

Introduction

Author: Stephanie Enemark<senemark@middlebury.edu>

Introduction to the music of the Maghreb

Introduction to Maghrebi Music

June 25th, 1998, a date that will always symbolize the importance of poets, musicians and singers in the Maghrebi cultural landscape. A poet, singer, musician was gunned down on a remote mountain road in Alegria. Matoub Lounes was only 47 and had already survived multiple threats on his life. A few years back he was kidnapped by a radical Islamist group which had supposedly released him on condition that he would give up music and singing. No sooner was he released than he made his wish to carry on his struggle. « I will continue my struggle until the last second of my life. They can kill me but they will never silence me. I would rather die for my ideas rather than because of complacency or ageing» (tr. From the French in <http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1998-06-26/1998-06-26-419070>) Matoub had a cunning sense of how his days will end. Almost a decade earlier he would write in his milestone song «D idurar ay d IÅçamriw» («These Mountains are my Life»).

D idurar ay d IÅçamriw
Xellsegh adrar s yidammen-iw : a d-yeqqim later-iw
Xas gullen ard a t-sefden
These Mountains are my Life
For it I paid my due in blood
So that a trace of me will stay
When they swore to erase it
(French text in) (http://matoub.kabylie.free.fr/matoub1_tr.htm)

These same Atlas mountains that Matoub Lounes sings for/about extend from the Atlantic coast of Morocco in the west all the way to the Mediterranean shores of Tunisia. They are a visual geographical link that brings this part of the world together. These mountains have also played an important role in the resistance to the onslaught of wave after wave of invaders as far back as the Vandals and the Romans and as recently as the French and the Spaniards around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. In the case of Matoub Lounes and many other Tamazight-speaking artists in the Maghreb, these same mountains are a symbol of resistance to an official cultural identity that negates anything that is not Islamic and Arabic.

This history steeped in cultural and linguistic diversity that straddles three continents and that has been punctuated by violent moments when the Maghreb was faced with large scale invasions, is expressed in musical traditions that are more often than not incredibly difficult to classify. In fact

there is a virtue to avoiding or challenging existing categories as they tend to present a compartmentalized view of what is intrinsically a fluid and rebellious field of expression. This web resource seeks to present the music(s) of the Maghreb in as diverse a way as possible. After all, when one wanders through the streets of Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia, one is never sure of what kind of music will billow out of the half closed window shutters on a late summer afternoon. Indeed, how does one classify the musical oeuvre of a band such as O.N.B. short for Orchestre Nationale de BarbÃs, or Gnawa Diffusion, or Nass El-Ghiwane, or Jil Jilala or even one artist like Idir, or Aamouri Mbarek etcâ? This gets even more difficult as we try to approach newer artists, some of whom, are deliberately trying to subvert existing categories and create their own style in a forever shrinking global village.