



AN ALGERIAN REVOLUTION

Robin Denselow on El Gusto, a remarkable project that bridges the divide between Jewish and Muslim musicians

Robin Denselow

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In a concert hall down by the old port in Marseilles, a rabbi wearing a suit, Phillippe Darmon, walks on stage and launches into an unaccompanied song. Beside him stands another man; they trade verses before singing together. So far, so ordinary: except for the fact that the man at the rabbi's side is Cheikh Saidi Benyoucef, a Muslim imam.

It was a brave signal that Jewish and Muslim musicians can work in harmony: the first European show from an Algerian orchestra brought together by a project, three years in the making, that has involved a film, an album produced by Damon Albarn, and now a series of concerts across Europe. Called El Gusto - a Spanish word meaning "joy", in recognition of the Jewish settlers who arrived in north Africa from the Iberian peninsula in the 15th century - it set out to revive the musical links that once existed in Algeria between the two communities.

Behind the rabbi and the imam was a 42-piece orchestra, composed of Algerian Muslim and Jewish musicians. Some of them had lived together in the country before 1962 - the year of Algerian independence - when some 130,000 Algerian Jews, the vast majority of the community, fled for France, fearing for their future in what was now a Muslim state. It was the end of an era in which Muslim, Jewish, and European musicians had lived and played together in the narrow streets of the Casbah in Algiers, developing a rousing, wildly varied hybrid pop style - chaabi - that the El Gusto project set out to rediscover.

It began in 2003 with a documentary by Irish-Algerian film-maker Safinez Bousbia, who was determined to track down surviving musicians from the heyday of chaabi, the 1940s and 50s. Chaabi is a mix of Arabic and north African berber styles, blended with modern French chanson, American boogie and Latin American styles, brought by the American troops stationed in Algeria during the second world war. It's a lively, versatile music suitable for weddings, bars and concert halls alike, and played exclusively by men.

Above all, chaabi is a reminder of the role Jewish musicians have played in north Africa. The community had existed there since Roman times, and their numbers increased with the influx of both Muslims and Jews after their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula. As pianist Maurice el Médioni - one of Algeria's finest Jewish musicians, known for his award-winning collaborations with Cuban percussionist Roberto Rodrigues, and a chaabi pioneer - put it, "they brought with them the same music from Andalusia. They had the same music in their suitcases."

In Algiers, Bousbia met Abdel Hadi Halo, a pianist who became the project's musical director. His father had run a music school in the city that continued to teach chaabi until 1974, after the Jewish musicians had left. Halo spent three years building up a new orchestra of chaabi musicians, many of whom were graduates of his father's school. "Chaabi had died," he says. "It disappeared 20 years ago when it was replaced with more modern styles, but now it's coming back again. Young Algerians are interested in chaabi once again."

El Gusto's first step was a concert given by Halo and his orchestra in Algiers last year. But no Jewish musicians took part: some openly admitted that they feared for their safety. Algeria is still recovering from the civil war that broke out in the wake of the annulment of the 1992 elections, when the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) declared war on non-Muslims and foreigners, causing most of the country's small remaining Jewish population to leave the country.

El Médioni admits that he didn't take part in the Algiers show "because of the war. I'd like to go back to Algeria when there is peace, but it's not the right time. Maybe I will accept if I have good protection, but I said I was happy to be part of the project in Marseilles, Paris or London."

One person who did make the journey to Algeria was Albarn, who produced an album with Halo's orchestra.



It's a rousing record but, as Halo says, it includes "no Jewish musicians. But once the European concerts are over we will make a CD with the whole band."

The "whole band" places Halo's orchestra alongside five Jewish musicians, including El Médioni and the 74-year-old French actor Robert Castel, the son of popular chaabi composer Lili Labassi. Castel, too, joined the Jewish exodus to France in the early 1960s. Backstage in Marseilles, he talks of the "good times" in Algeria, and the sufferings of his fellow immigrants as they tried to make a new life in France. Describing his father - "a Jewish musician who was invited to play both at Arabic marriages and Jewish barmitzvahs, and worked with all the musicians of Algeria" - Castel comes close to tears.

Castel's revival of his father's songs is one of the emotional highlights of the Marseilles show, which, after the rabbi and the imam, sees El Médioni and Halo sitting at grand pianos at opposite sides of the stage. If it weren't for the instruments - which include the North African oud and qanoun, a Persian ney flute, an accordion, hand-drums, violins and banjos, introduced to Algeria by the American GIs - it could be a convention of middle-aged, suit-wearing bankers. But the music they play is rousing and it could, the musicians hope, bring change.

"It's a real step for the two communities to get together as before, through music that has no frontier," says Castel. "We are looking for peace," El Médioni adds. "We hope it brings something for both sides".

· El Gusto perform at the Barbican, London (0845 120 7536), tomorrow. Abdel Hali Halo and the El Gusto Orchestra of Algiers is released on Monday on Honest Jon's Records.

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