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Folk the Kasbah

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FOLK THE KASBAH

A conversation with Omar Sayyed, leader of Nass el Ghiwane

Elias Muhanna

In the back room of a dusky Casablanca café, three men are trying to teach me a lesson. Our dialogue is muffled by the sounds of the city on a freezing February afternoon: rain, traffic, and the steady boom of ten-foot swells pounding the rock pools below the nearby pier. Inside the café, surly regulars bark at each other over all manner of beverages: pastis and cognac; green-tinted bottles of Cigale, the local beer; syrupy mint tea, the “Berber whisky.”

The three men surround me, their voices garbled and slurry with drink. The leader—a soft-spoken giant named Omar Sayyed—reaches out to clamp a huge hand over my mouth.

“Shut up and listen. I will explain it one last time,” he says quietly.

“Listen to me!” shrieks a young geneticist, elbowing the big man aside. “Listen, and repeat after me.” The wiry doctor clears his throat, straightens his collar, and licks his lips.

“Illa,” he says.

“Illa,” I dutifully repeat.

“Illi.” He pronounces the word with exquisite slowness, flicking his tongue against the second syllable, pressing it into relief.

I hesitate for a moment, going through the motions. “Il-li?”

The doctor’s eyes are glowing as he leans back and casts a triumphant look at his comrades.

“So what?” I ask abruptly.

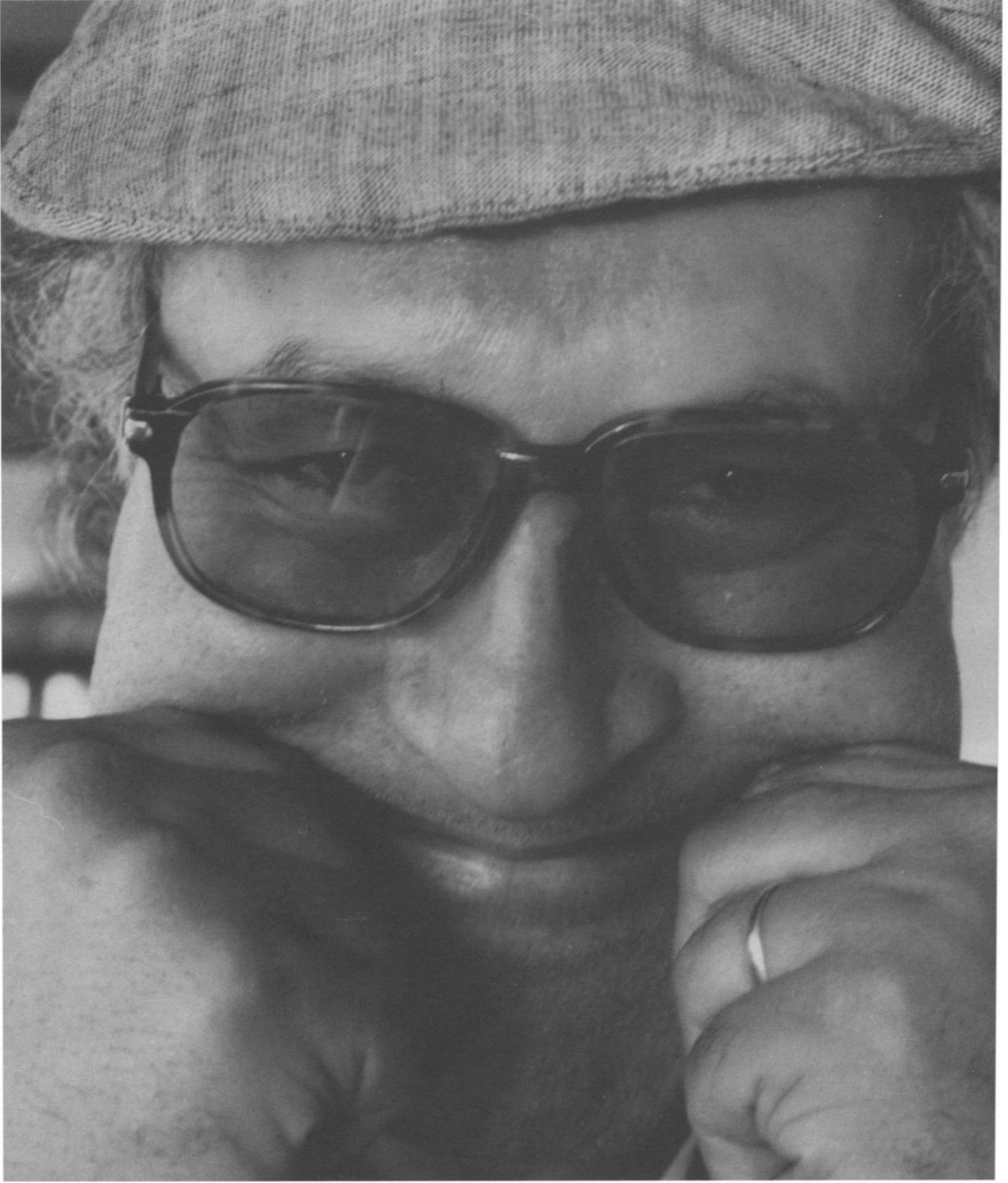
The table erupts with flailing gestures and rapid-fire cursing in Arabic. The doctor stands and shoves his drink aside in disgust. Omar lumbers out of his chair, aping his friend’s pronunciation lesson. The third man at the table, a toothless old sailor, swipes the doctor’s discarded glass and empties it in a single swallow. I laugh aloud and roll up my sleeves.

Omar finally regains the floor. “Don’t be ashamed,” he offers. “The difference is very subtle. Listen again.”

He pauses and surveys the drunken crowd menacingly, daring anyone to disrupt his performance.

Omar Sayyed

Lara Messersmith



“Ma hmouni gheir ar-rijal illa da’ou.” The words, nearly whispered, fill the silence. Around the café, patrons are listening in, grinning.

“Which means,” he says, “I worry for men when they disappear, when they are lost to us.”

He waits for my cue, and says: “As opposed to: Ma hmouni gheir ar-rijal . . . *il-li* . . . da’ou,” lingering before and after the penultimate word, and suddenly I hear it.

“Which means,” I blurt, flushed with discovery, “I worry for *those* men who disappeared. Right?” I am desperate to qualify: “Those men, the ones that you knew? The ones you can *name*, who disappeared, who were imprisoned—right?”

Drinks are ordered; a busboy cheers.

Omar eyes me appraisingly as his friends cackle and thump my back. My translation lesson is complete. In a different country, even a different Arab country, this conversation would have been

inscrutable. But we are in Morocco, and everyone knows exactly what we are talking about. The waiters and assembled café dwellers share a chuckle at my expense, while cabbies and grocers and accountants come over to greet my teacher, Omar Sayyed. He knows almost none of them, but they all know him. He is a singer, a celebrity, perhaps the most famous voice in Morocco. He is fifty-six years old. And he has just explained some song lyrics to me with the help of a genetic engineer and a drunken sailor.

. . .

Moroccans are intensely proud of Nass el Ghiwane, the group Omar Sayyed and four friends founded thirty-odd years ago in Casablanca. People like to call them the Beatles of Morocco—and also the Rolling Stones of Morocco, the Bob Dylans, and even the Grateful Dead. The profusion of titles is confusing but apt: in the 1970s, the members of Nass el Ghiwane (pronounced “ghee-WAN”) were



Left to right:
‘Allal Yalla, Omar Sayyed, La’arbi Batma, Abdelaziz al-Tahiri, Boujmil’

Courtesy Nass el Ghiwane

indeed Western-style stars. They played before thousands of fans at packed arenas, in country and abroad, and released dozens of recordings. Their songs played on every radio station, their logos emblazoned on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and window decals. They grew their hair long, smoked dope, and wore white leather vests with mohair bell-bottoms. To most Moroccans, they looked like the revolution.

As it happens, Nass el Ghiwane don't sound anything like the Beatles. Their music doesn't rock—it jangles, rumbles, and spins. It has a coarse, vaguely rural quality. When I first heard them, the image that came to mind was that of a crowded barnyard: a scene of squawking hens, lowing beasts of burden, a bony sheepdog trailing a passel of tin. The melodies are simple and soulful; the voices soar and dip in unison chants. But it is in the rhythm that you hear their incredible dexterity. When the drums join in after a banjo solo, the effect can be transformative, like a natural runner hitting his stride. The beat sways and shifts against the melody, drawing near and pulling away again, as though the tune were trapped inside a whirling, weighted centrifuge.

Nass el Ghiwane debuted in 1971, when Omar Sayyed was twenty-four years old. All five members sang, often in chorus, and the group played a motley assortment of traditional instruments in untraditional combinations: the *sentir*, a gut-stringed bass lute; banjo; kettle-drums, frame drums, tambourines, and cymbals. The plaintive melodies and chants brought to mind *'aita*, a popular style associated with the *shikhat*—independent women of sometimes ill re-



pute—but also *melhoun*, a medieval Moroccan oral tradition with roots in the courtly arts of Moorish Spain. The group's hypnotic rhythms borrowed from the mystagogic cadences of the Sufi brotherhoods, especially the Gnawa—descendants of West African slaves, whose ritual exorcisms entailed what might be the original trance music. The banjo—a grittier African alternative to the Arab zither—reinforced the sense that this music, which was unlike anything ever heard in Morocco, was in its own reckless way a summation of everything ever heard in Morocco. It was a self-consciously nationalist sound, new-

Clockwise from top: Omar Sayyed, La'arbi Batma, Boujmlil', Abdelaziz al-Tahiri. Center: Mahmoud al-Sa'di

Courtesy Nass el Ghiwane



Gnawa musicians

From La religion des esclaves by Viviana Pâques (Bengamo: Moretti/Vitali)

fangled and old-fashioned at the same time.

Out of this ferment, the members of Nass el Ghiwane emerged as custodians of Morocco's cultural heritage, curators of its traveling show. Their songs were full of references to old poems, proverbs, medieval saints, and mystics. The fact that they sang in colloquial Moroccan rather than Egyptian Arabic affirmed this tip-of-the-tongue familiarity:

*It's hard to be at peace, but the love of drink
is easy,
Desire never forgets you
It's hard to be calm, but the passions of
people are easy . . .
So difficult when the desire arises, when the
ambergris is put before me,
And the mint and wormwood . . .*

This, from Nass el Ghiwane's most famous song, is stirring social commentary disguised as a conversation between a man and his tea tray ("Essiniya" [The tea tray]). The words invoke family or friends, gathered around a platter of steaming cups, a pot of tea, and the sprigs of mint, worm-

wood, and ambergris that are used as infusions. In the opening verse, the narrator asks the tray: "Where are those people of good intention once gathered around you? Where are those blessed and principled people, those who once accompanied you?" Evocative, poetical, and vague, the song practically begs to be interpreted. Who were those "principled people," anyway, and where did they go? Morocco was an erratically authoritarian country in the 1970s, a decade marked by coup attempts and assassinations, political kidnappings and censorship. Thousands of "dissidents"—students, intellectuals, religious fundamentalists, leftists—were peremptorily jailed, silenced, or worse. Although the band steadfastly refused to explain itself, it isn't difficult to understand why young, urban Moroccan audiences were thrilled and scandalized by Nass el Ghiwane's preoccupation with lost time, disintegrating landscapes, and missing people.

At the group's inaugural concert in Casablanca, thunderous applause summoned them back on stage for an encore. After the headlining act was canceled by

popular demand, Nass el Ghiwane played an impromptu second set, and a star was born. As Tayyeb Seddiki, Morocco's leading playwright, observed, "In the 1960s, Moroccans were sick of the Egyptian song. Totally fed up. The musicians were old men in burnouses droning on about their lost loves. Young people weren't so attracted to that—shall we say—'classical' aesthetic. Then along came a group of young guys with long hair, singing short songs, in a dialect that we could understand, with a few political denunciations, and . . . voilà! It was a smash hit."

Their popularity was boundless. In the next few years, Nass el Ghiwane played all over Morocco, as well as Europe, spawning hundreds of imitators and heralding the rebirth of Moroccan popular music. In 1973, the group released its debut album, *Essiniya*, featuring many of their most potently allusive songs: "Fine ghadi biya khouya" [Where are you taking me, brother?], "Ya bani insan" [Oh, human], "El madi fatt" [The past is gone], and the beloved title track. They called their style *chaabi*, folk music, and the *chaabi* revival became the dominant sound of the 1970s. Nass el Ghiwane was largely responsible for the emergence of the Moroccan music industry, to say nothing of Moroccan music piracy.

In 1974, tragedy struck the group for the first time with the death of Hgour Boujmii'. The whole country mourned his death. The group's next album was titled *Hommage à Boujmii'*; "Ya sah" [Oh, my friend], one of its more powerful numbers, appeared years later on the soundtrack to Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Boujmii's soaring voice was a crucial part of Nass el Ghi-

wane's sound, soaring above the group's unison chants. "My voice was high," recalls Omar Sayyed. "It rose to the ear. But Boujmii's was higher: it cut straight to the heart."

Still, Nass el Ghiwane has gone on to release countless records. I mean that literally—Omar Sayyed, for one, has no idea how many official releases the group was party to, and that doesn't even include the bootlegs, which you can buy on nearly any street corner in Marrakech. Some of their most recent recordings are a kind of homage to black Morocco; *Chants Gnawa du Maroc* and *Transe musique du Maroc* feature faithful yet spirited interpretations of that five-hundred-year-old black tradition.

Of course, the group has had its critics. While other artists pursued Nass el Ghiwane's polemically hybrid sound—Jil Jilala and Lem Chaheb are the most famous—the *chaabi* style has been overshadowed by other musics, including the Gnawa music that has become ubiquitous at world-music festivals. There are

Omar Sayyed is a singer, a celebrity, perhaps the most famous voice in Morocco. He has just explained some song lyrics to me with the help of a genetic engineer and a drunken sailor.

also Western imports like rock, soul, and especially hip-hop—not to mention *raï*, the Algerian-bred sound that has become a sort of pan-Arab house music. Lyrically, too, the group's studied allusiveness has come to seem more obtuse than enticing. By the late 1970s, even, Moroccan critics were complaining that

“the troubles of our time—while at the center of the group’s message—are not realistically expressed, and not adequately given shape: they are consumed by the ‘old-speak’ and the entrancing rhythms.” It seemed that Nass el Ghiwane spoke eloquently to a particular moment in

Nass el Ghiwane’s most famous song, “Essiniya,” is a stirring social commentary disguised as a conversation between a man and his tea tray.

time, and that time has passed. Still, as I discovered in Casablanca, the group’s fan base is in no way limited to aging hipsters. Preteen surfers in Essaouira listen to their music, while graduate students compose semiotic analyses of their lyrics. Even Mohammed VI, the young king of Morocco, is said to be a fan—though his enthusiasm does not match that of his father, Hassan II, who used to book the group for state dinners.

The group members are beyond famous: they’re family. In 2001, Morocco observed Nass el Ghiwane’s thirtieth birthday with concerts, television specials, and an extraordinary twenty-five-part series in *Ittihad-al-Ishtiraki*, one of the country’s biggest newspapers. Some articles celebrated the group’s history with misty-eyed reminiscences about the boys from Casablanca (profiles, family portraits, interviews); others reaffirmed Nass el Ghiwane’s continuing importance to Moroccan society. The group still performs, though only two founding members remain—Omar and Allal Yalla, the grizzled banjo player. They are also beginning to cross over into the English-speaking world. John Peel, the preemi-

ent radio personality in the Commonwealth, recently played the group on his show. Their music is erudite and ethnic, alien and entrancing. Indeed, it’s easy to imagine the same audiences that have come to love the quirky late-sixties art-pop of Brazil’s Tropicalia making space in their hearts for seventies Muslim folk-pop modernists like Nass el Ghiwane.

ELIAS MUHANNA: What has the band been up to these days? Have you been traveling?

OMAR SAYYED: Not really. We may be doing a show next week in Tunis, but we’ve mainly been playing around here.

EM: When was the last time you played a big show in Morocco?

OS: We don’t usually get to play big shows, these days. But we did one a little while ago at Yacoub el Mansour—I think the attendance was around 80,000. It was sponsored by *Ittihad-al-Ishtiraki*.

EM: That’s one of the socialist newspapers. Do you support the socialists?

OS: Absolutely not. I don’t believe in political parties. Make sure you get that straight: I’ve never belonged to any political party.

EM: Does Nass el Ghiwane still perform in Europe at all?

OS: Sure. The last big show we played was the “Jour de la Musique” festival in Paris, in front of the Eiffel Tower. It was huge: the Trocadero was totally packed. The newspapers said the crowd was 400,000 people. But you know, it’s not easy to play in Europe. We’re always forced to explain that we’re not some kind of traditional Moroccan group. People assume that we must be an Andalusian orchestra or a Gnawa troupe . . . something folkloric and traditional.

These days, when we play in France, we get people at our shows who are second-generation French citizens—children of Moroccan immigrants—and they are completely assimilated into French society. The only thing they’ve hung onto from North Africa is *rai*—and it’s a bastardized form of *rai*, in any case. They don’t care about the lyrics; they don’t know anything about the poetry. The last time we were in France, a promoter actually said to us, “Maybe we should advertise you as a group that plays Koranic instruments.”

EM: Like the banjo!

OS: Just because we’re not using synthe-

sizers, drum machines, samplers, or whatever, suddenly we’re playing “Koranic instruments”! He said that if we wanted to attract big crowds, we’d have to completely change our look, our music, everything. What can I say?

EM: I didn’t realize that it was that bad.

OS: I think it annoys me more than anyone else in the group, but I am horrified that anyone would consider us a traditional ensemble, which, in Morocco, is the kind of group that’s hired to play weddings or—if you’re lucky, because the money is better—to entertain tourists. That, to me, is not art. It’s entertainment that sounds ethnic enough for

Gnawa ritual

From La religion des esclaves by Viviana Pâques (Bergamo: Moretti/Vitali)





Joudi Berdak

© Polydor

tourists, or for the younger generation that's listening to bad *rai*.

EM: Was it really all that different for your generation?

OS: Completely. I'm a child of the 1940s. I grew up in Hay al Mohammadi, a working-class district of Casablanca. There was a real sense of hope and enthusiasm in my generation. Our parents were nationalists. We were the children of independence; everything was ripe. You got the sense that anything could happen.

EM: And this sentiment was particularly strong in Casablanca, I imagine.

OS: In Casa, yes, because the city represented *le nouveau Maroc*. Casa was the industrial center of the country, and it was populated by Moroccans from all around the kingdom. Rich, poor, Berber, Arab, as well as European.

EM: When you say that your parents were nationalists, what do you mean exactly? Was it possible to be anything but nationalistic right after independence?

OS: No, you're right. But there were many political groups in those years, and the general movement of the *Istiqlal* [Independence Party] began to split into separate tributaries quite quickly. There were pan-Arabists, there were socialists, there were many who remained loyal to the king. No matter what your politics were, it was impossible not to feel swept up in the excitement of independence. Plus, the world was changing so quickly; we were not impervious to what was happening in Europe and America. On the contrary, we were very much influenced by it.

EM: You mean musically or socially?

OS: Both, obviously. The hippie revolution arrived in Morocco by way of Casablanca. We were listening to Western music, the Beatles, Jimi, the Stones. Young men were leaving their families in the country to come and work in Casablanca, which probably felt, to them, like a different planet.

EM: What kinds of things made the biggest impression on you at the time?

OS: Actually, I was most impressed—or obsessed, you could say—with the theater! We had the Théâtre Municipal in Casablanca, a great theater with a famous director, Tayyeb Seddiki. It was a place where ordinary people could go and lose themselves in the novelty and fantasy of it all.

EM: When was this exactly?

OS: This was the mid-1960s. We used to hang out at the theater and watch the plays. There are many kinds of performance in Morocco, stretching back over the centuries, but we were interested in *bsat*, which Tayyeb was exploring. *Bsat* theater is closest to what you know as theater in the West. It uses a stage, of

sorts, and it has scenery and costumes. And stock characters—many of these stories were familiar to us. But to see them brought onto a European-style stage was . . . well, it was startling to us at the time. Tayyeb would turn proverbs into real, full-scale productions, with elaborate scenery and scores of actors and sometimes musical numbers. We were quite in awe of him and his entourage, which included some of the most famous actors and writers of the Arab world, at the time.

EM: When you say “we,” you mean the band?

OS: Everyone from Nass el Ghiwane was there, though we weren’t yet a group. We came separately, over the course of a few months, and after seeing his productions, we all wanted to become actors.

EM: Not musicians?

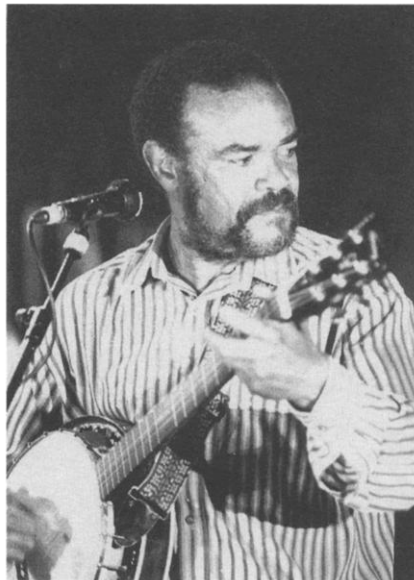
OS: No, we had our hearts set on acting at first. It was inevitable, because Tayyeb was an irresistible force. He treated the theater like a sacred place; onstage, there wasn’t a single person out of place. Everyone had a little ritual to perform. When you finished your part, you’d sit quietly and remain in character, waiting for the rest of the play to end. And when you came back the next day, you’d find the props and costumes back in their proper places. I tell you, we weren’t used to that kind of discipline and attention. And people remained in character. Tayyeb didn’t tell you how to play your part, he told you how to find your part. Even now, when you watch *Al Harraz*—the filmed version, in black and white—you’d be amazed at what he produced with kids who’d never been on a proper stage. Everything moved, even the scenery! One of the other great writers and



**Funeral of La’arbi
Batma, 1997**



**Funeral of La’arbi
Batma, 1997**



‘Allal Yalla

*Courtesy Hassan
Habibi*

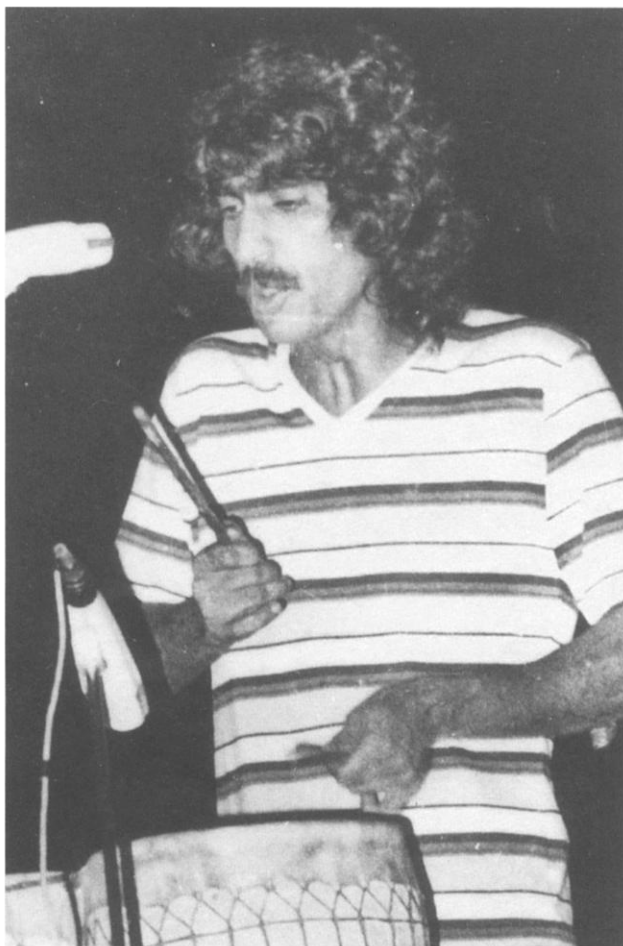
actors of the time, Ahmed Tayyeb Laalaj, said of us: “The beasts are being trained.”

EM: So, was this the first true Moroccan theater?

OS: Well, not exactly, because we have always had a theatrical tradition in the *halqas*.

La'arbi Batma

Courtesy Hassan
Habibi



EM: I've seen those in the Jemma' al Fna', the huge central square in Marrakech. They are basically street theater, right?

OS: The *halqa* is a combination of theater, poetry, storytelling, music, and dance. We spent an enormous amount of time at them as kids.

EM: I think I've only really seen them in tourist traps. What were the real ones like?

OS: Quite simple. A man would get up in front of a circle of spectators and tell a story—a long story, embellished with beautiful details. At various points, he would stop and sing, and then someone

else would accompany him with a tambourine or a drum. You would hear music and stories from all around Morocco. As a kid, crouching in that circle, you'd feel the hairs rise on the back of your neck as the performers created a world in front of you. So, you could say that the *halqa* was the first true form of Moroccan theater.

EM: Did the other guys from Ghiwane also go? And did you all know each other at that time?

OS: Absolutely, we used to go together. I knew Allal, Boujmii', and La'arbi at that time; we met Paco and Abdelaziz later on. But the four of us all grew up on Moulay Sherif Street in Hay al Mohammedi. We've known each other for over fifty years.

EM: Had any of you had any musical training?

OS: Allal did: he could read music, and he was an excellent banjo player, even at that young age. The rest of us didn't have a formal music education. We didn't have much of a cultural or academic background, period. But this is what I'm trying to say: the *halqa* was our school, our musical, social, and spiritual education. Without it, I don't think that there would have been a Nass el Ghiwane.

EM: So, when did the inspiration for a musical group develop?

OS: It all started in the Café Théâtre, which was a little café that Tayyeb Seddiki started up beside the Théâtre Municipal. It had a little stage, and anybody could get up and perform in front of the regulars. Actors did monologues and little skits; musicians came and played. The café was filled with journalists and students and writers who would spend the whole day arguing and drinking coffee and smoking.

EM: Sounds a bit like a modern *halqa*.

OS: Actually, yes, except anyone could get up and play. Tayyeb himself was doing very *halqa*-esque skits, one-man shows, poetry readings, storytelling, and he roped us into adding some music into the mix to make some of the stories more vivid. We'd never had a place like that in Morocco—that was the kind of thing you'd find in Paris. But Tayyeb brought it here. He realized that we needed something like that, so people could come together and debate art or music or anything they liked. So anyway, that's where we first started playing as a group, writing our own songs.

EM: One of my favorite things to do in Casablanca is to strike up conversations with people in cafés, and ask them what your shows were like in the 1970s. I have yet to speak to somebody between forty and fifty years old who had never been to one. The look they get in their eyes—when they describe that time—is priceless.

OS: The shows were really special, particularly the more intimate ones, because you felt like you were in the presence of a family. Everybody knew every word, the music tied us all together.

EM: People often talk about the difficulties of interpreting—let alone translating—your songs.

OS: You know, our parents spoke in a dialect, a vernacular that was very poetic. It was creative and complicated, and they had learned it from their parents. That language is almost seductive in its descriptiveness, and it is full of proverbs, which are passed from generation to generation.

Anyway, this is the language we sing in, and if it sounds different to you

than the ordinary dialect you hear on the street, that's because it is older. Al-Mellih, one of Morocco's greatest writers, once said that he loved Nass el Ghiwane because the language we used had a scent, a perfume. I think he meant that this language has the scent of an earlier time, before independence, before colonialism, when our great-great-grandparents were young. Most of our songs

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are written in that language, and we incorporated a lot of the images from the old proverbs. Our name, even. We found it in a *melhoun*: "I asked the jasmine about you / I asked the rose / I asked the friends of Ghiwane about you."

Of course, we took proverbs from all over the country, not just the most famous ones—not just Abderrahman al Majdub. And we drew heavily from the poetry of the Amazighen, the Berbers. The creativity of the Amazighen is incredible; you don't find it anywhere else. They have a very expressive language. You know, every rooster in the world is a Berber.

EM: Excuse me?

OS: When the rooster crows in the morning, he sings five notes. [*Omar demonstrates.*] The notes are identical to the ones in the pentatonic scale that all of Berber music is built on. No matter where the rooster is, in Russia, in Bo-

livia, in China, he sings five notes. That's because the rooster is Berber.

EM: I'll keep that in mind. Do you have a song about that?

OS: [*Laughing.*] No, but it isn't a bad idea. Anyway, when we got up on stage, people were initially surprised to hear that the words we sang were from a different generation. But at the same time, they didn't sound archaic, like the traditional music we'd heard growing up. Our

The *halqa* is a combination of theater, poetry, storytelling, music, and dance. It was our school, our musical, social, and spiritual education.

music was fresh, but because we combined it with the dialect and intonation of our parents, the result was something that many Moroccans—especially young people in the city—found familiar.

EM: I've heard there's an interesting story of borrowing behind your most famous song, "Essiniya."

OS: Well, there was a man named Ba Salem who used to sit and sing in the street, begging for alms. He had been all around Casablanca, singing a particular song—something about a tea tray. People tossed him a few coins, but nobody really paid any attention to what he was saying, except for one man. This one guy lived in Hay al Mohammadi; he was sitting in his room and he heard the beggar singing, and the song kept going round and round in his head. So he got up and went outside to listen. And that one man happened to be my friend La'arbi Batma, who was one of the original five members of Nass el Ghiwane.

He listened to what the beggar was singing:

*I've gone and left all behind
My family and loved ones didn't want me
to go
But I didn't fall into this ocean by chance ...*

That's what the beggar was singing. So La'arbi took it, added some other verses and brought it to Boujmii', our main singer, and Boujmii' transformed it completely. Boujmii' sang:

*Oh regret, regret!
What is wrong with my glass of tea, sad
among all the happy glasses?
What is the matter with my own glass, lost
in thought, lost, extending its sadness to
me?*

And that was the beginning of our most famous song.

EM: Almost from the beginning, people have been finding political messages in your work. Was that ever your intention?

OS: In the context of all the fear and paranoia at the time, it's inevitable that one might see a political agenda in our lyrics. But we never tried to write political songs. They were songs of protest, sure, but they were more than merely political.

EM: What kind of protest was it, then, if it wasn't political?

OS: Look, we were street kids from the poorest part of Casablanca, and we sang from that perspective. It's not an elevated perspective, you see. It's not a perspective from which somebody can criticize the people who have power, in order to take it for himself. Because the man of the

street, the beggar, doesn't have any hope of getting power, so he can be honest about what he truly feels. And what he truly feels, or what *we* truly felt, didn't have to do with politics. I don't think we were smart enough to criticize even if we had *wanted* to be political. Take the

songs "Fine ghadi biya khouya" [Where are you taking me, brother?] or "El madi fatt" [The past is gone]. These were songs about the uncertainty and anxiety we felt in that moment, because everything around us was changing so rapidly. The world of our parents was slipping away,



Omar Sayyed

Lara Messersmith

and we were heading to . . . who knows where?

EM: I'm sorry to harp on this, but Moroccans love to talk about the politics of the group. Maybe you didn't put it there deliberately, but many seemed to feel it. It's widely believed that "El debbana fi-l btana" [The flea in the sheep's hide] is your most political song. A journalist in Rabat once told me that you used to look up at the portrait of the king over the stage in the concert halls while singing the chorus: "We are living the lives of fleas in a sheep's hide."

OS: That's complete nonsense. Many people tried to find a political agenda in that song, but they were totally missing the point, which is unfortunate, because we were—in all honesty—trying to say something much more important. They thought we were saying that the flea was sick of living in the sheep's hide, that it wanted something else.

EM: That's what I gathered, yes.

OS: But that wasn't it. After all, a sheep's hide is the natural home for a flea, right? That's where it is *supposed* to live. However, that is where it is supposed to live when the sheep is *alive*, not dead. We were trying to say that this hide that the flea is living in was once a sheep. The hide remains, but the living thing is gone. We—Moroccans, our generation—were living within the remains of something that no longer exists.

EM: In other words . . .

OS: In other words, the world of our grandparents was disappearing—or had disappeared already—and as much as we thought that we were on our way to something better, we had also lost something enormous.

EM: So the song marked this middle

ground? Between the old Morocco and the new one?

OS: Yes, maybe. It was a reminder to look around and notice that the husk was still there. But, as you say, many people misunderstood.

EM: Did these misreadings disturb you?

OS: You know, despite what you say, I don't think the average listener thought of us as a political group. The problem that we had was with the intellectuals and the critics; they're the ones who wanted us to talk about the deeper meaning of our songs. And it's been like this for the last thirty years. I've tried to ignore it as much as I can, because I don't have a political agenda, so I don't have much to say to them. They never wanted to talk about form, about the music itself: why do you sing it this way, why do you play it that way? They weren't interested.

EM: Has the group ever gotten into any trouble with the authorities?

OS: No, not really. Actually, the only time we were ever questioned was about our song "Ma hmouni" [My great sadness]. It had no political message at all. But because the chorus was a bit ambiguous—it was about death, people being lost to us, and as you know, by changing a single vowel, the entire meaning changes—everybody thought we were trying to make trouble.

EM: About all the political kidnappings at the time.

OS: Right, but that wasn't the point. We tried to explain, but they didn't understand, and they kept giving us trouble. So in the end I just went to the police station and said, "All right, look, the song is about Palestine."

EM: And they believed you?

OS: Yes. And it made it easier for every-

one, because that was a recognizable political cause that people could rally behind. But I really think that that's the kind of thinking that turns artists into cannibals. If you only sing about tragedies and great causes, you end up waiting for a thousand students to be thrown in prison, just so you can find the inspiration to perform. I don't believe in anthems. Artists aren't supposed to chase after the events and tragedies of the world. Make an event of your own life, your own art.

EM: Moroccans often refer to you guys as the Beatles of Morocco. There may be some truth to that, but I feel that the connection between Nass el Ghiwane and Morocco is unique—if anything, you mean more to your fans, in an odd way, than the Beatles meant to theirs.

OS: Well, there's a certain respect. When you go out on the town with me, when we get into a taxi, you'll see. Because when I get into a taxi, it's as myself, not as a star. We greet each other like family, even though we don't know each other, because in some way the taxi driver feels that we *are* family.

EM: Yes, but there's something else, too. It seems like your music is everywhere; your fans come from every region of this country, every social class, every age group. How do you explain that?

OS: You should probably ask the historians about that. I can't explain it myself, except to say that there is a deep connection. So deep that it scares me, sometimes. I ask myself, "Why do these people respect Nass el Ghiwane in this way?" I have never thought that it was purely because of our music. It's also because they are aware that we don't have the freedom of expression that we

should have. It's not like it is in the United States. The Rolling Stones can do whatever they want, say whatever they want. We can't, and what's more, as an artist in Morocco, you don't have any security.

EM: Security against what?

OS: Social security. The only thing an artist can depend on is his children. I think that people here are aware of that fact, and they respect us for continuing to find a way to make art despite the difficulties.

When the rooster crows in the morning, he sings five notes. The notes are identical to the ones in the pentatonic scale that all of Berber music is built on. No matter where the rooster is, in Russia, in Bolivia, in China, he sings five notes. That's because the rooster is Berber.

EM: But surely you aren't doing so bad? I mean, your group is the most successful band in the country. If anything, you'd think that people would feel spiteful for your success.

OS: Not at all, for a couple of reasons. First of all, whatever success we've had, we haven't flaunted it. We're not out buying airplanes like the rock stars in America. But the real answer to your question is this: being the first successful band of our kind in Morocco meant that we were the first to be taken advantage of by piracy. In fact, the piracy industry in Morocco developed into what it is today because of us. So, don't be fooled by what you see in the cassette shops. We're not getting a cent of most of it. But getting back to your original question, I think





Omar Sayyed

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people respect us because they identified completely with what we were singing.

EM: Maybe it's a Middle Eastern phenomenon. Millions of Arabs felt the same way about Umm Koulthoum.

OS: But we didn't set out to be a truly Moroccan group. When we first started, we were playing with a guy named Ali al-Qadiri. He hoped that we would turn out to be a Western-style rock band.

EM: You were originally called the New Dervishes, right?

OS: Yes. Al-Qadiri was determined to turn us into a foreign band. He said, "You have to wear different trousers. And no shirts."

I said, "What if it's cold?" He didn't think that was funny, but I was serious. "And what about the fat guys?" Even in those days, some of us were quite plump. "And the scars?" You know, it's not like it is in France, where all the singers are good-looking.

So in the end, we decided against the whole approach. We wore regular clothes. We called ourselves Nass el Ghiwane. And that was the end of it.