

John Robb reports from Casablanca

Contributed by Ken Foster
Wednesday, 27 June 2007

Casablanca ‘Play it again Sam,’ Oddly enough Humphrey Bogart never went to Casablanca. They filmed the whole damn thing in LA and pretended they were in Casa. Fifty odd years later and you still won’t see many white faces here. Casablanca may be the biggest city in Morocco but its not for tourists, they all schlep off to Marrakech or Fes for some of that medieval market magic or up to Tangier looking for a sniff of the old school sleaze that made it the home of William Burroughs who remodelled the city into Interzone in the classic Naked Lunch. Whilst Casablanca was going through a population explosion Tangiers was one of the stop offs on the beat trail in the fifties before it became the hot spot for Joe Orton and Kenneth Williams who spent their summer hols there hanging out with young chaps on the beach. (It’s also the place where Tangerines got their name from!) Later in the sixties everywhere apart from Casa became the hang out for hippies looking for some exotica on the cheap, afterall Tangier was only 14km from Spain- a whole other world just over the water from spoiled Europe. Brian Jones recorded the Master Musicians of Jajouka here which was released after his death in 1971 it’s a wonderful record- the wild drums produced through a sieve of wonky late sixties weirdness.

Whilst Tangier, Fes and Marrakech are classic images of Morocco their younger and bigger cousin Casablanca was always the true Moroccan city. Strange then that it looks so European. Built by the French in 1907 on top of a few crumbling houses it was a city of 10 000 inhabitants who had to run like fuck as a city that looked like Marseille was thrust upon them. 100 years later and nearly seven million people live in the choking smog of the sort of sprawling city that buzzes with life that is so loved by yer correspondent. Casablanca has none of the classic medieval architecture that makes Marrakech and Fes such popular Sunday supplement tourist cities, Casa is a huge sprawling mass of concrete built quickly by the French after they couldn't get their hands on the countries then main city, Tangiers, which was turned into an internationals zone. They created a beautiful monster and today Casablanca is one of the biggest cities in Africa- a noisy messy sprawl of seething life, stink and noise. It also has the biggest Mosque in the world. Its absolutely enormous built on the seafront as a response, perhaps, to jibes that Casablanca was the only major city in the world with no famous buildings. Its mind boggling big, you walk up to it and it seems to go up forever, it’s the only mosque in Morocco that you are allowed into inside it’s awe inspiring, you can get 25 000 people into it and its surrounding courtyard. Imagine that. 25 000 people! In Casablanca music is the law. Its everywhere, get in the taxi and the driver will speak at a thousand miles an hour in French and crank up the radio blasting out the Chaabi- a pop form of all Moroccan music’s mashed together. He grins and batters his hands on the steering wheel; this is upbeat music, the sound of the city that crackles with its own energy. Casa is a music city, it oozes the stuff. Every taxi, every street corner is buzzing with electric noise. Its great to be somewhere were you don’t hear western music stomping around everywhere, the endless arguments over whose the coolest band in Britain or why have the NME got another bunch of pale faced gimps on the cover means little here. Infact it means nothing atall. There is a nascent hip-hop scene and, curiously, a death metal scene, and a couple of punk bands and that’s just about the total impact of western music apart from in the CD stores which are crammed full of local stuff, but still stock the ubiquitous Pink Floyd section and a smattering of the British classics from the sixties and seventies. The rest of the mini CD kiosks are crammed with local stuff like the mystic hypnotic Sufi music- the trance like music for the Muslim mystics who danced themselves into a trance a thousands years before earnest rave DJs started to gabble on about the same sort of thing. There is also Gnawa music another mystical trance style that seeped into Morocco from the Africa over the years. Very popular is Rai music from over the border from Algeria with its hypnotic groove and its political lyrics, Rai is the pop music of Algeria and its rhythms are a welcome break from the boom boom boom of the bass drum so dominant in our post industrial wasteland. You start to listen to all this Moroccan stuff and you realise just how far away from the F.U.C.K fuckbeat our music has become, the music here has sinuous, sexual energy to it that we have lost in a haze of click tracks and samples. The music has you hooked. Its got these supple sensual rhythms, a mystical melody and vocals sang by people who sound like they have been round the block a few times. Within 24 hours you are down the CD kiosk buying shed loads of stuff, pointing at sleeves or in the capable hands of my guide the Amina from Algerian music magazine D-Tell (d-full@yahoo.fr) who has a list of cool stuff to buy. Most of the CDs are, of course, bootlegs, the only difference here is that they actually burn them right in front of you on their rusting old computers. These dudes are pretty brazen about their work. The traditional is everywhere in music but its constantly updating itself. Sometimes successfully and sometimes clumsily but there is no fear of the modern. On the second night I'm whisked up the motorway at well over 100 miles an hour to see an outdoor concert by a driver who is stoned on kif on one of those white knuckle rides that makes you prey to whichever god you want. There's 10 000 people there in a dusty field buzzing away in front of a huge stage, its just like being at a festival in the UK, except the backstage is bizarrely sumptuous. Tents with carpets and a spread of fine food on platters- more that the two cans of lager and last years cheese butty so

beloved of UK promoters- here it looks like 5 star food and no beer- a desert feast. 'm here to see Haoussa (www.myspace.com/haoussa) who sound like the early Chili Peppers. They play a tight hard funky set that has the crowd going crazy. The kids here are wild, really up for it, Haoussa have subtle political lyrics that get a big cheer every time they slip into the song. They are followed by Hoba Hoba Spirit (www.hobahobaspirit.com) who kick out a sprightly rock that is a bit like the French band Les Negres Vertes. They are huge here and the crowd goes crazy for them, and their mixture of rock, traditional, Gnawa and Rai is well executed. They are followed by a Moroccan folk band that sounds amazing. The sun goes down and the party goes on, the Moroccans know how to have fun! We slip back to the terror car at the end of the concert with 10 000 people staring at your correspondent's greased up pompadour and non tourist styling, a fucked up quiff seemingly is not the hair cut that graces these streets, mind you it isn't in England and at least people are genuinely curious here instead of wanting to get in a scrap over hair. Rock is big on the underground here. There is the aforementioned death metal scene, a clutch of bands like Reborn, Butchers Of The Morgue (featuring the fantastically Muslim Grinder Thereafter on drums) and In the Nightmare and Nekros as well as Algeria's Litan and Carnavage who make an equally fucked up noise- the stuff coming out the two countries sound heavier and more bowel loosening than any other death metal in the world Butchers Of The Morgue are particularly unsettlingly weird (<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=185171963>). There is a whole myspace dedicated to the whole scene in North Africa (check the following myspace for some Algerian info… <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=39895498>) These are the kind of bands that will headline the annual rock festival to well over 30 000 kids, this blatant Satan worshiping love of the dark side wound the authorities up so much that a bunch of metal fans were imprisoned for wearing satanic shirts in 2003 in a case that got enough international press attention to shame the authorities into releasing the fans. The were all too much for the judge, who found it "suspicious" that a musician penned lyrics in English rather than Arabic, and said that "normal people go to concerts in a suit and tie". Not even the heavy metal fans' recitals of sections of the Koran deterred him from jailing them. One of satanic t shirt wearers, Nabyl Guennouni is the man on the scene here, organising everything from festivals to foreign tours as well as being in Reborn, he is a fund of information about the death metal and rock scene not only in Morocco but right across the Arab world. They don't do things by half here. This is the darkest deepest bowl strappingly heavy death metal with the guttural growling vocals- like they heard the initial stuff and took it into a deeper, darker place. Its bizarre to hear such an icy Scandinavian form of music played with such intensity in such a different environment but quite brilliant as well. Its also odd to have such intense discussions about Carcass and Cannibal Corpse in the backstreets of Casablanca with Redouane the cool ffigure who is the spokesman for the Algerian death metal scene (<http://www.lelahelmetal.com>). The metal heads are close campadres with the nascent Moroccan rap scene; the rebel music here is in cahoots. We're standing in the street of Casablanca, there's me and the cream of Morocco's hip-hop scene high fiving in the midday sun. They got the swagger of rap without all the arrogance and are burning with enthusiasm. Hip hop along with death metal is massive here, but instead of blindly copying the Americans they are pretty keen to make their own style, their own mark. Moroccan hip hop uses traditional music samples and they rap in their own tongue with that kind of jazzy edge that the French rappers have patented over the years, its pretty cold and works very well and is going down big in their home country. Rap crews like H-Kayne, Moby Dick, Fes City Clan, Bigg, K-Libre, Fnaire, and Casa Crew are the cream of the crop of a scene that has only emerged in the last ten years and shares the same DJ in a small but highly creative scene. If someone said 'play it again Sam' in 2007 in Casablanca they would be getting a very different answer. Instead of some cocktail noodling they would probably get some full on death meatl growling back at them, even Bogart would flinch at that thought. JOHN ROBB