

RHYTHMS OF MOROCCO

For more than a decade, Jane Cornwell has been visiting Morocco's Gnawa Festival. She tells us why she still can't get enough.

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images: various





MUSKETS RAISED, ROBES flapping, the horseback fantasia came galloping along the curve of beach leading to Essaouira's old town, then wheeled to a halt outside the castellated city walls of the medina. On the other side of the blue-and-whitewashed stone, along the traffic-free avenue that runs past the Clock Tower and under the palm trees, came the sound of music: trance-like, rhythmic, bluesy. The sound of the Gnawa, the Maghreb's funkier, most mystical of religious brotherhoods, whose musicians were gathered here on the Atlantic coast for their annual four-day wingding.

The opening night of the 13th Festival D'Essaouira Gnaoua: Musiques du Monde saw groups of Gnawa in brotherhood-specific uniforms – leather slippers, different coloured boubous, an array of creative headgear – leading the procession past the cloth merchants and jewellery stores of the souk and into the vast open square adjoining the Moulay Hassan stage. Having recreated their 15th-century military cavalry dramatics, as they do at most large-scale Moroccan events, the fantasia riders peeled away from the parade they'd joined briefly, leaving the Gnawa in the spotlight.

Onstage before a huge crowd comprised mainly of 20-something

Moroccan youths, Gnawa musicians beat side drums and clacked the metal castanets called krakeb: symbols of the chains that bound these descendants of sub-Saharan slaves in centuries past. They whirl, bending at the knees Cossack-style, the tassels on their skullcaps spinning out like spokes. They chant, calling phrases from the vast Gnawi repertoire, which tells of exile and forgiveness, invokes God and the saints, and which everyone seems to know. The crowd chant back, as loud and unified as anything you'd hear on a football terrace.

I've been going to Essaouira's Gnawa Festival for more than a decade now. At the end of each June, I fly to Marrakech and take a two-and-a-half hour taxi ride (give or take a mint tea pit stop) to this windswept port town on the Atlantic coast, lightening the boredom by counting the goats in the branches of the hardy argan trees and the workmen on the stretch of bone-rattling roadworks that seem to stay the same year after year. My heart still flips as soon as I clap eyes on the fairytale fortifications of Essaouira, dubbed the 'Pearl of the Kingdom' by merchants of yore. The town could be suspended between sea and sky, especially when the moon is out.

Essaouira has long had a magnetic effect on people, and particularly on musicians. Cat Stevens, Frank Zappa and Bob Marley all hung out here,

attracted by the laid-back atmosphere and ubiquitous Gnawa soundtrack pulsating from cassette stalls, shop windows, private homes. Jimi Hendrix only came for a few days but was duly impressed (the ruined fort at the far end of the beach was allegedly the inspiration for his song 'Castles Made of Sand'); western jazzers such as Randy Weston and Pharoah Saunders have experimented in situ with Gnawa music's deceptively simple polyrhythms.

Robert Plant is another festival regular. Last year, he stayed in a rooftop room overlooking the Scala, the great sea bastion that so impressed Orson Welles that he featured it in his 1952 film version of *Othello*. Today, the Scala tends to be frequented by tourists having their photos taken astride impotent canons, and dreadlocked Moroccan hippies wrestling with the three-string guimbri bass-lute, the instrument whose subterranean boom and thwack is pivotal to Gnawa music. When wielded by maalems (masters) such as the great Mahmoud Guinea – a Zeus-like figure who has played with Carlos Santana – the guimbri has the power to both enchant and heal.

"Our music speaks to everyone, without barriers," Guinea tells me through an Arabic interpreter, as we sit smoking kif in a private riad belonging to his wealthy Casablanca-based

benefactor. "It has a very spiritual dimension and it attracts people so they almost become addicted to it," he says, reaching for a slice of watermelon from a table set for a soiree. "It is a therapy that is universal."

As a spiritual force, the music of the Gnawa is held to cure all sorts of complaints and maladies with all-night, incense-heavy rituals called lilas. Lilas entertain good spirits, appease bad ones and heal everything from scorpion stings to nervous breakdowns via long, mass trances, and while the festival sometimes hosts late-night cultural demonstrations, and while some people even start convulsing dramatically, they are not the real behind-closed-doors thing. The emphasis here is on entertainment, as well as on tolerance and unity. It is largely thanks to the festival that the Gnawa – once regarded as pariahs and treated with disdain – have become national heroes.

Crowds of up to 40,000 now pour in from all over Morocco and beyond, packing out the festival's nine stages and turning the place into a pickpocket's paradise. My friend had his mobile phone pinched within minutes at Place Moulay Hassan, while watching the opening concert of a cross-art form spectacle featuring Gnawa maalems and brothers Mohamed and Said Kouyou and the Georgian National Ballet, which introduced the traditions of the Balkans to Gnawa rhythms with interesting if cacophonous effect. During the same concert someone even managed to nick the phone of Andre Azouley, the Moroccan Jewish advisor to King Mohammed VI, despite his coterie of security guards.

A sort of Moroccan Woodstock, Essaouira's Gnawa and World Festival has always invited musicians from other genres to jam with the Gnawi: musicians from the worlds of jazz, rock and rap; from African, Brazilian and Latin music. This year's new emphasis on dance yielded mixed results. While Washington troupe, Step Afrika impressed with a stand-alone performance on the beachside Pepsi stage (as opposed to the beachside Meditel communications network stage – corporate sponsorship is big in Morocco) but were overshadowed two days later by the driving rhythms of Maalem Mustapha Bakbou, a one-time member of Morocco's beloved Jil Jilala band.

Of the four big outdoor stages, the Moulay Hassan is my favourite. It lets you listen, look, roam about. On the second day, during a fusion concert with

the jazz-leaning Maalem Said Oresson and the jazzy Horacio, Garrison and Kinsey Trio from Cuba/USA, I order a freshly squeezed orange juice from a vendor. I sit down at an outdoor table belonging to one of several makeshift cafes, with the music from the stage

The stars are out by the time dinner is over and Mahmoud Guinea takes to the stage at Bab Marrakech, a stage that bookends a vast space within walking distance (as are all the stages) of the medina. Guinea's performance is typically majestic: the booming chords of

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still crisp and audible. From there, I also have a (partially obscured) view of a harbour crammed with ramshackle fishing boats. That evening I wander into the port to eat Moroccan-style seafood at the famous Chez Sam restaurant, watching falcons glide about their breeding ground on the adjacent Mogodor Island.

his guimbri carry on the wind before the music explodes into a ferocious groove and hundreds of thousands of people raise their arms in the air. This was pure, unadulterated teknowit (authentic Gnawa), the stuff that puts devotees at lilas into trances. Indeed, as the layers build and chants repeat like mantras, a few people in the crowd start head





banging – much as the entire audience did when heavy-metal loving electric outfit Speed Caravan rocked the Pepsi stage earlier.

60-year-old Guinea is equally big on fusion. His guest this year, Mauritanian singer/songwriter Daby Touré, brought his African sonorities and western guitar to the party, sending them vying and blending with the heavy Gnawa rhythms. “When I perform with African artists, the fusion is so easy because it is so similar,” Guinea says, not entirely truthfully – a few years ago he appeared to willfully block every attempt made by his then guest, Paris-based Nigerian guitarist Keziah Jones, to find the groove. Jones came offstage choking back tears. “Sometimes we don’t even need to rehearse, it’s that easy,” Guinea adds now, eyes twinkling.

Still, the right to fail is an intrinsic part of any jam session – even if it is probably the biggest jam session on the planet. No matter, then, that the Armenian Navy Band’s Eastern European jazz got completely lost on day three when paired with the likes of Maalem Aziz Bakbou on Bab Marrakech. Inside the more intimate Dar Sourì venue the revered Pakistan Qawwali praise singer, Faiz Ali Faiz and his group enjoyed a

joyous communion with progressive French guitarist, Titi Robin. Many punters simply eschewed jazz fusion in favour of, variously, the all-stops-out punk/rock/Gnawa of Houssa, the reggae-lite of German star, Patrice and the late night hip hop of H-Kayne.

With 48 concerts, 23 Gnawa Maalems and over 300 artists, there really was something to blow everyone’s hair back. On day four, after a rousing closing concert that featured Rabat fusion maestro, Maalem Hamid El Kasri and various Parisian jazzers including saxophonist Vincent Mascart and drummer (and festival co-founder) Karim Ziad, my friend and I head off through the medina’s piss-soaked backstreets, past gangs of glue-sniffers and the odd mumbling drunk, in search of something that’s not in the program. When we round a corner and suddenly feel the heat and tension of a crowd swept up by the moment, we know we’ve found it.

In an unremarkable courtyard filled with swaying devotees, a Gnawa ensemble sits cross-legged, chanting and drumming, on a raised platform. Whipped into a fervour, several testosterone-filled men push their way to the front, where they drop onto all fours and begin trancing so hard that

their friends are holding fast to their collars, to stop them cracking their skulls on the ground.

The Gnawa keep drumming and chanting, calling on the saints, drawing people to them, in a trance themselves. ☒

GET PLANNING

Get There

Air Asia has return flights from Australia to London via KL from A\$600 return. Royal Air Maroc flies from London and Paris to Marrakech, and to Casablanca with connections to Essaouria for about A\$550 return. www.royalairmaroc.com
www.airasia.com

Stay There

Villa Maroc is a gem of an 18th-century hotel located within Essaouria’s ramparts and accessible only by foot. This phantasmagorical villa could have been designed for a fashion shoot or theatre set. Word-of-mouth has made it one of the ‘must-stay’ hotels in Morocco. 10 Rue Abdallah Ben Yassi (04/4476147 fax 4475806)

More Information

The next festival will be held in June 2011.
www.festival-gnaoua.ne