



MARIEM HASSAN

Mariem Hassan, known as the most representative voice of the music of Western Sahara, was born in 1958 near to the holy city **Smara** in the basin of Saguia el Hamra, near to the river Tasua. The family lived of herds of camels and goats. She is the third of a total of ten brothers and sisters.

Mariem was seventeen when Morocco invaded Western Sahara. Two of her brothers were soldiers and had cars and could move the family to Mjeriz, near Tifariti, the first stage of the exodus. From there they moved to Algeria to a place in the inhospitable Hamada. Her refugee camp is known as Smara, in memory of the city most of its inhabitants left behind. There Mariem Hassan lived for 27 years and there were born her five children. Nowadays she lives in Sabadell, near to Barcelona, where, after having dispersed her children for school or health provisions, could gather the family for the first time.

Mariem started her professional music career with the group, **Mártir Luali**, which was founded in the refugee camps in memory of the first secretary of Frente Polisario, early killed in a combat. With this group she travelled to many places participating in cultural events loaded with a high political impact, which were often boycotted by Moroccan activists and officials abroad.

Mártir Luali group recorded in different European countries four or five LP's with the help of the respective committees of solidarity. Outstanding among them is „**Polisaro Vencerá**“, produced by Mohamed Tammy, Saharawian Minister of Culture since the late 70's to mid 80's. It was originally released in 1982 by the Spanish label Guimbarda and recovered in 1998 by the label Nubenegra. Mariem, as well as the other women, being integrated in the group Mártir Luali, participated or not in tours or recordings according to their personal circumstances like pregnancy, childbirth or bring up the children. Mariem recorded in 1980 with the group in Netherland, but the album never was published and the album recorded in France was edited in 1989 but never has been distributed, due to the bankrupt of the company.

For such reasons we needed to wait until 1998 and the CD „**A Pesar de las Heridas**“ to enjoy her voice in a few songs. Among all these, the song „**Canción de la Intifada**“ was in subsequent tours with **Leyoad** - a group of changing musicians due to the lack of passports and regular travel papers - a highlight in every and all concerts.

The CD „**Mariem Hassan with Leyoad**“, published in 2002, had a splendid reception. Mariem started to consolidate herself as an individual artist, participating in numerous tours and events as **Mariem Hassan**. Notwithstanding this she performed with the group **Mujeres Saharauis** with whom she also recorded the album „**Medej**“ a collection of ancient spiritual songs.

The definitive breakthrough came with „**Deseos**“ her first solo album. Together with **Baba Salama**, as producer and guitarist and the assistance of her brother **Boika Hassan**, she developed a solid and perfect work where the guitars enjoy a freedom previously unknown in the territory of the Haul music.

„**Deseos**“ is an ardent CD, full of rhythm, which amazingly not revealed the two tragedies that developed while recording: the leukemia of the producer who died, before the CD was published, and the breast cancer of Mariem herself. Mariem could beat the disease and as soon as her health permitted she performed at the **Mercat de la Musica de Vic**, and soon after at the World Music tradefair **Womex** in Newcastle where she achieved the maximum recognition of the international audience. It was the starting point to recommence her career on stages in Europe, America and Africa.

A documentary of an hour summarizes her life adventure. „**Mariem Hassan, the voice of the Sahara**“ contains some of the decisive moments of her musical career like the concert at **ETNOSOI** in Helsinki or the mentioned one at **Womex** in Newcastle. Premiered at **FISAHARA** in 2008 the documentary is being exhibited at numerous music and film festivals.

In 2008 **Womad** started to invite Mariem to their festivals: first to **Cáceres**, then to **Womad Canarias**, in July 2009 to **Charlton Park** in the heart of England and in September to **Taormina** (Sicily) where the festival was held at the famous Greek Theater. In March 2010 Mariem participated at Womad on the other end of the world, **WOMADELAIDE** in Australia and **Womad NZ** in New Zealand.

At the beginning of 2010 „**Shouka**“ was published. Contrary to the songs of Deseos which had been played in many concerts, Shouka was an „ex novo“ recording with the lyrics of the Saharawi poet **Lamin Allal**. Mariem and Lamin composed the core of Shouka, a CD totally thought and recorded for the Saharawi people. „**Shouka**“, the heartbeat song of the CD, is a cantata by using up and down all scales and rhythms of the Haul music and is the answer of Mariem to the renowned speech of **Felipe González** in the refugee camps in 1976 one year after the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara.

In the recordings are participating musicians from very different countries, but the real center are the guitarist **Lamgaifri Brahim**, the percussionist and chorus singer **Vadiya Mint El Hanevi** and Mariem herself. This three together with the support of the poet firmly grounded the work of the traditional haul. In every moment of the recording, Shouka was a common process in which the last decision lied in the hands of Mariem. It is her most personal album.

In 2012 Mariem gives her music a new twist. The events of the last months, known as the „Arab Spring“ and the indomitable Saharawi struggle for independence, are subject of her new songs. Following determined the bases of the Haul music, Mariem explores blues, jazz and contemporary sounds as no other Saharawi musician ever has.

„**El Aaiún Egdat**“ (Aaiún on Fire) which is the name of the new CD and was published at the end of march, reflects the new vision and style of Mariem. The Saharawi diva is accompanied by **Vadiya Mint El Hanevi** on tebal (drums) and chorus, **Luis Giménez** on electric guitar, mbira and harmonica, **Hugo Westerdahl** on bass and **Gabriel Flores** on saxophone and flutes.

This group is bounded by their love and knowlegde of the music of Western Sahara. **Luis Gimenez** from Villena, Spain, first heard the scales and the rhythms of the Haul music during a visit in the refugee camps some years ago, which inspired his documentary „**The seas of the desert**“. **Gabriel Flores**, from Mexico, is one of the directors of **Enamus**, the first national music school in the Saharawi refugee camp „February 27th“. And **Hugo Westerdahl**, from the **Canarian Islands**, met many musicians from Western Sahara while they were recording their albums with the label **Nubenegra** at his recording studio **Axis**. His passion for the Haul music can be discovered on his CD „**Western Sahara**“, dedicated to the guitarist **Baba Salama**.

The album **El Aaiún Egdat** is above all an open work in the thematic and in the expression. The Haul is still the main engine. Prestigious exiled poets such as **Beibuh**, **Bachir Ali** and **Lamín Allal** sign the most burning pieces like the one that gives name to the record, the two referring to the **Gdeim Izik** camp, the one dedicated to the Arab Spring and the one named „**The victory**“.

Other tracks introduce us to a much sweeter Mariem. We never before heard her singing the way she does in her authentic statement of principles „**Ana saharauia**“ (I am Saharawi). Or like „**Rest in peace**“ a jazz-tinged vision of the haima (tent) under the warm light of the desert moon. In a more dynamic mood Mariem shows herself hoisting the „**melfa**“ which two year before she had to defend from being sullied in a street assault. Finally, the song „**The Legacy**“ is a watershed in which tradition and modernity fight a bloodless battle that will for sure set people talking.

Mariem's quintet initiated the tour „**El Aaiún on Fire**“ on the 25th of May in the **Clamores Jazz club** in Madrid and two days later at the **World Village Festival** in Helsinki.

The first of June „**El Aaiún Edgat**“ appeared on **Top of the European World Music Charts (WMCE)** revealing the excellent critics that her third solo record has granted, and remains number one still in July 2012, and second in August.

Manuel Domínguez

