

MONDAY, JULY 12, 1993



Jack Vartoogian

Safy Boutella performing on Thursday night at S.O.B.'s.

Review/**Pop**

An Algerian Has His Way

Safy Boutella, an Algerian composer and singer who performed at S.O.B.'s on Thursday night, mixes Algerian rai music with fusion jazz from the 1970's, a combination that, as dull as it sounds on paper, is actually worse in concert. Rai, the music of the disaffected urban landscape of Algeria, is a hybrid that has produced music of protest and beauty. Antique American fusion, which has become the secret hobby of third-world musical intellectuals, seems inevitably to poison everything it touches.

Mr. Boutella, who studied at the Berklee School in Boston, home of the internationalization of fusion,

can write intricate lines that owe a debt to Arab classical music. The lines, played on keyboard and violin, zipped along, darting and turning, and always giving off the sound of passion. And on "Orient," playing in an odd meter, the band actually grooved enough to quiet the Algerian heckler in the audience who had been shouting, "What happened to the rai?"

The rest of the music sounded like exotic soundtrack music; it was possible to extract visions of broad desert views and veiled women. From an Algerian like Mr. Boutella, one might have expected something less clichéd.

PETER WATROUS