



Hamed Sinno (center), the lead singer of Lebanese band Mashrou Leila, performs on stage at the Dubai International Marine Club during a music festival in the United Arab Emirates. — AFP photos



Avo Demerjian, bassist and back-up vocalist of Jordanian band Autostrad, performs on stage at the Dubai International Marine Club.

Arab music's alternative ambassadors find fans, and bans



Iraqi-Canadian hip-hop artist Yassin Alsalman, known by his stage name Nancy, performs the chobi, an Iraqi folk dance, to his Arabic and hip-hop beats on stage.



Hamed Sinno, the lead singer of Lebanese band Mashrou Leila, performs on stage.

Their voices narrate the unofficial soundtrack of life as an Arab today. But for the artists leading the Arab world's alternative music scene, their work is not revolutionary—it's a legacy. With the growing popularity of bands like Lebanon's Mashrou' Leila and Jordan's Autostrad, hip-hop artists like Iraqi-Canadian Nancy and Palestinian Muqata3a and solo acts like Yasmine Hamdan, Arab artists not traditionally considered mainstream are increasingly gaining recognition both at home and across the globe. Building on a rich musical history, their fusions reflect experiences in situ and in the diaspora, blending traditional beats and maqams, or modes, with rock, reggae, funk, electropop and hip-hop.

Indie outfit Mashrou' Leila, arguably Beirut's most famous contemporary musical export, sold out at both London's Barbican and The Hamilton in Washington DC after the release of their last album, "Ibn El Leil," in 2015. Multimedia artist Nancy this month landed a Juno, the Canadian equivalent of a Grammy, for directing an equally gripping and entertaining music video for the 2016 hip-hop track "R.E.D.," which spins a complex tale of race, war and migration in under five minutes. But hard-won recognition and rampant misrepresentation are far from mutually exclusive.

"Arab culture is under attack. It's fetishised in the West and all over the world. It's either evil or it's sexy, right?" says Yassin "Narcy" Alsalman, one of the leading voices of Arab hip-hop. "At least while they're killing our children, we try to continue the legacy that our parents put in us," Nancy, formerly known as The Narcycist, adds

shortly after a high-octane gig in Dubai. "If we're alive we might as well do that while we're here, you know?"

'Heart-to-heart'

With their blend of traditional garb and trainers, of maqams and messages, artists not conventionally considered mainstream have reinvigorated the Arab world's music scene. For Avo Demerjian, vocalist and bassist with breakout Jordanian act Autostrad, "it's not a renaissance so much as a return". "It's a heart-to-heart between musicians and the people," Demerjian says of the Arabic reggae funk band's success. "I think this is the moment when music is coming back to our part of the world, when we can stand on our own feet and say what we ourselves have to say, through music."

Autostrad, Nancy and Mashrou' Leila headlined the April 7 closing night of Dubai's STEP 2017 conference, an annual technology, digital and entertainment festival. Overlooking the water of the man-made Dubai Marina canal, festival-goers mingled and cheered as a string of mainly Arab, and mainly male, musicians took the stage. Massively popular Mashrou' Leila sang against a backdrop of animated footage, including a segment that appeared to take the audience through a pink-lit underground sex club. But the most high-energy gig was Nancy's. In a traditional aabaya and his trademark wire-rimmed glasses, the rapper was joined onstage by fans doing the chobi, an Iraqi folk dance, to his Arabic and hip-hop beats.

"The currency is murder/you a man of worth," he rapped in "R.E.D.," a collaboration

with Native Canadian DJ collective A Tribe Called Red. His award-winning music video played on a giant screen behind him, featuring African-American hip-hop artist Yasiin Bey (also known as Mos Def) and drum group Black Bear, who hail from the Atikamekw community of the Manawan First Nation in Quebec. Nancy's final track, "Free", was dedicated to refugees around the world.

'Wave of misrepresentation'

While fans went wild for the politics of "R.E.D." at STEP, the messages behind much of today's Arab indie music are far from universally welcome. Within the Arab world, backlash over gender politics and sexual orientation is not unheard of. And abroad, the threat of anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia remain all too real. "We are still in a very precarious place as a people," says Nancy, whose latest track "Fake News" addresses US President Donald Trump's travel ban against a string of majority-Muslim countries. "We are countering yet another wave of misrepresentation which is more dangerous, more protracted, more violent ... We have a lot of work to do, but we are on our way."

With their openly gay frontman and lyrics that both bait authorities and champion love in all its forms, Mashrou' Leila have faced bans of their own at home. "Our problems tend to be playing in the Middle East, rather than playing in the West" says guitarist Firas Abou-Fakher. The group was banned from performing in the Jordanian capital last year over "the themes that we're talking about and for representing the kind of people or communities we like to be



Hamed Sinno (right), the lead singer of Lebanese band Mashrou Leila, performs on stage.

associated with," Abou-Fakher explains. He pauses briefly, then adds: "I guess it's sometimes a bit intimidating for governments."

And it's not just governments displeased by the band, who sing exclusively in Arabic on all of their albums. "A big record company wanted to change our lyrics before they worked with us," drummer Carl Gerages told AFP. "That's one of the main reasons we didn't sign. That's not an option for us." — AFP