



TIMITAR

Peter Culshaw travels to Agadir on the Moroccan Atlantic coast for the festival that celebrates the country's Amazigh (Berber) music and culture

There's a rapper I'd been told about, who is huge here in North Africa right now, called Muslim. He's on at Timitar Festival in Agadir and the crowd at the seaside 'urban' stage in Agadir swells to over 100,000 as he ambles onstage. I'm with a couple of Moroccan guys from Casablanca and they tell me his big hit is called 'Al Rissala' (The Letter), a fiery anti-authoritarian condemnation of corruption and ignorance in high places. The authorities you would think might be nervous – it was a similar rap by the Tunisian El Général back in 2010 that was one of the triggers for the Tunisian revolution.

On another stage, the Place Al Amal, Alpha Blondy's hard-hitting ten-piece reggae band

from Ivory Coast sing a song about "spiritual terrorists" who think it's OK to kill for religious reasons and *gimbri* player Mehdi Nassouli was positively post-modern, almost prog-rock, while the next night local heroine Najat Aâtabou sings songs in support of women's rights, in a more traditional style.

Previously at Timitar I'd caught Marcel Khalife, a Lebanese artist who sings rousing Palestinian revolutionary songs. I also met the leading Moroccan rockers Hoba Hoba Spirit, who sang a number called 'Marock'n'Roll' and another called 'Will to Live', which is the setting of a poem written in the 40s – the song became an anthem for the demonstrations in Morocco that occurred a couple of years ago.

Timitar is at heart a celebration of Berber culture. This culture has been historically oppressed in these parts, even though they are the indigenous population. The origins of their music go back millennia before the arrival of the Arabs.

"It's a good way of letting off steam," says Réda Allali, the lead singer Hoba Hoba Spirit, referring to Timitar as a kind of safety valve. "It's a step in the right direction anyway – although there are many steps ahead." They take delight in the fact, unlike in Europe and the US – where you can't really rock the boat and we all have become well-behaved, if brain-dead consumers – in North Africa it's relatively easy to create waves, scandals and infamy. "In London now, unlike in the 70s, everything seems to be permitted, so nothing can shock people."

At the core of the festival are local Berber singers like Fatima Tabaamrant, who spent her childhood in the Anti-Atlas mountains, and whose life story of losing her mother is well-known here. Other local stars like Inouraz and the veteran group Oudaden were pioneers in the Berber revival, and are accordingly revered by the Timitar audience.

In the end, though, the audience are here to party, and go bananas for huge artists like Nass El Ghiwane or the *rai* star Khaled.

There have been recent Berber uprisings in Algeria and elsewhere. As some like the New York-based Saharan-Berber singer Malika Zorra see it, the festival may be a bread and circuses distraction. But it's also true the authorities here are canner and more flexible than the more blatantly repressive regimes elsewhere in the region, which may be one reason Morocco is more stable than its neighbours. Another reason is the unifying force of the seemingly universally revered king, whose picture was tellingly on the side of the stage at Timitar's main venue, Place Al Amal.

In the last few years, the authorities have set up a Berber TV station and the language is now taught in schools and recognised as a national language. There is also an effort to rename the word 'Berber,' a foreign word derived from 'Barbarian,' to Amazigh, meaning 'Free Man.'

Over the last 20 years Morocco has been establishing itself as one of the great countries for music festivals. As well as Timitar, the

biggest ones are the funky Gnawa Festival in Essaouira, where 100,000 people have been known to crash on the beach, and the massive pop festival Mawazine in Rabat, which has starred the likes of Rihanna and Stevie Wonder. Then there's the great Fes Festival of Sacred Music, a smaller but hugely important event known for inviting musicians of all faiths, a 'beacon of tolerance,' vital as a polar opposite to the madness of ISIS.

Timitar has become an important part of Morocco's commitment to music festivals. It seems, though, that Timitar is more aimed at the Moroccan locals than the others. Agadir was largely destroyed by an earthquake in 1960 and it is less atmospheric than other cities such as Fes as most of the buildings are modern. In spite of its less characterful atmosphere, the climate ensures it has many tourist visitors year round (and if you do feel the need for a more typical Moroccan town the charming Taroudant is half an hour from Agadir airport).

The artistic director of Timitar is the dynamic and charming Brahim El Mazned, who is something of a cultural dynamo – he's also starting a new Visa for Music conference for African music, which will take place in Rabat in November. He helped put together the recent groundbreaking album *Al Qantara: The Bridge* (reviewed in #103) by Benjamin Taubkin, the Brazilian pianist who he invited to appear at Timitar and whose album is an intriguing

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Brazilian-Moroccan fusion. Mazned also effectively manages the Gnawa *gimbri* player from Taroudant, Mehdi Nassouli, who has real potential to make it as a world music star.

Mazned is not against thinking the unthinkable, like considering inviting the only groups who don't appear in Moroccan festivals – those from Saharan refugee camps, where there is a decades-old territorial dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front of the Western Sahara, who are fighting for independence. Admittedly, this would be a political and media minefield. Mazned also has, what seems to English sensibilities at least, a quirky side in some of his programming – last year there was the country music veteran Kenny Rogers, this year 80s soul-popsters Imagination. But as he says, "for me, this is world music. They are good artists and the audience here has never seen anything like them." ♦

♦ **DATES** Next year's Timitar festival will take place July 22-25 2015

♦ **ONLINE** www.festivaltimitar.ma



Rising Gnawa *gimbri* star Mehdi Nassouli at Timitar 2014

All photos by Rachid Bouhina