

MY WORD IS FREE

An EMEL Discography

**Helma Dream**

(Emel Mathlouthi, 2007)

Self-released CD of demos and live recordings, including many of the

songs that she would become known for. On the album are 'Kelmti Horra' and 'Naci en Palestina', an adaptation of the Spanish-language 'Naci en Alamo' to pay homage to Palestinians and their struggle.

**Kelmti Horra**

(World Village, 2012)

With stunning versions of 'Kelmti Horra', 'Ma Lkit' and 'Dhalem', it's a fine studio debut with an extended palette: *chanson*-esque chamber strings alongside *bendir* and *daf* drums, moving choirs and dashes of electronics. The 2022 reissue comes with her emotional live rendition of 'Kelmti Horra' from the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize Concert.

**Ensen**

(Partisan Records, 2017)

A clear move away from protest songs as EMEL begins to defy easy

categorisation and create a pan-global sound. She worked closely with fellow Tunisian Amine Metani to create a beat-driven, yet Middle Eastern sound bed. It remains her rawest album.

**Everywhere We Looked Was Burning**

(Partisan Records, 2019)

An astonishing concept album around the end of the world. Informed by climate change, there's lavish orchestration and punchy production as she looks at the past, present and future of life on Earth. Written after she moved to New York, it's her first album mainly in English.

**The Tunis Diaries**

(Partisan Records, 2020)

Quarantined in her childhood home in Tunis during lockdown EMEL

armed herself with a laptop, tape recorder and guitar and recorded this intimate set of reworkings of old songs on side one and a surprising set of covers on side two, including versions of songs by Nirvana, David Bowie, The Cranberries and Placebo.

“I love the lyricism, drama and intensity of metal and its correlations with classical music”

music. She got me to sing faster, to divide my Arabic flow. I had fun playing around with the music of my culture.”

EMEL grew up in Tunis, the daughter of an academic Marxist father who was “imprisoned for his opinions” during the 1990s regime of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, then fired from his job ('IDHA', a dramatic song about the world's lack of empathy, is dedicated to him). She read Arabic literature alongside books by Dickens, Dostoevsky and Mark Twain, and listened to a vinyl collection that favoured classical music and Tunisian-Jewish music from between 1900-1950 (“When people were really free: Habiba Msika had her own car before she was shot by her male lover; Louisa Tounsia had a song called 'Empowering Women'”).

Her mother, an elementary school teacher, instilled a drive, a wish for self-betterment, in the young EMEL that – in tandem with a preternatural ability for singing, acting and songwriting – would stand her in good stead. She went on to front a heavy metal band called Idiom while (“sort of”) studying engineering at university: “I love the lyricism, drama and intensity of metal and its correlations with classical music. Just listen to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*! It's got a total metal feel.”

She says she came late to Arabic music, which she'd previously associated with clichés involving “the diva standing on stage who just has to sing beautifully and follow the rules set by the men who compose for her. I had been searching for something more freeing, which was why metal spoke to me. For years I was proud of being the only woman wherever I went.” She sighs. “The conditioning was bad.”

One day a bandmate played her Joan Baez' version of 'The Boxer', and her world tilted. She began writing protest songs, including the aforementioned viral hit 'Kelmti Horra', written with Tunisian poet Amine Al Ghozzi, who provided the lyrics. With these new songs she was mindful that a) she was being monitored, b) opportunities were limited and c) the songs' sentiments had seen them banned on Tunisian TV and radio. In 2007 she slipped out of the country for a new life in France. She was on tour in Tunisia for the brief blooming of 2010's Arab Spring: “I took the mic onstage and said, ‘we have to support these people because they are just asking for work and dignity.’” “Being in France empowered me for sure,” she says. “But it wasn't until I got to New York that I really started trusting myself as a producer, an artistic director. New York gives you wings; there's no end to what you can try and experiment with there. I love that you mention Diamanda Galás,” she continues, “because I'm not the gentle pretty little thing that comes on and does the exotic Arabic belly-dancing.”

“I've always felt that I had to win people's respect through my music. And with *MRA* I've created a sisterhood through banger music that will bring healing to everyone and break the cycle of male domination in a fun, non-negative way.”

She flashes a grin. “It's a new cool universe.” ♦

+ *MRA* is reviewed this issue, p63. 'Souty' is on this issue's compilation, track 11. **EMEL** will perform at The Jazz Cafe, London on May 21

Ryan Murad, Amber Grey