



MAROUANE HAJJI

SUFI SINGER

— The Sufis, a mystical branch of Islam, have a long tradition of using music as a way of connecting with the divine and Marouane Hajji, a 24-year-old singing prodigy from Fes, Morocco, sings from the heart. Lisa Rovner talks to him about the principles of Sufism and the devotional power of music to transport listeners to a higher spiritual plane.

Lisa Rovner: The Whirling Dervishes whirl as a form of *dhikr*, remembrance of God. I try to imagine their mental space.

Marouane Hajji: The Whirling Dervishes are Sufi and their practice is strongly based on Sufi principles. Sufi songs and dance were originally performed in Zaouaia, but more and more, we are performing in other places both inside and outside the Arab world, bringing light to this ancient heritage, attracting new audiences and taking them to a world full of spirituality.

Lisa: You sing songs that are based on the devotional poetry of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, songs that often speak of being intoxicated by divine love. The songs date from the 13th century. Please tell us about the origin of your practice.

Marouane: My style of singing is composed of poetry, melody and rhythm. The poems I sing date back to the Sufi masters, both from Morocco and the Orient. Sufism emphasises love and peace, and we Sufis seek a close, personal relationship with God through special spiritual practices. These disciplines, or *dhikr*, include reciting prayers and passages of the Quran and repeating the names, or attributes of God, while performing physical movements according to the codes established by the founder of the particular order. The result is often a state of ecstatic abandon. To be a Sufi singer, one needs to have great knowledge and understanding of the devotional and spiritual poetry of Sufism, and of Al-Hadra or spiritual dancing, through which the body is transported to the other world, the divine world.

Lisa: Sufi music is practised across the entire Islamic world, how would you explain the particularities of Moroccan Sufi music?

Marouane: Sufism is characterised by the veneration of local saints and by brotherhoods that practise their own rituals. Moroccans have excelled practically and theoretically in this kind of sacred music. The melodies I sing are infused with Moroccan rhythm, which is originally Andalusian.

Lisa: You studied music at the Regional Conservatory Institute of Fes, but tell us about your Sufi teacher, the poet Mohammed Bennis.

Marouane: The master Mohammed Bennis is considered my spiritual father. He has taught me everything I know about Sufi songs. He is not a poet himself, he learned Sufism from the greatest scholars, jurists and through Sama. [Sama is a means of meditation on God through focusing on melodies and dancing]. I met him as a child; he was the head of the Sufi association that I would go to every week with my friends. That's where I studied and learned the traditional Sufi songs, Sama and Andalusian music as well.

Lisa: Are your concerts essentially ancient rituals in which you connect with that which is unchanging and unchangeable? How much are the Sufi classics open to reinterpretation? I heard for example that the great Pakistani Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, slightly sped up the songs, adapting the music to his generation.

Marouane: Yes, the Sufi rituals are ancient, it's the way the Sufis connect with the supreme power and I perform the songs I was taught by my teachers as the root is the most precious thing. To be a Sufi is to have a pure spirit and pure heart. I think Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is a great example of an artist who is aligned with the original spiritual quality of Sufi songs. Personally, I would like to be very famous for this kind of music. I want my echo, the echo of Sufism, to resonate and travel beyond, reaching all parts of the world.

Lisa: Your songs unite the aesthetic and the devotional. They transport listeners. What do you imagine visually when you sing?

Marouane: It is impossible to see the spirituality I feel inside. I feel serene, humbled. I transcend to the divine world.

Lisa: I would love to attend the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music that takes place every year in June. What was it like to perform there?

Marouane: It's a mix of different music and rhythms from all over the world. It's incredible to witness the way people experience the festival, the moments full of inspiration, the way they feel the meaning of the devotional poetry of Sufism. I am very interested in all that is spiritual and sacred, but in terms of performances, the Whirling Dervishes, Gospel and Sami Yusuf were very special to me.

Lisa: If you could be anything other than a Sufi singer what would you be?

Marouane: I was born in a conservative family, based on respect, love and education. These characteristics have contributed to making me a really good Sufi singer. I can't imagine any other path.

Interview by LISA ROVNER
Photograph by UMUT KEBABCHI
Thanks to Taoufik Lemsidi, Hajji's interpreter.