

MASHROU' LEILA REVIEW – SEQUINS, SENSUALITY AND A DAZZLING AURA OF RESISTANCE

By: Maddy Costa

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In the seven years since Mashrou' Leila formed at the American University of Beirut, the quintet – whose name, in fact, means “overnight project” – have won comparisons to everyone from Arctic Monkeys and Radiohead to Roxy Music and Wild Beasts. It's a promising set of references that the backdrop of guitar, bass and drums would struggle to meet were it not for the band's twin poles of flamboyance: violinist Haig Papazian and vocalist Hamed Sinno. At this launch concert for their fourth album, *Ibn el Leil*, the two even look subtly different from their bandmates, with leather bands tied around their wrists and sequined T-shirts shorn of sleeves. They charge the stage with electricity, sensuality and a dazzling aura of resistance.

That resistance, in an Arab context, registers in Sinno's authority-baiting lyrics, his references to checkpoint thuggery, shootings, club culture and gay desire. In a western context, it surfaces in his refusal to sing in English. At this gig, he also mostly speaks in Arabic between songs, mindful of the audience watching a simulcast on MTV Lebanon. It's a mark of his magnetism that, as a film of Beirut floods a screen at the back of the stage, this split focus creates a thrilling sense of cross-cultural togetherness.

The music conveys a similar intertwining. Papazian's violin slices through the thumping drum pattern of *Im-bim-billilah*; it brings space and question to *Asnam*, from the new album; and in *Taxi*, its sinuous smokiness is haunted by Papazian's Armenian roots. Sinno's vocal dances with the violin as though courting a lover: in *Aoede*, the sound is fluid and eerie, a mercurial contralto; in *Marrikh*, it trembles before soaring into sustained high notes. It's such an impressive performance that stadiums seem not only possible but imminent.

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