



Daniel Brown

Singer Ridha Diki Diki performing on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis

Journées Musicales de Carthage, Tunisia

Daniel Brown visits Tunis for its annual event that aims to promote homegrown musical talent and showcase neighbouring African artists

Post-revolutionary Tunisia throws up contrasts at every corner of its rich and varied land. So why should its annual world music festival JMC (Journées Musicales de Carthage) be any different? Born three years after many of Tunisia's 11 million people took to the streets to oust the Ben Ali dictatorship, these seeming contradictions seeped into the third edition of the festival.

An electrifying concert by Jupiter & Okwess International on the beautiful Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis, for example, competed for attention with demonstrators marching down the sealed-off thoroughfare. They were protesting against police violence and pollution resulting from oil spills by the British Petrofac company in Chergui, the

Kerkennah island off the south-east Tunisian coast. The previous evening the leader of the country's conservative religious Ennahda party, Rached Ghannouchi, had slunk discreetly into a front seat at Le Rio concert hall to enjoy the brilliant tenor singing of Lotfi Bouchnak, dubbed Tunisia's Pavarotti. The venue's entrance hall is bedecked with erotic paintings, Dadaist cartoons and revolutionary figures from around the globe, none of which seemed to perturb the Tunisian leader whose moderate Islamic party was inspired by the Iranian revolution and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The following afternoon, troubadour Ridha Diki Diki tried to recapture the glory he knew in the 70s before he was forced underground, then into exile by

Bourguiba and Ben Ali. His outlandish onstage attire and humorous repertoire drew bemused, almost uneasy applause from a youthful audience who seemed far more electrified by the Arabic rock of Jordan's Jadal band, the inebriating Gnawa rhythms generously offered by Moroccan Mehdi Nassouli or the charismatic singing of Sabry Moshah who mixes Tunisia's *maalouf*, *nouba* and *hadhra* traditions with a bluesy reggae far removed from the provocative lyrics of his father, the singer Slah Mosbah.

The acrobatic running of the JMC festival programme is overseen with discretion by Hamdi Makhoulouf, a young, chain-smoking *oud* player and musicologist. Four years after returning from Paris in 2010 to witness the



Clockwise from above: Sahad and the Nataal Patchwork receiving their award and in concert; Gangbé Brass Band and Jupiter & Okwess International



revolution firsthand, Makhoulouf was nominated to create a new festival by then-minister of culture, Mourad Sakli, who hoped to mirror the new wind blowing through the country's rich musical culture. "Challenging," he sums up with the kind of wan smile that mirrors sleepless nights and an intense diet of coffee, cigarettes and delicious local *brik* pastries. The closing day of the 2016 edition yawns and the 36-year-old sees the finishing line from his improvised HQ in central Tunis' Africa Hotel. Eight days, 41 concerts involving artists vying for the Tanit d'Or trophy for the best act, conferences, speed meetings with producers, workshops, a professional music salon, debates on music creativity, 500 participants from 30 countries... no mean achievement for an event spread over Tunisia's top 12 cities. And all this on a relatively threadbare budget, "about a third of what the government provides for the better-known Carthage Arts Festival each summer." There is no hint of bitterness in Makhoulouf's voice. Instead, a feeling of matter-of-fact pride: "The revolution brought a degree of anarchy with the sudden discovery of freedom," he states. "We needed an event to channel that energy and also to stretch out a hand to musicians south of the Sahara."

The gamble appears to have paid off, despite persistent challenges of a society still grappling with its new-found civil liberties. In its 2016 annual report, the Washington-based NGO Freedom House declared Tunisia "a notable exception" in the region, the first in the Arab world to be labelled "free" since Lebanon in 1975. Yet, its political transparency is not always reflected in the music world, where some artists are arrested for crossing "red lines" on police brutality, cannabis consumption or government corruption.

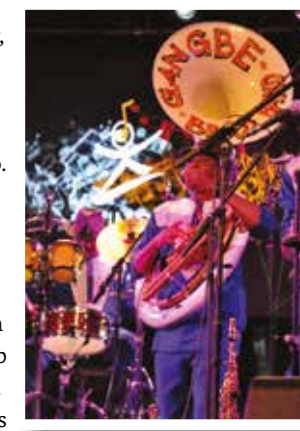
"Singers like Amina Fekhed and Sofia Sadok were forced to abandon their careers because they used to work for Ben Ali," claims Tunisian composer Adel Bondka who works as artistic advisor for the festival. Outspoken blogger Lina Ben Mhenni (of *Tunisian Girl* blog fame) has charted the unremitting pressure exercised by the police, nostalgic music unions, the justice and religious groups on street buskers and rappers. "Festivals like the JMC do what they can to create artistic spaces in a country sadly lacking them," she observes while monitoring the Petrofac protest for her blog. "But the system is so corrupt, even those from within who try, cannot do much."

This pessimism is contested by JMC communications head and musician Imed Alibi. "Hamdi Makhoulouf is an open and young director," he insists, "who has opened up the Tunisian music scene to the country's neglected youth, and brought them in touch with outstanding talents from abroad. We never had such diversity before." The Tunisian-French percussionist, who tours the world with his own band Safar, chooses his words carefully. "The JMC gives the youth a structure, something the government is struggling to do. Hamdi is taking it from the roots upwards because much of the system is rotten. And it's working." Alibi points to his native Maknassy region, which has seen the birth of a jazz club and a cinema in the past years. "It is partly thanks to my efforts

to federate my network with the likes of Makhoulouf, the director of the Semmama shepherds' festival, Adnen Hilali and ethnomusicologist Saima Samoud."

Alibi is also instrumental in bringing the services of trumpet player Michel Marre to JMC. Marre joined seasoned artists like Linda Volahasiniaina of Madagascar and Lebanese singer Oumaima Al Khalil on the jury choosing the best act for the Tanit d'Or prize. "Tanit was the goddess of fertility and love in Phoenician Carthage," explains the trumpet player, creator of the Occitan band Cossi Anatz. The French veteran had put his finger on the only link between the name of the festival and the ancient Mediterranean port. "There is a generosity in that symbol we were looking for among the 46 candidates for this prize. In the end, we were plumped for the Senegalese band Sahad & the Nataal Patchwork. They are very much the tapestry which best sums up the festival's spirit, a hyphen between Afrobeat, Malian blues, rock and jazz."

Led by the charismatic vocalist Sahad, the Dakar-based group has grown in maturity and stature to start to justify the eulogies showered on them since this prize. Last year, they followed the footsteps of the 2015 winner, Coulibaly Souleymane of Ivory Coast. It only needs another winner from West Africa at this year's fourth edition to make it a hat trick for the region. ♦



+ DATES This year's festival will run from April 8-15
+ ONLINE www.jmc.tn