

# Gateway to the Blues

A new rocking Maghrebi band are making waves with their exciting Gnawa-blues hybrid sound. Bab L' Bluz's co-founders Yousra Mansour and Brice Bottin explain their intent to **Jane Cornwell**

“**B**ab L' Bluz are about people moving their heads to the same vibe – and thinking,” declares Yousra Mansour, the charismatic frontwoman of one of the rockiest, most exciting acts to have emerged from the Maghreb in recent times. “Thinking about respect, equality, what unites us,” she explains. “We want to open the doors of the mind as well as the gate to the blues.”

A French-Moroccan quartet with a counter-cultural aesthetic, 21st-century mindset and mission to highlight the North African roots of the blues, Bab L' Bluz (*bab* means ‘gate’ in Arabic) was created in Marrakech at the end of 2018. Storming gigs at the likes of Visa for Music in Rabat and Sakifo festival on the island of La Réunion sparked talk of big things. Bab L' Bluz signed to Real World Records and were set to wow

summer events including WOMAD Charlton Park when the pandemic pulled the plug on live music.

“It has been challenging,” smiles Brice Bottin, 28, a Lyon-based guitarist, composer, musicologist and producer who co-founded Bab L' Bluz with singer-guitarist Mansour as they honed their skills on the *gimbri*, the three-string bass-lute traditionally played by Gnawa *maalems* (masters). “Luckily we are children of the internet.”

Armed with visuals that subvert clichés by merging tradition with psychedelia, pop art and identity politics, Bab L' Bluz have retaliated with a formidable debut. *Nayda!* is an album grounded in the trancey pentatonic rhythms of Gnawa music, taking in the music of Morocco's Berbers, the poetic Hassani music of Mauritania, comparable elements in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and the music of Mali. “Mali is the source of the blues and of Gnawa culture,” says Bottin, whose deft effects – loops, beats, reverb and samples of children's choirs and fizzing Moroccan *chaabi* – sharpen *Nayda!*'s cutting edge.

**WIN**

We have three copies of *Nayda!* to give away. To enter, answer: What instrument does Yousra Mansour play? See p19 for competition rules and deadline

