



# Arid fidelity, reluctant capitalists: salvage, curation, and the circulation of Tuareg music on independent record labels

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## ABSTRACT

The record labels Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies position themselves as insurgent alternatives to the mainstream music industry's capitalist profiteering in the global circulation of Tuareg music. While they are rooted in an art scene promoting a new media ethics and mode of world music circulation characterised by David Novak [2011. 'The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media'. *Public Culture* 23(3): 603–34] as 'World Music 2.0,' the relations of production among the Tuareg artists and American producers involved, in many respects, differ little from those of other labels. I argue that these producers' claims to subversive subject positions are primarily motivated by the values of their U.S. social worlds rather than those of northwest Africa, though these worlds are entangled. To this end, I situate these labels within a particular global network of music circulation, examining their remediation of salvaged recordings, production of new studio albums, and competing claims of ethnographic authority to show their ambivalent reckonings with the commodification process.

## KEYWORDS

World music; Tuareg music; record labels; circulation; commodification; Niger

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, guitar music from the Tuareg community of the Sahel and Sahara has made waves internationally. Stars like Tinariwen and Bombino today reach well beyond their home audiences in northwest Africa, building on subversive protest anthems from the 1980s–1990s that popularised the genre locally.<sup>1</sup> In many respects, the routes of Tuareg guitar follow the familiar story of a localised music style coming to circulate globally through the circuits of the world music industry. But profiting from its droning, pentatonic tonal language, its incorporation of blues and rock aesthetics, and the exoticising European narratives that since at least the nineteenth century have characterised Tuareg as masters of an inhospitable desert engaged in righteous resistance movements for self-determination, it has managed to expand beyond a Global North listenership of world music aficionados to engage rock and indie audiences.<sup>2</sup>

This represents an intensification of a longer historical process by which Tuareg music has been rendered legible for international listeners who may know little, if anything, about Tuareg culture. Over half a century, as Marta Amico (2018) shows, ethnographic

field recordings, albums released for global audiences, and performances by touring musicians have constructed ‘Tuareg music’ as an object of consumption in the Global North. Much of this translation and promotion work has been driven by corporate-owned or other large record labels based in cultural capitals like Paris, London, and Los Angeles. But the small U.S.-based independent labels Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds have also played critical roles in fostering the contemporary popularity of Tuareg music. Situated next to the larger labels, they position themselves as insurgent alternatives, eschewing what they see as the mainstream music industry’s sensationalist representations and capitalist profiteering in the global circulation of Tuareg music.

In many respects, however, the relations of production among the Tuareg artists and the producers for Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies differ little from those of other labels. The ‘dynamics of dependency’ (Whitmore 2016: 333) in the world music industry are tenacious: its principal performers (in this case) are Africans, its curators Americans. Indeed, Aleya Whitmore shows in her research with the London-based World Circuit label that industry personnel are frustrated by these dynamics at the same time that they cite market success to justify their reproduction of unequal power relations. ‘Although industry personnel do challenge the status quo with sounds and images,’ she writes, ‘much of their resistance to the existing state of affairs lies in their discourse, not their products’ (ibid.). It becomes easy, then, to read characterisations of the work of Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies as ‘guerrilla ethnomusicology’ (Schmidt 2014) or ‘punk ethnography’ (Veal and Kim 2016b) as convenient discursive gestures.

I want to gently push back against such an interpretation, not because it is irrelevant but because its cynicism precludes full consideration of what these labels achieve.<sup>3</sup> While Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies share many structural similarities with other world music labels, their particularities are significant in the mediation of Tuareg music. I thus frame their work as what Fred Myers calls ‘intercultural production’ (Myers 2001). Such a process does not happen within overly broad dichotomies like ‘Tuareg’ and ‘Westerners’ – as often appears in discourse about Tuareg music – but rather ‘through historically and institutionally specific mediations’ (Myers 2002: 351). In other words, studying circulation is not about showing how a cultural form enters into production in one place and emerges, changed, in reception somewhere else; it must contend with the feedback and provocations of cultural output, to treat circulation as ‘a nexus of cultural production that defines the things, places, and practices within its loops’ (Novak 2013: 17–18). The values animating the work of Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds lead to the production of recordings that are unlike those created by other labels, and this in turn shapes the meaning of ‘Tuareg music’ in both Africa and the Global North.

Tracing the specific routes of Tuareg music that link the Sahara to the U.S. therefore demands understanding the particularities of the social actors involved in both places. Though I situate both labels within the same indie world music niche because of their many commonalities, there are also meaningful distinctions between the two of them. My goal here is not to provide a comprehensive comparison of Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds, but rather to draw attention to their circulation of cultural goods across different regimes of value and to the making of meaning and social relations within which it occurs. In my other work, I explore Tuareg musicians’ social worlds in Niger, where I conducted most of my fieldwork. Here, following Whitmore’s research

on industry personnel, I focus principally on the American producers. One methodological challenge in researching the world music industry is that musicians are sometimes reluctant to publicly and directly criticise the producers they work with. Their collaborations to globally circulate their music via tours and recordings are inflected by the dependency structures of the industry and largely rely on personal relationships. For this reason, I avoid identifying interlocutors by name when discussing their critiques made to me privately (I do identify those whose comments are more neutral or are impossible to anonymise due to their relationship to the projects discussed below). It is an imperfect choice that consequently privileges American voices.

I attend to the social worlds of these two labels by examining three aspects of their cultural production. First, I present some of their projects that rely on remediating extant recordings in new albums, part of what David Novak identifies as a new mode of world music circulation that he calls 'World Music 2.0' (Novak 2011). Through this work, the label producers have established a reputation for skilfully trafficking in salvaged material characterised by an aesthetic of lo-fi rawness, which serves not only as a marker of a particular sort of artisanal authenticity but also, relatedly, as a way to draw attention to the producers' own journeys to distant worlds. Second, I turn to the studio production of new recordings, which complicate the remediation discussed in the preceding section. I show how significant labour is invested in downplaying the mediating role of the studio, which threatens to undermine the sense of unmediated rawness produced in salvaged recordings. Finally, I discuss the significance of curation in the work of both labels by examining competing claims of ethnographic authority that emerge in the contrasting stories they tell about the music scene in Agadez, a town at the heart of Tuareg cultural activity in Niger.

Together, these points of analysis illustrate many of the pressures on producers and artists who are implicated in global capitalism but who strive for ways to exist outside or against it (see Garland 2019; Taylor 2016; Tsing 2015). This is partially achieved by their disavowal of the pursuit of profit, which is ascribed to other labels as a dominant characteristic. Creating different forms of value, as David Graeber (2001: 88) argues, is a political matter, one of pursuing freedom by shaping the social worlds in which we find ourselves and, perhaps, forging new ones. What sorts of worlds are being made in the work of Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies? And what does this mean for Tuareg music?

### **Arid fidelity: salvage and the remediation of Sahelian music**

Many social actors outside the mainstream music industry negotiate their relationship to capitalism by seeking to create values within regimes other than the industry's dominant economic order. This might be achieved by opting to produce recordings solely on archaic media (like cassettes), restricting their circulation while also contributing to the creation of music scenes around particular labels, as Burger Records does in California (Taylor 2016: 154–176). It may also manifest in the premium placed on sociality within music networks, which in some situations are perceived to be abandoned when artists begin to achieve market success, as emerges in the Chilean indie scene (Garland 2019). For Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies, as part of the twenty-first-century generation of world music circulation that draws on a post-punk DIY (do-it-yourself) lineage and the

possibilities of the internet and the mp3 for remediation (Novak 2011), the emphasis is on discovery of the obscure; the valorisation of open source culture; distorted or anachronistic sounds; and a signification of edgy authenticity that claims to subvert mainstream music industry mores. Like other social actors of this generation, they rely heavily on underground redistribution of existing recordings of global popular musics. Often their recordings appear as ‘new old media,’ drawing on old audio formats like vinyl, cassette, and radio and circulating them via the internet – or on newly produced copies on these elder media. In sum, as Novak writes, ‘regional music cultures are filtered through the wow and flutter of an unlabelled cassette, the obscuring static of an ephemeral radio signal, or the chains of quasi-anonymous speculations about sources in the comments of a YouTube video’ (ibid.: 605–607).

Sublime Frequencies serves as one of the primary cases in Novak’s analysis of contemporary world music circulation. It was founded by Hisham Mayet and Alan Bishop, a member of the experimental postpunk group, the Sun City Girls, who were rooted in a community of DIY record collectors, amateur ethnographers, and avant-garde musicians in Seattle, Washington. Over several years, they met regularly to show materials they found and produced during travel abroad, whether self-made field recordings and films or records collected from a variety of sources. Mayet notes that after some enthusiastic responses to public screenings, ‘we decided to go on a suicide mission and start a label dealing with obscure and esoteric music and video from the far reaches of the globe’ (Toenes 2007). Launched in 2003, Sublime Frequencies has since developed a catalogue highlighting sounds of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel, among other locales.

Archetypal for its releases is the 2014 album *Radio Niger*, a selection of radio collages.<sup>4</sup> Mayet compiled radio transmissions he had recorded in Niger since his first visit in 2004 and re-arranged them in *Radio Niger* as new aural experiences blending songs, advertisements, talk shows, and other phenomena. Like other releases in the label’s *Radio* series, such as *Radio Java* (2003) or *Radio Morocco* (2004), *Radio Niger* is presented with provocative track titles like ‘Sahel Drum-Machine Gun’ and ‘Death on the Back of the Neck.’ The liner notes give no explanation of what the titles mean for individual tracks, though they provide a cursory overview of Nigérien radio culture. This is consistent with Sublime Frequencies’ frequent casting of academic ethnomusicology as a sort of ‘straight man’ to which producers like Mayet are opposed as ‘ethnographic Robin Hoods’ (Veal and Kim 2016a: 6). The sparse notes are less invested in sober ethnographic explanations than in extending the poetic seduction of the track titles:

DJs bring an improvisational element to local radio: singing along with tracks live on air; creating live multichannel compositions and avant-collage cutups; and generally preserving the human element that has long since disappeared from corporate western radio. In short, *Radio Niger* is outlaw radio, broadcast with freedom and spontaneity, and bathed in an arid fidelity that reveals the region’s character and landscape.

These same liner notes reveal that Niger’s official government radio station, begun in 1958, was once called *Radio Niger* – the very antithesis of ‘outlaw radio.’ While the state-run station has been known as *La Voix du Sahel* (‘The Voice of the Sahel’) since the 1970s, *Radio Niger* draws on broadcasts from many of the privately-owned radio stations that have operated legally in Niger since the liberalisation of mass media in the 1990s.

For example, ‘Auto-Tune Your Own Scene!’ begins with the regal plucking of the Tuareg *tahardent* lute accompanied by booming *tende* drum and a women’s chorus singing ‘*afous d’afous*’ (‘hand in hand’ in Tamasheq, the Tuareg language).<sup>5</sup> A few moments into the track, the voice of a radio DJ – Issouf Hadan of Nomade FM, though he is not identified – cuts in over the music, gently intoning ‘*afous d’afous*’ before making some announcements. His voice is clear, but in the background the women’s voices skip and repeat; it is the unmistakable sound of digital noise from a faulty CD ripping job, predestined by a media infrastructure in disrepair. After nearly two minutes, there is a moment of quiet and then the low, fuzzy blip of a needle dropping on vinyl. Suddenly the rapid beating of Hausa *ganga* drums and the wailing of *algaita* shawms fades in.<sup>6</sup> Seconds later, the crackling distortion of a changing radio tuner signals the transition to a new song in the track: women singing to the accompaniment of electric guitar and rollicking drums – Groupe Tasko d’Agadez’s ‘Gajere.’ The rest of the track continues in a similar vein, and it is not until the beginning of the next one that we hear the Auto-Tuned voices and synthesised sounds of *dandalin soyayya*, the music of Nigeria’s Hausa film industry. The collage that Mayet pieces together in ‘Auto-Tune Your Own Scene!’ thus reads as a sort of playful, territorial declaration of resistance to the dominating influence of the Nigerian Hausa film industry in Agadez – don’t Auto-Tune *our* music.

The remediation of old media by Sublime Frequencies, including that featured in *Radio Niger*, fits within a broader culture among Global Northerners who pursue crate digging and the nostalgic collection of African pop recordings, especially those dating from the 1960s and 1970s. DJ Boima Tucker refers to this phenomenon as a contemporary ‘scramble for vinyl,’ recalling the nineteenth-century European colonisation of Africa (Tucker 2010; see also Gardner and Moorey 2016; Greenstreet et al. 2017; Sohonie 2019). These moves constitute a form of ‘salvage accumulation’ (Tsing 2015) in which collectors amass capital without controlling the condition under which their commodities are originally produced. Characterising this process as fundamental to capitalism, Anna Tsing shows how global matsutake mushroom commodity chains rely on irregular mushroom growth timelines, making it difficult to rationalise matsutake harvests on more regular schedules suitable to industrial agriculture. Digging vinyl and remediating old records relies on a similar polyphony of production timelines, recouping the refuse of past production to reinsert into contemporary capitalist exchange. This is not the result of a ‘technological lag’ so much as it is a product of global modernity (Steingo 2019: 52). Yet many producers involved in the reissue of older African pop specifically invoke notions of historic preservation, a clear reverberation of salvage ethnography that has informed recording projects since the nineteenth century. While *Radio Niger* is not a reissue like other projects by Sublime Frequencies and such labels as Analog Africa, Awesome Tapes from Africa, and Soundway Records that are heavily invested in this practice, its exploration of ‘the human element that has long since disappeared [in radio of the Global North]’ demonstrates a similar orientation.

Much of the material heard on radio in Niger was indeed recorded decades ago by ORTN (Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Niger). Copies of the original tapes have been made and reproduced by private stations, sometimes digitised for easier distribution, so that recordings that once could have been imagined as belonging to ORTN are now available at stations across the country. But *Radio Niger* illustrates that producing

‘new old media’ is not solely a matter of evocative remediation of old recordings. Rather, even recently recorded sounds offer a taste of nostalgia. The musical advertisements, the announcements filtered through audio effects like reverberation and echo, and the DJ singalongs are newer media productions that Mayet sees as part of what has been lost in the Global North. Some of the material that appears in the *Radio Niger* collages even comes by way of remediation that private stations have themselves performed, such as by playing European world music releases: The song at the beginning of ‘Auto-Tune Your Own Scene!’ is from the Malian group Tartit’s album *Ichichila* (2000), released by the German label Network. Layers upon layers of remediation play together, the old and the new blurred in what Mayet describes as ‘an astonishingly diverse sonic patchwork.’

What I want to focus on here is how contemporary locally-produced popular musics, rather than older styles, fit into the values of this new remediation culture and afford its protagonists tremendous social capital. A sort of technological throwback manifests for Global North listeners in many Sahelian music forms. Most *dandalin soyayya* songs like those heard on *Radio Niger*, for example, rely on keyboards several generations older than current models available in Europe and North America (see Adamu 2010). Of course, even in the circulation of earlier world music, antiquated sounds helped to distance the Global South’s technological infrastructures from the modernity of the Global North’s present – even when new technologies are available. But interventions in mainstream world music production to emphasise folkloric sounds and downplay what Global Northern ears might hear as distracting technological interventions are as much about erasing parts of extant material as they are about recording them in new ways. In the first global release by Nigérien rock group Tal National, *Kaani* (2013), the Auto-Tune modulation of the vocals heard on the original Nigérien version is scrapped. Similarly, Whitmore (2016: 330–331) discusses how Malian singer Oumou Sangaré was forced to abandon some of the keyboard sounds featured in her homegrown hits when recording for World Circuit. No doubt countless more examples can be named. In contrast, something refreshing about the work of Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds – even as they do not escape the scrutiny about ethics, intellectual property, and racial dynamics that is levelled against the broader world music industry – is their focus on current sounds from the Sahel and tendency to eschew efforts to sanitise them for Global North markets.

The labels nonetheless distinguish themselves from each another in certain respects. For one, the focus on recently-produced nostalgic sounds is a more pronounced characteristic of Sahel Sounds. It originated not as a record label but as a blog, a way for founder Christopher Kirkley to explore West Africa through sound and writing. Its website elaborates:

Sahel Sounds is a project focused on culture in the West African Sahel. Sahel Sounds began as a blog by label founder Christopher Kirkley in 2009 to share field recordings. Today, it is a record label, artist collective, film production house, and arts organisation. We work directly with artists that we represent and aim to have input and control over artistic endeavours. All profits are shared 50/50. We’re committed to using culture as a means of communication, helping our artists build careers, and listening to good music.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to his travels in the Sahel (and in Brazil the year before that), he lived in New York, immersed in an artists’ scene that prided itself on its DIY ethos, on its lack of access to money, materials, or formal education. As he explains: ‘I was surrounded by a lot of



artists who were like, ‘You don’t need to study this stuff. You don’t need to go to art school. You want to make art? Make art. You want to play in a band? Get some instruments’ (personal communication, 6 March 2017). Now living in Portland, Oregon, where he grew up, Kirkley remains grounded in a similar artistic community.

Although he rarely makes as combative statements about academia as Sublime Frequencies has, he has presented himself as a ‘guerrilla ethnomusicologist.’<sup>8</sup> Kirkley more explicitly critiques extant academic and commercial recordings of West African music in an episode of the radio programme *Afropop Worldwide*:

The effort of the label is to capture what is actually happening on the ground in Mali right now or in West Africa, to showcase some of the pop music that people are actually listening to ... I think that a lot of the world music that we hear right now in America or in the West is not really representative of what people are listening to in West Africa. (Backer 2013)

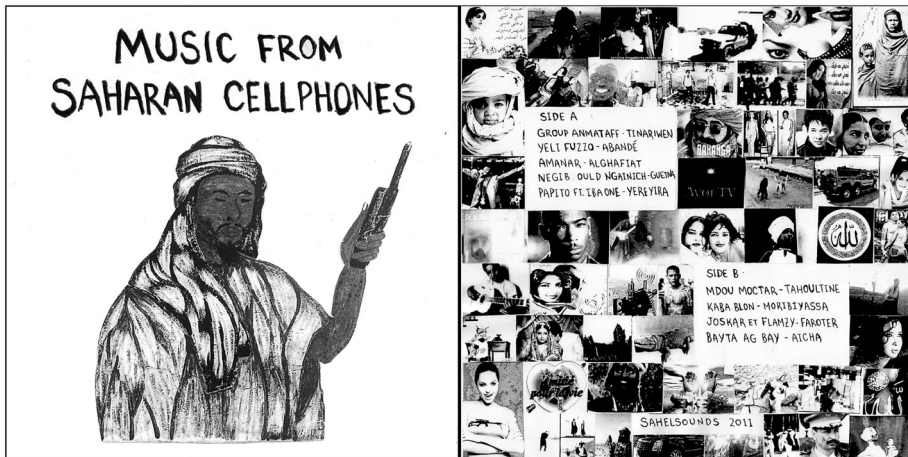
Capturing ‘what is actually happening on the ground’ takes many forms in Kirkley’s work: he has generally spurned the aesthetics and recording studios tied to mainstream world music labels in North America, Europe, and Africa, preferring instead to release recordings he obtains via digital media exchange, digging in archives, and field recordings. If both Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds share similar collecting and remediation processes, Sahel Sounds tends to place greater emphasis on new media and electronic music, with albums celebrating cellphone culture, hip-hop, film soundtracks, and synthesisers, contemporary cultural production largely ignored by the world music industry.

About six months after returning from his first trip in West Africa, Kirkley met up with the team at Mississippi Records, a record store and label in Portland that offered to put some of his recordings on an album. He was hesitant at first:

I was really reluctant to turn [Sahel Sounds] into a label. You know? Because I had that idea too—that it crosses over into commercial territory, and that’s not what I’m about. I’m not about selling these things. But that first record, you know, it kind of twisted my arm, because, well, look—I recorded all this stuff, and everybody I recorded was a friend, and I know their financial situation—and now there’s money that’s going to be offered to them. (personal communication, 20 January 2014)

In 2010, Sahel Sounds and Mississippi Records released the first album of the new label: *Ishilan n-Tenere: Guitar Music from the Western Sahel*. Much of the Sahel Sounds catalogue, especially early on, was jointly produced with independent labels like Mississippi Records and Little Axe. The label began to attract more widespread attention and enthusiasm in 2011, however, when it released *Music from Saharan Cellphones*. Drawing from a collection of recordings acquired during Kirkley’s 2009–10 stay in northern Mali, the compilation captured the fascination of listeners throughout the Global North. Many of the tracks had been previously released on cassette in 2010, with a handful of tracks unidentified; Kirkley turned to the blog to provide a dynamic track listing that would be updated as he learned more about their identities. He also provided links to websites with more information about the artists, including MySpace and Facebook accounts and links to the music blogs *Awesome Tapes from Africa* and *Ghost Capital* (where more downloads, including of the digitised cassette, were available).<sup>9</sup>

For the LP and digital release of *Saharan Cellphones* in 2011 (Figure 1), Kirkley tracked down the artists and track names – the track selection is not quite the same as on the cassette – and, according to his website, promised them 60% of the proceeds.<sup>10</sup> In face-to-face



**Figure 1.** Front and back covers of *Music from Saharan Cellphones*.

encounters and breathless journalistic features, Kirkley was showered with positive feedback for what he later described as a rather mundane production:

[*Saharan Cellphones*] got a lot of attention, and I think a lot of attention was like, ‘Wow, people are listening to music on their phones!’ It provided a contrasting image, but that contrasting image is just ... the mainstream image in West Africa. It’s kinda weird. It’s like coming over and saying like, ‘Hey, so, this is what’s happening here.’ I’ve been saying that to people and they’re like, ‘Wow! That’s amazing! The project!’ And it’s like, well, it’s not really that amazing—it’s just what’s happening, you know? (personal communication, 20 January 2014)

Yet in his earliest dispatches about Sahel-Saharan cellphone culture, Kirkley’s excitement is just as palpable as those of his audiences.

African encounters with young technologies have fascinated Global Northerners for a long time. Brian Larkin (2008), for example, draws attention to how British observers were perhaps projecting their own notions of the awe-inspiring sublime more than local meanings when reporting the completion of railways, first uses of electric lighting, and film projections in northern Nigeria during the colonial era. This sort of technofetishism permeates *Saharan Cellphones* and the Sahel Sounds oeuvre. In the Afropop Worldwide programme referenced above, a brief segment is dedicated to the sound of Kirkley clicking through his phone to play highlights from his collection. Contributors to a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign to fund the vinyl release of *Music from Saharan Cellphones: Volume 2* (2013) could be rewarded with their own cellphone from West Africa pre-loaded with mp3s. Meanwhile, the liner notes for the first volume (Figure 2) list the names of artists and track titles, supplemented with brief explanations of their origins: Tuareg groups from Algeria, Mali, and Niger; synthesiser music from Mauritania; Malian hip-hop. But they also include the original and often cryptic filenames (e.g. ‘Baye AHMED.mp3,’ ‘Dimi 2M.mp3,’ etc.), id3 tags that provide metadata about the mp3s (some are just ‘Track,’ while others are phone numbers), and bit rates. The song title ‘Tinariwen’ is spelled according to English convention, but its francophone rendering ‘Tinariouin’ from the id3 tag remains in the notes. Meanwhile, the notes are presented in a



Group Anmataff - Tinariwen  
 filename: Baye AHMED.mp3  
 id3 tag: 01 Tinariouin  
 bitrate: 128 kb/s

Group Anmataff is a young group of Tuareg musicians from Tamanrasset, Algeria. This song was composed using a Groovebox - a programmable drum machine - to replicate the common rhythm used in Ishumar guitar. It was recorded as a demo and transferred to a few friends.

**Figure 2.** Detail of liner notes for *Music from Saharan Cellphones*.

mono-spaced font that recalls the materiality of typewriters and signifies the DIY culture in which Kirkley is rooted.

Heavily compressed digital audio, made available on vinyl, printed as if from an analogue era: appeals to rawness and authenticity permeate the work of Sahel Sounds, too. Both labels pursue a sort of ‘arid fidelity’ of their own through these audio and visual simulacra of seemingly unmediated recordings. In some respects, this resembles the African art trade, where the perceived authenticity of an object has tremendous bearing on its value. While Walter Benjamin (1969) argues that the ‘aura’ of authenticity of an artwork – its unique existence as an object in time and place – is lost in mass reproduction, Christopher Steiner (1994, 1995) shows that art dealers in Côte d’Ivoire deliberately manipulate objects in order to navigate the anxieties of Global North art collectors. As these consumers seek to avoid acquiring ‘fake’ reproductions of objects produced and used for ritual or other purposes, traders not only may keep objects tucked away in the back of their shops to distance them from the banal commodities of a market, but also may artificially age them, such as by creating a patina on metal. These actions cultivate a ‘mystique of ‘direct’ contact’ (Steiner 1995: 157) with an imagined original that elevates the value of a piece. Thus emerges what Steiner describes as a ‘paradox of authenticity’ (ibid.: 159): an object must be marked as authentic in order to be experienced as such, yet the marking is itself a mediation. Even if the materiality of audio recordings is distinctive from art objects – for one, an ‘original’ recording is already itself a reproduction of sounds created either live or through electronic means – similar notions of time, place, and contact inform the arid fidelity cultivated by Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies.

### **Reluctant capitalists: studio labour beyond salvage**

The pre-label origins of Sahel Sounds highlight its position within a broader phenomenon of the 2000s, when there was a proliferation of blogs dedicated to freely circulating rare mp3s, promoting a participatory culture across a network of like-minded collectors (Borschke 2017: 113–157). Such mp3 blogs form part of a long lineage of independent music circulation, particularly cassette culture. Novak’s (2013) study of noise music circulation between Japan and North America, for example, shows that noise is rooted in the cassette culture of the 1980s and 1990s. The flexibility of cassettes – the way they could easily be used to reproduce, remix, and distribute recordings – enabled users to escape

the passive consumption mandated by older media formats, to step outside the control of the music industry. People could easily create mixtapes to share their favourite music with friends, fans, collectors, and, of course, romantic partners. In the internet age, as the format on which noise was founded is threatened by the ease and rapidity of digital exchange, noise artists fiercely valorise the cassette medium. For them, its ‘obstinate material form’ (ibid.: 222) revitalises the person-to-person barter exchange of physical media out of which their network emerged; furthermore, cassettes gifted in this artistic network are imbued with social forces that surpass their magnetised audio content.

The origins of Tuareg guitar music in cassette exchange – when its political messages were copied and circulated illicitly across the Sahara (see Belalimat 2010; Genthon 2012) – and its more recent circulation on cellphones provided a basis for a strong affinity for Sahelian music among Global North collectors.<sup>11</sup> Similar dynamics to those of the noise scene play out across the DIY culture of independent labels like Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies, even as they uneasily begin to adapt to new modes of circulation and financing. These labels came to life informally, as creative projects among like-minded friends and artists that manifested as film screenings, mixtapes and CDs, and writing. In developing their projects into labels, however, they became directly involved in commodification, potentially jeopardising their credentials as artists and explorers. Both labels now engage streaming services like Spotify and Bandcamp, and Sahel Sounds crowdfunded four projects through Kickstarter between 2011 and 2016, raising over \$40,000 from more than 1,600 pledges.

Yet Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds cannot be understood as simply two among an array of music commodity-makers that are indistinguishable in terms of their embrace of capitalism. There is, for starters, some resistance by the producers – both material and discursive – to scaling up their work. Mayet has claimed that the reason Sublime Frequencies stopped working with Syrian singer Omar Souleyman, who gained fame in the Global North through tours and several album releases, was because ‘he was too big for us’ (Superfly Records 2015). Whereas Sublime Frequencies has checked its development through decisions like these, Kirkley has opted for expansion, albeit with some ambivalence. With the successes of Sahel Sounds, plus the growth of his family, Kirkley no longer felt it was sustainable to remain a one-person operation; seeing no alternative, he has begun tapping into a network of various members of a music industry he had long critiqued. He explains:

I’m a reluctant capitalist. I’m very reluctant about these kinds of decisions. [...] The more work you start doing and the more you see this record and you really want it to succeed, then you’re hiring distributors, you’re hiring PR, you’re hiring managers, tour managers, web site designers—you know? And you start filling all these pockets of people who don’t really have anything to do with the music—though they do, you know? Because it’s required. And I started off doing all this stuff—everything by myself. And as it becomes bigger, I can’t do it all. (personal communication, 6 March 2017)

Concomitant with deepening engagement in the production of commodities, as Marx ([1867] 1978) notes, is the alienation of labour and the obscuring of social relations. Alienation and masked relations suggest a sort of loss of connection, of estrangement not just from our labour and its products but also from each other. This process invites intervention. In her study of global matsutake mushroom commodity chains among the U.S.,

Japan, and beyond, Tsing (2015) points to supply-chain capitalism and what she calls ‘translation’ – when lives and products move across value systems – as key processes through which people reckon with these disconnections. For example, she highlights the work of Japanese mushroom wholesalers who act as ‘matchmakers,’ connecting their fungal commodities to discerning consumers. This curatorial activity serves to reinscribe aspects of the gift in the mushroom commodity. Timothy Taylor argues that cultural goods undergo similar processes, whereby consecration, promotion, and branding dress up commodities as gifts, replacing the real but unperceived social relations of production with social relations manufactured by advertising, marketing, and branding companies (Taylor n.d.).

To grapple with their capitalist entanglements, Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds similarly must navigate the alienation inherent in their work. They pursue this in several ways. As the previous section showed, one approach is to produce signs that index the earlier person-to-person exchange of their pre-label days, aural and visual manifestations of their raw aesthetic values. However, a second approach, more familiar to students of the world music industry, unfolds in the recording studio as producers strive to reproduce the aura of direct mediation that accompanies reissues and field recordings. There is a finiteness to the raw material on which salvage relies for reissues, particularly in the Sahel where music shops selling physical audio media have for the most part disappeared or been picked over, replaced by mp3 vendors and free circulation on digital media. To sustain its work and further support its featured artists, then, Sahel Sounds also pursues the production of studio albums, which call greater attention to Kirkley’s mediations as a producer than do some of the label’s other releases.

Comparing the production of two albums by Nigérien guitarist Mdou Moctar illustrates this point. One of the more prominent tracks to emerge on *Music from Saharan Cell-phones* was Moctar’s song ‘Tahoultine.’ Whereas most Tuareg popular music relies solely on guitars, voice, and sometimes a drum set or djembe, ‘Tahoultine’ introduced listeners to something that was novel at that time: not only the familiar pentatonic droning of Tuareg guitar, but its juxtaposition with drum machines and vocals modulated by Auto-Tune software. It originally appeared on the 2008 album *Anar*, recorded at Ahmadia Multimedia Sound Studio in Sokoto, Nigeria – well before Kirkley arrived in Niger. Much of the particularity of *Anar* stems from the fact that Ahmadia Multimedia is primarily in the business of creating Hausa film soundtracks. Drawing on drum machines, keyboard synthesisers, and Auto-Tuned men’s and women’s voices, *dandalin soyayya* is immediately recognisable and reminiscent of the Bollywood songs that influenced the development of the genre (Adamu 2010; Larkin 2008).

It is in part for this novel synthesis of local popular music styles that Moctar’s songs became so popular in Sahelian music exchange networks. But it also speaks to how *Anar* captivated audiences elsewhere in the world. In 2014, Sahel Sounds released *Anar* for the first time outside Africa, billing it as ‘spaced out autotune from Niger.’ The reissue draws attention to how recordings are evaluated not simply by the qualities of mediation, but also by who does the mediating. The obvious marks of the labour of Nigerian producers adds to the appeal of the album because they do not undermine the sense of direct contact that is integral to the notions of authenticity raised in the preceding section. Nonetheless, this contrasts with world music studio interventions that often privilege traditional acoustic sounds. *Anar* would be understood as a very different record had

American producers made these interventions, adding foregrounded drum machines or effects like Auto-Tune. What is being consumed in the album, then, is not simply Tuareg music, but a token of West African cultural industries – an extension of the nostalgic technofetishism discussed above.<sup>12</sup>

The production of *Anar* stands in stark contrast to *Sousoume Tamachek* (2017), Moctar's first studio album recorded for Sahel Sounds. While visiting Portland to perform at a screening of the film *Akounak* (discussed below) in February 2017, Moctar and Kirkley recorded the new album over three days at Buzz or Howl Studio with the help of audio engineer Jason Powers (Figure 3). As the producer, Kirkley grappled with seemingly contradictory ambitions: he wanted the album to be something 'just a little more produced than a field recording' by leaving Moctar to explore and take advantage of the possibilities of multi-tracking. In conversations in the control room throughout the recording process, Kirkley and Powers discussed the studio aesthetics of world music records with some disdain; Kirkley didn't want to include 'some funky guitar' or 'electronic effects' on the album. 'It's important that this doesn't sound like another Tuareg or world music album,' Kirkley commented on the last day in the studio. 'Otherwise, what's the point? There are so many now.' Yet, if he wanted to take advantage of studio capabilities for *Sousoume Tamachek*, he also wanted to retain the organic feel of a casual jam session, an important part of contemporary Tuareg youth culture, at least for young musicians in Agadez and their friends who have access to a rare guitar.

I argue that in order to grapple with the tension inherent between the raw remediation of other Sahel Sounds projects and the studio recording of *Sousoume Tamachek*, Kirkley strove to produce what Louise Meintjes calls 'liveness.' In her study of mbaqanga music production in South Africa in the early 1990s, at the height of the world music boom and the country's transition from apartheid state, she finds that liveness is a way to



**Figure 3.** Jason Powers (left), Mdou Moctar (centre), and Christopher Kirkley (right) at Buzz or Howl.

sound ‘authentically African’ (2003: 112), particularly for listeners who are not indigenous Africans. It is a studio aesthetic, an illusion of technological disengagement and non-mediation constructed by technological intervention in the studio and by promotional discourse. Meintjes shows that outdated recording techniques are deliberately selected in lieu of newer options – for example, old echo plates rather than digital reverb machines – in order to ‘make the face-to-face imaginable by reproducing the acoustics of such an encounter’ (ibid.: 127). They serve to render the studio invisible as a site of performance.

Producing such liveness for *Sousoume Tamachek* required significant studio labour. This was particularly true for Moctar, who travelled solo, without his usual accompanists; as a result, he had to perform several roles usually divided among performers in a guitar group. The recording process for each song began with Moctar recording the core soloist duties simultaneously: lead acoustic guitar and solo voice, often with tapping on the guitar body to accentuate the rhythm. Once these initial tracks were finished, Moctar recorded accompanying voices (layering two or three in chorus) and guitar parts. These additional tracks were usually overdubbed immediately after the initial tracking of the lead parts, with Kirkley and Moctar discussing how to arrange a particular song. Later in the process, as remaining time in the studio was running low, Moctar would record the lead parts without doing much accompaniment at all. Although the arranging process could have been sped up by using a metronome, Kirkley opted not to use one because he was concerned it would stifle Moctar’s playing. Thus, multiple takes of a particular track were sometimes necessary when tempo changes in either an original or new take led to phasing.

In the studio, worn out from a recent tour in Australia and visit home to Niger immediately preceding his trip to Portland, Moctar sometimes grew exasperated with what seemed unnecessary labour of recording additional tracks for a given song. Following a discussion with Kirkley and Powers about an arrangement, for which Moctar needed to record multiple backing vocals, he observed: ‘In Nigeria, you can record one voice and multiply it [on the computer]. Here in Portland, I have to go back in multiple times. C’est nul! [It’s rubbish!].’ He stepped out of the control room and, before disappearing into the studio, grinned at us: ‘Christopher, did you see how I insulted Portland?’

Kirkley and Moctar often exchanged playful jabs like this throughout the studio sessions, recalling West African joking relations as they diffused moments of tension through the playful performance or inversion of hierarchical relationships. After Moctar recorded a new take, for example, he waited alone in the recording booth while Kirkley and Powers discussed whether to scrap it in the console room. After a few minutes’ discussion, during which Moctar sat silently beyond the soundproof glass, unable to participate, Kirkley punched in on the mic leading to the recording booth: ‘Hey, *Petit*, let’s keep going!’ At another moment, as Moctar, Kirkley, and Powers discussed whether to add backing vocals to a different song, Moctar turned to Kirkley, asserting his artistic authority in French: ‘You have to bring me whenever you record Tuareg guitarists’ – then, switching to English mid-sentence – ‘I’ll show you how to get the real sound.’

As the recording processes for both *Anar* in Nigeria and *Sousoume Tamachek* in Portland illustrate, Tuareg musicians rarely have much technical control during the recording process. Few Tuareg have the training and equipment to control the means of record production in the studio; in Agadez, for example, much of the contemporary mediascape remains heavily influenced by Hausa-language *dandalin soyayya* produced locally and



in Nigeria. While there are exceptions, many guitarists who record in studios thus wind up producing tracks similar in style to *Anar*, with drum tracks or Auto-Tune voices, a phenomenon that some musicians embrace and others find frustrating, discouraging their pursuit of additional local recording projects. Most other recordings of Tuareg guitar that circulate locally were either recorded live on cellphones or produced in studios abroad. With his artistic agency constrained by unequal access to the intellectual and material infrastructures required for conventional participation in world music circulation, Moctar can thus turn to playful insults to symbolically level the playing field and maintain a spirit of collaboration. In turn, by highlighting collaboration in the recording process, Kirkley is able to downplay the alienating aspects of these projects, reinscribing the aura of direct mediation and discursively distancing himself from the exploitative structures of the music industry.

### Curating the Agadezian sound

Even if collaboration is valued within the artistic community of which Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds are a part, the global circulation of Tuareg music with these labels heavily depends on Mayet and Kirkley as curators. Curation, in this case, is not simply the process of selecting which songs to include on a compilation, which artists to support, or the sounds to mix into a collagist project like *Radio Niger*; nor is it solely a matter of what kinds of albums to produce, whether they be reissues like *Anar* or studio albums evoking jam sessions like *Sousoume Tamachek*. In addition, it is also the storytelling that accompanies these projects – the crafting of narratives about music scenes, styles, and artists. In other words, curation is not only a declaration of taste, but also a matter of ethnographic authority.

Producers assume the powerful role of cultural brokers, creating, translating, and determining meaning and value for their audiences. While academic ethnographers have grappled with matters of ethnographic authority since the 1980s–1990s crisis of representation and reflexive turn in anthropology, here I am particularly interested in the issue as an aspect of how Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds market their various projects. Andrew C. McGraw, reviewing the album *Radio Java* (2003) that is part of the same series as *Radio Niger*, observes: ‘That Sublime Frequencies does not attempt to label or explain any of the tracks on this disc reminds us of the ways in which ethnomusicologists [...] consolidate their position through the power to name’ (McGraw 2016: 335). This ‘power to name’ exemplifies a politics of value articulated by Terence Turner and David Graeber. Turner argues that politics is about the ability to define and accumulate what is valued within a particular setting. He writes that at ‘any given moment, some elements of [a] society will benefit in terms of the ability to define and accumulate surplus value through their control of the reproductive apparatus of the society, at the expense of others from whom this surplus is extracted and who are, in these terms, exploited’ (Turner 1979: 30). Graeber builds on this point by arguing that ‘the ultimate freedom is not the freedom to create or accumulate value, but the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what it is that makes life worth living. In the end, then, politics is about the meaning of life’ (Graeber 2001: 88). Projects like *Radio Niger* remind us of these dynamics by sidestepping many conventions in academic field recordings, though they do not ultimately extricate a label from the responsibilities and potencies of



representation. This becomes clear through comparison of the stories told about Agadez by Sublime Frequencies and Sahel Sounds.

Mayet made his first visit to Niger in 2004, when he encountered the guitarist Bibi Ahmed and his group Inerane in Agadez. Tuareg music had yet to permeate the global music industry at this time: Tinariwen, the founding group of Tuareg guitar, had just had its second international release and breakout success with *Amassakoul* (2004) that same year. Their growing fame paved the way for many other Tuareg acts to achieve international recognition, including Bombino, Terakaft, and Mdou Moctar. Profiting from the fluidity of its style, Tinariwen expanded beyond its world music audience and began drawing a following among rock listeners with *Aman Iman* (2007), the group's third release (Amico 2016, 2018; Belalimat 2010: 167–170). Popular press accounts of Tinariwen's genesis in the 1970s–80s during exile in the Sahara situated Tuareg guitar music in long-standing narratives linking rock to rebellion. For example, one sensational story told of veiled Tuareg rebel 'guitar-poets' like Tinariwen co-founder Keddou Ag Ossid running into battle with Kalashnikov rifles and sabres at hand and guitars on their backs (Rasmussen 2006: 643).

Mayet's encounter with Bibi Ahmed and Inerane eventually led to the release of *Guitars from Agadez* (2007), an album comprising songs from the band's archive as well as field recordings made by Mayet in 2004 and 2007. Mayet's enthusiasm is palpable in the liner notes: 'Group Inerane is the now sound of the Tuareg Guitar Revolution sweeping across the Sahara Desert and is inspired by the rebel musicians that started this music as a political weapon used to communicate (in the Tamacheq language) from the Libyan Refugee camps in the 1980s and 1990s.' It was the first in what became a series of several *Guitars from Agadez* volumes; to date there are seven. Throughout the series, Tuareg music from Agadez fits a clear narrative: 'This is the truest music of revolution – where transcendence of historical poetry and the daily grit of human struggle are in dialogue, from verse to verse and refrain to refrain.'<sup>13</sup>

What is striking about the series is that while it draws on the same rebellion narrative as many of the more mainstream Tuareg guitar releases, like those of Tinariwen, its circulation of lo-fi field recordings marks it as somehow closer to the perils of these conflicts. The liner notes for many of the volumes offer listeners a taste of danger. For example, they tell of the tragedies that claimed the lives of musicians because of conflict (Adi Mohamed of Group Inerane) or road accidents (Koudede, who stars in volumes five through seven). They also discuss challenging recording circumstances that Mayet encountered during the rebellion. This highlights the mediation of other record labels, reminding listeners of the studio labour that distances them from the conditions and experiences of the Tuareg rebellions; the dangers directly affecting Tuareg communities had seemingly been sanitised in the recording studios producing polished Tinariwen albums.

Kirkley presents a different take on the Agadez music scene – and on revolution itself – with the film *Akounak Tedalat Taha Tazoughai* (Tamasheq: 'Rain the Colour of Blue with a Little Red in It'). Released in 2015, *Akounak* is an adaptation of the 1984 film *Purple Rain* featuring American pop star Prince and his band, The Revolution (Figure 4). Rather than telling the story of Prince struggling to get a break in Minneapolis, it features Mdou Moctar in an Agadezian music scene that appears far removed from the subversive concerns portrayed by *Guitars from Agadez*. On the Kickstarter page soliciting financial support for the project, Kirkley explains that '*Akounak* tells the universal story of a



**Figure 4.** Promotional poster for *Akounak*, paying homage to *Purple Rain*. Re-produced with permission from Christopher Kirkley.

musician trying to make it ‘against all odds’, set against the backdrop of the raucous subculture of Tuareg guitar.’<sup>14</sup> Following a brief primer on the political origins of Tuareg guitar, he critiques the documentary films that portrayed this scene abroad: ‘[They] are almost always aimed at Western audiences and betray a sensationalist tilt, focusing on the origins of the ‘rebel music’ and not the contemporary subculture.’ Elsewhere, he explains that ‘it feels a little weird to me to exploit that [rebel narrative] to sell records.

[...] I don't like the idea of creating myths to sell records. I don't think it's necessary. I think we can tell the truth about things and that truth is interesting enough to carry on its own' (Holslin 2015).

Yet Kirkley explains that when he first envisioned the project,

It was sort of just a joke because, you know, *Purple Rain* ... We hadn't seen it in a long time when I was talking with a friend in Mauritania about it. And like, man, *Purple Rain* was the perfect movie, you know? It was made to hype up a musician, basically. [...] It was like a long music video, with a bunch of narrative things kind of tying it together. And so I got the idea [for] adapting that format, more than anything else. (personal communication, 20 January 2014)

Kirkley cites the blending of documentary and fiction in both *Purple Rain* and the 'ethnofictions' of French ethnographer Jean Rouch (known for his work in Niger) as an important influence in crafting *Akounak*. That it would draw a broad audience in the Global North was clear: Kirkley fundraised through Kickstarter, led a U.S. and European press campaign, and – taking inspiration from the Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* (1972) and its role in promoting reggae to global audiences – saw the project as a way to generate tours. But Kirkley's goal, as he explained to Kickstarter supporters, was 'to create a compelling story that is relevant and watchable by the Tuareg community.'<sup>15</sup> He strove for this goal by setting the movie in Tamasheq, as well as by collaborating with his fellow Nigérien filmmakers to make the original *Purple Rain* plot more relatable to Tuareg audiences.

If Kirkley casts *Akounak* and the greater Sahel Sounds project as a correction to representations of Tuareg music based in the rebellion narrative, he is not without his own sceptics. While the overall reception of *Akounak* in the Global North has been mostly quite positive, some *Akounak* viewers have asked at film screenings, in reviews, and elsewhere if the role of cellphones is perhaps overplayed in the film. (They constitute a major plot force when a song is stolen by being recorded on a phone.) The implication is that this serves to extend the Sahel Sounds brand built off the buzz surrounding *Music from Saharan Cellphones*. Similarly, when asked about the contrast between the narratives portrayed by *Akounak* and *Guitars from Agadez*, Mayet responded:

I find it quite perplexing to suddenly re-contextualise what this music is about. Kirkley's claim that Tuareg music is all about motorcycles and cellphones is absurd! There were no cellphones when I made my first recordings in Agadez in 2004. Talk to Tinariwen or [Abdallah] Oumbadougou or any of the early pioneers of this music and tell them that their music is all about cellphones and motorcycles. I've lost three musician friends to the rebellion. (personal communication, 5 May 2017)

Tuareg in Niger with whom I have discussed the film express little concern about the film's depiction of cellphones, motorcycles, and romance. After all, these constitute an important part of contemporary youth culture and the newer generation of guitarists. However, some of these viewers are more critical of *Akounak*'s representations of the relationships among musicians. While acknowledging that artists compete with one another for fame and may steal songs or enact other devious behaviours, they felt that *Akounak* portrayed the negative sides of Tuareg guitar without adequately showcasing community solidarity. This has been an important value since the era of the first rebellions in Mali and Niger, when the broader Tuareg community mobilised around the notion of *toumast* – the Tuareg nation –

in order to achieve better political recognition. The issue here seems to be the politics of representation conveyed by the film, even as some artists suggest that to portray the full realities of the Agadez scene would be inappropriate. Moctar, for his part, publicly equivocates about the competitive dimension in *Akounak*. At a 2017 screening in Portland, when a member of the audience asked him if the competition portrayed in the film is real, he mentioned both how musicians struggle to distinguish themselves from one another and how they perform acts of fraternity; he noted for illustration that he and Kader Tanout (his rival in *Akounak*) call each other to borrow cables and other equipment. In a later interview, Moctar remarked that once those in the Tuareg community who had been sceptical of *Akounak* viewed at its first screening in Agadez, their attitudes often became much more positive (personal communication, 6 February 2017). This, in turn, facilitated the production process for another Sahel Sounds film, *Zerzura* (2017), featuring Moctar's rhythm guitarist Ahmoudou Madassane.

How do we reconcile these disparate representations of Agadez? There are, I believe, two factors to account for balancing their perspectives. The first is relatively straightforward: Mayet's experiences in Niger and the recordings he made there date from an earlier period than do Kirkley's projects, ranging from 2004 through about 2012; additionally, the musicians he worked with on the *Guitars from Agadez* series are widely recognised as representing earlier generations of guitarists than most of the artists featured by Sahel Sounds (see Genthon 2012). During his visits, Mayet also navigated the second Tuareg rebellion, a conflict erupting in 2007 from discontent with reconciliation efforts following the 1990s rebellion, which ended well before Kirkley's first arrival there in 2012. In short, Mayet and Kirkley mediate different ethnographic presents because the Agadez they encountered is a temporally – and therefore, culturally – different place.<sup>16</sup>

The second factor is a matter of branding, a need to discursively differentiate the two labels from one another in order to generate interest in their work. This recalls Whitmore's (2016: 347–351) observation that 'extramusical values' are crucial in world music culture; when the sounds circulated internationally may not always be accessible to their audiences – especially when sung in foreign languages – it is crucial for industry personnel and journalists to craft and promote stories to draw listeners in. The contrasts in narratives between Bibi Ahmed and Mdou Moctar, for example, does not reduce the significance of their artistic differences, but rather works complementarily to attract and generate enthusiasm among listeners. The story of rebellion in *Guitars from Agadez* is one point of entry to Tuareg guitar; the cellphone-mediated romance of *Akounak* provides another. Both speak to certain truths about Tuareg music while neither narrative on its own can adequately portray the whole range of issues, styles, and artists that make up the Agadezian scene.

## Conclusions

Where Novak (2011) locates a new media ethics in the mode of world music circulation exemplified by Sublime Frequencies, and which I show influences Sahel Sounds as well, I have highlighted the labels' production of the obstinate commodity form and the ambiguities it poses for them. The spirit of open source culture and salvage provided initial impetus for the labels and continues to inform their work. But longstanding patterns of mediation are difficult to escape, as Kyra Gaunt shows in her research on the limitations

of YouTube as an outlet for playful self-presentation among Black girls who record twerking videos: ‘This new media ecology continues to mirror and replicate former and existing ways of understanding Others – particularly when it comes to watching videos of minoritised girls and women dance’ (Gaunt 2015: 261). Similarly, Sahel Sounds and Sublime Frequencies manufacture global connection to Tuareg artists in a way that replicates the mediating labour of mainstream labels at the same time that they animate new models of media circulation. If, as Novak writes, ‘World Music 2.0 does not originate in the appropriation of global sounds in popular works by Western authors’ (Novak 2011: 605), the evolution of Sublime Frequencies and especially Sahel Sounds show ways in which the implicit ‘World Music 1.0’ model has not really gone away. Even mainstream labels are making notable changes, no doubt influenced by indie labels across genres, such as by embracing the current vinyl renaissance.

The intercultural production of both labels calls the people involved to navigate uneven structural disparities between Niger and the United States. But as Kirkley remarks in the documentary *A Story of Sahel Sounds* (2016), he does not want his success with the label to simply be a product of global inequity, that he has a credit card and that the musicians he works with do not. Rather, his efforts are informed by the value regime of the art world in which he is situated, where the raw aesthetics and direct mediation of ‘arid fidelity’ are privileged over money. The histories of both labels tell a story of art projects evolving into businesses, yet this is not an inevitable and powerless march towards some form of capitalism, nor are they becoming particularly wealthy in the process. Instead, they operate self-consciously both within and outside capitalist exchange – what Anna Tsing characterises as ‘pericapitalist’ (Tsing 2015: 63) – working anxiously and playfully at its fringes. The possibilities of such ambivalent engagements emerge in Anthony Seeger’s observations about directing the Smithsonian Folkways label:

It seemed to me that capitalism and the market system actually was a really efficient way, if it worked, for anybody anywhere in the world being able to get what they cared about. It seemed to me in principle you could in fact take advantage, sort of ride on the back of the capitalist system to do something it wasn’t made for ... and I think a number of independent record labels do that. (quoted in Taylor 2016: 154–155)

In some respects, the pericapitalist moves of Mayet and Kirkley do little to distinguish them from other labels from the perspective of Tuareg artists. One Nigeri en artist, reflecting on *Akounak* and the circulation of Tuareg guitar, remarked to me that ‘it’s just like what always happens over the past ten years: if you want to have success [...] abroad, you always have to lie’ (personal communication, 14 November 2016). While they expressed overall quite positive sentiments about Sahel Sounds, their point criticised the film’s representational limitations at the same time that it acknowledged that these contortions seem inherent in marketing music, regardless of the label. Yet this process is fluid, with shifting dynamics of creative power among producers and artists from one project to the next. Ahmoudou Madassane, for example, characterised *Akounak* as ‘an American film’ made with Tuareg culture, whereas *Zerzura* – which draws on Saharan folklore rather than the plot of *Purple Rain* – seemed to him ‘more Tuareg’ (personal communication, 6 March 2017). More generally, artists who have made a name through work with these labels – for example, Bibi Ahmed through *Guitars from Agadez* and Mdou Moctar in *Akounak* – now perform abroad regularly. One of the key consequences of



the involvement of these labels, then, is that they have expanded the networks through which Tuareg music circulates beyond the channels of mainstream world music labels, thereby amplifying the droning sounds of Tuareg guitar for new listenerships.

## Notes

1. Tuareg guitar developed among Tuareg displaced from their homelands in Mali and Niger in the 1970s–1980s by extended droughts and political repression. In shantytowns and military camps, particularly in Algeria and Libya, Tinariwen and other youth turned to guitars to compose a new repertoire that spoke of their displacement, championed community solidarity, and, later, advocated for rebelling against the Malian and Nigerien states (see Amico 2016; Belalimat 2010; Genthon 2012).
2. For example, the early major international releases by Tinariwen were produced by the world music label World Village before they began working with the more omnivorous Anti-. While Bombino's earliest releases came with the indie world music labels Sublime Frequencies (*Guitars from Agadez*, Vol. 2, 2009) and Reaktion (*Agamgam 2004*, 2010), his international status took off with *Agadez* (2011) on Cumbancha and later releases on Nonesuch and Partisan.
3. There is plenty to critique about the workings of many of the underground labels circulating African popular music today. See, for example, Michael Veal and Tammy Kim's edited collection *Punk Ethnography* (2016b) or discussions of the 'scramble for vinyl' (Greenstreet et al. 2017; Sohonie 2019; Tucker 2010).
4. See Novak 2011 and Veal and Kim 2016b for thorough explorations of the label, including its radio collage series.
5. The *tahardent* is a plucked half-spike lute with a wooden body and three strings, essentially identical to the *molo* performed by the Songhai-Zarma community in Niger and closely resembling the Beydane (Moorish) *tidinit*. Believed to have originated along the Niger River in northern Mali, it accompanies the praise singing of griots and the popular Sahelian dance music called *takamba*. The *tende* is a single-headed mortar drum performed almost exclusively by women at camel festivals, weddings, musical curing rituals, and other occasions. Generally, one woman beats the drum with her hands and sings verses while a large group sits around her, singing responsorial phrases and clapping. *Tahardent* and *tende* are not typically performed together, brought together in this recording by the Tuareg group Tartit as a new configuration of cultural heritage (see below; for more, see Amico 2013: 47–69).
6. The *ganga* double-headed barrel drum and *algaita* double-reed shawm are performed together by court musicians in praise of Hausa traditional leaders.
7. <http://sahelsounds.com/about/>, accessed 30 August 2019. An earlier version (accessed 10 April 2017) presented a slightly different characterisation, whose subsequent replacement demonstrates an evolving sensitivity to ethical business practices and representation: 'Sahel Sounds is the project of Christopher Kirkley, gentleman explorer/music archivist/artist/curator/and occasional dj.'
8. Both labels have collaborated with academic ethnographers, so their critiques appear to be mostly discursive and about methodology, rather than dismissive of ethnography tout court.
9. <http://sahelsounds.com/2010/10/tracklist-from-music-from-saharan-cellphones/> (accessed 30 August 2019).
10. <https://sahelsounds.bandcamp.com/album/music-from-saharan-cellphones/> (accessed 30 August 2019).
11. Complementing these technological factors are the stylistic appeal of Tuareg guitar and the exoticising narratives of the Sahara circulated in the Global North. As discussed below, the dangers of the desert and the notion of rebellion deeply inform the marketing of Tuareg music (see also Amico 2016).
12. Increasingly, Sahel Sounds extends this remediation by sharing audio and video clips received via WhatsApp on its social media accounts.



13. From the webpage promoting *Guitars from Agadez, Vol. 5*: <http://www.sublimefrequencies.com/products/576405-koudede-guitars-from-agadez-vol-5> (accessed 30 August 2019).
14. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/454629120/akounak-the-feature-film-of-a-tuareg-guitarist-in> (accessed 30 August 2019).
15. *ibid.*
16. This difference explains the contrast between *Guitars from Agadez* and *Akounak*, but it should be noted that Sahel Sounds circulates a broader swath of Tuareg guitar than this contemporary Agadez scene alone. For example, the label has released two albums by some of the only women Tuareg guitarists, billed as Les Filles de Illighadad. It has also reissued *Anou Malane* (1995) by Abdallah Oumbadougou, one of the founders of Tuareg guitar in Niger; this album was originally recorded in a Beninese studio with drum machines and synthesizers, fitting comfortably within the Sahel Sounds focus on older technologies.

## Acknowledgements

I foremost must thank the many stakeholders in this story without whom this article would not have been possible, including Christopher Kirkley, Ahmoudou Madassane, Hisham Mayet, and Mdou Moctar. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology annual meeting and the Boston University African Studies Center, where I received invaluable feedback from many colleagues. I wish to specifically thank Brian Barone, Joseph Berman, Fallou Ngom, Brian Nowak, Alex W. Rodriguez, Margaret Rowley, Timothy D. Taylor, and finally Shzr Ee Tan and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and support throughout the research process.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Institute of International Education, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. The views presented here are my own and do not reflect those of these institutions.

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