

Nawal's musical journey to liberation

By Siddhartha Mitter

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Chalk it up to globalization: The foremost cultural ambassador of an obscure Islamic island nation off the coast of East Africa can be found, when her schedule permits, taking the waters at a Northern California yoga and meditation spa.

Such is the habit of Nawal, the singer and instrumentalist who is the first female performing artist of the Comoros, an archipelago of four islands of which three are an independent republic, and the fourth, Mayotte, is a French territory. Though she moved to France as a child and is today based in Paris, she has become an object of Comorian national pride and returned to play there with her trio, which includes an American woman, to rapturous stadium crowds.

Her music takes as its point of departure traditional Comorian sounds, which resonate with Arabic and African influences accumulated over centuries through the Indian Ocean trade. The instrumentation showcases the gambusi, a string instrument akin to the oud. On Nawal's new album, "Aman," her lyrics draw in part on Sufi incantations and on traditional laments that Comorian women perform at private gatherings.

But if its predominant component is Comorian roots, "Aman" deviates in many ways, each one offering a glimpse of this woman's unusual journey from a highly conservative family in a highly conservative nation to the liberated spirit that she has become. "Meditation" quotes Nelson Mandela (himself quoting Marianne Williamson) and ends with a mix of Muslim and Buddhist chant. "L'Amour Sorcier" is a tribute to the late French singer and songwriter Claude Nougaro. The songs that open and close the album, the groovy "Salama" and majestic "Aman," are both prayers for peace.

"I mix different things," Nawal says of her spiritual practice, by phone from her California hideaway during a break in her current American tour. (She visits Ryles on Wednesday.) "The Sufi roots of my ancestors, Arabic styles, and animism. In France, I discovered yoga and qigong. I've created my own practice." Referring to a line by the

poet Rumi, she says she has one foot in her own culture and the other in that of all nations. "I take from everywhere."

Nawal, who is in her early 40s, had more than a few hurdles to overcome be-

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fore fully blossoming as a musician. Though her family immigrated to France, they tried to retain their strict Comorian habits. "My mother insisted I wear traditional clothes," she says. "I would have to stop the elevator in my building to change my clothes. I had to jump through the window when I wanted to go play in the evening. I was punished a lot."

Undaunted, she got involved in local radio in Valence, the city where the family lived, suffering her mother's wrath when she caught her on the air. Finally, she broke out and went to university in the southern city of Montpellier. "I studied psychology," she says, and still practices it. "Even now sometimes I do workshops to help people be more happy, more in harmony. I use the voice also. I love to sing with people."

Nawal happily owns up to her crunchy tendencies. Valence is close to the Ardèche, an area with a Vermont-like reputation as a haven for free spirits. She credits as a shaping influence her exposure to those "hippie people from the peace and love epoch, with this peace and love life." It's also, she says, why she's comfortable in California.

It was at a jam-session party in Oakland that Nawal connected with Melissa Cara Rigoli, an American player of the mbira, the "thumb piano" of traditional Zimbabwean music.

"I was playing the mbira in the mellow area, outdoors under the sky," Rigoli says. "And all of a sudden this voice started singing that I had never heard before." Not only that, but Nawal took charge of a shaker and started playing the complex Zimbabwean rhythm



Comorian singer and instrumentalist Nawal performs with the gambusi, a string instrument akin to the oud.

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faultlessly. It was similar to what she knew from the Comoros. "She said, 'How come I have to come to the US to find the music of my cousins?'" Rigoli recalls.

Rigoli found herself traveling to Paris to play with Nawal and eventually decided to move there, playing mbira and percussion in the trio, which is rounded out by Nawal's brother Idriss Mlanao on bass.

Last year, the group returned to give a series of concerts in the Comoros. Nawal was stunned by the welcome: "I didn't know how much people loved me there," she says. "But the ones who live in the Comoros are more open-minded than Comorians abroad."

At one show, she asked a group of women players of traditional music to play with her in public. The women, she says, asked forgiveness of their brothers and fathers, but nonetheless took the stage.

The Comoros, she says, are experiencing the ambiguous benefits of change: On one hand, traditions are fading; for instance, she says, keyboards and CDs are replacing traditional instruments at weddings and ceremonies. "But also at the same time people have a more open mind and women are a little more free."

That, in the end, is an important benefit in her mind. "Hima," one song on the new album, tells women that no one but themselves can fight for their rights. The a cappella "Dandzi" is a traditional song in a genre that women use to express their grievances indirectly.

Not only has Nawal followed her own message, but so has her family. "My mother used to not speak to me," she says. "Now, she's not happy I'm still not married and don't have babies, but she can respect me for my job. She accepts

it."

And Nawal finds herself returning the favor, the sharp edges of her youthful rebellion now mellowed by accomplishment and experience. "I see things differently now," she says. "I'm trying to practice what I think. Each one has a story, each one has the right to be who he is. My family, my mom, they have the right to want me to be different. Don't judge the other."

**Nawal is at Ryles
Wednesday June 27 at
9 p.m. Tickets \$10.
Call 617-876-9330 or
go to rylesjazz.com.**