



# Essaouira Gnawa and World Music Festival

Jane Cornwell feels the vibe during Morocco's Gnawa music festival

**S**eagulls wheeling above, the sea sparkling behind, the crowd in Essaouira's Bab Marrakech square are packed tight and jumping. Pulled to this gloriously windswept town on Morocco's Atlantic coast by the promise of four free days of music, the closing concert by reggae legends The Wailers is - for many of the country's reggae-obsessed youth - tantamount to a spiritual visitation. Kitted out in red, yellow and green, the colours of the Moroccan Gnawi and Bob Marley's beloved Rastafari, thousands watch, rapt, as if Marley has been beamed down before them (the presence of Aston 'Familyman' Barrett, the Wailer's original bass player, is blessing enough), before singing along - veiled and unveiled alike - to 'Redemption Song'.

It was a sensational, if surreal, ending to one of the best music festivals (and, damn it, one of the best kept secrets) around. Take the location, for starters: a mere two hours' drive north of Agadir's soulless tourist beaches or west of frenetic Marrakech, Essaouira (that's Essa-wee-ra, or Mogador if you're local) is a medieval-style bundle of whitewashed, blue-trimmed cubes and fairytale fortifications. Orson Welles shot scenes for his *Othello* from its ramparts. Privy to soft pink sunsets, the insistent call of the *muezzin* and the sort of laid back vibe embraced by creatives (Cat Stevens allegedly changed his name to Yusuf Islam while here; Jimi Hendrix was in situ for a long, hot summer), the town has long been referred to by Moroccans as the 'Pearl of the Kingdom'.

Westerners wised-up long ago; property prices have sky-rocketed. Boutique *riads* with lush interior courtyards and tiny, secretive entrances dot the Medina. Robert Plant favours the Al Medina. Sting stays at the Villa Maroc. My favourite, the Riad Dar Ness, was marred last year by thumping techno that played until 4am from neighbouring Café Taros. It was, perhaps, an inevitable offshoot of a festival that began modestly in 1998 and now draws over 200,000 people - mostly young Moroccan men. That sees the end of some performances - the acoustic ones within the city walls - reduce narrow streets to gridlock.

There's no small irony in the fact that the Gnawa, the stars of a festival intended to promote peace and harmony, were once dismissed as pariahs. The descendants of West African slaves who passed through Essaouira's port, the Gnawa evolved into an itinerant Sufi brotherhood of healers and mystics, their very presence viewed with suspicion. Now, thanks in part to acknowledgement from on high - the king's right-hand man and advisor, André Azoulay, attends each year - and the vision of festival director Neila Tazi and her staff, the Gnawi are celebrated as cultural treasures. Even their all-night, incense-heavy healing rituals or *lilas* get a platform here (in one of three dedicated venues), though you'll have to go elsewhere for the real, intense, 20-hour wig-out.

The focus, then, is on the music. Music that fuses the sounds of sub-Saharan Africa with those of its North, that combines the deep, meandering blues bass-lines of the *guenbri* (lute) with the rhythmic

MAIN, FAR RIGHT & RIGHT: **Gnawa musicians at Essaouira 2004**  
(Pierre Emmanuel Rastoin)

BELOW RIGHT: **Crowds pack Bab Marrakech square**  
(Nawal Slaoui)



clack-clack of giant iron castanets called *krakesh* (alleged to imitate the noise of the slave chains), the pounding of bass side drums and mesmerising call-and-response vocals – together with a sort of Cossack-style dance that gets the tassels on dancer's hats spinning. Transatlantic jazzers like Don Cherry and Pharoah Saunders saw the crossover potential of this pentatonic Maghreb phenomenon years ago, but here Essaouira hands everything back to the Gnawi – the Gnawa Maalems, masters of both ceremony and the ubiquitous guembri, in particular.

2004 saw the great and the good of the Maalem fraternity out in force: iconic Casablančan H'Mida Boussou, Rabat innovator Hamid el Kasri, Abderrahman Paca of the mythical 70s group Nass el Ghiwane. The Zeus-like Mahmoud Guinea was conspicuous by his absence from the programme, choosing to stage his own private, fee-charging concert inside the Medina. (This prima donna of Maalems was allegedly being taught a lesson). In long robes and fez-style caps decorated with cowrie shells, supported by troupes of Gnawi, some 20 or so big name Maalems variously played lilas, acoustic concerts and/or experimented with daring fusions on the open air stages at Moulay El Hassan square and Bab Marrakech.

Patience brought rewards. As with Berber outfit the Master Musicians of Jajouka, or even that of the music of *candomble* or *santeria*, the sound of the Gnawi is most effective when given time to build, to layer loops of sound that achieve a trance-like state in practitioner and often, the listener. Some Gnawi groups went higher than others; a lila by local Maalem Allal Soudani at Marché Aux Grains proved an out-of-body highlight. "When I play," Soudani has said, "I empty myself. And when I reach a state of trance I become nothing more than a leaf on a tree blowing at the mercy of the wind."

Visiting musicians included LA-based Hassan Hakmoun, the Axel Rose of Gnawi, a WOMAD veteran who has done much to promote his indigenous music internationally. For Hakmoun, blues, jazz and even

funk are all present in Gnawa music; his band's use of keyboards, drums, guitar and percussion rendered this obvious. Backed by two hair-flailing female vocalists, Hakmoun – no mean hair-flailer himself ("I'm always trancing when I perform") – threw handfuls of friendship bracelets towards an excitable crowd. That they all fell into the VIP-area didn't matter; he

returned for a series of encores.

Renowned Moroccan band Jil Jilala revisited their socially-aware hits from the 70s; Hoba Hoba Spirit mixed rock, reggae and Gnawa rhythms on electric guitars to create *haiha* music, a progressive yet authentic sound that marked them as a band to watch. From elsewhere came the uptempo Jaojoby band of Madagascar, colourful French-Brazilian outfit Batoucouleurs, the jazz excursions of Spanish flamenco bassist Carles Benavent... Oh, and The Wailers, their whistlestop visit part of a world tour. "We haven't heard any Gnawa music," Aston Barrett admitted, "but we're on the vibe."

Visiting musicians and Gnawi crammed onstage to jam and create, to find and follow a common thread. Senegalese master percussionist Doudou N'Diaye Rose faced off with Adda Gnaoui. Maalem Omar Hayat (a prodigy of the dog-housed Mahmoud Guinea) was joined by French drummer David Fall (Souad Massi) and Malian guitarist/percussionist Bako Keita. Collaborations didn't always work; the festival's French

co-programmers have a tendency to favour Francophone artists who are often too bland to aid and abet the force that is Gnawa music. But with Essaouira's improvising jazz spirit insisting on the right to fail as much as the right to experiment, there were few disappointments.

And indeed, highlights a plenty. Even Joe Zawinul's audacious use of a vocoder worked, part of a trailblazing set that saw the pianist and former Weather Report founder backed by French and Moroccan musicians, including Hamid el Kasri. Cuban pianist Omar Sosa, seated at a grand piano on the Moulay El Hassan stage at nightfall, sent delicate adagios and allegros floating star-wards before changing pace with compadré and percussionist Miguel 'Angá' Díaz and a troupe of chanting, dancing, *krakesh*-wielding Gnawi.

The resultant one-world groove went beyond the music, as it did at various points throughout the festival. 'Towards a greater truth,' the programme had insisted, 'that of being different and together.' Essaouira 2004, then: a microcosm of a world we'd all like to live in. ■

**This year's festival runs from June 23-26 2005**  
[www.festival-gnaoua.co.ma](http://www.festival-gnaoua.co.ma)