

Emel Mathlouthi (aka EMEL) never wanted to call herself a feminist. Then she realised that she'd been one all along. "I thought, hang on, it's not even a big deal. Women should be feminists by default, especially with everything that is going so wrong in the world right now. We need to flush these toxic patriarchal systems from everyone's bodies."

The Tunisian singer, composer and arranger has been making moves to do exactly that, both by challenging the norms of the male-dominated music industry and by writing protest songs that encourage a new way of being. Her guitar-led tune 'Ya Tounes Ya Meskina' (Poor Tunisia) and the formerly banned folk-hymnal 'Kelmti Horra' (My Word is Free) – which she sang to protestors on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba during Tunisia's Arab Spring protests in 2011, and again at the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo – contain the sort of hope that is strengthened by timing, and indeed, by musicality.

"After the 70s and 80s there was a void in protest music in the Arab world [because] of the presence of dictators," says EMEL, a mother-of-two who has been based in New York City since 2014. "So, by the 90s the young Arabs were definitely tamed. When I started singing even Joan Baez songs in my early 20s, people were like, 'How did you know about this? Where did you find your conscience?'"

"The problem is also that activist music is often a bit boring and simple," she continues, FaceTiming from her bed in a Berlin hotel room, a whistlestop after playing a gig outside the pyramids in Cairo, singing her full-throated songs while weaving a cat's cradle of rhythms on hand percussion.

"From the early days, I was just very interested in being totally free and singing in many different ways, boldly as well as subtly. It was never about just being beautiful or delivering nice melodies."

Welcome, then, to *MRA*, EMEL's frankly astounding fourth studio album. Pronounced 'Imra-a' (that's 'woman' in Tunisian Arabic), it's a project that was written, conceived and produced exclusively by and with women. A *miss-terwork* [sic] whose 12 electro-spiritual, electrifyingly danceable tracks are variously sung and/or rapped in languages including English, Arabic and French, and duly themed to raise awareness and combat transphobia and homophobia, sexism and racism.

Unapologetically mainstream – unapologetically everything – *MRA* pulses with elements of rock, funk and hip-hop; with Arabic reggaeton, African trap, Brazilian *batacuda* and banging dancefloor-tearing drum'n'bass beats. It's a portal to change, opened by dancing. "This record is about taking back control of our bodies, our lives, our narrative, our colour, our speech," declares EMEL. "As an Arab woman from Africa, I was never allowed to define myself on my terms. My multilayers were ignored. For the west, I had only two ways of existing: exotic or political."

'*I am a warrior, I am a witch, a superheroine*,' she sings, mellifluous and strident, on the anthemic 'Nar (feat Ami Yerewolo). '*I am a soldier, I am a fighter, a bullet...*' Watch her video for lead single 'Lose My Mind', a banger about fear and liberation lent smoky-voiced ballast by Swedish-Iraqi rapper Nayomi, and it's easy to believe her.

Clad in flowing red, her nails talon-like, her black plaits flailing, EMEL is an otherworldly force, a queenly apparition not unlike the great NYC multi-hyphenate artist/activist Diamanda Galás, an ancient-to-future vision bent on rallying like-minds, transcending boundaries, unleashing and enacting change.

This morning, however, she's getting her rest, midway through a tour that has taken in Abu Dhabi and the archaeology-rich Altındağ in Turkey. In March she played WOMADelaide in Australia, a very different artist from the guitar-strumming, laptop-and-violin-accompanied protest singer of her last visit in 2014.

Nevertheless, while *MRA* is buoyed by a team of underrepresented, overly-talented women, including Malian rapper Ami Yerewolo (on 'Nar'), Nigerian MC Eva Alordiah (on 'IDHA'), Brazilian DJ-producer Lyzza and Ukraine's 2024 Eurovision entry, alyona alyona, the musicians that are touring with her are male. It's not ideal, she says. But it is how it is: "Facts are facts. Men tend to hire men. It's hard to find female musicians who'll tour."

"But we don't have to be apologetic for wanting to support women and especially, to trust each other. I'm not interested in that inherited feeling where women are rivals anymore." Her eyes flash. "I want to change the system from within. I'll be doing a residency in May in Paris and we will have a female drummer, female sound engineer, lighting designer, tour manager, photographer, publicist, you name it."

If she's angrier now – indeed, if all women are angrier now – it's because she's tired of waiting. Change was promised and didn't come; not really. "I keep thinking of that comment by Ruth Bader Ginsburg,"

says EMEL, namechecking the late associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

"She was asked when she thought there would be enough women on the Supreme Court. She replied, 'when there are nine of them [taking all nine seats],' and people were shocked. She said, but it's been men all these years and no one thinks that is extreme!"

A pause. "We're still labouring under this system that was created by men. 99% of the tracks on my albums" – *Ensen* (2017), the remix album *Ensenity* (2018), *Everywhere We Looked Was Burning* (2019) and *The Tunis Diaries* (2020) – "were done with male producers. People were always like, ah your music is so empowering, who produced it? I'd be like, er, well..."

"I figured that if I don't insist on having female producers, I'll just end up working with another man." When her previous record label "tried to push me to do things I didn't want to do," she duly set up her own label, Little Human. "I wanted to create a new accessible sound that would get the message out as widely as possible. I was listening to an extensive playlist of women DJs and reckoned some had to be producers. I rented a house in Normandy, France and invited a few of them along."

One of the first to arrive was Netherlands-based Brazilian DJ Lyzza, whose eagerness to experiment dovetailed with EMEL's art-pop aesthetic: "Lyzza is young and was eager to try anything: sampling old Tunisian and Algerian songs, or mixing north African rhythms with trap, hip-hop and electronic ▶

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