

Hasna el Becharia

Vive les Célibataires!

Interview by Julia Varley

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When did you start singing and playing music?

My father was a Gnawa master in Béchar, a town in the Sahara desert in south-west Algeria, forty kilometres from Morocco. When he made rituals I left school to go with him. Many families would call on him. I learnt to play the *gumbri* with him, but he said that if I played I should be initiated, because it is dangerous to be in contact with Gnawa, especially for a woman. Later I wanted to exchange the *gumbri* for the guitar, but my father did not want me to learn that instrument. Sometimes he would hit me, saying I should go to school or learn to make couscous with my mother. Only boys played guitar.

What is Gnawa?

When I was a little girl, I didn't know. My father would heal people. If my father made a ritual, the person who was ill would come alone and he would make some Gnawa to make him well, with music from Morocco. My father is originally Moroccan and he introduced Gnawa to Béchar.

During the rituals I could fall into a trance. The rhythm made me feel better, as if I was on good form. I played the *gumbri*, and learned to use the *jaoui* (incense) with my father and the other musicians. Thirty-five people played the *kark-abous*, while my father only played the *gumbri*. When he played people felt something special, which touched them directly in their hearts and spirits.

My father was seventeen when he crossed the border and arrived in Béchar where he met my mother. He never left again. My father was Gnawa, my father's father was Gnawa like most of my ancestors. The Gnawa are descendants from the black slaves who were taken to North Africa. They are organised in confraternities and they have spiritual and therapeutic powers. They play therapeutic music as part of a ritual in which the *djinns* (spirits) come from the invisible world into the visible world to cure human beings. The *gumbri* (which has the same function as the *balafon* in black African music) and the percus-

sion lead people into a trance. We sing the love of God and the Prophet, in a language that mixes Arabic with African dialects like Bambara, Haoussa, Germa and Fulani.

Why did you choose to play the guitar?

I was in love with the guitar. I was reaching the end of my studies. My teacher, a French woman, sent a message to my father to say that I was not going to school. I left school to dedicate myself to the guitar. I learned to play hidden away in the kitchen.

My cousin Mohamed helped me. He lent me his guitar and helped me find some notes. If my father returned, Mohamed would whistle and call me so I could avoid being punished. I learned to play by listening to a short song by Enrico Macias, called *J'ai quitté mon pays* (I left my home-country). He is an Algerian Jewish singer who had to leave (like all French people in 1962/1963), but I was young and didn't really understand the story. I was just fascinated by the sound of the guitar. I found the guitar notes by listening to some Arab-Moroccan records on the record player my mother bought for me. My mother said, "All right, as long as you don't go with boys in the streets, and you keep to the kitchen and to the guitar". I was fifteen years old.

How did you start singing in public?

My neighbour, who was at school with me, was going to get married, and, as he had seen me playing the guitar at home, he asked me to play for the girls of the school who were invited. He had to ask my mother if she would let me go and she said yes, as long as he brought me back home. So I played outside there for the first time. The girls were happy and said: "Oh, Hasna, you play the guitar! You are good! Well done!" After the feast, there was the wedding supper and my neighbour's mother asked me to come back for the evening. My mother was

asked again for permission and she received some money.

My mother was paralysed, blind and diabetic, and my father left her for another woman. I could help her. Some of the women at the feast said that I should work for my mother. They said that I was good and should go on, that fortunately God had given me this gift. I was afraid, but I started touring weddings.

Still my father did not want me to play; he said that if I played at weddings I could not return home. My mother cried and said; "Let her! She is not doing any harm; she goes to school; she is home and does the housework, cooks, and then she goes to play." When she heard that I was at a wedding, my father's other wife came and said, "Careful of what you are doing, Hasna. People will say that you leave your sick mother alone." She hit me and I cried.

My mother insisted that I should go because I brought her food. My father had left my brother, my sister, my mother and I alone. He had three boys and three girls with the other woman. I was the one to bring money home. I could not understand why my father didn't want me to play and sing. I didn't listen to him anymore because I had to help my mother. He would no longer decide for me. If he had stayed with us, I would not have been able to play. In Béchar people do not let girls do things like ride bicycles, or become mechanics, as they should only get married. Women cannot do men's things, it is forbidden. My grandmother encouraged me: "Go on, Hasna! Don't listen to your father, he has left." So I worked and I managed to get my sister married, so I feel content.

Did you marry and have a family of your own?

My father gave me away in matrimony to my cousin Bilal. He did not even know me when he married me. I did not want him. But people said that if I didn't marry I would be

ruined; I should get married and have babies. Have a baby?!? I didn't even know what it was. I didn't even know why the *monsieur* takes the woman. On the first night, when my husband came to me and told me to undress, I said: "What? Undress? Me? I am not going to undress!" I could not understand and he hit me. You can still see the scar I have here near my mouth. Now I never ever want a man, it disgusts me. I don't want anyone to touch me. I was fifteen years old. I had no idea about any of these things. The woman who was with me - because we have a young woman who looks after us - told me I should undress. I cried.

My mother was at home. They had taken me to my husband's house. That is how it is done with us. I had no idea what was happening to me, why they had dressed me up, made my plaits, given me perfume and nice clothes. I didn't know what it was to get married. It was sad.

I was married by force, but after a year I divorced. I couldn't stay. I had a boy, my son. Then my husband died and I was free, nobody would order me about anymore. My husband did not let me do the things I wanted, I could not sing, I should only stay at home. After he died, I dedicated myself exclusively to the guitar and I started to sing and play again. It was in 1972 and I was twenty years old. A year had gone by during which I could not play and sing, it was difficult to start again and search for women who could play with me.

We were three, and we only played for women. Little by little things happened. A Spanish man called Gomez, who had a small sound equipment shop, suggested that I should buy an electric guitar and an amplifier to "warm up" the women more. I asked him how I could find them and he showed me a brochure with lots of instruments. "Look Hasna! This is the guitar and this is the amplifier." "Wow! And how does one get hold of one?" "At Oran". I had two bracelets that

my mother had given me for my wedding. I sold the bracelets, left for Oran and bought the guitar and the amplifier.

Now when I played at weddings it was beautiful. Afterwards I got lots of work all the time. I worked and worked and helped my mother. It was all going very well. My mother gave me great happiness by saying: "You helped me, Hasna. God will give you all that you want."

What is it that you want?

I want to help children. There are lots of poor people in Algeria. If I can work, I can help and earn some money for the people there. It is my destiny to sing. In Béchar people invited me to entertain them and their friends for an evening. There were feasts at weddings, but also when a baby was born, for engagements, when they cut the *pipi chichila*. My house was big and open to everyone; I didn't hide any money. I gave what I had, as I lived as a celibate. I took some women who had been left by their husbands, and their children into my home. They ate with me. I was never alone with my son. There were always friends, old and young people from different places.

In my songs I speak about children, family, about people who have died and about life because I would like a life where love is valued and where young women are not sad. I talk about my own life, love, God. I sing for myself, for sadness, for my mother, brother, friends and for feasts. Some texts are sad. I sing love songs. When I play the *gumbri*, I play songs of God - like my father did.

Do you write your texts?

I don't know how to read or write. I know how to speak and I compose my own texts. I repeat a song at least six, seven times, and I have learnt it. Before, when you asked me to sing a song, I wanted to sing a song for Algeria, my



Photo: Thomas Dorn

Hasna el Becharia

country [Hasna speaks the text]. It is impossible to translate for me [Hasna sings the text]. I cannot translate the songs, some of which are from Moroccan singers and poets.

Why did you leave Algeria?

I could not stand living there any longer and I moved to France. In Algeria now there are a lot of problems; it is very dangerous. There is a climate of terror, with killings every day. It is a struggle just to survive. Music is the only source I have of providing for my family and myself.

They did not want me to play music. They are killing artists in Algeria and I am

afraid. Before all the artists had work. But nowadays no women play, sing and dance; they do it only hidden in private rooms. Before we had all kinds of audience on the terraces, while now there no longer is an audience. The wedding feasts are not like before. Everything is done inside, behind shut doors. Before we played music in the evening and in the morning. Now music can be played only from midday until five o'clock in the afternoon. If the feast lasts an hour or two longer, they will come after you.

When my sister comes to France, she tells me how things are in Béchar. They only play junky recordings now. I promise you!

They want Hasna, but I cannot go. They throw stones.

They threw stones at you?

When I last sang in Algeria, people threw stones to make me shut up. I never saw them. I don't know who they were. We were singing on the terraces and suddenly the stones were flying. I didn't know what was happening. I was afraid and had to leave. I thought they might kill me, because I was a star in Béchar. I have left a hole there, especially in my village, in a street called Rue Isabelle Eberar. I played the electric guitar, I drove (we were the only three women who had a driving licence in the whole town), I went out even at night when this was forbidden in 1993, I smoked, I drank red wine - but I had to leave.

I don't know what will happen now. All the artists are sad there and they all want to come to France; many of them ask me to bring them to France from Béchar. They cannot stay in Algeria where there is no work and nothing to eat. When I was there, I worked every day, I provided food for myself and for others, but now there would be nothing at all.

Would you like to go back to Algeria?

Yes, I receive many invitations, but I cannot go.

Do you think your songs are important and can change something at a political level in Algeria?

I do not believe in politics, I don't understand them. Before we danced, we had fun, we sang, and no one said that I should not play. But since 1986-87, there is always the same terror and I cannot stand it. I am a diabetic. The hospitals don't have medicines; I would have to buy the medicines, the needles, the bandages, the alcohol... They let you go under. I will not go back. If my country

becomes a good place to live in again, I could sing there, as everyone loves me in Béchar.

What do you do in Paris?

I don't play for weddings, but I give concerts. I make compositions, using the spoken language, and my friends are Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Africans... I speak to them when I sing. Only once in France did I play at a wedding; the woman was from Béchar. I was invited and I agreed. I always play when I can.

Do you continue to play the rhythms and melodies that you learnt from your father?

I continue to play the rhythm of the Gnawa, of the *gumbri*. I play the same rhythms and melodies on the guitar. I have my father's same energy when I play; I am his daughter and so he gave it to me. Even in France, when I play I always have the same energy. It brings good things for the heart and everyone sings and dances, so I believe I am in Béchar again.

The Gnawa tradition is passed down from father to son. Can you also pass it on?

My son is an artist, he sings and plays the banjo, lute, guitar and *derbouka*, but he is not Gnawa. The tradition is only passed down from father to son and I think it is all right like that. My grandfather, my father and I were all artists in the family, but not my daughter; she works in a restaurant.

If I find people who want to learn, I would like to have a school in Paris where I can teach the *gumbri* and the *karkabous*. I love women who play like I do.

Is it difficult to be in France without knowing how to read and write?

It is not difficult; I manage well. I don't forget

anything. As I haven't got enough money yet to live by myself, I am staying in my manager's flat. She taught me how to take the underground, how to shop in the supermarkets, how to go to the doctor, to read the French alphabet, how to count... I do most things by myself now. I already have a bank account, a credit card and soon I will have my own flat.

Why do you have Vive les célibataires written on your guitar?

One day at home in Paris, I went downstairs with my guitar and I found a piece of paper on the street with *Vive les célibataires* written on it. I took it because I liked it. I stuck it on my guitar, because I live alone. Lots of women are celibate and this is good. Life and women - it is good!

Now you work with male musicians, do they listen to you?

Only since I am in Paris can I play with men, as it is forbidden in Algeria. In Paris, I found men and only one woman. They are nice, very nice. It would not work if they didn't listen to me, as I direct the group. For me now it is the same to play with men or with women. My manager Magali Berges helped me. I met her at the Cabaret Sauvage when I played for a festival with a group of women from Algeria and she was a journalist covering the festival for a website. She asked if I had done any recordings. And I said I hadn't, because they rip you off in Algeria. I knew of another woman who had made a cassette, and no profit went to her. I did not want to be cheated, so I did not want to record. Magali gave me the possibility to make a record in France. That's life! I would not record in Algeria, but my records can be heard there.

So you go back home in another way... Is there hope for Algeria?

Inchallah! The song I was singing asks for things to go well for Algeria.

What does it feel like to be at the Festival of Women's Voices in Belgium?

It is good. It gives me a lot. I am well in my heart when I am with women, because I worked only with women in Algeria. An evening with just women like here at the festival makes me happy. It gives me strength to continue.

During the workshop I heard the Korean singer telling about her life and I thought I was listening to my own story, even if I still have no idea where Korea is. In the afternoon, while I was playing *Mendi Feïda* after listening to all the testimonies, suddenly something happened, as if the music could give us hope. These days spent in Brussels have changed my life. We have laughed and cried and danced. I have understood many things, but they are still too strong to be put into words. Perhaps if I knew how to read and write I would express myself better and I would write a text or a poem with simple words that would be my own. But for now, I just close my eyes and play music thinking of all the women I have met in Brussels: they are all here, in my guitar.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

HASNA EL BECHARIA (Algeria/France) comes from Béchar, in the Algerian Sahara where she is very well known for playing music at weddings. She belongs to a family of Gnawa musicians. Hasna moved to France in 1999 to escape from the difficult situation in her country. At fifty-one, she has just released her first record *Djazair Johara*, officially recommended by the Gnawa Music Festival of Essaouira (Morocco).