



ROBERT—SIPA

Bringing in the beat: Safy Boutella and Cheb Khaled performing at an Algiers concert

Singing the North African Blues

An import called rai blossoms in Europe's Arab community

*At the mere mention of your name
My blood stops running
You are far from my eyes
But so close to my heart
I tell myself it's over
But every night you haunt my
dreams*

—*Sel Dem Draï*, by Cheb Kader

Ya, rai! Emerging from the smoky cabarets of Algeria, rai music—the word means opinion or will in formal Arabic but has come to mean fate in the vernacular—has swept through Western Europe's expatriate North African community and is poised to move into the cultural mainstream.

Imagine a blend of Puerto Rican hip-hop, Cuban salsa and American rock—sung with a throaty Arabic wail. That's rai. It has the same driving rhythms of hip-hop, the same urgent sexuality of salsa, the same elemental ferocity of rock. But this is Muslim pop music: reggae meets the souk. In rai, traditional Arab instruments such as the *ud* (a kind of lute) and the *gazba* (bamboo flute) are combined with electric guitars, saxophones and synthesizers to produce a new pop hybrid that is unmistakably Arab in its plangency yet universal in its sentiments.

Like pop music the world over, rai appeals primarily to youth. Male rai singers are given the honorific Cheb, which means "young one" or "the kid," while the women are dubbed Chaba. To rai

singers, neither temperance nor virginity is a virtue to be extolled, and rai is often criticized for the "pornographic" quality of its lyrics. Says Algeria-based Cheb Sahraoui, 28, who, with his wife Chaba Fadela, 27, forms rai's hottest duo: "The language of rai is very direct street talk."

One who is softening its raw impact in an effort to broaden its appeal is Cheb Kader, 22, a Moroccan in Paris who is on his way to becoming the Elvis of rai. "I don't talk about sexual problems in my songs," says Kader. "My songs are more poetic. They show the negative side of life, the disappointments." The boy pining for a lost love in the hard-rock *Sel Dem Draï* is from Kader's *Best of* album. On another track, Kader sings plaintively, "I ran up against misfortune/ Luck never shows its



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The Elvis of rai: Cheb Kader

His songs "show the negative side of life."

face/ At every sign of hope/ Fate got in the way."

The father of the style is widely considered to be Algeria's Cheb Khaled, 29. His 1988 album *Kutché*, recorded with keyboardist Safy Boutella, is a rai masterpiece—a great, throaty cry for freedom. Unlike the slickly marketed Kader, Khaled so far has shown little inclination for Western-style promotion; when in Paris, for example, he generally prefers to jam with unknown players in the heavily Arab Barbés district.

Rai traces its origins to the colonial '40s, when popular music sprang up in Oran in reaction to a group of aged bards called *shioukh*, whose literary verses were unintelligible to most Algerians. The new style quickly found a home in Oran's seedy night spots and brothels. After Algeria won independence from France in 1962, a rock-influenced music from the Kabylie region introduced the bass, synthesizer and drums to the mix. Increasing liberalization in the late '70s injected Western mores and materialism into Algeria and thus led to rai's contemporary incarnation.

The music's popularity is still mainly concentrated in the large Algerian quarters in France but is showing signs of breaking out into the broader European community. Sahraoui and Fadela, for example, recently made a tour that included stops in London, Paris, Rotterdam, Munich and Vienna. Kader sold 25,000 copies of his *Sel Dem Draï* album, 5,000 in West Germany and Austria—a remarkable accomplishment considering that most rai cassettes are quickly dubbed and circulated in bootleg versions.

To the French-born Arabs called *beurs*, rai's blossoming is overdue. "Algeria's youth were dying to have a good time," says Rabah Mezouane, an Algerian journalist in Paris. "These kids were sick of the patriotic jargon glorifying the Algerian revolution. They were attracted to the Western life-style: going out to discos, wearing jeans and leather jackets, dating." Says Kamel Amriou, a disk jockey on Radio Maghreb, an Arabic-language Paris radio station: "Rai speaks about the immigrant community in a positive way. It's no longer the *beur* getting arrested or bumped off."

Whether rai will ever be as popular as salsa, reggae or other ethnic music that has broken across cultural boundaries remains to be seen. But rai's prospects are good. "The Arab lyrics don't put people off, because half the people who listen to Anglo-Saxon music don't understand the words to that either," says Isidore Brobst, a record promoter at Virgin records in France. "This music will influence pop." Just call it fate.

—By Michael Walsh

Reported by Farah Nayeri/Paris