

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- July 27, 2018, Festival international du Timgad, Batna (Algeria)
- August 9, Festival international Hadra et musique transe, Essaouira (Morocco)
- December 3, Radio France (Paris)
- December 7, Festival Africolor (Île-de-France)

LEMMA

Lemma can be translated as a meeting, a gathering. It can also mean glean or harvest. So many meanings for the band created by singer and musician Saoud Asla who, accompanied by women from Western Sahara, has made it her mission to save their cultural heritage. They believe that their oral tradition shouldn't be allowed to disappear, but should instead serve to preserve a culture full of nomadic influences, which means collecting ancestral songs which have been sung and danced throughout the ages. Here, three generations gather and share those songs that give life in the region its rhythm. From *diwan* to *malhoun*, from *zeffani* to *gnawi*, from *hadra* to *el ferda* or *haydous*, those musical genres find their strength in songs and rhythms inherited from both slaves of the Sudanese Empire and from Berber and Bedouin tribes. Those women are the voice which bravely speaks of a complex, open culture, with its many influences. The show, made up of successive tableaux, allows them to express their happiness at being together onstage, and describes a struggle for life that must be fought with joy.

SOUAD ASLA

Born in Béchar, within the Saoura (in southwest Algeria), Saoud Asla has lived in Paris for 25 years, but often comes back to her roots. A singer and musician, she created in 2015 the *Lemma* project to protect the cultural legacy of her region. Twelve women aged 20 to 70 breathe new life into a collection of songs they've gathered during musical encounters to then share them during their concerts. Gnawa songs, drums, guembri, dances, and trances, to tell the hybrid history of the desert nomads.

72th
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.

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INTERVIEW WITH SOUAD ASLA

Can you tell us about your career, and about how the Lemma project came about?

Saoud Asla: I was born in Béchar, in southwest Algeria, in the desert of the Saoura. I left for Paris when I was 20 in order to study drama. After three years in school, I finally started a career in music. In 2002, musician Hasna El Becharia (“the rocker of the desert,” an icon of Gwana and Diwan music), who was touring France, asked me to perform with her. We started a musical collaboration which is still going on. We accompany and support each other. I toured and travelled a lot with her. Then I composed and released my album, *Jawal*, in 2008. Every time I went back to the region of the Saoura, I’d go to the small village of Taghit where, for years, women have gathered every Friday to play music, sing, and dance, to the point of going into a trance. As I watched them, I understood that music was a way to open up and an essential means of expression for those women. Discussions during those meetings were and still are entirely free. They tackle all the subjects of their everyday lives as women, wives, and mothers. It’s a great moment of sociability, exchanges, and transmission. I then realised that every year, this circle of women grew smaller. When I asked them why young women didn’t take part in those ceremonies, they told me that the young didn’t care for this music they thought old-fashioned, that they liked more modern styles like Raï. They’d resigned themselves to that music dying with them. They’re very traditional and only play music within a private, intimate circle, and didn’t want to perform in public. So I went in search of other musicians and singers from the region, and was able to bring together a group of twelve, including me. I called it Lemma, which means the union, the meeting, the gathering. This word symbolises the women who were part of my past, who are part of my future, who carry so many emotions. It wasn’t easy at first, we had to convince their fathers, their brothers, their husbands. We had to show the importance of this cultural legacy, the gold in their voices, in their memories. So that this oral tradition wouldn’t disappear. Little by little, minds opened up, and I was able to start working in Taghit. Over four sessions over a period of ten days, we rehearsed, performed, sang. I was able to choose which musical styles to use, which songs I wanted to record, and do the arrangements.

What musical genres did you choose? What do they express?

The Ferda style is religious music, close to Sufism, very open-minded, and with a rather slow tempo. The Hadra is a collective trance practiced during Sufi rituals, which follows the songs of great mystical celebrations. El Hadja Zaza (the oldest of the group, with her 74 years) and Aziza Tahri are our specialists. The Gnawa is represented by Hasna El Becharia, who also plays the guembri (an ancestral instrument of the Gnawi, usually played exclusively by men), the banjo, and the electric guitar. Fatima Abbi lends her voice to the Gnawa songs of black slaves, very slow and complex. The Zefani is a non-religious style, they’re songs about love and weddings, accompanied by the bendir (a Berber drum), songs about exile and welcome... The Malhoun is a very poetic and spiritual style. The Heydous (or Ahidous) is a very popular Berber dance that is often performed during celebrations. Men and women stand elbow to elbow and form circles, and bodies sway in a very sensual movement. It was one of the traditional rituals of weddings, to help people find each other. There are therefore a lot of influences,

incredible rhythmic variations, a great many different subjects and traditions carried by those songs. *Lemma*, the show, described through different tableaux life in our region, from the softness of a love song to the spiritual trance born of repetition. The only song I wrote myself, *Lemti*, is a song that pays homage to the group, to thank the eleven women who are part of this musical “union.” To thank them for coming with me on this adventure to preserve this music.

How do you see the future of Lemma?

First there’s the Festival d’Avignon, a dream about to become true for me, who’ve often come as a spectator. We’ll be releasing our album—also called *Lemma*—in France soon, under the label Buda Musique, which should give those songs a new resonance. We’ve also been invited to the next edition of the Festival Africolor, near Paris. It will be a beautiful way to share this fascinating musical melting pot which finds its source in sub-Saharan Africa before spreading throughout the Maghreb. Performing in Béchar would be a dream come true. The group is reluctant to perform in front of their families and friends. But little by little, I’m sure we’ll manage to return to the roots of this music and to make the communities of the Saoura aware of the importance of the legacy they carry within their hands and voices. That’s why I would also like to create a box set with all the songs we’ve collected (90 songs up till now). It will represent the diversity and richness of the music of southwest Algeria, and will be available for future generations.

How have audiences reacted to your concerts, in Algeria and in France?

This musical project goes beyond just music. It’s unleashed things at the levels of society and education, even politics. It took four years to see the light of day, we had to raise funds, patiently collect the songs, create the show, and prepare to tour. The other eleven musicians have performed and sung since they were children, but never in public, outside of celebrations and weddings with their families. They also had to learn everything about the stage, and about the technical details relevant to concerts. Right away, Algerian audiences were enthusiastic and gave us a warm welcome. People were surprised to see women singing in public in styles traditionally reserved to men. It brought people a lot of hope and joy to see those “free” women sing and dance onstage. They’re proud to see their culture and this music that’s part of their legacy coming out of the shadows and into the light. If you want progress, confrontation isn’t particularly useful, it’s better to softly offer beautiful projects and see them through. Our album was released in Algeria in February 2018, and it was a big hit, in particular in our region, where it’s often played during celebrations. The album rekindles memories and is a permanent witness to the richness of that culture. We’ve also had a beautiful French tour. With French audiences, both young and old people, and not necessarily from immigrant backgrounds, were very moved by our shows. Some told me that even if they didn’t understand the words, they’d found the show emotionally overwhelming. This music which comes from the earth, savage and raw, hits you right in the heart. Seeing Algerian women up on a stage to sing their lives and their struggles has also helped to alleviate the stigmatised vision of women as submissive victims. They’re strong and brave women, full of joy and emotions. They have a great sense of sharing. This project is one of solidarity, driven 100% by women, which has found a positive echo both in Algeria and in France.

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Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach