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Algerian singer Soolking performs at the Apollo Theater in New York City. — AFP photos



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Algerian rapper Soolking plays Harlem's Apollo during debut US tour

As his merengue-inflected single "Suavemente" once again topped France's songs chart, Algerian rapper Soolking was stateside, delighting fans and wooing new followers with his blend of rap and Maghreb folk music. Already acclaimed in the Francophone world, the Algerian rapper Soolking this year set his sights on North America, where he played historic venues including New York's Apollo and the Globe Theatre in Los Angeles.

"I never thought that one day I would come here to sing," the artist born Abderraouf Derradji told AFP backstage ahead of his set at Harlem's esteemed venue, which launched the careers of icons including Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin, and where James Brown recorded a groundbreaking live album. "It's a mythical hall like Paris' Olympia... where so many legendary artists have performed," said Soolking, wearing oval sunglasses and a black beanie. "It's an honor for me; it's cool."

Born and raised in a suburb of Algiers, the 32-year-old was born to a

percussionist father and at a young age began playing music and learning dance. He first moved to France in 2008, but returned to Algeria to be in the rap group Africa Jungle, with whom he released two albums: "Ched Rohek" and "Eclipse." The artist returned to France several years later, launching a solo career in 2016, adopting the moniker Soolking and starting to play small venues and drop music online. He went viral shortly thereafter after performing his song "Guerilla"—a track about his experience immigrating without papers—on the popular French radio Show "Planet Rap."

'Representing for Algeria'

With two successful albums under his belt and another on the way, Soolking embarked this spring on a North American tour that along with New York and Los Angeles included dates in Montreal, Houston, Chicago and Washington. The artist who sings in both French and Arabic is interested in expanding his global reach but isn't ter-

ribly concerned with where his fans come from: "The most important thing is my fans."

"In my country of origin, there's people who listen to me and people who don't listen to me," the rapper continued. "I'm going to look for what's human, because in the end, music is feeling." As evidenced by his first New York show, Soolking had broken ground in the United States long before he played any of its stages: fans danced and sang along at the Apollo, waving Algerian flags and illuminating their phones.

"It's just amazing to see someone from our country in New York City and their name in lights," said 26-year-old Sarah Hammadi, one of four cousins who traveled from New Jersey to catch the show. "It's amazing—he's really representing for Algeria." "It just feels like you're back at home," seconded her cousin Dilia, 18. "He's such a pop icon in our country... it just brings warmth to our heart." — AFP

Pentagon creates new office to probe UFO reports

The Pentagon is creating a new office to investigate unidentified flying objects amid concerns that after broad probes it cannot explain mysterious sightings near highly sensitive military areas. Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks, working with the US director of national intelligence, ordered the new investigatory body to be established in the US Defense Department's intelligence and security office, the Pentagon said late Tuesday.

The order came five months after a classified US intelligence report on possible alien UFOs came up inconclusive; it could explain some reported incidents but was unable to account for other phenomena, some filmed by pilots near military testing areas. The new office will focus on incidents in, or near, designated "special use airspace" (SUA) areas strictly controlled and blocked from general aviation due to security sensitivities.



US Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence Scott Bray explains a video of an unidentified aerial phenomena, as he testifies before a House Intelligence Committee subcommittee hearing at the US. — AFP

The US military is worried some of the unidentified aerial phenomena spotted by military pilots in the past may represent technologies of strategic rivals unknown to US scientists. "Incursions by any airborne object into our SUA pose safety of flight and operations security concerns, and may pose national security challenges," the Pentagon said in a statement.

The Defense Department "takes reports of incursions—by any airborne object, identified or unidentified—very seriously, and investigates each one," it added. The new office was dubbed the Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group (AOIMSG), the successor to the US Navy's Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force. It will be overseen by a panel of experts from the military and intelligence community. A mostly classified official review of UFO reports released in June determined that most of around 120 incidents over the past 20 years could be explained and had nothing to do with unknown or secret US or foreign technology. — AFP



Men look on at an art installation by Senegalese Artist, Yakhya Ba, along Dakar's sea promenade. — AFP photos

Senegal festival brings contemporary African art to the streets

Intriguing pyramids and a huge yellow dog have cropped up on the Senegalese capital's seafloor. The enormous exhibits are part of the much-anticipated Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Art, which opens on Thursday and promises to "break down" gallery walls by bringing modern art to the streets of Senegal. It's a fresh idea for the 14th Biennale as the organizers set out to challenge art's "elitist image". The exhibition is all about moving "the artist's studio to the street", they say—a "plea for art to be more present in public spaces".

By the ocean, people silently approach two pyramid-shaped mausoleums. Dozens of earthen faces appear in piles in their interior and on their outside walls, their eyes closed. Some are screaming. A line of shoes leads away from the tombs and towards the cliff edge of Dakar's cornice, as though they're falling into the sea. Senegalese artist Yakhya Ba's work is a powerful study of the agony faced by migrants and their families. A little further on, others take selfies by Egyptian artist Khaled Zaki's massive dog sculpture. He wanted his work to delight children—and draw attention to the problem of stray canines in the Senegalese capital.

'Africa at the crossroads'

The Biennale this year will showcase works from more than 2,500 artists across 85 countries. It is to feature some 300 exhibits in the capital and nearby islands of Ngor and Goree, as well as around 100 in other towns and countries of the diaspora. The exhibition was postponed due to COVID in 2020, but the 2018 event attracted almost 250,000 visitors, including 50,000 from abroad. For this year's edition, artistic director El Hadji Malick Ndiaye asked 17 artists to produce monumental works to interact with locations along Senegal's coast, from fishing villages to universities and prisons. This year's theme

is "Ndaffa"—the forge in Wolof—and "the construction of new models".

"This Biennale is symbolically strong because it's after the Covid-19 crisis that shook and tested African countries," Ndiaye told AFP. "Africa is at the crossroads of several changes. There are movements for a new appropriation of African heritage, questions about the CFA franc and the autonomy of African countries, unrest in several countries, and the emergence of new citizen consciousness..." He said participating artists had been invited "to have their own points of view on all this" and "forge new ways of thinking".

Dreamlike work

A former courthouse hosts the Biennale's international exhibition, which displays the work of 59 artists from 28 countries, including 16 African countries and 12 countries of the diaspora. There's dreamlike work from Senegalese painter and contemporary art sensation Omar Ba, video pieces courtesy of South African artist Sethembile Msezane, and space-age creations from Franco-Togolese-Senegalese Caroline Gueye—who is also an astrophysicist.

Other exhibits include a "forest" of 343 armless sculptures by Senegalese artist Ousmane Dia, a fierce critic of inequality who is calling for a new order "that focuses more on human dignity". There will also be a seminar, organized by Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr, discussing the restitution of African heritage. The Biennale, which runs until June 21, comes as war rages in Ukraine. Artistic director Ndiaye said art was vital to encourage reflection in such fateful, changing times. "When weapons crackle, we must make sure culture does too," he said. — AFP

Macklowe art collection becomes most expensive ever sold at auction

The famed Macklowe collection, subject of a bitter divorce battle between a New York property developer and his ex-wife, became the most expensive art collection ever sold at auction Monday. Sotheby's sold its second offering of works from the collection for \$246.1 million, bringing the total value of the group of paintings to \$922.2 million, a spokesman told AFP.

That exceeds the \$835.1 million that the Rockefeller collection sold for in 2018, then the highest total ever made by a single private collection at auction. Among the highlights of Monday evening's sale were Mark Rothko's "Untitled," which fetched \$48 million and Gerhard Richter's "Seestuck", which went for \$30.2 million.

Andy Warhol's "Self Portrait" sold for \$18.7 million while Willem de Kooning's "Untitled" went for \$17.8 million. Sotheby's won the rights to sell the Macklowe works back in September. It sold 35 of the pieces in November for \$676.1 million before selling the remaining 30 on Monday. Sotheby's had described the paintings as the "most significant collection of modern and contemporary art to ever appear on the market." During divorce proceedings, Harry Macklowe and his ex-wife Linda had been unable to agree on how much the vast collection was worth. A New York judge ruled in 2018 that they should sell all 65 works and split the profits. — AFP



Andy Warhol's 'Self Portrait' during a press preview for the Macklowe Collection at Sotheby's in New York. — AFP

Race satire meets teen buddy comedy in Amazon's 'Emergency'

"Emergency" begins like any coming-of-age buddy comedy. But its young heroes' night of party-hopping hi-jinks quickly takes a more serious and sinister turn in large part because they are Black. Unlike white characters from genre classics like "Superbad" who emerge unscathed from playful interactions with bemused cops, college students Sean and Kunle panic when they find a high-school girl passed out on their living room floor. Fearing what might happen if they dial 911 in such a compromising scenario, they rope Latino housemate Carlos into helping ferry her to hospital, setting off a series of hilarious and terrifying consequences. "It seems like it's gonna be a 'Superbad' or a 'Booksmart' type of movie—I feel like even the characters want this so badly to be like a teen comedy," the movie's writer K.D. Davila told AFP.

"They want it to be that, but it's not, it can't be." "Which is a f***-up, bitter reality of what it's like for a lot of people," agreed director Carey Williams. At the heart of "Emergency," out in US theaters Friday and on Amazon Prime Video next week, is the constant and everyday burden placed on young men of color whom society is quick to perceive as a threat. Growing up, Davila said she "saw this phenomenon where my dad and other men in my family, especially the ones who were darker skinned, had to do this strange calculation every time we went anywhere, (of) considering how they're being perceived."

"You can make those calculations and you can do your best to project 'innocence' or whatever. But it doesn't matter sometimes. You can still get pulled over and searched for no reason." Davila and Williams turned those observations into a short film, winning awards at festivals including Sundance and SXSW in 2018, before Amazon and a cast including pop star Sabrina Carpenter came aboard for this year's feature-length version.

The intervening period brought the death of George Floyd, the explosion of Black Lives Matter protests and a greater focus on diversity in Hollywood,

but the filmmakers reject the idea their film is "topical." "This is literally not new. We're glad that people were talking about it and engaging with it. But the idea that it had to get to this point was a little surprising," said Davila. In a nod to the superficiality of society's change, an indignant white couple film themselves confronting Sean and his friends simply for parking at night outside their home—the lawn of which proudly bears a "Black Lives Matter" sign.



In this file photo Sabrina Carpenter attends the Los Angeles Premiere of Amazon's 'Emergency' at Directors Guild of America in Los Angeles, California.

'Cathartic and funny'

But the filmmakers say they did not set out to preach to white people about race. "We weren't like 'We're teaching you how bad this is!'" said Davila. Instead, "Emergency" was made "for people who've been through this, who've been living in this culture of fears." "Hopefully, the movie is cathartic and funny to people who've been through that. That was the thing that might be a little different in our approach than other movies." For Williams, the film is an opportunity to delve into the young friends' relationship, and their different approaches to handling "Black masculinity and vulnerability."

Clean-cut and trusting Kunle (Donald Elise Watkins) doesn't initially feel he is treated any differently due to his skin color, while cocky and macho Sean (R.J. Cyler) has had a fear of authority seemingly drilled into him by lived experience. This contrast leads to the pair making very different choices over the course of the night—each of which Williams hopes the audience can empathize with.

"There is a lot of humor... in the way they reacted to each other trying to do the right thing and get out of the situation," said Williams. He added: "The film should raise questions about how these young men have to maneuver through the world." — AFP



In this file photo Sebastian Chacon, RJ Cyler, Diego Abernham and Donald Elise Watkins attend the Los Angeles Premiere of Amazon's 'Emergency' at Directors Guild of America in Los Angeles, California. 'Emergency' begins like any coming-of-age buddy comedy. — AFP photos