

Saving Mauritania's Musical Heritage

Grantee

Malouma Mint Moktar Ould Meïddah – Music 2014

Project

Popular Hassani Tarab

Story collected by *Nathalie Rosa Bucher & The Outpost - March 23rd, 2015*

There are three distinct ways of playing music in Mauritania – al-bayda (the white way associated with delicate and refined music such as the Moors of North African stock would play), al-kahla (the black way, associated with roots and Sub-Saharan music) and I'gnaydiya, the so-called spotted way. I became known for fusing the traditional and the modern – something that had never been done before in my country and also for voicing straightforward opinions about freedom, injustice and inequalities for which I was blacklisted by the government and forbidden to sing or express any public opinion between 1993 and 2003.

The Information Assembly for Culture, Heritage and the Arts, on behalf of which I applied for an AFAC grant, aims to preserve the practice and to record rare musical works from our Mauritanian musical heritage. As it stands, the situation is critical – this music is on the verge of extinction.

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My country has a very rich musical history, especially when it comes to traditional Hassani music, which is a highly original blend of African beats combined with Arabic songwriting. In Mauritania, being a singer or a musician is a family tradition and I too come from a large family of “iggawen”, which are hereditary musicians and belong to the lowest caste (“iggawen” is also the Moorish word for griots, a historian storyteller, praise singer, or poet musician). I grew up listening to the voices of Egyptian icons Oum Kalthum and Abdelhalim Hafez and famous Lebanese singer Feyrouz while at the same time being immersed in Hassani music, which uses unique instruments, different from the ones that are common in the Arab region.

My father, Moktar Ould Meïddah, was a master of traditional music. Through him, I discovered an eclectic array of music, including Arabic but also Senegalese, and Berber music, along with classical music. The music that had the biggest influence on me was American blues, which I came across in my early teens. I had been performing with my father from the age of twelve. The encounter with blues music, though, led me to take a change of direction, and



at fifteen I began composing my own songs that fused my varied musical genres, including blues.

Besides teaching me all the secrets of the instruments and the arts of words and poetry, the instrument I learnt from my father, as a young girl, is the ardin, the 10-stringed Mauritanian harp and one of the traditional Hassani instruments. The production of Hassani music has always been limited to just a few big families. These have been very protective of their music. However, when these families started disappearing, so did the music. Added to that, this culture is also a very closed one. The families neither record their music, nor do they pass this rich musical knowledge on to people outside their families. So I felt that especially since this tradition isn't being transmitted to the younger generation, we would lose it forever, unless we did something immediate to save it.

Of the musicians that still know and master the traditional repertoire – the children of the older generation taught by the masters – only a handful is left. We had to look for them and this took a lot of time and effort. The good thing is that they knew and liked me; otherwise it would have been impossible to convince them of allowing non-family members to gain access to their musical traditions, to record it and therefore preserve it as well as make it accessible to everybody.

Since I belong to a generation that received this musical knowledge, they consider me part of them, so to speak. When I first reached out to them, I explained the importance of this project and of having them involved in it. I said that this music would vanish if we did not do something about it now. I said that they couldn't stay behind closed



doors, trying to fight technology or progress, because we have to allow other people to discover the uniqueness of this music and allow it to survive, to reinvent itself and to thrive in novel ways.

Hassani music is very representative. The people who have contributed to the development of Mauritania made it. It speaks of our history and it is a very important musical tradition that distinguishes this country. So we need to maintain and save what's left of this rich heritage for the future by recording it and archiving the knowledge and ensuring its future.

We have been recording music during the month of February 2015 and are working with six artists. Each artist comes to the studio with his/her team and spends two days there, working with experts on recording the music. Our initial plan was to have nine artists but we couldn't reach three of them, so we have been working with six.

Once the recording is done, there will be the mastering and finalization process. We will produce an album containing 19 songs. Then we will invite the musicians, the press, the Ministry of Culture and other people interested in the musical scene to an event at our association where we will launch the album. It will be a gathering to listen to the music, get feedback, and promote the work we've been doing. The project will be concluded in June 2015.

Overall, the initiative has been very well received. First of all we are very grateful for AFAC for supporting the project because otherwise we couldn't have done it. The Minister of Culture has also been very encouraging and supportive. Generally the response has been very good and we have received a lot of very good press.

We established this association in order to archive a musical tradition that we believe is extremely important. We are starting to have a group of people interested in preserving this music and they will act as the nucleus that will help in documenting, recording, and archiving this music in order to preserve it for the future and teach future generations about it. Music passes on history and the traditional Hassani music tells the story of the Mauritanian people and the story of Mauritania.

I dream about teaching emerging musicians the traditional instruments and rhythms before they are defunct. At the same time, I want to adapt these ancient instruments to the taste of the new generations and new genres of music. I believe in collaborating with a wide range of musicians and singers from various styles, in order to showcase the versatility of our musical heritage. To this end, I am also trying to create a school for music, though it would mean breaking the rules of how music should be passed on: strictly, exclusively and honorably, and of course through specific family ties.