

By Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

FLOWERS FOR ALGERIA

It's not easy to be a singer in Arabic countries, you really have to prove yourself," says Algerian singer and guitarist **Souad Massi**. For a Muslim woman who wears jeans, doesn't cover her head, and dares to perform frowned upon Western genres such as hard rock, that's somewhat of an understatement. Then again, understatement seems to be the favored method of communication for the critically acclaimed singer-songwriter. Exiled in Paris since 1999, Massi's music addresses the longing and hardships of Algeria's expatriate community with subtlety and hope. Her third CD, *Honeysuckle (Mesk Elli)* (Wrasse), presents the complicated landscape of the culturally diverse, war-torn country with a melancholy air that never directly states anything. Yet, the 11-track album, with Massi's lustrous, sultry voice couched in everything from Algerian chaabi rhythms to flamenco flourishes and Tuareg

"It's always a problem when you're an outsider," she says of being an immigrant in France's xenophobic culture. "In general, it's very difficult but I'm in France to work. I sacrifice my life. I have to cope and deal with it." It's something that Africans and Arabs have been doing for generations in France, struggling to survive amid the French's refusal to acknowledge their colonial past or make any adjustments for it. The recent nationwide riots illustrated the simmering resentment and anger that such denial reaps, but Massi chooses to express her frustrations through her deceptively tranquil music.

Although she's often compared to Joan Baez and Tracy Chapman and lists spaghetti westerns and Emmylou Harris as influences, Souad Massi's sound is really unlike anything else, especially popular Algerian music. While Rachid Taha and Khaled have erected impressive careers with thumping rai

rhythms, Massi weaves a sweeping tapestry that perhaps points to her nomadic Berber roots. Singing mostly in Arabic with rock, folk, and classical Arabic music as her foundation, Massi can sound like a weary Cape Verdean morna singer on one tune and a lovelorn French chanteuse on the next. At 32, she has developed an identity closely tied to Algeria but rooted in the various musical genres that helped nurture her as a musician. "Algeria is very significant to who I am," she says. "Geographically, it opens up to lots of places where different music is born. That's who I am too."

Honeysuckle (Mesk Elil) opens with "Soon (Kilyoum)" a rousing tune that mixes a churning chaabi beat steeped with the yearning and loss of morna melodies. It's about an immigrant who tries to communicate the loneliness of another land while attempting to convince a loved one they will return home soon. It serves as a telling example of the dichotomy of the entire album. Lots of inter-

esting hybrids and uptempo rhythms are paired with lyrics that translate intense longing and melancholy. Massi's voice is mercurial and can boast a wide range of emotion and attitudes and it's this quality that transcends everything else. On "That's Life (Denya Wezen)" her voice melts into zithers and flamenco guitars for high drama, while "There's Worse (Hagda Wala Akter)" positively weeps with mournful cello and Massi's haunting crooning that reveals hurt and painful memories. The stand-out track, "Inspiration (Ilham)" offers a bouncing Tuareg groove coupled with the singer's rough, high-powered vocals. Listeners would be convinced that this was the CD's lone upbeat dance tune, if not for lyrics that explain a tale of betrayal and sadness.

Though all of Massi's music reflects the conflict of longing for the past yet being firmly planted in the present, it also displays her connection to Algeria and hope for its future. Indirectly, she represents the wealth of Algerian culture and the need to embrace the future as well as the past.

Upcoming World Music Shows:

Ghanatta, Rocambu Jazz, and Occidental Brothers at HotHouse on January 7th.

Yukijurushi: The Bronx Bossa Nova Band at HotHouse on January 11th.



Photo By Carole Bellache

Souad Massi

grooves, speaks volumes.

Growing up in the suburbs of the coastal capital Algiers, Massi listened to everything from rock to country to reggae and flamenco. Traditional Arabic folk music didn't interest her. "We got a lot of music from all over because Algeria is at the crossroads to Europe and Africa. All these different influences were on the radio," she says. With these elements swirling around her, it wasn't too surprising when she hooked up with a flamenco band and then most famously in the mid '90s, a hard rock band, **Atakor**. "They asked me to play with them. In the beginning it was very noisy but in the end, it was O.K.," she says.

The Algerian military government apparently didn't think so. Rock represents rebellion to fundamentalists and even though Massi's lyrics never made any overt political statements, her growing fame made her a target. Violence at concerts and anonymous phone calls with thinly veiled death threats inspired her to question her musical career. She had fronted Atakor for seven years and enjoyed a best-selling album and critical acclaim for the band's fusion of folk and rock, but she considered giving it all up. Just at that point in 1999, the musician got a call to perform at the Femmes d'Algérie festival in Paris. Her pure voice and acoustic-guitar playing won her a record deal with Island Records and she's been in Paris ever since.