

When a Wanderer Meets Stan Kenton

By Mike Zwerin

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PARIS — This is one fine mess when you first of all have to define a musician from the Third World by what he is not. To set the record straight up-front, Safy Boutella makes neither *raï* nor World Music.

He accepts the adjectives, however limited, "Africano-funk" and "Arabo-Andalusian" in the sleeve notes of "Mejnoun," his latest album. On his previous one, "Kutché," he shared equal billing with the *raï* superstar Cheb Khaled (now known as Khaled alone). "Hey! I thought you said he didn't play *raï*." Patience, all will unfold before your flight is announced.

His father was an officer in the French and then the Algerian army. Born in Germany, Boutella grew up in France, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. He does not object to being called a wandering Arab.

He grew up listening to classical music, both Arab and Western, with his parents.

Try 'Africano-funk' and 'Arabo-Andalusian' to describe his music.

When the Algerian war ended, many Frenchmen left, abandoning their houses. At the age of 12 in Algiers he walked into one of them, looked through the record collection and because it had a futuristic jacket which appealed to his fantasies, listened to a 10-inch 33-rpm recording by Stan Kenton's band of Bob Graettinger's "This Modern World." Its dissonance touched him deeply.

Until then, he'd only heard easy listening pop melodies and the classical music of Mozart and company. He began to listen to rock, reggae and jazz (Weather Report and Miles Davis) and to understand that music is tied to all sorts of sounds including noise and that it all has to do with the human heartbeat. Now, 30 years later, he still has the same copy of "This Modern World," which changed his life.

He came to Paris, passed his baccalauréat exam and continued the musical studies he'd started in Algiers. Parisian conservatories, however, were unsatisfactory. Befriending a couple of American hippies on the Champ-de-Mars, he told them he wanted to go to the U. S. to study music. The girl was from Cambridge and talked about the Berklee School of Music in Boston which specialized in jazz and promised to send him a brochure. Much to his surprise, she sent it. He was accepted. The school terrified him.

Playing a variety of instruments "not very well," he heard all these teenage virtuosi running up and down complex harmonies at breakneck tempos. He knew he could never do that. He was 25, he was late. So he made his own curriculum, concentrating on harmony, counterpoint, arranging and composition and took what he needed away with him

when he returned to Algeria after four years. He did not like America, it was too far from the odors and sounds of his own culture.

Since then he has written music for 30 Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan films (he has also played two featured roles, one of them Romeo). Reading scenarios and sitting in front of screens, he learned "how to invent music for any kind of situation." His tunes and rhythms oscillated between Occident and Orient. He wrote a ballet utilizing elements of the music of the Tuaregs, a tribe that lives in the desert on the border between Arab and black Africa. "You can smell the sand in their music," he says. He calls himself "The only musician in Algeria who takes real musical risks."

When he first heard the rock-Arabian fusion *raï*, which was rough and hard like punk, he understood immediately that it was the product of a sad society. It took so little to please the people, who needed very badly to dance. The performers were under-rehearsed and the records badly produced. There were hundreds of *raï* singers all singing the same songs with lines like "little girl I love you" over and over, changing a note or a word here and there. It was such poor music, he wondered why. Was his country really so poor? When it became a fad, it got worse: "The singers thought, 'It's popular in Europe, we don't have to work.' They recorded 12 tunes in two hours, all bad."

Then he heard *raï* superstar Khaled. This was something else. He like the energy and the originality and what the music did for the people: "I said to myself, I'd like to do something with *raï* so that it is no longer poor. People will never again be able to say it's cheap."

Research for the record "Kutché" was a harrowing experience. Drinking more than he wanted with Khaled in bars until dawn was part of a lifestyle which does not come naturally to Boutella. At first, he could not understand this man who caroused and talked about neckties and shoes, and he didn't like the way Khaled related to women. Boutella is an intellectual who looks for explanations and tries to control his instinct, Khaled is all instinct. But he stayed with him, night after night, until he began to see a deep heart behind the superficial front. It made him very sad somehow. Sometimes he came home at 8 A. M. feeling so empty he burst into tears.

"People said 'Safy is an opportunist,'" he said, looking sad. "They said I did it for publicity. But working with Khaled wasn't easy, just getting him to the studio on time was difficult. He's better now but then it was a constant effort. I made that record for the music, it was important to me. It's a good record, I'm proud of it. I mean, I used to cry after the stuff and people said it was a career move."

Boutella, who had just returned from two weeks in Algiers and will perform at the New Morning here Friday, spoke in a low voice with a slow measured cadence describing what's behind the emptiness and the tears: "I



Christian Rose

Safy Boutella

like refinement, things should be nicely said. This should be normal, not a luxury. But there's no more elegance in Algeria. Algeria has been occupied by the Turks and the Romans and, for 132 years, by the French. After 30 years of independence, the people are completely out of it. Everybody steals. With all the petrol, the country should be rich. But you have some people with ranches, yachts and Mercedeses and then the rest with nothing. So kids don't go to school, they see it doesn't get them anywhere, they say 'I might as well cheat like everybody else.' That's the worst crime, everyone is alienated. *raï* comes out of that. It's a way of saying 'I don't give a damn.'

"After 132 years of occupation, stealing was like a normal postcolonial syndrome. I don't forgive it but I understand. It's a *passage obligé*, like World Music. World Music is a way of saying second-rate. It's also guilt from the Occident to the Third World. 'We remember that you exist, we're not really racist.' I hope the World Music stage will pass and we'll end up with a real understanding between different people and that everybody will truly respect each other's culture as equal."