

For Nawal, past is ever-present

By BOB YOUNG

MUSIC

From adversity, the saying goes, comes strength — and also, in the case of singer and guitarist Nawal, inspiration for a life of music.

When she was 19, the teenage musician dared to do what no woman on her native Comoros Islands had ever done before: perform publicly as an instrumentalist in an ensemble of men.

She paid a heavy price for it. "My uncle came out and said, 'You can't do this,' she recounted during a call from a tour stop in California. "And then he beat me."

That public abuse, which took place before Nawal was able to play a single note on her guitar, has stayed with her, a reminder of intolerance in the name of tradition.

After that 1985 episode, she returned to France, where she had moved with her family several years before. She didn't perform publicly again on the Comoros Islands, a tiny African nation located in the Indian Ocean between Mozambique and the island of Madagascar, until last year.

"We were very well received," Nawal said. "A lot of young people from the new generation who were there knew my songs by heart. The ones who didn't come out don't make noise about what I do anymore."

Nawal appears in the Boston area for the first time this week when she leads her trio at Ryles in Cambridge on Wednesday. On July 1, she returns to play at the Amazing Things Arts Center in Framingham.

She'll perform music from her new CD, "Aman," which has a delicate, often spiritual beauty to it and updates the musical traditions her uncle tried to stop her from playing two decades ago.

The Comoros is a poor, densely populated nation of less than a million people. It has experienced almost continual political upheaval since it gained its independence from France in 1975 (Wikipedia says the country's history is notable for "its inordinate number of coups d'etat").

The music that has soothed the soul of many in the Comoros has roots in both Arab and African countries, and according to Nawal, features more than 40 different rhythms.

"At the big weddings that last a week or two, a different rhythm is played every day," she said.

Nawal, who calls herself "Muslim-Buddhist" and now lives in Paris, has created an original mix that straddles the sacred and the secular. Her influences are wide-ranging. She listened to Jimi Hendrix and Pink Floyd as a young girl, but her own music has an airy, trancelike Middle Eastern feel to it.

Singing in Arabic, French and English, Nawal creates lyrical, acoustic songs that recall life on her native islands. She notes that despite her country's small size, it's emphatically part of today's world.

"We are all one," she said. "We are all connected."

And as the lyrics to "Hima" ("Get Up") from her CD make clear, Nawal hopes to inspire others with some of the lessons she learned along the way:

"Hey modern woman, get up, get up."

Free yourself from the shadow and fight for your rights,

No one is going to fight in your place."

— robertcyoung@comcast.net

Nawal, at Ryles in Cambridge, Wednesday at 9 p.m. Tickets: \$10; 617-876-9330. Also at Amazing Things Arts Center in Framingham, July 1 at 2 p.m. Tickets: \$15; 508-405-2787.



SAY 'AMAN': Born on the Comoros Islands, singer-guitarist Nawal brings her updated traditional music to Boston for the first time this week.

