



f FESTIVAL PROFILE

MAWAZINE FESTIVAL

RABAT, MOROCCO

Morocco's capital knows how to shake its festive thing with the best of them. Jane Cornwell joins the throng

Out of festival time, Rabat is allegedly a quiet, focused, businesslike place. A capital city where work is all and nightlife, at the very least, understated. Denizens of bustling Casablanca and mad-for-it Marrakech tend to look down their noses at their sedate administrative capital – except, that is, for nine days in May, when they wish they were joining in the party.

The seventh annual Mawazine Festival turned Rabat, a port city of two million people, into an aural treasure trove. The dream programme, boosted by some serious corporate sponsorship, would turn your average festival organiser green: here was Colombian heartthrob, Juanes; Brazilian diva, Daniela Mercury; Jamaican reggae prince, Ziggy Marley; the Maghreb's Orchestre National de Barbès; Romani rebels, Taraf de Haïdouks; Algerian *rai* star, Bilal. And a wealth of other musical giants, the likes of which had never before been gathered together – except, perhaps, in the pages of *Songlines*.

These days Morocco teems with music festivals. There's the Gnawa and World Music Festival in Essaouira; The Festival of World Sacred Music in Fes; The Timitar Festival, championing Amazigh (Berber) music in Agadir. But it's Mawazine – a celebration of cultural diversity featuring artists from over 40 countries in more than 100 performances – that has the A-listers. Wall-to-wall. Venue-to-venue. Imagine drawing up a wish list of big-name world artists. They're all here: larger than life, better than ever, in numbers too dizzying to choose from.

This is festival as grand spectacle. A showy, pleased with itself event that, while welcoming tourists, is a festival for the people of Rabat and Morocco. Banners for Mawazine – which translates as 'balance' or 'equilibrium' – line the city's wide boulevards. National radio and TV ads trumpet its uniqueness: '*Mawazine... Rythmes du Monde...*' breathes the female voiceover, while a shirtless African musician delivers a neat *djembe* drum roll. There is even, unbelievably, a headline act. A triple A-lister to (arguably) trump the rest: R&B diva Whitney Houston, in her first public performance in years.

"In every festival we need stars that people will talk about," says Aziz Daki, the festival's new artistic director, with good-natured understatement. "Whitney Houston is a great star in the Arab world. She will give a live performance with live musicians, not just do a playback. Getting to this point has taken six months of negotiations. Now more than 80,000 people will be at Hay Nahda football stadium to see her."

Dedicated, indeed, to the Stars of the Arab World (think Lebanese sensation Nancy Ajram, Egyptian heartthrob Amr Diab, Tunisian crowd pleaser Saber Roubai), Hay Nahda is located in one of Rabat's most populous neighbourhoods. Men on motorbikes, women with and without veils, groups of teenagers and honking taxis swarm outside the stadium before and after concerts. All of which take place before a sea of excitable humanity. Those lucky enough to have special passes get to stand in a roped-off area near the stage, situated behind

another roped-off area filled with VIPs.

Hay Nahda is one of five free open-air stages dotted across Rabat. The Bouregreg stage, situated at the foot of the Kasbah of the Oudayas (a sort of city within a city built on a cliff overlooking the Bouregreg river) hosted the festival's opening ceremony – featuring the jazz funk of a nipped and tucked George Benson – amidst the same traffic-congested mayhem as Hay Nahda. Devoted, somewhat arbitrarily, to Latin music (Balkan giant Goran Bregović played the following day), Bouregreg sashayed to the likes of Cuban juggernauts Los Van Van and Spanish acts including *flamenco nuevo* rockers El Bicho. Meanwhile Juanes' power chords and Spanish-language tunes prompt mass adulation.

Located on the edge of town in a 'fully expanding' (but comparatively empty) neighbourhood, the Hay Riad stage hosted artists from Africa: South African popsters, Freshly Ground; Senegalese icon, Omar Pene; Afro-beat co-founder, Tony Allen; guitar-slashing Malian *chanteuse*, Rokia Traoré, who, like many of Mawazine's international artists, is setting foot in Morocco for the first time. "It's a country in cultural evolution," she tells me, "which is great because it's the doorway to Africa." Traoré admits that she's excited about seeing Houston. "I loved her when I was a teenager. She's a huge star all over Africa. '*And I-I will always love you-oo-oo...*' she sings, note-perfect, grinning.

A Friday night electronic music soirée with Paris-based Tunisian Smadj, Brazilian DJ Grace Kelly and Belgian DJ Gaetano Fabri brought the kids out in force at

HEADING TO MOROCCO?

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HOW TO GET THERE

- For cheap flights to Morocco, try Ryanair (www.ryanair.com), Easyjet (www.easyjet.co.uk) or Atlas Blue (www.atlas-blue.com).
- Alternatively Air France (www.airfrance.co.uk) and Royal Air Maroc (www.royalairmaroc.com) offer indirect flights to Rabat.
- For more information about your visit, check out www.visitmorocco.org



Hay Riad. Over at Qamra – a stage in the heart of the Yacoub El Mansour *quartier* – Moroccan groups such as Darga and Hoba Hoba Spirit give traditional sounds an urban slant. “We are a rock band and we want to hit people in the head and under the belt,” says the latter’s suitably gobby Reda Allali. “We apply this attitude to Moroccan rhythms and lyrics that address society. I don’t give a fuck about Whitney Houston, by the way; I wish it was Bruce Springsteen or the Arctic Monkeys.”

Moroccan song ruled at Moulay Hassan Square. Then there were the small spectacles: the picturesque Chellah stage where Tuvan throat singers Huun-Huur-Tu competed with the chatter of a thousand

nesting storks. Moroccan legends Nass El Ghiwane shared an eye-popping bill with 1970s cohorts Jil Jilala, Lamchaheb and a psychedelic wealth of others. Plus the courtyard fountain and art exhibitions of the Villa des Artes, which was privy to Chinese flautist Wang Li and Venezuelan percussionist Luisito Quintero.

All this, and Whitney Houston. The fact that no one – not even Aziz Daki – was 100% certain that the Grammy-winner and reformed Class A dabbler would turn up lent a healthy tension to this wonderfully ambitious, clearly minted and occasionally impersonal shindig. But then, suddenly, there she was. Dressed in white, chiffon scarf draped across her hair, gliding across

Hay Nahda stage with a loud “Shukran! It’s a pleasure to be here in beautiful MOROCCO!” before delivering hit after 20th century hit.

OK, an unlikely headliner for a world music festival she may be. But by the end of her big-hearted performance – topped with a costume change and a rousing version of Chaka Khan’s ‘I’m Every Woman’ – Houston had Hay Nahda upstanding, dancing and in the palm of her manicured hand. The roped-off VIP area thronged with a who’s who of artists; the after show party must’ve been some jam. ●

DATES This year’s Mawazine Festival runs May 15-23 2009

ONLINE www.festivalmawazine.ma

Clockwise from top left: Whitney’s back!; Rabat’s sea-front esplanade with the Bouregreg open-air stage in the background to the left; *rai* star Bilal; Dee Dee Bridgewater on the Bouregreg stage