

Rachid Taha, North Africa's punk-rock hero

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

RACHID TAHA

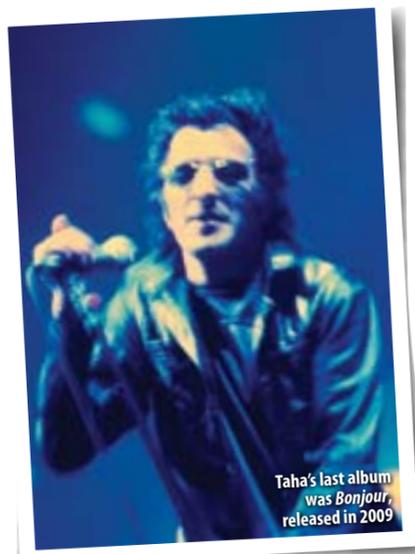
The North African singer's incendiary music and caustic lyrics are as relevant today as when he began his career back in the 80s

WORDS ANDY MORGAN

In 2004, Rachid Taha released an angry, probing, tank-plated fist of an album called *Tékitoi*. On it there's a song called 'Safi' in which Taha growls out his frustration over a deep-core bass, trilling *oud* and thrash metal guitars: 'The oppression is great! The government has gagged the people. Our culture is the one-party state. No law, no respect. But my heart is pure!' Listening back to it now, 'Safi' sounds like a perfect anthem for the Arab Spring. In fact, Rachid Taha's entire output, with its mix of punk, metal, techno and the entire contents of your favourite North African corner shop, sounds like it was recorded to accompany an imminent Arab uprising of some kind or another. The problem is, when most of his records were released, no one was chanting slogans down in Tahrir Square. In musical terms at least, Taha often seemed to be out

there manning the barricades on his own, lobbing lyrical Molotovs at the orcs and goblins of France and Arabia in a molten rasping voice, dangling his carrion-bird frame from the mic stand like the demented Algerian cousin of Johnny Rotten.

It's been a lonely battle. Doubtless anyone less mouthy, ornery and wickedly intelligent than Taha would have jacked it all in a long time ago. His refusal to become a cuddly, cabaret pop dolly like many of his crooning Algerian contemporaries has earned him the barbed reputation of a maverick North African punk hero. Taha's records fidget uncomfortably in the Algerian *rai* section, the French rock section, the world music section or any other section that your local record shop or online emporium might dream up. You need infinite flexibility of categorisation to do his



music any justice at all.

Somehow Taha took the wrong turn when he arrived in France in 1968, after a decade growing up in the town of Sig, in Algeria's wild, wild western province of Oran. Instead of hauling up the drawbridge and wallowing in the false security of the community into which he was born – like so many North African immigrants chose to do – Taha left his home in the wooded hills of Alsace to go out and do battle with the racism, economic despair and general snobbishness of France in the late 70s. He worked for a while as a travelling salesman and a skivvy in a heating appliance factory near Lyon. He also started a club there called Les Refoulés (The Rejects), where the music policy was... no music policy. Everything from Led Zep, the New York Dolls, the Clash, the Who and Johnny Cash to Nass El Ghiwane, Oum Kalthoum, Farid El Atrache and Camarón de la Isla was deemed fair fodder for the wheels of steel.

With this musical self-education, it's not surprising that Taha's first band, Carte de Séjour (Resident's Permit), was unique from the word go; a bunch of French and North African rockers ranting about the ills of French society was a rare sighting in the early 80s. The band's version of Charles Trenet's 'Douce France' was an inspired piece of provocation, tearing up the country's tourist board image of sun-kissed vineyards, curlicued elegance and gastronomic refinement and defiling one of French popular music's most sacred heirlooms in the process. Taha saw the Clash play at the Mogador in Paris in 1982 and managed to hand them a tape of Carte de Séjour songs after the gig. Naturally, he never heard back, but when the song 'Rock The Casbah' came out later that year... well, you could forgive Taha for thinking he'd planted some kind of seed.

Twenty years later he repaid the compliment by recording his own version of the song.

It was also in 1982 that Taha first met and teamed up with ex-Gong guitarist and

visionary producer Steve Hillage. Although Taha has always abhorred the snobbery of the English rock scene, this particular Anglo-French-Algerian marriage turned out to be blessed by some higher being. It produced four of the most radical and groundbreaking albums in the recent history of North African inspired music: *Olé Olé*, *Diwân*, *Made in Medina* and *Tékitoi*. *Diwân* is the masterpiece of the quartet. It has become the road map for any worthwhile rock or electro detour into the music of the Maghreb. Hillage's innate curiosity about the musical culture of the Arab world – and many other worlds besides – combined with his Brit-instinct for knowing what rocks and what doesn't, made him the perfect partner for Taha.

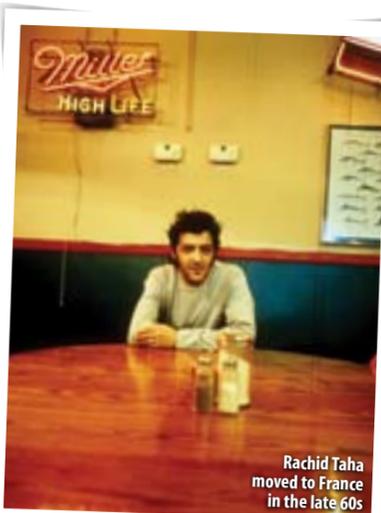
.....
Rachid Taha's greatness has always been his refusal to compromise

For a while it seemed as if the partnership was positively indestructible, but unfortunately the pair fell out in 2008, for reasons that remain thankfully obscure. Taha decided to work with Gaëtan Roussel from the mega-famous French rockers Louise Attaque and the producer Mark Plati on his most recent album *Bonjour*. All the ingredients were there, but the Hillage X factor wasn't, and you feel its absence from the first earful. At its very best, the Hillage-Taha partnership produced music that walks a high wire between raw rock power and North African subtlety, without ever tipping too predictably either way.

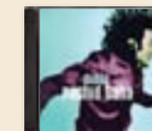
Taha's greatness has always been his refusal to compromise. He never strolls down the obvious path, peddling the obvious political views or hawking pre-scripted fusions from the Exotic Maghrebi Rock songbook. Everything he says or records or does is designed to test you and test himself. When he peroxided his hair and wore Aryan blue contact lenses for the cover of *Olé Olé*, he was sticking it to all the lily-livered TV producers in France who daren't sully their studios with the presence of an Arab. And he was also teasing his macho homophobic Arab contemporaries. 'Look what a fey pretty boy I can be,' he was saying. 'I hope you feel disgusted.' That's pure Taha. His mission has always been to make you feel uncomfortable, and more importantly, to make you think, whoever you might be – Arab, English, French, rocker, intellectual – it hardly matters. Of course, that mission wouldn't be worth a Barbary monkey's fart if it weren't accompanied by searingly powerful and innovative music. Long live the revolution! ●

.....
PODCAST Hear music from Rachid Taha on this issue's podcast

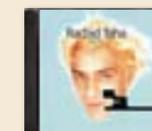
UNIVERSAL FRANCE



BEST ALBUMS



Diwân (Barclay, 1998)
The apotheosis of the Rachid Taha-Steve Hillage partnership in which the blend of North African with rock, techno or dub achieves perfect equilibrium and power. The album consists of cover versions of old North African classics and features 'Ya Rayah,' the old Dahmane El Harrachi song about exile and nostalgia, which has become one of the biggest North African dance floor classics of all time.



Olé Olé (Barclay, 1995)
The moment when Taha embraced techno, musically and sartorially. It could have been a disaster, but Hillage was on hand to make sure it was a triumph. The anthem 'Voilà Voilà,' about the resurgence of right-wing extremism in La Douce France, is a classic, worthy of any barricade or mass demo.



Made in Medina (Barclay, 2000)
Despite the cool designer minimalism of the front cover, the mood grows more sombre on this album, the guitars more lethal in their chainsaw intensity. It sets the vibes up nicely for 9/11 and the decade that follows.



Tékitoi (Wrasse/Universal France, 2004)
"I dreamed of singing about my own nightmares." That's how Taha describes the genesis of his last collaboration with Steve Hillage. The mood is darker than ever before and the existential question in the title, which means 'Who the f**k are you?' in French slang, is central. Pure metal Maghreb of the highest order. Reviewed in #26.

BEST AVOIDED



Barbès (Nord Sud/Barclay, 1990)
For his first solo sortie, Taha decided to team with producer Godwin Logie. The result isn't bad, just mediocre, with that textbook cod-funk production that was the signature sound of late 80s sono-mondiale Paris. There are no grounds for immortality here. Taha would have to start working with Steve Hillage to make the grade.

IF YOU LIKE RACHID TAHA, THEN TRY... SPEED CARAVAN



Kalashnik Love (Realworld, 2009)
Rachid Taha has many musical offspring, but *oud* maestro Mehdi Haddab and Speed Caravan are among the most raw, heavy and exciting. The combination of Haddab's virtuosity and dazzling speed, the smoky elegance of the Arabesque themes and the sheer torque of the backing tracks makes for an exhilarating ride. A Top of the World in #64.

Speed Caravan – rock'n'roll style *oud* playing

