

# ORAN RAI FESTIVAL

Philip Sweeney travels to the birthplace of Algerian rai music to see whether Islamism still casts its shadows over the annual festival



Like much in Algeria, the August holiday still mimics the old French colonial pattern. Oran half-closes for *les vacances*, the beaches and hotel complexes fill up, the airport resounds shrilly with ululations as families greet returning emigrés, marriages are scheduled, and groups stroll the great, raised Boulevard de Front de Mer eating ice cream in the evenings. In the sloping, open-air Theatre de la Verdure, where once French entertainers performed, it's time for the greatest single showcase of Oran's very own music – *rai* – in its home city.

Come 9.30pm, streams of young men and a few families and groups of girls are pouring through the gates, buying packets of biscuits and water at the kiosks, milling around, chatting, dancing, starting brief little fights swiftly quelled by truncheon-wielding policemen, and getting ready for a long night of erratically organised performers.

Cheba Warda, a plump young woman, takes the stage to wait out her new hit 'Ala Djalek Nechri Carta' (for you I'll buy a card). The card is a mobile phone pre-paid. This year the great theme of the summer's hits is the mobile, and network names like Djezzy, Mobilis and GSM pepper the songs which echo through the warm night until proceedings stop with an arbitrary announcement somewhere between 4 and 6am.

Usually, the Rai Festival goes on for a week, but in 2005 it's reduced to three nights. The reason is cash. In theory underwritten by grants

from the ministry of culture and the state oil and gas companies, the last two years have seen budgets, in any event tiny by European standards, reduced. The minister of culture turns up to announce that from 2006 the festival will be put on a serious state-backed footing, and given a new international status. For the time being though, Nasro Touil, the soccer-outfitted festival director hanging out under the trees behind the stage, is bedevilled by singers dropping out unless the fees are increased in line with European standards, ie massively. For the second year running, big stars like Bilal, the creator of *chaabi-rai*, and Abdou, the scandalously bejewelled and made-up Boy George of rai, are no-shows.

The Rai Festival has faced worse threats in its 20 years than prima donnas however. The first event took place in 1985, and marked rai's emergence as a nationally accepted genre. Veterans remember Khaled's astonishment at being told he was to perform up there on stage – rai had previously been confined to rough cabarets. After a pause of six years, the present succession of festivals was launched in 1991, at the beginning of the fundamentalist Islamic movement which, crushed by the army, resulted in a decade of horrible terrorist warfare and hundreds of thousands of deaths. The relaunch of the Rai Festival was partly a reaction against the encroachment of the fundamentalists who were beginning to take over local administrations, close down music schools, and attempt to impose sexual segregation on

## The scandalously bejewelled and made-up Boy George of rai is a no-show

the beaches. Soon, driven underground, their followers were confiscating cassettes at road blocks where, before long, throats would be slit in a terrifying muddle of attack and retaliation. The 1991 Rai Festival took place in a sports stadium ringed by troops while fundamentalists bayed outside. The 2005 festival begins with a short ceremony in Ain Beida cemetery, by the grave of Hasni Chekroune, better known as Cheb Hasni, the great star of rai-love, shot in 1994, probably by Islamist terrorists. Hasni's name now adorns the Theatre de la Verdure and his status has actually grown in death: his records still outsell all other rai artists.

The biggest star of the 2005 festival is Hasni's successor as king of rai-sentimental, Houari Dauphin, so-called because he started out in the cabaret Le Dauphin, before joining the big league with a string of hits like 'Sheraton' (a reference to Oran's brand new



mirror-skinned luxury hotel) and moving to Algiers. Dauphin combines a smooth voice, a lyrical gift for capturing the flavour of young Algerian desires, feelings of betrayal, a love-hate relationship with both homeland and exile, and a common touch. Young men from the poor estates rush to touch his hand at the front of the stage.

Although modern pop-rai dominates the festival (and record sales in the region) the 40-odd acts include other styles, in keeping with the festival's policy of broadening its content. The early days of electric proto-rai are represented by the life-etched features of its ageing star, Boutelja Belkacem, and the traditions of the bawdy Cheikhates (of whom Cheikha Rimitti is a virtually forgotten forerunner here) by vital dames such as the peroxidized Cheikha Nedjma, who refuses to sing any new songs this year as all her fresh numbers were pirated at last year's festival. There are Kabyle singers, a Gnawa trance band, a French reggae group, and most striking of all to me, a nameless group of trumpeters and percussionists from Ain Temouchent, home of the great early rai trumpeter Messaoud Bellemou, playing a fabulous wild anthem taken up by similar ensembles in open



Peugeot pick-ups in wedding cortèges at the weekend.

It would be foolish, of course, to restrict oneself to the festival.

August is the busy season for the cabarets along the Corniche, which still provide much employment to the rai singers. Around midnight, fortified by an excellent supper at La Taverne or La Comète, you can drive out, for example, to the Chalet in Ain el Turk to drink beer and whisky by a little stage containing proprietor Cheikh Mazouzi and guests such as Chabba Sara, synthesizer and voice-distorted 'robotic' effect on full throttle, and watch the dance floor fill with shuffling men, arms outstretched. Further on, a raucous *gasbah* joint caters to a less chic rural audience, who hand banknotes and dedications to the *berrah* – MC – to be passed to Cheikh Krime, the flute-playing singer, for transformation into customised praise-song.

As of this year, there will be even more options

Left to right: Qur'anic reciters around the grave of Cheb Hasni, the great star of rai-love; Houari Dauphin – young men from the poor estates rush to touch his hand; Lebanese *oud* player and singer Khorchid Daoud; An ensemble plays wild anthems that will be taken up by others in wedding cortèges at the weekend; Cheikha Nedjma, who refuses to sing new songs this year  
Below: Cheb Nany: king of sports casual

around Oran at festival time. The 2006 outline plan, announced in February, promises a hugely increased budget, the return of the top stars, including, *inshallah* (trust in Allah), Cheb Mami, additional stages around the city, an ambitious programme of fairs, parades and much else. The rider – *inshallah*, as with all such plans in Algeria – is critical. █

**The 2006 Oran Rai Festival takes place on August 1-4. It is possible that a group package will be organised from London. For information, email: oranfest@blueyonder.co.uk**

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