

# A Musician From a Country With No Music

By Mike Zwerin

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PARIS — Safy Boutella is a musician from a country without music.

His definition of where he's at might at first seem overly dramatic, his ambition outrageous. But looking him in the eye and hearing him spell it out, he is clearly neither acting nor talking off the top of his head.

"Being an Algerian in France is not exactly convenient today. Right?" Confirmation was not necessary. He travels on an Algerian passport, visas are required just about everywhere. He was uncomfortably on the edge of his chair in this bourgeois French café:

"I'm blocked. I grew out of the Algerian culture. Kids down there need somebody like me who has traveled and seen and done things and has learned a little something about the world. For many years, I had the feeling that perhaps I was helping to build my country. But the road has been cut."

Boutella's Algerian father was an officer in the French and then the Algerian Army. His mother is Tunisian. He was born in Germany and raised in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and France. He has been called a wandering Arab.

"Who could be creative in such a mess?" It was a rhetorical question. "My experience is all mixed up between colonialism and those fundamentalists. Who wouldn't be stuck? I'm traumatized. O.K.?"

All of this was increasingly spat out. Angst bordered on defiance. Aggression was just around the corner. "People ask me when I'm going to make my next record and I want to cry. Making music with nice melodies and harmonies and grooves seems indecent to me now. Anyway, who will I make it for? I'm here, they're there. Who are 'they'? I used to mix my cultures into so-called 'World Music.' I suppose I could go on doing that, other people do. But it's not enough for me any more."

He grew up in Algiers listening to classical music. Later, turned around by jazz, he was frustrated by the classical curriculum in an uptight French conservatory and left for the Berklee College of Music in Boston. After four years, however, he decided he was too far from the "sounds and smells of my own culture."

As an Americanized Algerian pop and jazz musician living in Paris, he grew ever more schizophrenic in what some consider to be a culturally colonial métier. He went down-home for the last time in 1993 to record the music of the Tuaregs, who live in the desert on the border between Arab and black Africa. It was an unnerving experience.

The musicians were villagers, not professionals, and the project bordered on cultural politics. Villages are few and far between and everybody for miles around knew he was there and what he was doing. Certain violent believers do not consider such projects politically correct. So many artists he knew had disappeared or been shot. For years he had traveled to Algeria "nonstop," but it became depressing to see unhappy family and friends. If he were



Christian Rose

Safy Boutella is deeply troubled about Algeria.

needed in some way, a doctor, for example, he'd continue to go. On the other hand, don't people need music too?

Muslim fundamentalists consider music basically decadent. They say that dancing inspires smoking, drinking and flirting. People who play Western music are regarded as Uncle Toms. There are no more symphony orchestras in Algeria. Traditional Arab orchestras may play for weddings and other ceremonies here and there, but there are just about no concerts and music is mainly heard behind closed doors.

For many years he asked for nothing more than the opportunity to swim in music. He was willing to risk drowning in the wake of Miles Davis. A store next door to the café we were in sells vintage postcards and he looked at one of the singer Juliette Greco pressing

Miles's valves. As a waiter served coffee, he said: "I miss him. I think about Miles often. There is a hole in my life." He sipped. "But — and I can never ever get away from this thought — I miss my country more."

Boutella's music fuses the Occidental and the Oriental, the acoustic and the electronic. He has made a jazz record with the Brazilian percussionist Nana Vasconcelos. (The Tuareg record is on the back burner.) Composing, conducting and playing keyboards, he has recorded sound tracks for 37 films. (He also acts; he has played the role of Romeo.)

He just completed music for "Le Mouton noir" for French television. A French family with negative racial preconceptions vacations in Tunisia and returns home enriched by the people and the culture. Now he is working on "Salut Cousin" directed by Merzak Allouache, about an Algerian man who comes to Paris and falls in love with a black woman. Both combine good career moves with his conscience. It is not always so evident.

In 1987, Boutella, who is 46, shared equal billing with the *rai* star Cheb Khaled on the album "Kutché." A sort of Algerian rock, *rai* was just becoming popular. He was accused of being opportunistic. A jazzman associating with Khaled was somehow suspect. Khaled has since become a major variety-music star in France and there are younger ones coming up.

"We have Arab stars now," said Boutella. "That's positive. But these people are not using their power constructively. They could act as role models. They could at least call attention to the situation at home. But they take care of fun not business. There is a lack of consciousness in the Arab artistic landscape in general. Musicians of other nationalities work to build their cultures. Arab musicians do nothing. Somebody has to do the job, and I..." He hesitated. He seemed surprised by what he was about to say: "... And I think it's up to me."

This was getting to the heart of the matter. He explained as though hoping to explain it to himself at the same time: "This is a sad period in history. There is alienation everywhere. People everywhere are looking for values. I can understand how these fundamentalists turn into fanatics. Not agree, mind you, but understand. They see Western mass media luring their kids with what they consider pornography and greed. So they shoot a schoolgirl for not wearing a chador. They kill Western businessmen. Extreme to extreme. They react violently to violence. They see that as the only way."

"I would like to tell them that it's not; that their way does not express reverence. It is not a way to obey God. So I want to add words to my music for the first time. But before deciding what to say, I have to decide what parts of my experience to use — rock, *rai*, rap, the chanson, jazz? I am thinking of constructing my own combination. But to begin with I cannot even decide what language to speak."

"Like I said, I'm stuck."

ATT: SAFY  
BOUTELLA