

Bab L' Bluz - 'Nayda!'

**Debut album to be released by Real World Records
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Moroccan-French power quartet, Bab L' Bluz reclaim the blues for North Africa with their debut album, 'Nayda!'. The band are devoted to ideas of unity, to a revolution in attitude; values that dovetail with Morocco's "nayda" youth movement – a new wave of Moroccan artists and musicians taking their cues from local heritage, singing words of freedom in the Moroccan-Arabic dialect of *darija*.

Bab L' Bluz are fronted by lead vocalist and Guembri player Yousra Mansour, a Moroccan woman in a field that has long been traditionally male. "I fell in love with the trance grooves of Gnawa music and took up singing Gnawa-style at home and with friends. There was resistance at first because I was female," says Yousra, who was encouraged by her mother to follow her dreams.

Through an arched gateway into the medina, inside a labyrinth of alleyways lined with shops selling spices and perfumed oils, rare vinyl and handmade instruments, comes the sound of the blues. Ancient and current, funky and rhythmic, buoyed by Arabic lyrics, soaring vocals and bass-heavy grooves, it seems to pulse from the heart of the Maghreb.

Inspired. Soulful. As if it was born at its crossroads.

So *mabrouk*. Blessings. You've happened upon Bab L' Bluz, a Moroccan-French power quartet that is reclaiming the blues for North Africa. Created in 2018 in tribute to Gnawa culture, the centuries old Moroccan practice rooted in Islamic and sub-Saharan African traditions and music played with the guembri, the three-stringed bass-lute, Bab L' Bluz has commanded attention, opened doors - 'bab' means 'gate' in Arabic - from the off.

"More than anything we're a rock band," declares frontwoman Yousra, who sings, ululates and fires riffs from her goatskin-covered awicha [small guembri] like some Berber warrior goddess.

"We use the awicha as a guitar and the guembri as a bass, both at different tunings. We channel our huge range of influences into music that crosses borders and travels through time."

Think old-school Gnawa meets funk. Moroccan chaabi meets trance. The sung poetry of Mauritania meets the deep spiritual cry of the blues. Imagine ninja-style flute, propulsive drums and percussion including spiralling metal qraqeb castanets. Wrap it all up in the turned-on-tuned-in psych rock grooves of such countercultural heroes as Santana, Jefferson Airplane and Nass El Ghiwane, Morocco's very own Rolling Stones.

And maybe, just maybe, you'll be ready for 'Nayda!' – Bab L' Bluz's debut album.

Sensual, visceral and immediate, 'Nayda!' features four musicians devoted to ideas of unity, to a revolution in attitude, to shaking up the status quo. Values that dovetail with Morocco's 'nayda' youth movement – a new wave of Moroccan artists and musicians taking their cues from local heritage, singing words of freedom in the Moroccan-Arabic dialect of *darija* ('nayda' means both 'to rise up' and 'to party') and mixing influences as and when.

“We are fascinated by the origins of Gnawa culture and its musical similarities in parts of the Middle East,” says guembri player Brice, a French producer and multi-instrumentalist with a CV spanning live work across genres including rock, R&B and Afrobeat and gigs from Le Trianon to the Brooklyn Bowl.

“The African blues includes other pentatonic music: Mauritanian hassani. The Berber music found in Morocco’s Atlas Mountains. The music of Mali, which is the true source of the blues as well as the true source of Gnawa music.”

Yousra and Brice co-founded Bab L’ Bluz while honing their skills on the guembri, exploring the possibilities of the iconic instrument as they composed in their studio in Marrakech. The resultant outpouring of creativity is showcased across the album’s ten tracks.

“It was a challenge to start composing with just three-strings and one tonality, but it opened opportunities for various styles, scales and textures,” offers Brice. “It allowed us to take a new direction.”

“Bab L’ Bluz plays original material that while definitely not fusion, merges different styles to make a whole. There is also the fact we are led by an African-Moroccan woman - a symbol of our respect for equality in a field that for too long has been traditionally male.”

Yousra grew up in El Jadida, a fortified town on Morocco’s windswept Atlantic coast, playing guitar and performing songs by Lebanese diva Fairouz (their voices have the same melismatic quaver). Listening to Janis Joplin, Oumou Sangaré and Erykah Badu. Attending the annual sprawling Gnawa Festival (the so-called ‘largest jam session on the planet’) in nearby Essaouira.

“I fell in love with the trance grooves of Gnawa music and took up singing Gnawa-style at home and with friends. There was resistance at first because I was female,” says Yousra, who was raised by a strong widowed mother, a science teacher, and encouraged to follow her dreams. “Over the last decade or so things have slowly changed.

“But injustice continues everywhere. There is corruption, racism and poverty, and notions of visas and borders, of who can come and go. All of us in Bab L’ Bluz believe that art can open minds and change mentalities. This is what we try to do.”

Written mostly in Moroccan darija, Yousra’s lyrics are imbued with light and shade, warmth and nuance. They are, out of necessity, ambiguous: “I write between the lines about current subjects and society’s problems. The meaning can be understood.”

Album opener “Gnawa Beat” kicks off with an ululating battle cry, as galloping qraqeb make way for vibing desert blues and the aural weaponry of Bab L’ Bluz flautist Jérôme. “*Welcome to the truth that can be told without fear,*” sings Yousra, her band mates – including drummer Hafid – providing backing vocals.

Sung in classical Arabic (“The cradle of Arabic poetry”), and featuring looping Indian tabla and samples of the Atlantic waves crashing in at Essaouira, “Ila Mata” is an aural salaam, an unhurried gesture of respect and peace to brothers and sisters regardless of origin. The upbeat, darija-sung “El Gamra” praises the Moon and her restorative powers, inviting all to party under a night sky charged by trancing guembri and rocking chaabi, by ecstatic harmonies and handclaps that come fast then faster still.

“Gnawa music is healing music,” says Yousra, “You know this the moment you hear it.”

“Glibi” is a love letter written in the style of the tebraa poetry sung by women in the Western Sahara and parts of southern Morocco, and layered over tarab al hassani, the expressive Moorish blues of Mauritania. All sultry tempo changes and bittersweet vocal curlicues, “Oudelali” is a darija-penned ode to true love and its transcendental dimension: “*Love flows from heaven drop by drop, heals wounds and refreshes the air,*” sings Yousra, mesmerically.

The only cover version, and the second of two tracks in classical Arabic, “Waydelel” was written by the late Mauritanian diva Dimi Mint Abba and her husband Khalifa Ould Eide as an expression of absolute love for the Prophet Mohammed. On ‘Nayda!’ it is renewed by a verse/chorus structure, ambient tanpura loops and the fiery one-string ribab playing of guest instrumentalist Aziz Ozouss.

“Africa Manayo” is a stirring English-language tribute to the Motherland that finds Mansour denouncing – unambiguously – the despots that plunder Africa’s riches. Exploiting workers, depleting the earth, damning

populations to poverty. Beginning with a Berber music sample treated with psychedelic Afrobeat, taking in distortion, found sounds and a celestial children's choir, it is both a call for unity and a sucker-punch to the corrupt and greedy.

"I sing of the West African people evoked in traditional Gnawa songs, the ancestors of many Gnawa," Yousra says. "I ask Bambara, Hausa, Fulani and Sudani to stand up."

All changing grooves and patterns, "Yemma" is a tribute to the patience and fortitude of mothers. The loping "El Watane" – which features guest vocalist, Gnawa star Mehdi Nassouli - extols the joy and riches of Africa while holding out hope that poverty and 21st century slavery might be eradicated.

Closing track "Bab L' Bluz" finds the eponymous four-piece at a gathering where guests are welcomed with incense and invited to play percussion, and sing and dance.

To honour the African blues by cracking open the traditional Gnawa sound with new inflections.

"This is a huge moment/We all raise our hands/Share the goodness/We celebrate with Bab L' Bluz ..."

So come, join. The door is open.

'Nayda!' welcomes you in.

Words by Jane Cornwell

BAB L' BLUZ are:

Yousra Mansour: Awisha, Guembri (guitar sound), Guembri (bass sound), Lead Vocal, Percussion.

Brice Bottin: Guembri (bass sound), Guitar, Percussion, Backing Vocal.

Hafid Zouaoui: Drums, Sampling Pad, Backing Vocal.

Jérôme Bartholomé: Percussions, Flute, Karkabs, Backing Vocal.

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