

# BEROSKE

P R O D U C T I O N

## Souad Massi

Born in 1972 in Bab El Oued, the old working-class neighbourhood of Algiers that has nursed more than one revolution. Souad grew up in the suburb of St Eugene, amidst gardens that smelled of honeysuckle. Her father was a quiet man, who worked for the national water company and loved *chaabi*, the traditional pop of old Algeria. Her mother came from Kabylia, the mountainous Berber region of northern Algeria; her mother's music was Aretha Franklin and James Brown.

Souad's uncle - everyone called him 'Hugo' - played jazz on his 'flamenco' guitar. Her brothers all played music too, but when she started to learn how to play herself, she found it hard. "Yeah, in any case, music is a boy's thing," her brother would declare, "like cars..." But then he enrolled Souad in music classes at the École des Beaux Arts in Algiers, without even telling her.

"I was scared to be a woman because the status of women in Algeria frightened me," Souad says. She cropped her hair and took to wearing boyish clothes and playing football. People would throw insults and spit in her direction, especially when she was carrying her guitar case. "I was already very solitary," she remembers. "The night was an important time for me. If you wanted to cry, no one could see you. I lived in a large family and you couldn't do that during the day."

She loved going to the movies and watching westerns. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* was her favourite. Through westerns, she found out about country music and folk. They became her obsession, a very strange one for a young Algerian teenager. She also loved old Arabic poetry, and Victor Hugo.

Flamenco gave her goose bumps. Arabic music seemed too poised and polite in comparison. Spain wasn't very far away and Spanish culture was always a big presence in Algeria. She joined a flamenco group called Les Trianas d'Alger and began to play small gigs for fellow students and friends.

But Les Trianas were only imitators. Souad wanted something more, so she joined a hard rock band called Atakor, named after an arid mountain in the Algerian Sahara. "When I wasn't feeling happy, hard rock did me good!" There were protests by fundamentalists at her gigs. Riots too; youth smashing things up. But she found it hard to scream: "I was so used to singing in secret because I was scared that my father would find out what I was singing about."

Souad released a six-track cassette called *Souad*, full of folksy balladry. TV and radio were taking notice. Souad hardly earned a cent, but she became quite famous, which wasn't very welcome. Being a famous female musician in mid-1990s Algeria was very risky. Musicians, theatre directors, movie people, journalists and intellectuals were being murdered every day. Her mother was scared, especially when her daughter walked home from guitar lessons wearing jeans, after curfew. There were anonymous phone calls, even death threats. "We were playing with fire," Souad says.

After graduating from the School of Public Works, Souad found a job in a townplanning practice. She gave up music for a while. Touring in Algeria was too dangerous so earning a living from music seemed like a crazy dream. Then in 1998, she received a call from Aziz Smati, the producer of Algeria's hippest TV music show *Bled Music*, who had been shot and paralysed by the Islamists a few years before. He invited Souad to Paris to take part in a festival called *Femmes d'Algerie*. She arrived in February 1999. Snow lay on the ground. She had no intention of staying.

But there was an unexpected offer to record for Island Records. Souad felt conflicted. She was happy with the attention but also worn by a battle that had to be fought on two fronts - to be successful artist and a

happy woman. She found the coldness between people in France hard to bear. But she also saw that the artist had more weight there than back home.

Her debut album *Raoui* was produced by Bob Coke and released in 2001. It wasn't rai music, it was arabo-andalusian music, it wasn't Maghrebi rap. Souad was something new: a modern north African singer-songwriter who sang gentle pared-down ballads of great simplicity and emotional intensity, in Arabic. She owed more to Leonard Cohen than Cheb Khaled.

Souad toured mercilessly, making up for those 'hidden' years in Algeria. She won several major awards in France for *Raoui*. In 2003, she released her second album *Deb* and headlined at L'Olympia in Paris, a mark of 'arrival' in the career of any Francophone star. *Deb* won Best World Music Album at the Victoires de la Musique in 2004 and Souad toured the world.

Memories, images, scents were luring her back. Souad returned to Algeria in 2003 and found the atmosphere in the country much improved under the new regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. She helped her mother to rebuild her house in Algiers, after the terrible earthquake of May 21st 2003. She claims it was the proudest achievement of her life. She called her third album *Mesk Elil*, which means 'honeysuckle'. It was released in 2005 and on it she sings about her grandfather's house ('Dar Dgedi') and the meeting of old lovers ('Denya Wezmen'). There was another five years before arrival of her fourth studio album *Ô Houria* ('Freedom') in 2010, produced by Francis Cabrel.

One sleepless night, four years ago, at four in the morning, Souad happened to watch a documentary on TV about Cordoba and the wonders of medieval Spain. "I was ashamed," she says, "I asked myself 'How come I've been all around the world but I've never been there. How come nobody ever talk about all those men of learning...Avicenna, Ibn Arabi. Why do people talk about little Arab hoodlums who've stolen something or other, but never talk about these great wise men?'" This epiphany, one that lies in wait for anyone who ventures beyond the tired old clichés that suffocate the image of Arab culture in today's world, gave Souad a new mission and renewed energy. She formed a group called Les Coeurs de Cordoue ('The Hearts of Cordoba') with the Spanish guitarist Eric Fernandez, and plunged into the study of Arabic philosophy and poetry.

She wanted to pay homage to a time when the art of *kalām* or 'discourse' was valued by Muslims, rather than feared, when the central ideas and principles of the faith could draw strength by being subjected to rational argument and debate. In medieval Spain, the wise men in the council of discourse were called the *mutakallimoun* - the scholars of debate - and each of the songs of Souad's new album of the same name is an attempt to encapsulate their spirit of openness, intellect and tolerance in music; each with a piece of poetry at its heart, written by great men who didn't fear danger, like the 9th century Iraqi poet Al Mutanabbi, or his modern counterpart Ahmed Matar.

If Islam once gave birth to Ibn Arabi, one the greatest philosophers in man's history, it can do so again. If the Arab world was once rich beyond imagining, not in petrodollars, but in art, science, knowledge and philosophy, it can be so again. But it must open its heart and speak reason, without fear.