

As indeed do the quartet's other 20-something members: French-Tunisian kit drummer Hafid Zouaoui and French-Spanish flautist and percussionist Jérôme Bartholomé. The latter deploys the kind of upbeat woodwind melodies beloved of such 70s heroes as Santana and Nass el Ghiwane, and the *qaraqab* (metal castanets) whose spiralling clatter is carried on the wind at the Gnawa Festival in Essaouira which Mansour, 29, has been attending each year since the age of 15. "I fell in love with the trance, the rhythms," she says animatedly. "I was fascinated by the way the Gnawa repertoire is loved and known by the small, the big, the rich and poor, that this incredibly authentic music has origins in several African countries."

"When I started singing Gnawa-style as a teenager with friends there was disapproval," she continues. "It is changing slowly but for too long the musical environment in Morocco has belonged to men. The fact that Bab L' Bluz is led by a strong African-Moroccan woman is sending a message of equality, tolerance, peace and respect."

*Nayda!* is named for the Nayda youth movement that emerged in Morocco in the mid-2000s with politically-engaged artists and musicians including Casablanca-based fusionists Darga and rock/reggae/Gnawa crew Hoba Hoba Spirit. *Nayda* means 'to rise up' and 'to party' in Darija, the colloquial Moroccan-Arabic dialect in which such artists sang and wrote their words of freedom. Like most of the left-field, cross-genre acts that fall under the Nayda banner, Bab L' Bluz set out to rock – like, really rock – the status quo. Their weapon of mass enlightenment is art. More powerful, they say, and more liberating than ever. "We want to transmit a deeper awareness of art as a means of intellectual awakening," says Mansour, whose crystalline voice belies the ferocity with which she peels riffs from her *awicha* (small gimbri), and the hidden meanings of her self-penned Darija lyrics.

Seven of *Nayda!*'s ten tracks are in Darija. Two are in classical Arabic. While the only English-language tune, 'Africa Manayo', pulls no punches as it decries all those who pillage the riches of the Motherland, the majority of lyrics are couched in the ambiguity beloved of the great Arabic poets – Rumi, Khalil Gibran, Mahmoud Darwish – that Mansour grew up reading in El Jadida, a fortified town on Morocco's Atlantic coast. That is, in between windsurfing, playing guitar and covering songs by the great Lebanese diva Fairuz.



Asia Khazri



**"We want to open the doors of the mind as well as the gate to the blues"**

"I was intrigued by the way Fairuz would use texts from these poets in her songs." It's a technique she uses on 'Ila Mata', *Nayda!*'s first single, which is inspired by the work of Anis Shoshan, a contemporary Afro-Tunisian poet whose words address notions of peace, racism and religious extremism. 'Until when will ignorance rule/how long will injustice last...' sings

conservatoire-trained Mansour on a tune that lopes and shimmers, in an unhurried aural *salaam*.

The fiery one-string *ribab* playing of guest instrumentalist Aziz Ouzouss heightens the texture of 'Waydele!', the album's only cover version: "It is a song

we loved that was written by [late Mauritanian diva] Dimi Mint Abba," offers Bottin. "The melody fitted perfectly with our music, and we modified the original song and gave it a modern vibe with a rock and funk presence that moves into chaabi, with Aziz adding more colour."

Moroccan gimbri player Mehdi Nassouli, another friend of the band, contributes vocals on 'El Watane', a tune that extols Africa's joys and riches and holds out hope for a better future. Throughout, the three-stringed gimbri and awicha – which the band have tuned at different octaves – thud and resonate, driving the songs forward. "It's crazy, really, because the gimbri is such a basic instrument but it offers so much possibility," says Mansour. "They say it comes from Mali but it's also an instrument that has travelled a lot."

"There are a lot of very great gimbri players in Morocco. We have many friends who are maalems. *Hamdoulah!*" She smiles. "We just have to step outside our studio to hear them play in Djemaa el Fna Square, which always puts us in great spirits."

Two gimbri feature on the cover of *Nayda!*, positioned either side of a portrait of Mansour, who sits in the palm of the hand of Fatima, her gaze unwavering, her face painted with Berber tattoos similar to those etched into the chin and cheeks of her Berber grandmother. "We want to highlight the strength of the Arab-Berber woman and her special relationship to music, to the blues," she says. "To show that she can be attached to her origins and culture while being free from the masculine pressure exerted for many centuries." Another smile. "We want to acknowledge tradition, then go forward." ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Nayda!* will be reviewed in the next issue, out July 24

Chaimae Fichouri

