

A Thousand and One Boogie Nights

Paris moves to Arab rhythms

A new musical phenomenon is sweeping through the sound-systems in Paris's hippest nightclubs. But does the popularity of Arab music signify a new level cultural understanding, or just an appetite for a little exotic spice?

By Rupert Cook in Paris

It's just after midnight at a raucous, smoke-filled Paris nightclub. Out go the thumping techno anthems so typical of 1990s dance tracks, making way for the distinctive melodies of the Arab world, especially those of the Maghreb. The atmosphere lightens as the late-night crowd claps and sways to the music, working up a soaking sweat to the sounds of Cheb Khaled or Rachid Taha. Over the last six months, the ever-growing popularity of Arab music has become more and more pronounced, and not at all just confined to the night-owl world of clubs and bars. Whether the traditional, classical music performances held annually at the relatively recently instituted Festival de l'Imaginaire (See box), the frequent concerts of such groups as the Paris-based Orchestre National de Barbès or the soaring CD sales of the more ambient and London-based Natasha Atlas, the profile of Arab musicians is becoming increasingly visible throughout France.

Radio and television are following the trend with programs on the new Paris phenomenon, but little attempt has been made to explore its possible causes and implications, the roots for this widespread passion for Arab and Arab-inspired music among French youth. Does it herald some long-lasting transformation? Or is it simply transitory, a craze that will soon give way to the next day's fashion?

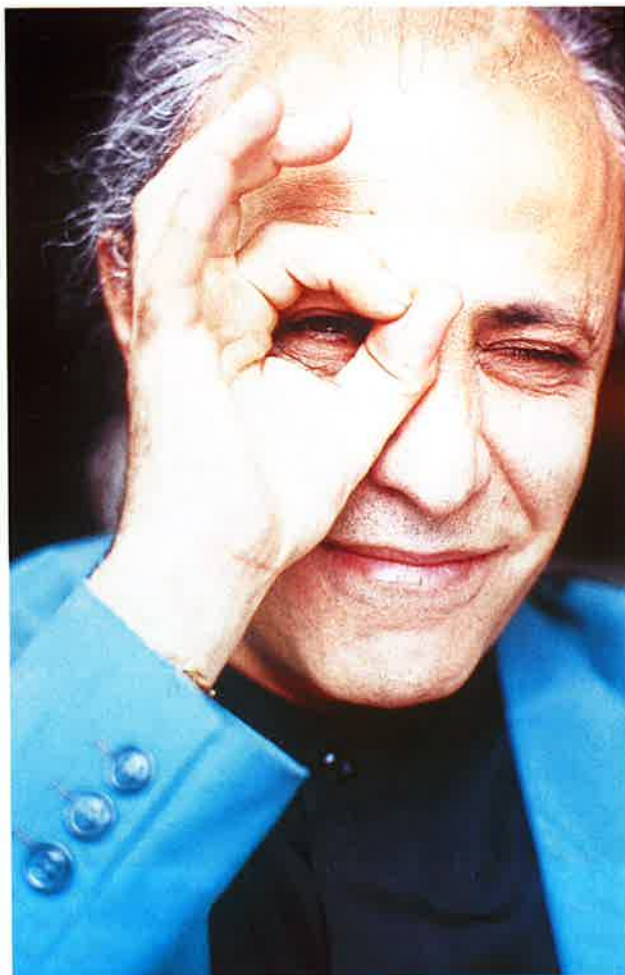
The well-known Algerian singer, composer and producer Safy Boutella thinks the vogue is exceptional, and will prove merely passing. He points out that French audiences are always searching for something new, the latest exotic sound, citing previous fads for Caribbean and African music. "They

needed to go through island music, African music. And after Arabic music, we're going to go maybe to Vietnamese music. I don't know, we're just going to move on," he says. Safy Boutella is probably in a unique situation among Arab musicians based in Paris. As the co-producer with Cheb Khaled on the seminal 1988 *rai* album *Kutché*, he has arguably done more than anyone else to introduce the sound of *rai* to the wider French public.

He observes that the Western, and particularly French, tendency to take up far-off and foreign music genres is part of a more complex process of reaction, possibly in response to a sense of disillusionment with their own home-grown musical scene: "They're searching for authenticity. They want truth. They want something solid. They need something new."

The real thing. This has repercussions, Boutella suggests, in relation to the number of second-generation Arab residents in France who are able to go on to achieve mainstream popularity as performers. Most of the singers and composers one hears today in the concert-halls, clubs and bars are almost exclusively first generation, born outside France. This is connected to questions of cultural identity, and the double bind that "French people don't want you to sing in French. They want you to sing in Arabic, to be authentic." In fact, Safy Boutella's background would almost certainly disappoint any "orientalist" search for some putative cultural authenticity.

Born in Germany, he spent his youth in France, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Brought up on classical Arab and Western music, he discovered jazz by looking through the record collection in an



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Algiers house abandoned by a Frenchman just after the war of independence. After passing the *baccalauréat* in Paris, he went on to study at the world-renowned Berklee School of Music in Boston, famous for its strength as nurturing ground for top jazz musicians. The influence of those formative years as a student of jazz left its mark on his style – particularly the 1992 album *Mejnoun*, on which the most powerful tracks tend to exhibit a highly invigorating mix of influences: Arab, Andalusian, jazz and funk.

However, Boutella has a particular aversion for that vague term, "World Music." Like many musicians of Arab origin in France, he disavows the label: "World Music is an insane term. I'm not a roots guy. I don't have any precise roots." He adds: "The only way to be international is to have a country. I need to be Algerian, to keep being concerned."

Political symbols. For Safy Boutella, the current resurgence of Arab music can only be a good thing for the often frustrated and socio-economically disadvantaged second-generation Arab population living in France. "As second generation here, they're a little shy. They're a frustrated part of the population. They come from frustrated families. By frustrated, I mean they have suffered a lot. Their parents came here 50 years ago when France needed workers. . . They want, they need to get back to their roots. So now they know they can speak and sing in Arabic."

The higher visibility and popularity of Arab culture in France is a potent and positive political symbol, particularly at a time when the extreme-right National Front is consolidating its share of the vote. For Safy Boutella, music can be an inclusive language of mutual tolerance and understanding. "It's time we forgot about Arabs being bad. You know -we must avoid them, etc. It's time we forgot about that. . . Music speaks by itself."

Real world music. Another major figure among Arab musicians based in Paris is Syrian-born Abed Azrié. Producing a range of albums over the last 30 years, his influence has been acknowledged by a range of composers and musicians, including Yehudi Menuhin, John Adams and Leonard Cohen. Though his albums are about as different from those of Safy Boutella as one could imagine, his background and breadth of musical influence are equally cosmopolitan. Known in academic and literary circles for his definitive

translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Abed Azrié himself seems rather reminiscent of the Renaissance polymath. Blessed with a gloriously affective voice, his lyrics are mined from the great figures of Arab poetry, whether Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, Qays, Omar Khayyam, Ibn 'Arabi or, more contemporaneously, Adonis.

In Paris, Abed Azrié has tended to work with the same group of supporting musicians, and his concerts are renowned for the technical accomplishment of the backing players. This has led to some richly rewarding associations, such as the acclaimed, prize-winning 1994 album *Suerte* with its distinctly Andalusian flavor.

He says that the musicians working with him are absolutely crucial for both the composition's success and its sense of identity. Although he has himself charted a very different and much more rigorously disciplined course to that of World Music, he does not share Safy Boutella's wholesale disparagement of the genre and says that it is necessary to distinguish between artists.

Azrié cites Peter Gabriel and his Real World record label as having a generally benign effect. It may be commercial, but still retains its integrity: "It struck a nerve. It caught the attention and drew people to what they wouldn't otherwise have noticed."

Universal culture. Azrié disputes the theory that the artist should be



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overtly political: "I write for a public," he insists, "not a particular people. My engagement is with patrimony, not with sects, political parties or religion."

He believes strongly in what he calls a "universal culture." "I like Blake as I like an Egyptian text," says Azrié. "I like Rimbaud as I like a Mesopotamian text." His range of reference, both literary and musical, is indeed exceptionally broad. He also considers that the current popularity of Arab music as positive as "the knowledge of different cultures brings about rapprochement between peoples." Yet he warns that the reductive, simplistic perception of "oriental music" runs the risk of missing the integrity of the music's rich complexity, much in the same way that fast food

should not be mistaken for fine cuisine. Indeed, he believes that one of the principal challenges facing society as a whole is a cultural choice for the future, a choice between a society of consumers or a society of creators. .

Azrié sees the current fashion for such commercial music as "maybe a way to discover classical, folk and ethnic music." This, he argues, is a significant, dynamic advantage both for the second generation of Arab immigrants and for France as a whole: "With this they will have more of a chance to make something new, and this is good for France and the generation mainly from Algeria because there will be much new energy. And what France lacks now is energy."

However short-term the popularity of Arab music may be, the consensus is that it is a boon for all concerned. The present trend takes its place in the continuous cycle of cross-cultural exchange, as old as any of the most ancient peoples of the world. Whether with the classical traditions of the Festival de l'Imaginaire or through the unique work of such musicians as Safy Boutella or Abed Azrié, France should continue to serve as dynamic conduit. Like the trade routes of old, today's cultural pathways inevitably bring more than the latest exotic import; they make possible a new understanding between distant peoples. And they also make Saturday nights a bit more exciting. ■

A Festival of the Imagination

The Paris showpiece event for the aficionado of traditional Arab music is a series of concerts arranged by the Maison des Cultures du Monde, the Festival de l'Imaginaire, now in its second year.

Last year more than half of the performances were by Arab musicians and composers, who came from Yemen, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Jordan. This repertoire of concerts offers the

opportunity to embark on a journey to the heart of the respective nations' musical cultures, whether through the Semsemiya from Aqaba in

Jordan, or the *maqâm* as sung by Hamed Al-Saadi.

To book advance tickets for the festival, and this is strongly recommended, contact the Maison des

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