

SONGLINES August 2010

PRICKLY BUT BEAUTIFUL

There hasn't been much news from the Western Sahara recently. But all is not quiet on the Western front. Shouka (The Thorn), is a defiantly honest and eloquent hymn to the pride and strength of the Sahraoui people, and to their pain and suffering ever since the Moroccan invasion of 1975.

With its lacerating starkness, molten intensity and gripping power, Mariem Hassan's voice is the metaphorical thorn plunged deep into the soft soul of the Moroccan conscience, or the rest of the world's careless amnesia. But where there are thorns, there is usually some beautiful flower or luscious fruit near at hand.

Shouka is not just a kick for self-flagellants. Its palette of emotions ranges from defiance and melancholy to sinuous coquettishness, conveying a love of home and the joy of the hot, clean desert wind. All these colours are painted with stark handclaps, booming tebal drums, fulsome airborne backing vocals, warm breathy nay flutes, ghostly clarinets and the scuttling guitar work of Lamgaifri Brahim and Malick Diaw, which, at its best, combines the raw sexual grime of classic Chess-label blues with the nano-intricacies that have made the Sahraoui guitar style so famous.

The experienced Nubenegra production team of Manuel Domínguez and engineer Hugo Westerdahl give this complex and nuanced mixture a fitting uncluttered and honest setting.

The album reaches its apotheosis in the title-track, modestly tucked away in penultimate position. It's a 12-minute epic in which Hassan's whiplash wail spars with the ghostly recording of a speech made by Spanish politician and erstwhile prime minister, Felipe González, in the then newly founded Sahraoui refugee camps in western Algeria back in 1976. Hassan gives the politician's broken promises the slicing they deserve.

Andy Morgan

fRoots reviews March 2010

This is the third album that I am aware of from the Spanish-based Sahraoui from West Sahara, and with each successive release this singer of extraordinary power and intensity digs deeper into the melancholy rawness of exile and hope. Hassan attacks each of the 16 deeply emotional songs on *Shouka* with guttural passion, her powerhouse vocals containing a real kick, supported by music that is all about sheer visceral charge rather than melodic or rhythmic nuance. The central (and often sole) musical plank is comprised of guitarists Lamgaifri Brahim and Malick Diaw who wind desert blues licks around the quivering thrum of the tebal drum like a raunchier, dirtier Tinariwen. Add the breathy call of *ney* flute, supportive handclaps and ululations and the campfire celebratory feel of that other desert blues troupe, Tartit, is also invoked at times.

But comparisons with the Touareg bands only go so far. This is far more stark fare, the songs more like shortened, hypnotic versions of the elemental *sheikhat* Berber music of neighbouring Morocco – somewhat ironic given that the subject matter of much of this material is the continued struggle of Mariem Hassan's compatriots against Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. The centrepiece of all this is the title track, a fiery, driving response to a Spanish politician's empty post-colonial promises – the type of polemic that may lack verbal impact due to the language barrier but which contains a musical and vocal spirit of undeniable expressive force.

Stirring, uncompromising, magnetic – *Shouka* is a formidable recording driven by a formidably imposing voice. *Con Murphy*

First World Music Newsletter

A review in the most recent issue of Footh magazine disagrees with my positive assessment of Adama Yalomba's latest opus; "Kassa". No problem, but Con Murphy's review of the latest Mariem Hassan in the same issue did him no favours as it reveals his profound ignorance as he mixes ethnicities and musical traditions to make false points. Hassan is from the Sahraoui people from Moroccan occupied Western Sahara. The Sahraoui are related to the Moors of Mauritania and are similar to them in culture. Murphy makes two comparative references to Kel Tamasheq artists [Tinariwen and Tartit] and Imazighen musical culture of Morocco. All WRONG! Which Imazighen? I'd like to ask him. A more appropriate comparison would have been with Dimi mint Abba. The Kel Tamasheq are part of the Imazighen people, the Sahraoui are not. The musical traditions are distinctly different, if you have an ear to discern them. Murphy was obviously over his head with this one. To him, all these mixed black and brown desert peoples are the same and therefore fungible. Had I been the editor, I would have rejected the review. Again, this is yet another in a long list of examples where hiring [or at least consulting with] a native of the culture under review would have been wise. At the very least, Murphy should have done his homework.

Akenataa Hammagaadji

CD *Roots*

MARIEM HASSAN

Shouka

Mariem Hassan sings with entrancing intimacy and poetry, in a clear message calling for all to fight injustice, discrimination and persecution. All of these new songs have been developed in a close complicity with the poet Lamin Allal and the guitarist, Lamgaifri Brahim. Although very young, he has mastered all the subtleties of haul music. And Mariem, with the lack of an appropriate Saharawi guitarist over the last years, was inspired to finally realize all the songs she has been carrying in her heart for so many years.

The CD also contains innovative new ideas: the title song "Shouka" is a cantata developed by using all scales and rhythms of the Haul. The essence of the traditional haul is impressively kept by Vadiya Mint el Hanevi, percussionist, chorus and dance, Lamgaifri Brahim, guitar, Mariem Hassan herself, with the important cooperation of poet Lamin Allal.

Cliff Furnald, editor

RootsWorld, the online magazine of the world's music

BLOGGER #1

This is the background info I was given about this talented woman:

“After more than 30 years of performing, Mariem Hassan is hailed as the true voice of the Western Sahara. Her people are Saharawis, living in exile within Algeria since Spain abandoned the Western Sahara in 1975 and their desert lands were claimed by Morocco. Within the Algerian refugee camps, women singers are recognised as pillars of strength, humanising the harsh living conditions through their powerful songs of hope. Mariem sings in Hassania, the language of her desert homeland and deemed closest to classical Arabic. During the 1970s, Mariem joined forces with Matir el Uali Mustafa Sayed (more popularly known as El Uali), touring internationally with his band until she recorded her first solo album, *Deseos*, during 2005. In concert, her intense voice sits atop two electric guitars (substituting for the rustic tidinit) and two tebals (ground-drums played by women), melding ancient spiritual sounds with whispers of blues, reggae and other current music, driving her music into the 21st century. Different dances, performed by the percussionists, enrich a repertoire based on traditional and spiritual songs. Her solo fame has been further enhanced by a documentary film, *Mariem Hassan, The Voice of the Sahara*, released in 2008 at the Fisahara Festival.” *(I watched this film at WOMAD 2010 New Plymouth and it was moving –there’s no doubt this mother of five is a rebel with a cause)*

Kiwi Travel Writer (Blog, March 2010)

BLOGGER #2

On the day of all-time record snowfall in big d, I drove through it listening to a singer from the West Sahara desert. It was a sublime experience.

My commute home today took three times as long as usual, but it went quicker than it would have otherwise, because I had Mariem Hassan's new CD *Shouka* on—I should say, a CD I burned from Ms Hassan's latest album on iTunes. Her CDs seem to be unavailable in the US, including on Amazon.

She is my new favorite singer. She uses a lot of the melisma that Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was known for, and she sings in an Arabic dialect, but her voice has a raspy quality that reminds me of some of the soul and girl-group singers. Kind of a cross between Ronnie Spector and Ann Peebles. Put that raw, penetrating voice over African guitar lines that sound like Ali Farka Toure, add a little percussion and girl-group backing, and you have *Shouka*.

I have heard other Mariem Hassan music that sounds more Western, almost rockish or Afro-Pop, and some that sounds like African folk music. This album is right in the middle. I can't unequivocally recommend it, just because people used to US radio may be put off by the "ethnic" intensity of it, particularly the ululating. Western ears are used to James Brown's squeals, even Tom Waits' growls, but ululating? May need to give it time...

"Global A Go-Go" WRIR 97.3 FM

ARTIST: Mariem Hassan

DATE: April 2, 2010

TITLE: Shouka

GENRE: world LOCATION: world / H

REVIEW: Mariem Hassan is the leading musical voice of Western Sahara, the last colony of Africa (granted independence by Spain in 1975 but occupied by Morocco since then). She now lives in Barcelona, but spent 26 years living in a Sahrawi refugee camp in Algeria. Singing in the local Arabic dialect of Hassaniya, her powerful voice is one of the great instruments in contemporary Africa music. Musically, her style is closely related to the desert blues of Mali, Senegal, Mauritania and Niger – stinging electric guitars drive the sound, accompanied by tebal (goatskin drum) and ululating female voices. If you like artists like Tinariwen, Ali Farka Toure, Baaba Maal & Mansour Seck and Malouma, this is for you. One of the best African recordings of 2010, for sure.

REVIEWER: Bill Lupoletti

RECOMMENDED TRACKS: 1 5 6 13

BANNED TRACKS: none

CEEDEE OF THE WEEK

First World Music

"Shouka" is the third solo ceedee by the Sahraoui singer, Mariem Hassan. The Sahraoui are culturally related to the Moors of Mauritania. They speak the same language, Hassaniya, and many other cultural commonalities stem from this.

Their music is very much akin to Moorish music with notable differences. The ardin, emblematic instrument of female Moorish dièliw, seems to be non-existent among the Sahraouis. Instrumental preludes, on which the singer displays her skill at appregi, are now played exclusively on guitar. The tidinit has been eclipsed by a preference for acoustic and electric guitars.

Finally, the two principal Moorish styles; black and white, and the five modes, are all in evidence as the music successfully evoke pleasure, joy, religious feeling, pride, anger, love, sadness and nostalgia. Of course, a concert setting is the better venue to assess if the correct order of playing the modes is still adhered to among the Sahraoui.

Ms. Hassan's singing style is loud. Sometimes strident. It's hard to imagine her singing a lullaby. She's got a strong, hot and dry voice that supports the style. It's also flexible as she can easily execute exciting ornamentation such as vibrato and melismas.

The songs in [what I would think of as] the black way [Ragast Naama, Maatal-la, Azzagafa] are very exciting as propulsive tbal, tense ostinati picked on electric guitar and sometimes handclaps and ululating, all conspire to raise the blood and call to dance around the campfire. The same effect is achieved on "Terwah" as the rhythm increases in tempo towards the end. The guitar work on "Salem" reminds me of something that Koité Habib might do. The bass playing is noteworthy here as well.

However, the biggest and brightest jewel in the diadem is undoubtedly the title track. At twelve minutes long, it is an ambitious work. In 1976, Felipe Gonzalez [then leader of the Socialist Workers Party and later Prime Minister of Spain] delivered a speech to the Sahraoui in their refugee camps in southern Algeria. It was a speech of condemnation of Morocco for their invasion of Western Sahara the year before. It was also an expression of solidarity with the people. Thirty-three years later, Ms. Hassan takes excerpts of this speech in the voice of Felipe Gonzalez, and follows them with verses in agreement and also amplifying his words. Each verse accompanied by music played in a distinct mode, so there is a lot of movement within the piece. Ms. Hassan's singing seems even more fervent on this track. The penultimate verse sounds a triumphant and celebratory note. Taken as a whole, it is very satisfying.

The year is still young, but "Shouka" is at the top of my list for the best African ceedee released so far in 2010. The album can be purchased from [CDRoots](#).

ROOTS WORLD

Though Mariem Hassan has been making the occasional record for at least the past 8 years, *Shouka* manages to be the first to properly marry her voice and lyrics to arrangements befitting a singer of such authority. With a small army of electric guitars delivering single-chord droning riffs, Hassan spins tales of injustice and female empowerment. And the best parts of this disc- the rawer, least produced hunks- are better examples of Western Saharan Saharawi music than anything Tinariwen, Etran Finatawa or Terakaft have in their discographies.

Hassan comes with the experience of life in the Smara refugee camp, one of some dozen instant villages that appeared over the Algerian border from the Western Sahara in the mid seventies, as Spain decolonized and the Moroccan military swooped in. Ironically, even in these camps, human rights are under in question, though simply getting inside Algeria, and then dealing with the remoteness of it all has no doubt allowed for such a paucity of credible information. Yet, it is also in the camps that women like Hassan are able to be educated, demand equal rights and divorce their husbands, as Hassan did when a past partner tried to keep her from singing. Indeed, the Saharawi are a culture largely nurtured by women.

And it's this sort of cultural complexity that makes this woman's music so intense. "Ala Ahd Said" finds its groove immediately, as two guitars compliment each so well you can almost hear them blush. This is slow music, taking its time to shape itself, shifting as subtly as the Saharan sands. The riffs are thick and Hassan doesn't sing over them; she rides them. Like the music of their Gnawa neighbors to the north, or proto-Rai from such Algerian singers as Cheikha Remitti, the music of the Saharawi is seductive, endless, and ultimately trance-inducing. Here and there, a track might have a wind instrument, a strummed acoustic guitar or an electric bass, but most of this music uses repetitive, guitar heaviness and ululations to set up patterns for Hassan to spin tales. From "Eid Arbain," where her voice soars like a kite over a suspended chord, to "Baba Salama," which pits her over a single guitar until a loping camel rhythm finally catches things before they fly apart, *Shouka* is well over an hour of songs by a woman who has clearly fought to be a leader and spokesperson for not only her people, but an entire musical style. *Bruce Miller*

Mariem Hassan • Agarits in the Sahara desert

SHOUKA (68 mins) NUBENEGRA

by *Violeta Ruano*

Many promises have been made to the Saharaoui people, many have been broken, but there is one particularly painful which has been in the air for the past thirty-four years. In 1976, one year after the Spanish dictator Franco had sold the last of the African colonies, the Western Sahara, to Morocco and Mauritania just before his death, a young politician, socialist and progressive, Felipe González, gave a hopeful speech to the hundreds of people who had fled from their home to the refugee camps in Tindouf in Algeria. This speech has been in the memory of the Saharaoui ever since, even though to this day, and after González became Prime Minister of Spain, none of those promises have been fulfilled. In *Shouka* (“the thorn”), Mariem Hassan sings back to the empty words, taking this thorn with her own teeth, pulling it out of the Sahara’s heart and throwing it to the wind, as Manuel Domínguez, the producer of the album, has beautifully written on the sleeve notes.

Mariem is not alone in her venture. While she sings, claps, plays the tebal and shouts the characteristic Saharaoui agarits, other great musicians accompany her, such as Vadiya Mint El Hanevi (Saharaoui; tebal, voice, clapping, agarits), Langaifri Brahim, Malick Diaw and Josemmi Sánchez (Saharaoui, Senegalese, Spanish; guitars), Kepa Osés and Hugo Westerthal (Spanish; bass guitars), Mel Seme (Cuban-Haitian; percussion), Jaime Muñoz (Spanish; flutes and clarinet), Behnam Samani (Irani; daf, tonbak) and Davood Varzideh (Irani; ney). This mixture of performers from different backgrounds symbolises and reinforces the efforts many societies have put together, unfortunately with small political repercussion, to raise consciousness against the tragic Moroccan rule in Western Sahara.

Hassan, having spent her entire adult life in the camp of Smara, decided long ago to express her grief, but also her hope in her people, through music. *Shouka* is a true tribute to Saharaoui musical style or haul music, where Mariem blends traditional songs, such as ‘Terwah’ (“presenting the bride”), a marital song, with others that she has always wanted to write and sing, as for example ‘Azzagafa’ (“the culture”), dedicated to all those who, like her, have used culture to fight for the Saharaouis’ rights. Apart from her powerful and piercing voice, another characteristic sound takes over the whole album: the groove of the electric guitar. Substituting a traditional haul instrument, the *tidinit*, the electric guitar has become a distinctive feature of this musical style, influenced somehow by the blues. This influence can be clearly heard in a track which is only available in the iTunes version of the album, ‘Haiyu’, an encouragement song for the true at heart Saharaouis, which starts with a characteristic guitar riff.

‘Shouka’, the track that gives name to the album, half hidden almost at the end, although longer than any other (12 mins), cleverly blends parts of González’s original speech in Spanish with Mariem’s contestations in hassania, her mother tongue. Also, the guitars, the agarits, the clapping and the choirs play a very important role in the development of the song. Each of Hassan’s nine contestations has a mood of its own, both in the lyrics and in the music, going from a mild reproach at the beginning to an explosion of anger at the end, showing irony and disdain in between.

Shouka is a beautifully produced album in which Mariem Hassan manages to take traditional Saharaoui sounds and turn them into a rebellious singing against injustice. Although it would have been interesting to have the original lyrics in hassania on the sleeve notes, the Spanish and English translations make her songs more available for international audiences, turning Hassan into an ambassador of her people. The job that Mariem Hassan, her musicians, her producer Manuel Domínguez and the whole Nube Negra have done with *Shouka* is priceless and represents a deep commitment to the Saharaoui cause.