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# THE COMOROS COME ALIVE

## SHE MAY BE CONTROVERSIAL AT HOME, BUT NAWAL EMERGES IN THE WEST WITH MUSIC OF RARE BEAUTY

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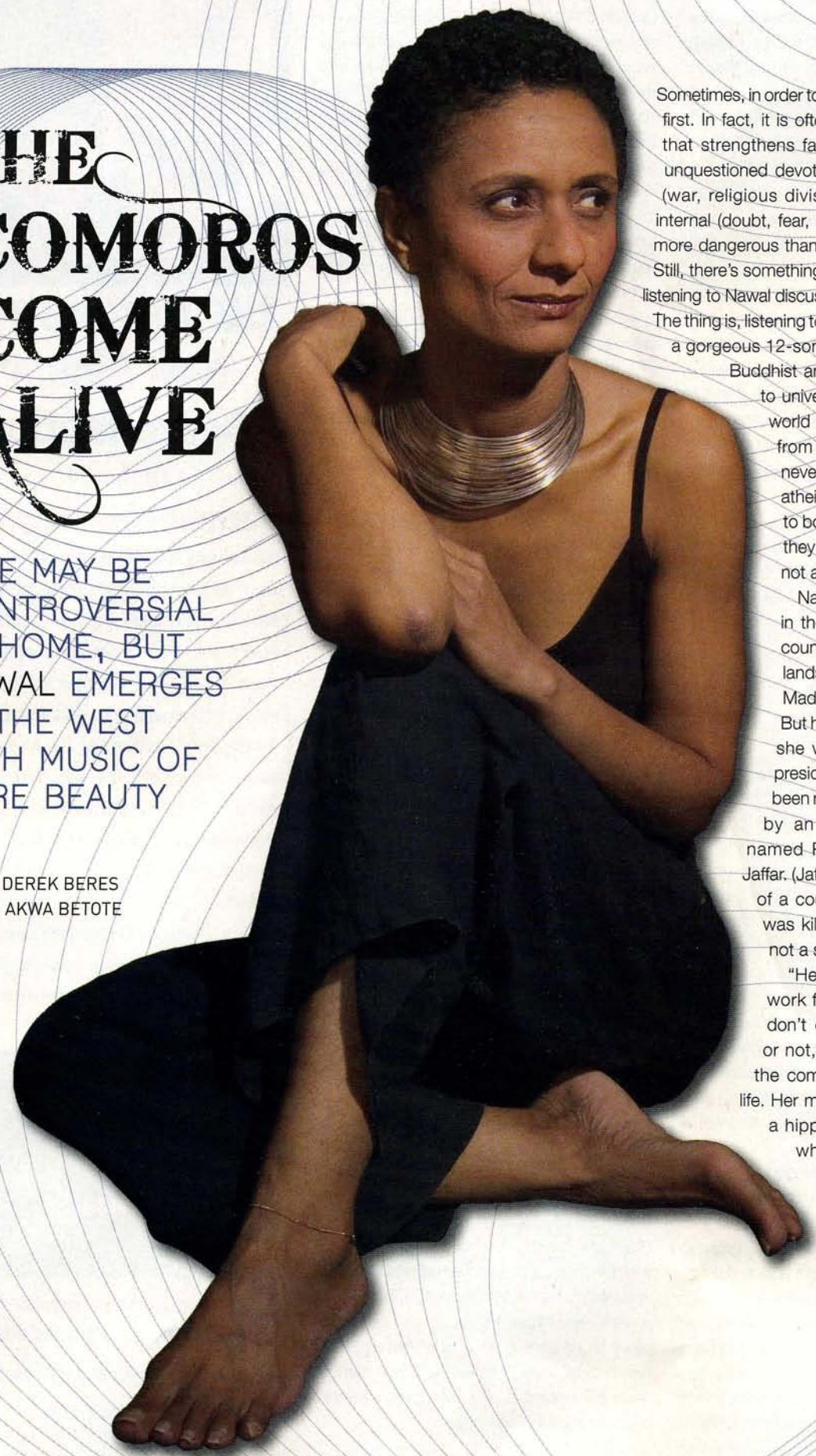
PHOTO AKWA BETOTE



Sometimes, in order to believe, we must disbelieve first. In fact, it is often the process of disbelief that strengthens faith. Blind belief results in unquestioned devotion to ideas both external (war, religious division, social tension) and internal (doubt, fear, uncertainty), which proves more dangerous than believing in nothing at all. Still, there's something funny and inspiring about listening to Nawal discuss her days of not believing. The thing is, listening to her latest record, *Aman*—a gorgeous 12-song collection that includes Buddhist and Muslim chanting, a call to universal peace in a post-9/11 world and various stanzas taken from her Sufi heritage—you'd never guess she'd dabbled in atheism. But there's a science to both her faith and her music: they reside in life experience, not abstract idealism.

Nawal was born and raised in the Comoros Islands, a tiny country comprised of three islands in the Indian Ocean near Madagascar and Mozambique. But her family left in 1976, when she was 11; the year before, president Ahmed Abdallah had been removed by force, replaced by an Islamic fundamentalist named Prince Said Mohammed Jaffar. (Jaffar himself was the subject of a coup a few years later, and was killed.) Nawal's mother was not a supporter.

"He said everybody have to work for free every Sunday, we don't care if you're bourgeoisie or not," Nawal says, cringing at the communist ideals of her past life. Her mother moved the family to a hippie community in France, where Nawal continued to play with the fishing-line-strung guitar she had picked up at seven.

In France, she was afforded a certain freedom unavailable in her homeland. She was raised on the music of the Doors, Pink Floyd and James Brown, as well as a family and community "into Jimi Hendrix and bell-bottom pants, black power and smoking joints." But the native politics and folk music of the Comoros were all around, as well.

"In 1975 my uncle beat me because I was playing guitar on stage. A woman never did that. Women singing, yes, but a woman that played guitar, like a man? They said 'Sorry, not our family.' Even today, some of the young ones say I'm not really Comorian. Comorians can't be like that. Then I realize how far we are away from the understanding between a man and a woman."

Nawal mentions this several times: how she is defined as masculine for her steadfastness in playing music publicly, as well as her actual performance style, swinging her guitar and gambusi (a unique oud-like instrument) in tranced-out fury. It's not a stretch, superficially anyway. She sits erect, firm and toned, with sharp features and short hair. When she repeatedly chants "Allah Hu" for emphasis during our talk, there's a deep resonance to her voice, noticeable on *Aman*. She takes it in stride, pleased to be considered a strong and passionate figure.

Her deep voice recalls the way Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's cut straight into listeners' hearts. In fact, it was the same Sufi poetry, the timeless wonder of Rumi, that brought Nawal back to spirituality. More recently, this Sufi template has been colored by a study of the Indian chakras, and how sound affects the psyche and body of the individual.

If, as she says, "the voice is the muscle of the soul," hers is one with the strength to heal. There's something soothing in the a cappella "Dandzi," which translates as "a woman's blues." It's a traditional Comorian song about a woman in a polygamous marriage that loves her husband, receiving none in return. As is often the case, it is through the expression of an ailment that the ailment is cured. This is the reason that, during heartbreaking times, we listen to sad music. It uplifts by reminding us we're not alone.

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"Aman," too, sounds sad, but it's all in the sympathetic chords. The epic, eight-minute closing track talks of expressing yourself and peace among nations. It is the repetition of that word that hooks you, playing inside you over and over as the call is responded to by her backup singers. Inspired by the trance-inducing practices of Arabic string and lute instruments as much as the percussion and thumb pianos of Africa, Nawal's dynamic music invites and lulls you much more than hitting you straightaway. Its effects take time to sink in—the very reason the album offers more complex nuances with each listen.

Nawal's music is indicative of the person who sat with me on a beautiful summer day in New York's Union Square Park. In the hour we were together, few questions were asked. Instead, she wove together her history of politics, society and music in no sort of chronological order. Remember, her occupation is creating safe and healing spaces through trance, which basically means allowing people to go deeply inside of themselves. In this way, she is a vehicle and transmitter more than music performer, even if, for a Comorian, such a "job" is difficult.

"In the Comoros everyone plays music, which is why it's tough to be professional. It's not considered a job." Somehow she's making it work, though. Nawal has taken the three languages of her homeland—Comorian, Arabic and French—and made them, as well as the cultures behind them, one. It is natural for her; it is her very essence. And when she jokes about becoming an a cappella performer, due to her growing awareness of healing through the voice, it doesn't seem far-fetched. There's something about the quiet pause between chords that brings everything together. In fact, those are her very last words that afternoon: "We write silence in music, but when we play we forget that silence is music too." •