING FORWARD MEDIA PRESENT

# THE LAST SONG BEFORE THE WAR



FEATURING MANNY AG ANSAR, GROUP AMANAR, KHAIRA ARBY, BOMBINO, HABIB KOITE, BASSEKOU KOUYATE & NGONI BA, OUMOU SANGARE, TARTIT, TINARIWEN, VIEUX FARKA TOURE, DR. NOURY MOHAMED ALAMINE AG ANSARY, BONO, BANNING EYRE, JECONTE & THE MALI ALL-STARS, LEMI STERN

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JON INCALLS EDITOR LEOLA CALZOLAI-STEWART SOUND MIXER SETH TALLMAN PRODUCERS ANDREA PAPITTO, KILEY KRASKOUSKAS, LEOLA CALZOLAI-STEWART DIRECTOR KILEY KRASKOUSKAS SPECIAL ADVISOR ABDOU ANSAR

[THELASTSONGBEFORETHEWAR.COM](http://THELASTSONGBEFORETHEWAR.COM)



KINOSMITH

# SYNOPSIS

THE LAST SONG BEFORE THE WAR is a feature-length documentary that captures the power, beauty, and uncertain future of Mali's annual Festival in the Desert. Told through stunning high definition footage captured at the 2011 festival, the film is a lyrical road trip through Mali, the birthplace of the blues, to the legendary city of Timbuktu where Grammy-award winning musicians play their hearts out in the dunes of the Sahara. Shockingly, the music and the festival were silenced in 2012 when the violent occupation of Northern Mali by extremists destabilized the entire Sahel region. To date, the festival and hundreds of thousands of refugees remain in exile.

## ABOUT THE FILM

From the bustling streets of Mali's capital of Bamako to the exotic dunes of the Sahara, THE LAST SONG BEFORE THE WAR takes the audience on a high-definition journey to the most remote music festival in the world. The famed three-day event features Grammy-award winning musicians playing their hearts out in the Sahara Desert surrounding Timbuktu. Over the years, the Festival has attracted some of the biggest names in music from Bono, Robert Plant, Jimmy Buffet, Chris Blackwell (Island Records), and Tom Freston (former president of MTV). Anouk Zijlma of Africa Travel and the Association for the Promotion of Tourism to Africa (APTA) ranks the Festival in the Desert as "one the most exciting annual events on the whole African continent."



The festival, in operation since 2001, was originally held in Essakane, a small rural village and commune near the Niger River, where musicians jammed amidst rolling sand dunes and an exquisite night sky, a reflection of the festival's origins in the ancient nomadic Tuareg culture. An incipient Al Qaeda presence led the organizers to move the festival to the less remote outskirts of Timbuktu. For many Tuaregs, this move from Essakane diminished the heart of the nomadic experience but provided crucial economic opportunities for the Timbuktu area and kept the festival alive. After years living in peace, Mali has taken a tragic turn for the worst. In February 2012, former Qaddafi fighters flooded back to Mali with the aim of forming an independent Tuareg state have fueled a new, more serious and better-armed rebellion than ever experienced in the past. Non-combatant Tuaregs have faced violent retaliation from other ethnic groups in Mali, with little protection from the police or government. To date, over 300,000 people, including the festival organizers, have been displaced. The fate of the festival now is in question and the fragile peace it once represented broken. The Festival in the Desert is now a Festival in Exile.

THE LAST SONG BEFORE THE WAR is the directorial debut for three filmmakers who joined forces with a shared passion for international affairs, economic development, and the power of film to create enlightenment and change. Each partner offers a unique professional strength: Kiley Kraskoukas, a seasoned producer, Leola Calzolari-Stewart, an award-winning editor, and Andrea Papitto, a successful fundraiser and non-profit founder who has lived and worked in West Africa. While the partners had limited access to financial capital, Andrea had a strong relationship with members of the Kel Ansar tribe—the founders of the festival—which allowed the team unparalleled access to document the festival, the musicians, and behind-the-scenes footage.

While living in Ghana, Andrea traveled to Mali in 2009, where she experienced the festival firsthand through the eyes of one of its early organizers, Abou Ansar. Abou's hospitality shared over three days and nights of live music amidst this peaceful celebration in the desert epitomized the culture of his people and inspired Andrea, who had never made a film, to tell the story of this tribal gathering. Knowing of the growing security threats in the region, Andrea feared that the Festival may not happen in the future, which propelled the team to use crowd funding and their past experience in production planning to quickly fund and organize the five person crew and equipment to document the 2011 festival. Andrea's premonition turned out to be true; the festival staff fled Mali along with 300,000 other refugees in response to the Northern occupation by extremists and the subsequent retaliatory attacks. The future of the festival is now uncertain.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The original goal of our film was to tell a positive story about Mali's rich musical heritage, warm culture, and peaceful civil society—all elements that contributed to its growing tourism industry. We were shocked and horrified to watch the civil war, military coup, and subsequent humanitarian crisis unfold over the past year. At times, we considered completely re-writing our film to follow the recent turn of events. However, we decided that showing the festival in all its joyful glory remains the most important story to tell.

The hope is that this film and the story of the festival can be a lesson in how music and cultural exchange can, and do, sustain peace. We also hope the audience takes away an understanding of how cultural tourism can impact development and play a central role in a country's economic well-being. Most of all, we want audiences to experience the 2011 Festival in the Desert—its music, its beauty, its power—and walk away with a greater understanding of what will be lost if the festival remains in exile.

## FESTIVALS & SCREENINGS

**Chicago International Music and Movies Festival—CIMMFest** (Chicago, IL), April 2013

**Woods Hole Film Festival** (Cape Cod, MA), July 2013

**World Music and Independent Film Festival** (Washington, DC), August 2013

**Kaunas International Film Festival** (Lithuania), October 2013

**WOMEX IMZ World Music Film Festival** (Cardiff, Wales), October 2013

**NY African Diaspora Film Festival** (New York, NY), December 2013

**International Film Festival Rotterdam** (Netherlands), January 2014

**Pan African Film Festival** (Los Angeles, CA), February 2014

**Victoria Film Festival** (Victoria, BC), February 2014

**Curacao International Film Festival** (Curacao), April 2014

**Helsinki African Film Festival** (Finland), May 2014

**New York African Film Festival** (NY), May 2014

**Zanzibar International Film Festival** (Zanzibar), June 2014

**Vancouver Biennale "Open Borders"** (Vancouver, BC), 2014

**Skoll World Forum "Festival in Exile" Short Screening** (London), June 2013

**Fairfield Theatre Company "Films that Rock"** (Fairfield, CT), June 2013

**HOT DOCS Bloor Cinema with Canadian Music Conservatory** (Toronto), October 2013

**Doc Lounge** (Sweden), November 2013

**No Festival Required with Phoenix Society for the Arts** (Phoenix, AZ) December 2013

**Talkfest** (Lisbon, Portugal), March 2014



# VOICES



## **MANNY AG ANSAR**

Manny is the Co-Founder and current Director of the Festival in the Desert. When the festival first started, Manny was managing the legendary Tuareg band Tinariwen. Prior to running the Festival in the Desert, Manny served as a Resident for the non-profit Stromme Foundation from 1985-2002. In September 2003, he became the

Chief Officer of Logistics and HR for AMADER, a Malian agency funded by the World Bank focusing on providing electrical services to rural areas, in addition to overseeing festival operations. Manny is also very involved in restoring peace in Northern Mali. [www.festival-au-desert.org](http://www.festival-au-desert.org)



## **TINARIWEN**

Formed in 1982, poet-guitarists Tinariwen are a blend of ancient musical tradition and contemporary politics. Despite severe natural and man-made hardships, the young Kel Tamashek exiles continued performing the traditional music of their Tuareg forefathers in the Sahara while simultaneously

speaking out against the Government of Mali through music. Forced to seek an alternative to starvation and repression in drought-stricken Mali, many of these young nomads hoped to attain a better life by striking up what proved to be an uneasy alliance with Libya. The musicians include Said Ag Ayad, Alhassane Ag Touhami, Eyadou Ag Leche, Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, Abdallah Ag Lamida, Abdallah Ag Alhousseyni, Bassa Walet Abdoumou, and others. The lyrics of their songs carry outspoken political thought that draws attention not only to repression in Mali, but also to the forced exile of many and the continuing struggle for self-determination of the Tuareg nomads. In 2012, Tinariwen won the Grammy Award for Best World Music Album for "Tassili." [www.tinariwen.com](http://www.tinariwen.com)



## **VIEUX FARKA TOURÉ**

Born in the town of Niafunké to legendary Mali blues musician Ali Farka Touré, Vieux has electrified fans on the world music scene from performing at the 2010 FIFA World Cup in Johannesburg to venues across North America and Europe. Vieux never ceases to amaze a crowd with his mix of blues, electrical and acoustic

guitar, and electrifying vocals. His first album was released in 2007 by Modiba Productions and featured both his father Ali Farka Touré and Mali's all-time greatest kora player Toumani Diabaté. His internationally acclaimed album—Fondo—was released in 2009 by Six Degrees Records and was one of iTunes top World Music albums of the year garnering praise from the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, the Village Voice and BBC. Speaking of Fondo, Banning Eyre of NPR said, "He has all the makings of a 21st-century African rock god." [www.vieuxfarkatoure.com](http://www.vieuxfarkatoure.com)



## **KHAÏRA ARBY**

To those in Mali, Khaïra Arby is known as the "Diva of the Desert" or the "Nightingale of the North." Born in the village Agouni, north of Timbuktu, to a Songhai mother and a Berber father, Arby's roots reflect the ethnic diversity in Mali. Against her father's wishes, drawing on inspiration from her cousin Ali Farka Touré, Arby pursued music as

a way to discuss issues that are important to her fellow countrymen, from love, peace, family, women's issues, development, democracy, and the everyday life. Her music includes sounds of the banjo, ngoni, electric guitar, drums, traditional violin, and the calabash mixed with languages from Arabic, French, Songhai, and Tamashek. After achieving success as a young musician, Khaïra was forced into marriage at the age of 16. She tried to continue singing, but was forced to stop until she sought a divorce eight years later. After her divorce in the 80's Khaïra has focused all her energies on her music and became the first woman in Northern Mali to release an album. Khaïra's home is in Timbuktu, but she has been living in Bamako since the takeover of Northern Mali. Her most recent albums include "Timbuktu Trab" and "Ya Rassoul." [www.myspace.com/khairaarby](http://www.myspace.com/khairaarby)



## TARTIT

Nothing is more evocative of the fascinating expanses of the Sahara Desert than the music of Tartit ("Tartit" means "union"), a Tuareg band consisting of five women and four men residing in the Timbuktu region. They include: Fadimata Walett Oumar; Walett Oumar Zeinabou; Mama Walett Amoumine; Fadimata W. Mohamedun

(Fatma); Tafa Al Hosseini; Mohamed Issa ag Oumar; Ag Mohamed Idwal; Amanou; and Mossa Ag Mohamed. The band Tartit released their first album, titled Amazagh, in 1997, using traditional Tuareg musical instruments, the imzad (single-string bowed calabash) and the tinde drum, resulting in a quiet, hypnotic, trance-inducing music. The women sit down, sing, and play cyclic rhythms on tinde drums, while the men accompany them on string instruments, acoustic and electric. The men are veiled, the women aren't. Their last album Abacabok was distributed by the indie label Crammed Discs. Tartit has also formed an association dedicated to preserving and raising awareness of Malian music and culture that has been recognized by the United Nations.



## GROUP AMANAR

Formed in 2005 under the direction of leader Ahmed Ag Kaedi, Group Amanar rose to fame locally in Kidal (a desert town in Northern Mali) through hard work and perseverance. The origin of the name "Amanar" (the Tamashek word for the constellation "Orion") was chosen because the band had to rehearse through the night

until the early hours, when the stars were high in the sky. Group Amanar represents the contemporary sound of Kidal, playing an original interpretation of classic ishumar guitar, while incorporating wailing guitar solos and frenetic rhythms. Ahmed Ag Kaedi's lyrics for Amanar are directed to youth, concerning education, development, and "agnah" (respect for tradition).





## **LENI STERN**

Born in Munich, but residing in New York City, Leni has been a recording artist for more than a quarter of a century, and with her latest release "Smoke, No Fire," she continues to define herself as a genre-blending master guitarist and timely songwriter. Leni established her vocal and guitar abilities with jazz, rock, and folk music

while more recently drawing upon studies and collaborations from her international travels to such places as Kenya, India, Mali, Madagascar, and Senegal. Leni has been awarded Gibson Guitar's Female Jazz Guitarist of the Year for five consecutive years. In 2005, Leni traveled to northern Mali to participate in the Festival in the Desert for the first time. It was there that she was introduced to master ngoni player Bassekou Kouyate and his wife and singer, Ami Sacko. She has been traveling back to Mali ever since. [www.lenistern.com](http://www.lenistern.com)



## **JECONTE & THE MALI ALLSTARS**

JeConte and the Mali All-stars featuring Joe Conte, Boubacar Sidibe, and Adama Drame, first performed at the 2011 Festival in the Desert.

JeConte & the Mali All-stars exude a soulful blend of traditional Malian Blues and Northern California/New Orleans harmonica-based rock 'n' roll. The band recently completed a full-

length album titled Mali Blues in Bamako, which includes soulful songs that blend blues, rock, R&B, reggae and African world influences. They have toured Europe and the United States. [www.themaliblues.com](http://www.themaliblues.com)





## **BANNING EYRE, SENIOR EDITOR AFROPOP WORLDWIDE**

Banning Eyre has written about international music, especially African guitar styles, since 1988. He comments and reports on music for National Public Radio's All Things Considered, and contributes regularly to The Boston Phoenix, Guitar Player, Rhythm, Folk Roots, The Beat, CD Now, CMJ, New

Music Monthly, and the Music Hound and All Music Guides. He has traveled extensively across Africa and has produced many programs for the public radio series Afropop Worldwide. He is also the Senior Editor of [www.afropop.org](http://www.afropop.org). In 1995, Eyre co-authored AFROPOP! An Illustrated Guide to Contemporary African Music with Sean Barlow. Eyre's book chronicling his apprenticeship in Malian guitar styles, In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali, was released by Temple University Press (2000) and in the UK on Serpent's Tail (2002). The companion CD Eyre compiled, In Griot Time, String Music from Mali, is out on Stern's Africa. Both the book and CD have been cited in the New York Times as excellent sources on Malian music and culture.

## **CREDITS**

### **Director**

Kiley Kraskouskas

### **Producers**

Andrea Papitto  
Leola Calzolari-Stewart  
Kiley Kraskouskas

### **Editor**

Leola Calzolari-Stewart

### **Director of Photography**

Jonathan Ingalls

### **Sound Mixer**

Seth Tallman

### **Special Advisors**

Aboubacrine Salam Ansar (Abou)  
J. Tayloe Emery

# FILMMAKERS

## **KILEY KRASKOUSKAS, DIRECTOR & PRODUCER**

Kiley is the co-founder and president of Thinking Forward Media. Before launching Thinking Forward Media she worked as a producer and business developer for Rock Creek Productions and Cortina Productions. She then served as producer and the principal fundraiser for THE LAST SONG. Kiley is a sought-after instructor, speaker, and consultant whose expertise includes crowd funding, video production, and project management. Kiley serves on the board of Docs In Progress and is a longtime member of Women in Film and Video. She holds a M.A. in Sociology from New York University and a B.A. in Sociology and Political Science from the University of Denver.

## **LEOLA CALZOLAI-STEWART, EDITOR & PRODUCER**

Leola brings rich international experience and a passion for foreign affairs to her work as an editor. She lived in Pretoria, South Africa and Bamako, Mali where she had the opportunity to attend the Festival in the Desert. Prior to working in film, Leola received a Master's degree in international affairs from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a Bachelor's in International Relations and Italian from the University of California, Davis. She attended film school in Pretoria, South Africa where she worked as an assistant editor and researcher for the television documentary show "Latitudes." Upon returning to the US, she joined the staff of Rock Creek Productions as Senior Editor before launching Thinking Forward Media.

## **ANDREA PAPITTO, PRODUCER**

Andrea has worked on various development projects in Africa for the past seven years, ranging from ICT education, rural tourism, community-led development, and nonprofit management in countries like Ghana, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, and Zimbabwe. She has a proven track record working with key stakeholders from the public and private sector, media, and NGOs. After years working in the non-profit sector in Africa, she decided to focus her energies on tourism development as a means to foster economic development. Andrea is a Member of the International Board of Directors of the Africa Travel Association. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and a Master's degree in Tourism Development from New York University.

# CONTACT

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