



BEGINNER'S GUIDE...

NATACHA ATLAS

Bill Badley on the voice of Anglo-Arabic dance fusion

In theory, there are many good reasons why Western and Middle Eastern music should not work very well together: for a start, harmony is integral to Western music but irrelevant in the East, where the emphasis is on melody, and then there's the small issue of different modal systems. Such anomalies mean that fusions between Eastern and Western musicians start with a distinct challenge. However, in recent years one person has bridged the gap with graceful ease, probably because she herself is a walking fusion; a fascinating, mercurial blend of Arab and British musical sensibilities.

Natacha Atlas was born in Brussels to a

Moroccan father and English mother and a nomadic early life set the pattern for someone who describes herself as "comfy amongst transients". (Indeed, one former aide waspishly observed that she doesn't so much tour with a band as a refugee camp!). Educated first in the liberal, creative and very international atmosphere of a Steiner school and then in a rather less aspiring and mono-cultural Nottingham comprehensive, she found herself out of step with her fellow teenagers. While they sat in their bedrooms drooling over The Rubettes, Atlas was rummaging through Oxfam shops in search of old records by such unlikely turntable-mates as Fred Astaire and

Turkish folk singers. When in her late teens, she left England for the Mediterranean and spent several years travelling around in what now clearly seems to have been a search for her roots. However, it was during this rite of passage that she really discovered Middle Eastern music and learnt the art of *raqs sharqi* (belly-dancing), which has been a vital part of her stage act ever since.

Atlas' first break came in 1991 when she sang on the Balearic Beat Crew's club hit 'Timbal' and, through this, was drawn into Jah Wobble's circle as a founder member of his groundbreaking Invaders of the Heart. However, it was her work with the innovative,

multicultural dance collective Transglobal Underground that really caught public attention; her sultry voice and beguiling stage presence soon becoming a vital part of their arresting stage shows. Although she and the band had parted company by the mid-90s, her association with members of the Transglobal team – Hamid Mantu, Tim Whelan & Count Dubulah – still continues from time to time.

Listening to Atlas' solo recordings in chronological order from *Diaspora* (1995) to *Mish Ma'oul* (reviewed in the Fusion section in this issue), it's plain to hear how she has developed and matured as a musician over the years. Although her passion for Arab music and her love of singing in that language have always been palpable, it must be said that the earliest songs showed a rather charming amateurishness in execution. However, by the time *Gedida* was released, she seemed to be taking the whole affair more seriously; even going so far as to re-record some tracks to improve her pronunciation. She also moved to Cairo and began working with local musicians, which gave her songs a deeper and more characteristically Arab feel to them. Ironically, it was her cover of Françoise Hardy's 'Mon Amie La Rose' – which she sang in French – that gave her the biggest boost of her career and established her as a major name in France. Many consider the artfully-crafted *Gedida* to have been her finest recording to date and it is certainly the most commercially successful. 2002's *Foretold in the Language of Dreams* showed a change of musical direction, as she moved away from the beat driven songs towards something more impressionistic.

Though generally seen as an Arab/Western dance crossover artist, Atlas has always been open to a much broader array of musical styles and influences than she is normally given credit for: the distinctive, lolling, *darbuka* drum-loop may be part of her signature sound, but you're just as likely to hear a Duane Eddy-style guitar riff happily twanging along to *bossa nova* rhythms. As someone who has always been either inspired or just very fortunate in her choice of musical partners, Atlas is remarkably offhand about how and why she chooses them: "it's just who comes along...".

The list of collaboration projects that Atlas has worked on is legion – including a staggering array of stellar (Jean-Michel Jarre), worthy (Nitin Sawhney), pop (Apache Indian) and unclassifiable (Sarah Brightman) artists that only serves to emphasise just how deftly she adapts her own brand of Arab singing to different musical styles. This ability to graft an authentic touch of the Arabesque to just about anything is one reason why she is also in huge demand for film soundtrack work and can be heard on everything from James Bond to French art-house movies.

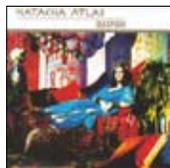
Atlas is not, and probably never will be, a star in the Arab world – the straight-jacketed pop industry

there would find it hard to understand her broad and very personal frame of reference. However, somewhere in the borderland between East and West there lies an intriguing little country – and Natacha Atlas is its national living treasure.

BEST ALBUMS

Natacha Atlas really hasn't released a duff solo album, so any are worth buying. However, these two stand out:

Best Solo Albums



***Diaspora* (Nation Records, 1995)**
Her utterly delightful, slightly dotty debut album which includes the irrepressible 'Yalla Chant': ten years on, it's still hard to hear it and not experience at least a fleeting desire to wrap a tea towel round your waist and try your hips at a spot of impromptu raqs sharqi!



***Gedida* (Mantra Recordings, 1999)**
Here, Ms Atlas and fellow songwriters/producers Tim Whelan and Hamid Mantu are all working at the peak of their creativity. Overall, this is probably her finest recording and – helped by the success of 'Mon Amie La Rose' as a single – is the one that made her a star in France.

Best Solo Compilation



***The Best of Natacha Atlas* (Mantra Recordings, 2005)**

The best place for the uninitiated to start listening to Atlas. This excellent selection cherry-picks the best songs from all stages of her solo career and some of the specially remixed tracks, like 'Mistaneek', sound even better than in their original versions.

Best Transglobal Underground Album

***Dream of 100 Nations* (Nation Records, 1993)**

The combination of Atlas'



ecstatic Arabesque voice with the band's infectious blend of electronica, hip-hop, funk and dub on this debut album defined the moment and became a prime inspiration for the whole world-dance genre.

COLLABORATIONS

Best Collaboration



'Acquired Dreams' from *Prophecy* by Nitin Sawhney (Outcaste Records, 2001)

This one track on the album is a tantalising tease of this partnership's potential as Atlas' aching vocals soar over Sawhney's rich layered instrumental textures.

Worst Collaboration



'Arabian Nights' from *Harem* by Sarah Brightman (Angel Records, 2003)

Oh, dear...

LIKE NATACHA ATLAS? THEN TRY...

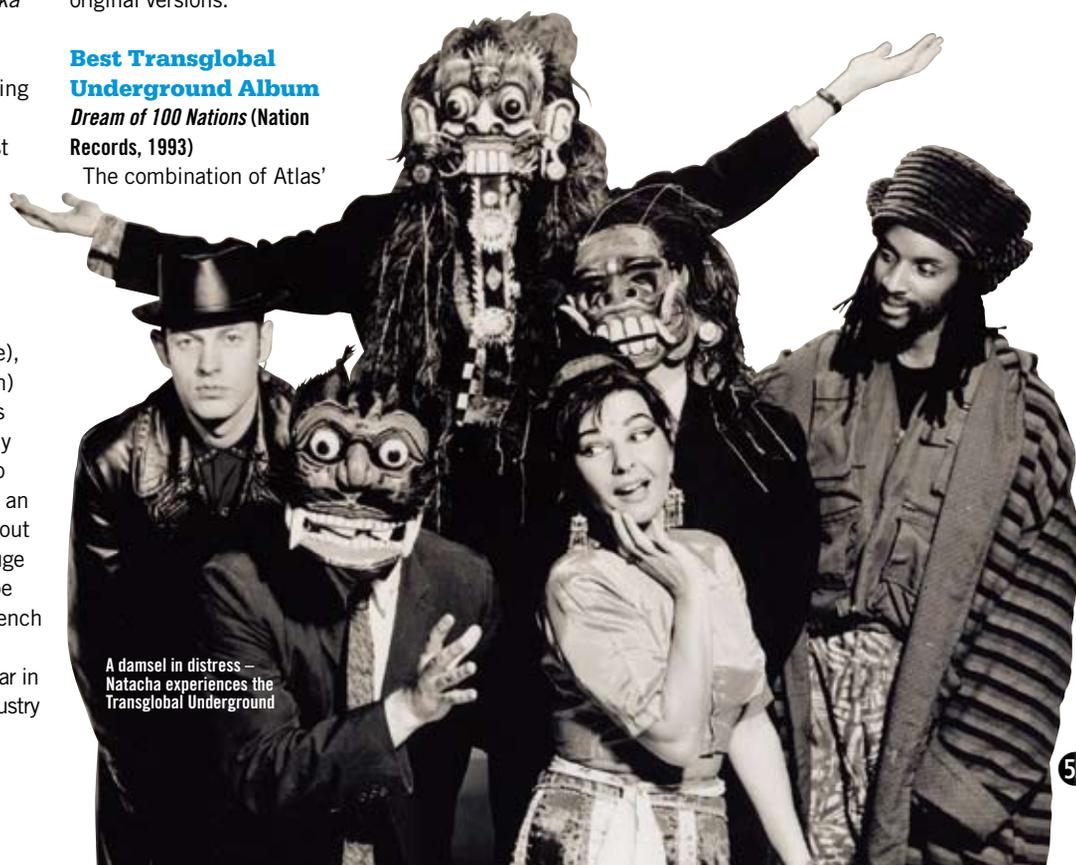
There are a number of musicians ploughing the Arab/dance groove but you might like to try something a little out of the ordinary.



Miami *Miami 2000* (EMI Arabia)

Kuwait's very own boy band fuses Gulf rhythms with hip-hop beats and (touchingly softcore) Arabic rapping. It's as wonderful as it is unlikely! |

Natacha Atlas' new album *Mish Ma'oul* is reviewed in the Fusion section



A damsel in distress – Natacha experiences the Transglobal Underground

MATT BRIGHT