

Yousra Mansour remembers the first time she saw a crowd going wild to the rhythms played by her country's Gnawa musicians.

As a Berber teenager from El Jadida, a city on the coast of Morocco, she'd hitched a ride to the nearby town of Essaouira for its Gnawa World Music Festival, a free event touted as an "African Woodstock".

Lured by the sound of looping, pulsating blues she'd entered a bab, a gate, that opened into a public square and found 100,000 people flailing their limbs and shaking their hair about.

"You just had to dance to these incredible grooves," says Mansour, 29, of Gnawa music – a repertoire of spiritual songs combining ritual poetry with traditional pentatonic (five-note) rhythms and dancing.

"I was blown away. As soon as I got to back to El Jadida I started performing Gnawa-style with friends."

Back then, this was taboo.

Music played by the Gnawa – an ethnic group originating in black West Africa, the majority descended from slaves – was the domain of men. Of brotherhoods led by a maalem (master) on the guembri, a three-string bass-lute made from goatskin, and featuring side-drums and clattering krakeb castanets alongside wailed chants, lyrics in Arabic and the occasional acrobatic leap into mid-air.

Gnawa women stayed behind the scenes, overseeing the all-night ancient healing rituals called lilas.

Like most Moroccan women, they never played string instruments. To do so brought disapproval, and worse.

Fast-forward to today, and Mansour is the frontwoman of Bab L'Bluz, a French-Moroccan quartet mixing funk, trance and rock with traditional blues, then processing the sound through a psychedelic filter.

Signed to Real World Records, the label owned by famed English rock musician Peter Dinklage, Bab L'Bluz's debut album *Nayda!* received global acclaim on its release in 2020, with outlets from the BBC and New York Times to Vogue Arabia praising the album's rock 'n' roll energy and message-driven lyrics; in 2021 they scooped the Songlines Award for Fusion Act of the Year.

Nayda means both "rise up" and "let's party!" in Darija, the Moroccan-Arabic dialect beloved of the "nayda" youth movement that began in Marrakech, Morocco's capital, in the mid-2000s: young artists, writers and musicians



WE WANT (TO) CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE WOMEN TO FOLLOW THEIR DREAMS, TO KEEP CHALLENGING THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM

crossing artforms, referencing local heritage, speaking truth-to-power.

Fittingly, the album's opening track Gnawa Beat opens with an ululating war cry from Mansour, who fires riffs from her awisha, a small guembri, while musicians on guembri, flute, percussion and kit drums wheel and crash around her.

"We want the role of the frontwoman to be seen positively, so that we continue to encourage women to follow their dreams, to keep challenging the patriarchal system," says Mansour, who was raised by a science teacher mother on a musical diet that included Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell and Erykah Badu.

Taught acoustic guitar as a child by her late father, she wrote songs inspired by poetry, especially the sung poetry of nomadic Bedouin tribes, and later moved to Marrakech to study at its conservatoire.

There she found other female musicians determined to go their own way. Mansour was making a modest living as a singer/songwriter, covering songs by female icons including Lebanese diva Fairuz (their voices have a similar melismatic quaver), when she met French guitarist, producer and musicologist Brice Bottin at a gig.

Having worked across genres including rock, electronica and Brazilian samba at venues including Le Trianon and the Brooklyn Bowl, twenty-something Bottin was in Marrakech to explore Moroccan music and particularly, the possibilities offered by the guembri: "The guembri is a basic instrument but it offers so much possibility. They say it comes from Mali in West Africa but it's an instrument that has travelled a lot."

The two collaborated, became a couple and moved to Lyon in east-central France.

In 2018, they co-founded Bab L'Bluz, bringing in French-Tunisian drummer Hafid Zouaoui and French-Spanish flautist and

percussionist Jerome Bartholeme, whose galloping krakeb castanets kept the trance vibes at a premium.

Bottin added electronic flourishes – loops, beats and reverb; samples of children's choirs, of Morocco's poppy chaabi genre – into ten mostly original tracks. A demo recording made its way to Real World Records, the label Gabriel launched in 1989 to showcase world class music from all corners of the globe, and was deemed the perfect fit.

Bab L'Bluz's visuals are intrinsic to their brand, recalling the psychedelic tropes beloved of famed 1970s Morocco-ophiles such as Santana, Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix.

The cover of *Nayda!* sees two guembris positioned either side of a portrait of Mansour, who sits in the palm of the hand of Fatima (the ancient protective amulet common to Islam), her lips a brilliant blue, her face painted with Berber tattoos like those etched onto the cheeks of her Berber grandmother.

Their videos are fabulously trippy. New single *El Gamra*, an upbeat paean to the moon, is so unrelentingly eye-spinning it comes with a trigger warning.

Live, they've proved themselves a force to be reckoned with, storming venues across Europe and North Africa and music festivals including WOMAD UK, which Gabriel also co-founded ("Peter came backstage after our set and told us we were among his festival highlights; the Flaming Lips came and told us the same thing").

Next month they make their Australian debut at WOMADelaide.

"Australia, the land of AC/DC, Hiatus Kaiyote and Tame Impala." Mansour grins, namechecking her top Aussie acts.

"Brice had a DVD of AC/DC in concert as a kid and swears that it changed his life.

"Bab L'Bluz is really a rock band," she continues. "We're based on the concept of the power trio à la Jimi Hendrix, but with guembri and awisha instead of bass and guitar, with an extra flute and with a female leader.

"We want our music to open the gate to the blues, and to the fact that cultural difference has always brought richness. We want to send a message of equality, tolerance, peace and respect."

She flashes a smile: "We're all about people moving their heads to the same vibe, and thinking." ■

Bab L'Bluz play WOMADelaide March 11, 12 and 13
womadelaide.com.au
realworldrecords.com/artists/bab-lbluz

BREAKING THE CEILING

Organizers are bracing for potentially one of the biggest WOMADelaides on record with tickets selling out fast and the city's hotel rooms bursting at the seams.

The South Australian Tourism Commission expects and influx of visitors to South Australia for the March long weekend, with all 3-day, 4-day and Saturday tickets sold-out for WOMAD and the remainder of the weeknd selling fast.

About half of visitors to WOMAD are expected to come from interstate and festival

organisers are rapt with the outcome, which shows a healthy appetite for entertainment in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The demand for tickets has translated to hotel bookings; at press time forward bookings showed average occupancy in Adelaide accommodation over the weekend of WOMADelaide was at 85 per cent occupancy – up 9 percentage points on the same time in 2022.

The Friday of WOMADelaide was already at 85 per cent of hotel rooms sold, and Saturday at 89 per cent already sold. This compares to 76 and 78 per cent respectively, at the same time last year.

Minister for Tourism Zoe Bettison said Adelaide hotels were "filling at a rate of knots" thanks to the state's blockbuster calendar of events. Australian Hotels Association SA CEO Ian Horne said events and festivals gave people a reason to visit the state and spend.

"This is a direct hit for our hotels, restaurants, pubs, bars and cafes – who we know will do a roaring trade off the back of our packed events calendar," he said. "We're already seeing the impact that events have on hotel bookings – our upcoming events and festivals are driving occupancy rates in Adelaide to record-breaking highs, making us the envy of other states."