

## ***The Rolling Stones of Morocco***

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.* Arab youth today aren't the first generation to remold the Middle East, and part of what inspires them now is the revolutionary struggles of their parents and grandparents. In Morocco, one rock band has captured this multi-generational history in song.

Nas al-Ghiwan is the kingdom's best-loved rock band and perhaps the greatest singing group in the modern history of North Africa.

Elias Muhanna, Professor of Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies at Brown University, says: "Nas al-Ghiwan is known as the Beatles of Morocco, the Rolling Stones of Morocco, the Bob Dylans of Morocco -- it's actually difficult to put your finger on who exactly they represent because they represent all of these different groups. If you go to Morocco today and you ask them about Nas al-Ghiwan, it doesn't really matter what generation they're from. It's as if Nas al-Ghiwan for some reason is relevant to their lives. Even though they emerged in the 70s and that was their heyday, you find pre-teen kids in Morocco today who still grew up on Nas al-Ghiwan, and so there's a very strange kind of connection between people from all generations and this music."

There's a common thread that ties the generations together. It started with a revolution in North Africa -- but not last year's Arab spring. It was a different great upheaval dating back to the 1950s. In 1957, Moroccans rebelled against the French and won their independence.

Hundreds of thousands rioted to get their king back. King Muhammad V was the youngest in scion a dynasty that had ruled for 250 years. The young king had been exiled by imperial French rulers. Moroccans finally won their rebellion against the French.

That revolution started in this sprawling working-class neighborhood in northeast Casablanca, Al-Hay al-Muhammadi. Half a million Moroccans still live here in poverty and squalor. I'm standing at the edge of a vast shantytown, by a bunch of goats foraging for dinner out of a trash heap the size of a minivan.

The Casablanca shantytown is the great historic melting pot of modern Morocco: Rural migrants from every corner of the map came here on the promise of factory jobs: Arabs, Berber, Saharans, and even the descendants of West African slaves. The band Nas al-Ghiwan was born in this place -- children of the 1950s from all four corners of the kingdom. Their sound is a blend of the entire country's folklore and musical traditions.

They came of age and started performing in the 1970s. New upheavals were underway by then. A harsh new regime was kidnapping hundreds if not thousands of its opponents, who were never heard from again.

Elias Muhanna says: "The decade when Nas al-Ghiwan emerged, the 1970s, is known as the "years of lead," because of the years of bullets that were flying, attempted coups, imprisoned journalists, students -- a very turbulent time -- and one in which freedom of expression was severely curtailed. So it was a difficult time to emerge as a group that was singing about social problems.'

'There was a fascinating song, "Mahmuni," with the chorus: "My greatest concern is for men when they disappear." This was a song that was interpreted as being very political. It seemed like they were singing about people who were kidnapped -- specific ones who can be named - a dangerous accusation at the time the song was written. At one point, they were called into a police station in Casablanca, and they said, 'what are you singing about in this?' They said, 'It's about Palestine,' and they kind of let them off the hook.

Truth-tellers sometimes have to speak in riddles to survive a dictatorship -- and that was the challenge of Nas al-Ghiwan.

A song by Nas al-Ghiwan speaks in allegory. The song praises a king -- but also takes a dig at the government that serves him. It's the story of a queen bee. From her hive, the queen bee flies off to see a human king one day and boasts to him about her beehive government. "There isn't a single greedy official to deceive me," she tells the king. "I have students of justice in my service." The king replies that he is not so lucky; that his government is corrupt. The bee buzzes away and says sadly, "The king is a doctor and his people are wounded, but there is not a single government official who will tell him of their plight."

Umar Sayyid is the rock band's lead singer and elder statesman. "As artists, our hearts are young even if our bodies are old. It is both a joy and a pain to be both at the same time...We know that we are old and getting weaker -- and people come up to us for what we are to them, even if they don't really know who we actually are. But, the truth is that our strength has always been in our weakness, in acknowledging the reality around us and inside us whether it helps or it hurts."

Several Nas al-Ghiwan bandmates still live here in the working class section of Casablanca where Nas al-Ghiwan got started.

What the band calls its "headquarters" is the back room of a tailor's shop with a poster of Charlie Chaplin pasted to the front window. Vocalist Rachid Batma is hanging out with the tailors. He lights up a "kufta," Moroccan slang for a hashish "cutlet" or a reefer. He takes a long drag, and the band starts singing to the beat of the sewing machines.

Lead singer Umar Sayyid walks in, summons the gang, and brings them out to his rusty, beat-up sedan. Traffic is heavy in Casablanca, and they have a gig tonight.

Elias Muhanna says: "Umar Sayyid is like a giant, and he is unmistakable. When he walks in the streets of Casablanca, when he gets into a cab, walks into a cafe, he is instantly recognized. He's a very imposing figure. He has an enormous smile that's infectious. Everybody treats him as if he is like a grandfather, or an uncle, or a brother."

Unlike some of its neighbors, the Moroccan monarchy weathered last year's storm of revolutions. The king has committed to incremental reform toward a European-style constitutional monarchy. But, it'll take some doing. A hip hop group from Marrakesh called, "Fnayer," has grafted the spirit of Nas al-Ghiwan onto hip-hop. They're rapping to the frustrations of Moroccan and pan-North African youth which continue to animate the political discussion. In some ways, their struggles have come full circle.

– *Reported by Joseph Braude for America Abroad*

Here is a list of tracks by Nas al-Ghiwan found in this segment:

- "Ya Sah"
- "Mahmmouni"
- "Alnahla Shama"

To listen and download these songs and other music by Nas al-Ghiwan [click here](#).

Additional tracks:

- "Yed El Henna" by Fnayer