



Sulaf – *RW271 Sulaf - ABA* / بَّ /

Sleeve Notes

"I gathered my belongings into a small bag, not shedding many tears as no one expected what would happen. No one foresaw all this separation ..."

Sulaf was only meant to be gone a minute.

When she left Sudan for France in 2022, taking only essentials including her instruments — her glorious melismatic vocals and resonant six-string wooden oud — she was simply setting off on a creative adventure. In Paris, at the Cité Internationale des Arts — the city's famed artists' residence — she would explore her potential and meet like-minded musicians. Then she would return home.

"I was not planning to stay, so I was not prepared for this exile," says the Saudi-born Sulaf, whose solo debut *ABA* moves through a panoply of emotions — from anguish and longing to spiritual radiance and fizzing, joyous release — while showcasing an ancient-to-future sound conjured in collaboration with French producer and instrumentalist Maxime Kosinetz, known for his work with desert rock bands Imarhan and Tinariwen, and French acts Bon Voyage Organisation and Oracle Sisters.

Sung in Arabic, the songs on *ABA* weave traditional musical textures from Sudan — bluesy rhythms with roots in ancient Nubian folk patterns and the traditions of sub-Saharan Africa — with lush retro-modern soundscapes. Violins soar. Synths drone, stab and swell. Bass and guitars boom and thrash. Hand drums gallop. Handclaps mark time. Space is carved out so that less becomes more.

Found sounds — jaunty air horns, the ticking of a car indicator — serve as portals to Khartoum, a dusty, sprawling African metropolis straddling the River Nile, and an Arab and Muslim hub once designated Arab City of Culture. *ABA* begins with the hum of cicadas then, in English, Sulaf's spoken-word prelude: *"No one expected what would happen..."*

"At first, it felt strange to be in a distant culture that spoke a language [French] I didn't understand," says Sulaf, who after graduating from Khartoum's Arab Oud Academy and refining her vocal technique at the Berklee College of Music in Abu Dhabi, was invited to Paris by the manager of Algerian Tuareg group Imarhan — with whom she had collaborated at Khartoum's Institut Français.

A career in music was always her end goal. Previously, to appease her family ("To forge an artistic profession in Sudan is hard - there is no music industry") and to avoid criticism from a conservative old-guard opposed to a woman playing the oud, she studied business management at Ahfad University for Women. Even there, her side-line in solo performance and singing won awards. A stint in France offered the sort of creative freedom — and infrastructure — she needed to pursue her art.



Nevertheless, the culture shock was real. “I retreated into my Sudanese music, the music I grew up listening to,” she continues. “My idols are the greats: Hasan Khalifa al-Atbarawi [known for his anti-colonialist anthem ‘I Am Sudan’]. Hanan al-Neel, one of few women singers who play the oud. I am a vessel for the songs of the women of Sudan, who are so musical that at even funerals they cry through song.”

Sulaf had been in Paris for five months when a vicious war broke out between two military factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), displacing millions internally and sending millions more fleeing as refugees.

She phoned her mother. They’d wailed, fretted, reminisced. They remembered her father, who died when Sulaf was a girl, and whose long illness prompted her mother to gift Sulaf her first oud (“I could escape into music”); her uncle, a multi-instrumentalist who supported her artistic dreams; her aunts, great aunts and grandparents, who had lived in close-knit proximity, speaking to neighbours through a nafag, the small windows built into traditional Sudanese houses.

They remembered her late beloved great-grandfather — a Sufi poet and musician who wrote and sang quietly at home, known within the family as Aba.

“I wanted to write about me. But I wrote about you instead.”

Sulaf had brought with her a cache of Aba’s poems. Their reflections on familial bonds, sorrowful partings and blessed homecomings - along with their imagery of rising suns, sacred valleys and watchful birds - became lifelines. Now, they spoke anew to her experience of exile.

“We would visit Aba every weekend. He would be wearing his brown-rimmed glasses, listening to his radio and dipping into his tumbak [smokeless tobacco]. We would always sing with him. He was so different from most people we knew. I think his Sufism” — the mystical dimension of Islam focused on devotion to God and compassion for others — “was what made him so kind, loving and understanding.”

ABA features verses by, and is dedicated to, Abdelazim Sayed Ahmed — Aba — who died in 2006. A progressive thinker, Aba would likely have approved of the album’s sophisticated, modern production. Of the way of songs are sequenced to trace an emotional arc. Of the English spoken-word interludes that tug at the heart, and deepen the storytelling.

“The new sounds took me a while to digest but now I am in love with them.” A smile. “I feel lucky to know Maxime. We have created an album for listening to with both the head and the heart.”

Sulaf’s astounding voice — all coiled power and undulating beauty — stunned Kostinetz from the outset.



“I’d recorded a track with Imarhan, which they sent to a Sudanese singer named Sulaf,” he says. “I was in my studio when her vocal take came back, and I was blown away. This was the voice of a great diva, with so much emotion, authenticity, and control. I knew I had to make a record with her.”

Three years later, Sulaf was in Paris. “We began by listening to a lot of Sudanese music, which for me was a challenge to understand,” he continues. “But I had to do the same with Tuareg music, which I know well from working with Imarhan and Tinariwen.” Sulaf also features on *Hoggar*, the new release by the Grammy-winning Malian group. “Then started experimenting, using live musicians and effects.”

Working together in Kostinetz’s studio in the Marais, they decided to make Sulaf’s voice the album’s central focus, guiding Aba’s spirited, spiritual prose through a wild and beautiful sonic terrain.

Aba’s literal voice appears on opening track ‘Bitti Alhitali’, a husky, heartfelt lament about the marriage departure of his youngest daughter Maria (*“You have travelled, you have gone/May the land of distance bring you joy”*). “When Maria got married in 1994, Aba gave her this song he had recorded onto cassette,” says Sulaf. “She kept it tucked away in a room filled with memorabilia. Just before I left for France, I recorded it onto my phone. I wanted to always have his voice with me.”

An ode to moonlit travellers and seekers with hearts aflame, ‘Shogi Ana’ begins with Sulaf singing softly to herself as effects ripple and whirl, their dissonance sweetened by layered female voices and the gradual unfurling of her intensely passionate delivery. Rich with imagery of boats, rivers and spiritual journeys, ‘Marhab Ya Alrasool’ belongs to the sacred communal tradition of madih — devotional poetry and music that is a cornerstone of Sudanese cultural and spiritual life.

‘Sameen’ is a traditional Sudanese song anchored around Sulaf’s shimmering and expressive oud, reaffirming strength of the collective. Oud-driven and synth-laden, serpentine and tempo-changing, ‘Naada’ unfolds like a desert flower — albeit one blooming somewhere in outer space.

Closing prayer, ‘Allah Ya Allah’, is a paean to God and a song of hope and renewal — for Aba and his family, for the people of the world, for refugees, and for Sudan.

“A man looks like Sudan, the Sudan inside me, the Sudan I love ...”

“Aba was Sudan for me,” says Sulaf. “This is my tribute to them both.”

Words by Jane Cornwell