

FILM REVIEW

Sara Nacer, dir. *La Rockeuse du désert (The Desert Rocker)*. 2022. 75 minutes. Arabic and French, with English subtitles. Canada. L'Équipage. No Price Reported. Available to stream on Eventive.

The Desert Rocker is a documentary about the pioneering Gnawa musician Hasna El Becharia, the first celebrated woman to play the guembri, an instrument strictly reserved for men. Gnawa, a form of popular music that extends from Niger, spanning across the Maghreb, notably from the Algerian Sahara to Essaouira, Morocco (where the annual Gnawa festival occurs every year), has always been understood as a musical milieu dominated by male players. Canadian-Algerian filmmaker Sara Nacer dedicated ten years to researching, filming, interviewing in Algeria and France, and gathering materials about Hasna El Becharia to make the first documentary about her.

Hasna El Becharia was born in 1951 in Béchar in southwestern Algeria. She was the daughter and granddaughter of Gnawa musicians who for decades played the traditional songs of the Sahara. El Becharia's home region is known for its Gnawa music featuring Diwan, Foundou, and Haddawi repertoires and styles popular for celebrations, particularly Arab-Berber weddings, which are typical in Algeria, Morocco, and elsewhere across North Africa. Nacer explains the trajectory of El Becharia's rise to fame, beginning her documentary with the rebellious, young woman who wrestled the guembri (an essential instrument for Gnawa music) from her father who refused to teach her how to play. In the film, El Becharia, now in her seventies, tells Nacer that where once "people threw stones at me because as a woman I dared to play the guembri, now they are asking me to teach their daughters how to play."

El Becharia became a legend in her homeland after forming a band in 1972 with a few other women (Zorah and Kheira who still play with her). By 1976, Hasna and her band were the guest stars of a major concert in Bechar, organized by the Union of Algerian Women, which took place in front of an all-female audience. Hasna became so popular that in January 1999 she was invited to play in Paris at the Women of Algeria Music Festival. Her notoriety on the stage in Paris made her an overnight celebrity. She was invited constantly to play, particularly the Carnival Sauvage founded by Méziane Azaïche. At one concert, she was on the program with Cheb Mami, the popular Algerian Raï singer. "She exudes force and strength," comments Azaïche, admitting that women should be considered as capable as men at playing the guembri. Azaïche, also from Algeria, remarks that "even though I am from her country, I never knew women like her existed in Algeria." Reminiscing about the incredible early days of Hasna's Parisian debut, Azaïche remarks "these women arrived [in Paris] with their

headscarves and long gandouras ... some of them were barefoot.” At fifty-one, Hasna recorded her first album, composing most of the songs in France. Most of the album features the traditional guembri and karkabas, the foundational instruments in Gnawa music. However, Hasna also integrates the electric guitar, ud, darbuka, bendir, and banjo. Hasna explains in the film that while in France she sought out new musical experiences, blending guitars, vocals, and improvisations. She is noted for exposing Europe to a globalized Gnawa musical form that featured musicians from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Niger. Although immensely successful, “life in France became difficult,” therefore she returned to her native region in the Algerian desert. This return in the early 2000s was even more difficult due to the ongoing violence of the last years of the Algerian civil war. Since then, despite health issues, she has continued to play the guembri whenever possible.

Sara Nacer’s first prize-winning documentary (she won the LOGIQ Award for a promising filmmaker, Best Feature Film award at Montreal Vues d’Afrique Film Festival, and her work was selected for the Tribeca Film Institute and Greenhouse in 2017) offers viewers a glimpse into the world of female Gnawa music rarely captured on screen. Interviewing Hasna El Becharia as she is invited to play at various ceremonies and weddings in the desert villages around her home, Nacer gives audiences an intimate window into the musician’s pioneering spirit. The film documents how Hasna El Becharia successfully feminized the Gnawa tradition, inspiring many women of the generations after her to learn how to play. Nacer’s filmography captures the vast desert which El Becharia notes is the grounding inspiration for her music. Gnawa, embedded in ancient Berber musical traditions, appeals to the human soul, El Becharia remarks. “Art is a gift from God” and “there are still beautiful days ahead.”

Sites consulted for this review:

<https://worldmusiccentral.org/2016/06/10/artist-profiles-hasna-el-becharia/>

https://www.womex.com/on/interview_with_sara_nacer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_91GiSNG8lA (interview with Sara Nacer)

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