

Aziza Brahim

CLYDE MACFARLANE talks to the Western Saharan singer, activist and *tabal* drummer about Cuban solidarity, life as a refugee, and making her grandmother proud.

Western Sahara was invaded by Morocco and Mauritania in 1975, causing a refugee crisis for the Saharawi people. What is the current political situation?

We're at a stalemate. We've been waiting 40 years to have a referendum, which is the fairest way to resolve our conflict. It's something that has been reaffirmed by the UN, and it was clearly ruled by the International Court of Justice in 1975. The Saharawi have every right to override any claims regionally, particularly by Morocco, and to have self-determination.

You were born in an Algerian refugee camp. How do you connect with your ancestral homeland?

I understand what is being transmitted through my parents' and grandparents' generations. I didn't personally experience the exodus to the camps after the invasions, but I know that previously many people died in the desert. Today, refugees die in the sea. Nobody flees from their countries without a reason, and normally it has a dangerous cause: war, hunger, oppression.

It's hard for the Saharawi to be so far away from the sea, which essentially represents freedom. Our coast is one of the richest fishing waters in the world. We miss the smell of the sea, and the chance to enjoy our own resources. The extremity of the Algerian desert makes us entirely dependent on international help. At present our focus is trying to live with dignity.

What is your earliest memory?

Living with my family in a difficult environment that was always full of love, affection and solidarity. I remember my childhood playing with stones and sand, and always walking barefoot. I remember the festive atmosphere, and the musical Fridays when all the family met to sing spiritual songs.

Have you taken Saharawi music in new directions?

Almost all my family are musicians, and the *tabal* drum is the percussive base of all Saharawi music. It's an instrument that's exclusively played by women, and it always forms the backbone to my music. In my family

everything is traditional, but because of my life experience and exposure I've introduced a lot of fusion.

Who or what inspires you?

Most of my singing is dedicated to my people, so they are my first inspiration. I'm also inspired by the music I listen to from many different places. My grandmother, who has been my biggest influence artistically, was very proud that I was in a position to explore other genres. My grandmother is a poet. Although she's illiterate, she's very wise. She took on the role of documenting the Moroccan takeover.

What is the relationship between Western Sahara and Cuba?

There's an agreement of support and solidarity that has existed since our plight began. This has been demonstrated by a regular wave of Cuban doctors to our refugee camps. At an educational level, the Cuban government has sponsored a lot of Saharawi children. I happened to be one of those children, so I got the chance to go to Cuba and gain a higher education. There I met people from all over the world. I learned to play music in Africa, but the Cuban influences in my sound are clear.

Your track 'Los Muros' (The Walls) seems to have an important meaning. What are your feelings towards the sand wall erected by the Moroccan government?

I feel impotence, because this wall is 60 times larger than the Berlin Wall was and yet it never appears in the newspapers. A lot of people don't know it exists. This wall hurts the essential rights of the Saharawi people, which is our right to return home. The wall divides Western Sahara, and stands as the physical symbol of an illegal occupation.

What hope do you have for the future of the Saharawi?

Self-determination. I would like to think that the Moroccan state can accomplish this legally by announcing the fair referendum that the UN resolutions are calling for. ■

Aziza Brahim's new album, *Abbar el Hamada* (Glitterbeat Records) is out now.

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