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Pop goes the Casbah

David Hutcheon hears Damon Albarn's latest project: reviving threatened Algerian music

Although he has been part of the furniture for 18 years, it is unlikely that any of Damon Albarn's previous guises has been greeted with quite the reaction accorded to his latest. The El Gusto orchestra had just begun their first tune when North Africa's only opera house was filled with a scream, the sort of thing you expect to hear from an Indian war party in a western. The woman responsible was the wife of the Algerian minister of culture. A radio presenter a few seats away reassured anybody alarmed by this When Harry Met Sally moment: "Don't worry, she's a Berber. She's just showing her appreciation."

How far have we come since Britpop's epochal Blur v Oasis conflict? Judge for yourselves: the Gallagher brothers have just released a contractual-obligation compilation album, Stop the Clocks. In 2007, Albarn will be offering us the cockney afrobeat of the Good, the Bad and the Queen; a Chinese opera at Manchester International Festival, called Monkey: Journey to the West; and El Gusto's album of Algerian pop (chaabi), produced by Albarn and played by an orchestra of men in their seventies.

"I didn't know Algerian chaabi before I got involved," admits Albarn after the concert. "I knew the Moroccan variety, and I knew Algerian raï, but after I got a call asking me to contribute to this, I made sure I was well versed when I got here." The project started as an attempt to discover her roots by a 22-year-old Algerian resident of Dublin, Safinez Bousbia, who saw a picture of chaabi musicians in a shop and decided to find out more about them. Three years later, it has become Mendoza's El Gusto, a documentary, an album (produced by Albarn) and a series of concerts in Algiers, Paris and Marseilles. A Maghreb version, perhaps, of Buena Vista Social Club.

Chaabi was the music of the bars, brothels and hookah-smoking clubs in the Berber-inhabited streets of Algiers's casbah. It flourished in the austere post-war years, when Arabs, Europeans and Jews lived side by side. The American navy brought both goods that would fuel the black market and the banjo, which became an integral part of the chaabi sound, alongside the hand drum, the oud and violins, played upright and balanced on the lap. The music reflected the roots of the players: French chanson, Berber and Arab rhythms from North Africa and the Middle East, Latin melodies from Jewish and Moorish descendants of those exiled from Spain 450 years earlier. But independence brought the exodus of the Europeans and Jews, and the musicians who remained found chaabi proscribed in favour of a classical Arabic playlist. The 10-year civil war that ended in 2002 almost closed down Algeria's music scene for ever. Until now.

Rachid Taha, a French-Algerian singer perhaps best known for his Arabisation of the Clash's Rock the Casbah, made the pilgrimage from Paris to see El Gusto and offered an insider's opinion of the importance of keeping chaabi alive. "People like Dahmane el-Harrachi or Mohamed el-Anka were our pop stars. Everybody knew their songs," he observes. "But that culture is in danger of dying out. We adore Zinedine Zidane, but young Algerians in France don't know their history, they don't speak Arabic." His latest album, Diwan 2, is a raucous tribute to his parents' record collection, which he found in a box in their attic.



This is not the first foray into world music for Albarn, or for Honest Jon's, the record company he runs with Mark Ainley and Alan Scholefield, owners of a London record shop of the same name. In 2002, he released Mali Music, for which he forged relationships with West African musicians who then issued albums on the label. "It's about putting our recordings in context," Albarn explains.

"At the same time as making our own music, we tried to create a bigger picture around it."

When challenged with the theory that he could do this only because of royalties from the Blur track Song 2, which has become an anthem at American football matches (the band receives money every time it is played), Albarn laughs before replying: "Yeah, well, that definitely helps my relationship with EMI. It's my Roman Abramovich."

However it is financed, the modus operandi of Honest Jon's is significantly different from the processes adopted by other western rock stars associated with world music. Peter Gabriel and Sting absorb the exotic into something that is entirely theirs; Bob Geldof, on the other hand, released a soundtrack to his BBC series Geldof in Africa that relied on compositions by the former Boomtown Rat Pete Briquette, rather than by Africans.

The latter approach seems short-sighted when compared with the activities of Honest Jon's: in Algiers, Ainley scoured music shops for old records. He returned to London with a crate, and plans to release an Algerian compilation to coincide with — and perhaps explain — the El Gusto recordings. For their acclaimed London Is the Place for Me series, which uncovered singles made by Caribbean immigrants in the 1950s, the trio headed to Trinidad to track down the original vinyl. Nigerian collections followed Albarn's visits to Lagos, when he was trying to record an afrobeat album with a local big band. Although those sessions remain unheard, the drummer Tony Allen, once a mainstay of Fela Kuti's Africa '70, became one quarter of the Good, the Bad and the Queen.

So, while Oasis have a Top 10 compilation, the other pillar of Britpop is uttering sentences nobody would have expected from the singer of Parklife: "This year, I have learnt how to write an overture and arias. The El Gusto musicians taught me a lot about dissonance and dynamics; with the Chinese musicians, I have been learning elements of opera and traditional folk music."

Concertgoers should perhaps be wary of sitting too close to Britain's culture secretary at the premiere of Monkey: Journey to the West in June, in case she also shows her appreciation of the music. "Don't worry — Tessa Jowell's from Dulwich and West Norwood" doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

