

MASHROU' LEILA

Let's start with a basic assumption: that a band based in Beirut, whose CD sleeves are a whirl of Arabic lettering, whose lyrics are written in a Lebanese dialect -- that's one for the world music pile, right?

Wrong.

If there's one thing Mashrou' Leila excel at, it's confronting and dismantling assumptions. The loose collective of students who began jamming together in 2008 at the American University of Beirut has gradually focused into a an ambitious, fiercely articulate quintet: vocalist/lyricist Hamed Sinno, guitarist/multi-instrumentalist Firas Abou Fakher, violinist Haig Papazian, drummer Carl Gerges, and bassist Ibrahim Badr. And the music they make has focused, too, into a charged, atmospheric version of pop that is geographically impossible to place. You hear it the moment you press play on *Ibn el Leil*: 'Aeode' begins with an assured yet restless bassline, bruised by the memory of dancing all night to Blondie and Joy Division; a shuffle-snap rhythm; synth notes that scan the scene like searchlights; a violin picking its way across rubble, skein of silk billowing behind it, and finally, after two full minutes of building intensity, a voice, breathy, unearthly, eyeing up a melody with naked intimacy. This isn't a song or an album to limit to known categories: it's music that might reshape the world.

And it's music that has been capturing people across the world. Arab audiences are already huge: 10000 people at shows in Egypt, 5000 in Beirut and Dubai. But word is already spreading: in December 2015 they played to a rapturous, sold-out audience in London's Barbican, and in 2016 made their first visit to the US, wowing crowds in Brooklyn, Washington and LA -- crowds not just of expats but people with no Arabic background, let alone language skills.

Going global makes sense: even in relatively stable Lebanon, says Sinno, there's no infrastructure to support an indie band. And yet: what a time to be an Arab pop band in the global west, surrounded by the rhetoric -- on both sides -- of the war on terror. The band was in Washington when Omar Mateen opened fire in an Orlando club, killing 49 people, and witnessed directly the virulence of anti-Muslim racism unleashed in its wake. The irony was that Sinno, who is queer, and defies Lebanese law and patrician, homophobic culture to sing more or less explicitly about queer sexuality, could be identified with either perpetrator or victims, depending on the perspective of the person looking. As he puts it: "Here you're too queer for your ethnicity, and there you're too ethnic for the queer community."

A similar construction could apply to almost everything this band does. Fakher offers another one, in relation to their sound: "People from Lebanon or around pick up a strong pop/rock influence from the US or UK in our music. While people from the US/UK and Europe seem to pick up the Lebanese/Arabic influence. Which is fun." While the musical influences, as described by violinist Haig Papazian, "range from Arcade Fire to jungle to [Egyptian folk singer] Asmahan," one thing is constant: all the singing is in Arabic.

And here's another assumption: that Arabic is what comes naturally to Sinno. But that, too is wrong. He grew up with parents who had lived across Europe and in the US: "So there was a lot of English at home. I relearned the language -- I still haven't mastered it, mind you -- through writing the songs," he admits. "It's fun: I think in English, and then spend months on translation resources. That process does a lot for the writing itself, because it forces you to really explore some concepts, especially when they don't readily translate."

His lyrics are knowingly literary -- in the expansive sense that includes everything from poetry to political theory. "I'm a closeted pseudo-academic," he says cheerfully. "But I'm also a bit of a douche bag: the lyrics are full of unnecessary references. It's almost like: dude, just sing a basic love song and go home. But the music I like has always been about that. The first time I heard *Wuthering Heights* I freaked out. That's the music I value, that's the music I'd like to be a part of."

The reissue of their most recent album *Ibn el Leil* has given the band a different way of thinking about how they want to be heard. For one thing, says Fakher, they're taking the opportunity to "imbue it with another layer of time." Inspired by an acoustic session recorded with NPR while in the US, and a stint on the Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior, they're including some stripped-back versions of the original recordings: rearrangements, says Sinno, that "maintain the drama but play with the gravity." Between tracks there will be snippets from demos: "Very raw," says Papazian, "us jamming around with ideas in the studio, to give you an insight into the writing process and the life span of a song."

Most of the lyrics reflect a period of mourning: Sinno was grieving the death of his father when writing -- and doing so mostly in nightclubs. With time, that private emotion has shifted to a public communication, with Ibn el Leil addressing a growing culture in Beirut that thrives at night.

The widespread assumption that arises from talk like that is that Mashrou' Leila are the voice of the youth who ignited the Arab Spring. This one, too, is wrong: so wrong. "You cannot conflate all these separate political movements into one thing just because they're Arab, and then take five males -- where are women in your representational politics? People that are in prison that are dying because of voicing their political concerns? -- and then tell me that we get to speak for them," says Sinno. He's wary of anything that smacks of racial profiling, and he sees his political reading as armoury against that. "You need to be able to use that heritage of theory to fight back -- or not so much fight back as try and level the playing field, so that someone will potentially understand why it's problematic for them to call you an oriental, which happens all the time."

In this quest to complicate, one thing about Mashrou' Leila remains blessedly simple. On stage, they are a great live band: lithe, alluring, and just the right side of belligerent. Unsurprisingly, their authority-baiting discourse both in interview and lyrics has begun to provoke a reaction: "actual restrictions," says Fakher, "like us not being able to perform in certain places in the Arab world." But this is one assumption that's safe to hold on to: that a band this great on stage are destined for stardom, no matter what pile their CD is slipped on to.