



BABEL MED

Philip Sweeney visits France's second city, Marseille, and discovers the *métissage* of music on offer at its annual music festival-cum-industry gathering

Rarely has the thorny problem of naming a festival without recourse to some WOMAD-style acronym been resolved so neatly. Marseille is the *bab* – gateway – to the Mediterranean *par excellence*, at least as far as France is concerned. And although pretty much any conurbation large enough to have a Tesco Metro can call itself Babel these days, Marseille has been outstandingly polyglot for centuries. Nearly a hundred years after the journalist traveller Albert Londres published his classic *Marseille Porte du Sud*, describing the great pullulation of seafarers, traders, immigrants and itinerants, exactly the same situation pertains today, with new nationalities – Comorans, Brazilians, Romanians – added to the layers of Italians, Corsicans, Algerians and others who have traditionally composed the patchwork identity of France's second city. Bernard Aubert, director of Babel Med throughout its ten-year life, as well as its

autumn equivalent, the Fiesta des Suds, comments: "Marseille is like all the classic port cities, New Orleans, Naples, Liverpool, and it's much more vital than Paris these days." The Dock des Suds, home of the festival, is one of the last vestiges of old maritime Marseille: an iron-framed sugar warehouse complex painted brutalist matte black inside, standing alone in a couple of acres of flyovers, concrete and cranes from which are sprouting great gleaming new edifices. This frenzy of building began a decade ago with the huge Euroméditerranée scheme, Europe's largest urban regeneration project, and reached its peak this year with the preparations for Marseille Provence 2013, Marseille's year as European City of Culture. The festival complex, with its twin marquee appendages and outside food court, stands literally at the foot of the soaring black glass skyscraper designed by architectural superstar Zaha

Hadid, western Marseille's newest landmark. Half a kilometre away the big white ferries to Algiers, Tunis and Corsica dock, and a bit farther west the gigantic cruise ships are ready to set off and deface other beautiful old Mediterranean ports for half a day. Although the festival site is somewhat isolated, it has the great advantage of a shiny new tramway gliding every seven minutes from its doorstep down to the Vieux Port and the historic *quartier* of le Panier, so a visit to Babel Med can easily be combined with some sightseeing in gritty, fascinating, old Marseille.

Like old Marseille itself, Babel Med has plenty of traders, and not only the stands selling oysters, fried fish, crêpes, T-shirts, books and drinks, for which you have to queue first to change your money into tokens. Whether this is to keep the temptation of cash away from Marseille's fearsome gangs or even more fearsome corrupt politicians is unclear. The music trade fair during the day fills a couple of halls with stands of record companies, touring agents, cultural associations and sundry networkers. There are also conferences on technical music production and marketing issues. I've been a *conferencier* on two occasions: this year on a panel addressing the subject of how world music artists should penetrate the UK market.

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Photos by Jo Frost & Jean de Peña



One of the other British speakers opined they should learn English. Depressingly, this is of course exactly what many young French acts are doing, and one can foresee the day when a young French rock band without an English name and lyrics will be a rarity.

In the meantime, many of them are adopting names beginning with Radio something or other, and playing a hotchpotch of European and African musics, with bits of *cumbia*, dub reggae, hip-hop, electronica and much else thrown in for good measure. This conforms theoretically to the cultural dogma of *métissage* dominant for the last quarter century, and sometimes also results in interesting music, though rarely anything of the stature of the outstanding concert in 2013 by Vinicio Caposella, whose Italian take on *rebetika* was not only an utterly riveting performance but also completely suited to the city. If Caposella were to bung a bit of Marseille *opérette*, Algiers *chaabi* and the odd

number by Yves Montand and Michel Sardou into the mix he'd consign the entire roster of Radio Whatevers into the spam folder of history at one stroke.

World fusion is by no means the only genre found in Babel Med, of course, and the geographic parameters are not restricted to the Mediterranean. This year's event boasted 36 concerts across four stages over three days and nights. The programme included traditional music from Tajikistan, Turkey and Iran; popular sounds from Chad and Guinea; and Caribbean dance music in the form of Dominican *merengue* from the Canadian resident accordionist Joaquin Diaz, who spent virtually all the time he wasn't on stage strolling around the complex in the company of the Réunionnais squeezeboxer René Lacaille provoking impromptu photos and jam sessions. In addition to La Réunion, other French overseas territories always get a decent look in, this year via Martiniquan singer Victor O and

the Guadeloupean *gwo ka* troupe Kan'nida. As for the other side of the stages, the public, it's pretty varied. Aubert is proud of the fact that his festivals are truly popular, unlike some of the other more elite or narrowly focused festivals. Reasonable too, with an evening ticket costing just €15. So the middle-aged French world enthusiasts are joined by young *beurs* from the *quartiers nord* estates for rappers in the ambit of the Marseille stars like IAM and Akhenaton, while elderly *pieds-noirs* (North African-born Europeans) turn out for vintage Algiers acts like El Gusto and the long-term former Marseille resident and pied-noir pianist Maurice el Médioni. This year 150 free tickets were reserved for homeless people, including Roma from the alarmingly third world-like encampments, which spring up on roundabouts only blocks away from the city centre. If Marseille singer Gari Grèu's 2013 anthem 'Export Import' still rings true for Marseille, it's the import bit, the inward journey through the gate from the Med that most visitors to the festival, musical or not, aspire to these days. ♦

➤ **DATES** The tenth edition of Babel Med takes place March 20-22 2014
 ➤ **ONLINE** www.dock-des-suds.org