

Photos Essaouira Festival / Quintina Valero

# FESTIVALS 2006:

WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL: ESSAOUIRA / THE BIG CHILL / SONAR: BARCELONA

# MUSIC FREES THE SOUL.

Chaser touches down at the summer festivals: Jane Cornwell connects with the Gnawa at the Essaouira World Music Festival in Morocco, Amar Patel pitches his tent at the Big Chill and Miriam Hempel heads of to Barcelona to savour the electronic experimentations of Sonar.

## WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL: ESSAOUIRA

**Maalem Mahmoud Guinea saunters to the front of the open-air stage in Essaouira, Morocco, wielding chords on his guimbri lute like some purple-robed, cowrie-shell-bedecked Hendrix.**

A group of musicians in slippers and hats with stuck-on dreadlocks formation dance behind him, knee-bending and spinning as they chant, pound side drums and clack huge metal castanets called qraqeb. A packed crowd – twenty-something men, women in headscarves, women not – cheer on their local hero. When Guinean electric-kora outfit Ba Cissoko and Malian balafon player Aly Keita stroll on stage right and start easing their way into the trance-like rhythms, they cheer even more. Hendrix – who loved this windswept town on the Atlantic coast – would have approved. Then probably begged to be put on the bill.

This was the ninth annual Gnawa and World Music Festival, held at the back end of June. A free, four-day celebration of the music of North Africa's funkier, most mystical religious brotherhoods, this one saw some 500,000 Moroccans swarming around its nine stages. Packing out its indoor acoustic concerts. Convulsing to its late night lila rituals. Comprised, mainly, of the descendents of sub-Saharan slaves (the Malian grandfather of Mahmoud Guinea came in on a slave-ship), the Gnawa used to be regarded as pariahs, dismissed in the same way as, say, Gypsies were/are in Eastern Europe. Not any more. Thanks to this progressive shindig - co-founded to champion cultural diversity and showcase a culture with a hotline to the spirit world - Gnawa brotherhoods are flourishing. As are their sisters: the 13-year-old daughter of Rabat's Maalem Hamid El Kasri already knows the entire Gnawi repertoire.

Healers as well as musicians, the Gnawa's pentatonic (five-note) sound has long inspired collaborations with Western bluesmen and jazzers. Some of whom have been caught out: the bass-like guimbri of the Gnawa Maalem (master) might seem easy enough to play over - but it isn't. Randy Weston and Pharoah Sanders only added superfluous topcoats (the latter on a project involving Mahmoud

Guinea). Don Cherry connected. To a lesser extent, so did Bill Laswell. When the Gnawa invite musicians to jam with them in Essaouira (their music cannot survive without stretching its boundaries, Guinea has said) it is always those that they think will get it. The element of risk - even the right to fail - is all part of the excitement. This year the African-American blues guitarist Corey Harris played a blinding solo set - but when teamed with Maalem Abdelkader Amlil, went surprisingly Limp.

There were plenty of compensations: the Gnawa/gypsy/Mediterranean music-loving French guitarist Titi Robin, playing one of the festival's two big outdoor stages with Casablanca's moustachio-ed Maalem Abdenbi El Gadari - and knowing instinctively when to step back and step in. Essaouira-based Berber (and festival co-director) Maalem Abdeslam Alikane and his group Tyouir Gnaoua to-ed and fro-ed with the jazz literate balafon of Aly Keita (a player favoured by Pharoah Sanders and Joe Zawinul). The aforementioned scorcher of a set by Aly Keita and Ba Cissoko (whose new album is rather fittingly titled Electric Griotland) with that Zeus of Maalems, Mahmoud Guinea.

Not for nothing has this festival been called 'the biggest jam session on the planet'. Amidst all the experimentation, one encounter stood out: Maalem Mustapha Bakbou, once of legendary Marrakech group Jil Jilala, with the Grammy-winning American jazz guitarist, Pat Metheny, outdoors, by the sea. That day's yawn-inducing press conference gave little indication of the electricity their meeting would generate (there were too many press conferences and invite-only receptions, which clashed with concerts that might have uncovered musical gems). Flanked by the shuddering talents of bassist Christian McBride and drummer Antonio Sanchez, Metheny peeled off intense and inspired responses to Bakbou's booming challenges, his hair (as some wag pointed out) getting fuzzier all the while. It didn't just mesh: it captured the sometimes joyful, sometimes ominous spirit of the Gnawa



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sound. By the end, even the wind had whipped up in appreciation.

There were stand-alone highlights: Essaouira homeboys Ganga Fusion, an eight-strong collective that managed to combine shades of Jethro Tull, Nirvana, Take That and Nass El Ghiwane in one deftly-blended package. Their flute-led excursions probably weren't to most visitors' tastes, but their pentatonic fusions were to everyone's. Meanwhile, on a stage inside the medina, Ganga d'Agadir played traditional Ganga drum-style Gnawa music (that's Gnawa music with drums only), dancing and trancing all the while. Down on a stage on the beach London-based Moroccan DJ and festival pet U-Cef mixed electronic sounds with rootsy, North African ones; the next night saw Maghreb-curious Parisian DJ Click dazzled a beachside crowd with his trademark world/electro adventures, two hundred metres or so away from the crumbling edifice in the sea nicknamed 'Jimi's Castle'. The almighty mass brawl that erupted on the shoreline a few hours later - complete with bricks, bats, concrete blocks - could have done with a dose of Click's One Love aesthetic.

And then there were the Lilas. These weren't the real, behind-closed-doors healing rituals, there wasn't any garotting of chickens and goats, but spirits (mlouks) were still invoked (each corresponding to seven different colours) and trances still entered into. Three separate Lilas were held at midnight each night; Gnawa ensembles sat cross legged on raised platforms, chanting and drumming, calling-and-responding (along with the up-for-it crowd), layering guimbri and qraqeb until suddenly, they had lift-off. At those moments the more testosterone-filled would push to the front, get down on all fours and start fitting and gurning at the feet of in-the-zone Gnawi. Security guards held fast to their collars of the more anaphylactic, to stop them cracking their skulls on ground.

"Music frees the soul," the Gnawa Maalems like to say. In Essaouira each June, you better believe it. *Jane Cornwell*

[www.festival-gnaoua.co.ma](http://www.festival-gnaoua.co.ma)



## BIG CHILL: HEREFORDSHIRE

**Let's emphasise this from the start:** in terms of vibe and setting, few festivals can compare with the Big Chill. The 30,000-plus visitors to Herefordshire's Malvern Hills can

testify to that. Gazing at the line up this year, it was encouraging to see more live acts performing and several bases covered. And so, below the sometimes erratic skies, people were treated to some excellent 'live' performances from Lambchop, electronica producer turned guitar troubadour Fink, Mali's majestic Amadou and Mariam, David McAlmont, Eva Ebrahim, Martha Wainwright and a typically eccentric Sebastian 'La Ritournelle' Tellier. Generating the biggest audiences were the more straight forward performances from the Ukelele Orchestra of Great Britain (the crowd lapped up their cover of The Clash's 'Should I Stay...'), Lily Allen (who can sing live!) and Jose Gonzalez.

The atmosphere at Fat Tuesday was electric. Friday night's melange of dubby disco, soulful vocals and classic Trax house succeeded in truly unifying and fortifying the spirits. The Sunday sets by Michael Cook and a Live Robert Owens plus percussion was almost as impressive. Sadly, both Zero DB and Spiritual South failed to ignite the rather vacuum-like club tent. Scruff fared slightly better.

When, Big Chill programmers got it right, they really did. Jamie Lidell underlined his status as probably the most talented artist in British music right

now with a mesmerising performance of Al Green soul supplications, beatboxing and live remixing. Arrested Development demonstrated how to turn up and perform. Five years away and they blew people away on a hazy Saturday afternoon combining all the elements of performance, some treasured songs ('People Everyday, 'Tennessee') and bags of energy. Watch out for their new album in October.

Similarly, the 45-piece Heritage Orchestra managed to assuage those final night blues. Eumir Deodato stepped up to inject a little sartorial levity into the proceedings and with effervescent arrangements like 'Skyscrapers' to call upon, the evening was only ever going to go one way. Special mention must be made of the drummer. Vital propulsion for the evening.

To close on 'Les Fleur' with Carina Anderson guesting, was a defining moment. A positive step up on Big Chill 2005, but what's always an enjoyable three days could be easily enhanced by furthering that desire to challenge and inspire. There's plenty of time to chill afterwards. *Amar Patel*



## Sonar 2006: Barcelona

**The Barcelona International Festival of Advanced Music + Multimedia Art - SONAR** - was founded by Enric Palau, Sergio Caballero and Ricard

Robbles in 1994. Over the past 13 years Sonar has resolutely combined the electronic avant garde with the latest sounds in dance music and Sonar 2006 focussed on two very different and diverse musical streams, both in origin, influences and evolution: the culture of Black music and contemporary electronic music from Japan.

An exceptional treat was the opening Thursday night concert with Ryuichi Sakamoto and Carsten 'Alva Noto' Nicolai. The piece was entitled 'Insen' and a spellbound audience experienced the tranquil, sensitive musings of Sakamoto on acoustic piano being dissected with precision by Nicolai and converted into fragmented electronic beats, arhythmic sound patterns and otherworldly noises which were in turn translated into images on multi-screens.

Nicolai created 'Insen' during a stay in Villa Aurora with his German/Jewish novelist Lion Feuchtwanger and describes 'Insen' as "a kind of dialogue with certain people far away", "a dialogue that transports you to a higher resonance of you very own being."

Sonar by day was set in and around the Macba, Barcelona's contemporary art museum, and showcased live sets from the highly acclaimed Tunng, NZ's Fat Freddy's Drop and the Arkestra's Mwes Lee. The 2nd floor of the museum was appropriately captured by the consistently innovative Red Bull Music academy.

Sonar by night was situated in Fira Gran Via, a massive conference complex on the outskirts of Barcelona. Lined up were DJ Krush, DJ Shadow, Laurent Garnier, Japanese beatbox duo Afra and Digable Planets to name but a few along with live acts as diverse as Goldfrapp, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Nile Rogers' Chic.

In theory the music on offer could have hardly been a more diverse, genre spanning experience but at times the experimental nature of the event predictably gave way to crowd pleasing, pulsating, four to the floor beats and dj stylings that, in my experience, reflect only the surface of contemporary dance music scene.

Barcelona is a magical, sun drenched city and the sheer breadth of what is on offer will ensure that Sonar remains a unique gathering destined to expand musical horizons of today's electronic music lovers. *Miriam Hempel*

**Check [www.straightnochaser.co.uk](http://www.straightnochaser.co.uk) for the Darren Husbands' vibe on the North Sea Jazz Festival, Amar's drop on Womad, Wireless and Wychwood and Miriam going green and getting down with the Fairies at the Glade.**