

Into The Mystic Lee Ranaldo



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Following in the footsteps of Brian Jones, Ornette Coleman, William Burroughs and others, Sonic Youth guitarist LEE RANALDO headed into Morocco's Rif mountains to seek out the legendary trance music of The Master Musicians of Jajouka. In this extract from his diary, he describes his intoxicating encounter with the village musicians, and outlines the battle currently raging over the music's birthright.

In September of last year, in the course of a two week trip to Morocco, Leah Singer and I were lucky enough to pay a visit to the remote mountain village of Jajouka, where the legendary Master Musicians reside. First brought to the attention of the world via recordings made by The Rolling Stones' Brian Jones in the mid-60s, their music has touched many and various souls since that time. The following text is an excerpt from my own Moroccan journal, specific to that visit.

A few words are needed in preface to the text, however, which was written in Fes in September 95.

In the time since my visit to Jajouka I have been made aware of a situation which places a sad weight upon the beautiful music which emanates from this little village. It seems there are currently two groups of musicians claiming to be the 'real' Master Musicians OF Jajouka/Joujouka (they're even arguing over the spelling). One group, the 'Jajouka' faction, is led by Bachir Attar, whose father was the leader of the group in the 60s when Brian Jones and Ornette Coleman made their visits (it is this group I have written about here, and for reasons of pragmatism, I have used the 'Jajouka' spelling throughout). The 'Joujouka' faction is in the care of Mohammed Hamri, who has been involved with the village since the 50s and 60s, and who had a hand in bringing Brion Gysin and Paul Bowles there.

It seems that neither group is willing to acknowledge the right of the other to exist, and both groups are fighting for the name which Brian Jones's recordings have made so well known. Players which appeared on those original recordings now appear to reside among both current groups.

Although I have not spoken to Hamri, I have had conversations with Frank Rynne, a London-based sound engineer who has made extensive recordings of the Hamri-led group in Joujouka. I am in the process of attempting to find out more about this troubling situation, and in no way do I wish the text which follows to appear to be an endorsement of one group over the other. I have heard the recordings made by both groups, and consider them all to be quite remarkable, and worthy of your attention.

Suffice it to say that my hope, and the hopes of many others in the music community, are for some sort of resolution to these conflicts that will allow both groups to co-exist and continue to bring this beautiful music out into the world.

< Lee Ranaldo, NYC July 96

Fes, 4 September 1995

So much has happened in the last 36 hours that I am nearly at a loss for where to begin, and already exhausted at the task of attempting to transcribe even a small portion of it here. Maybe just simply exhausted will do. There has not been much sleep. Leah and I arrived today in the great imperial city of Fes. We took dinner on the balcony of our room at the elaborately-tiled Palais Jamais, which is probably the most beautiful, elegant hotel in all Morocco.

We have travelled a rather circuitous route from Tanger, that discordant port city on the northwestern edge of Africa, famous for its expatriate community in the 40s and 50s. Its loose morals became the model for "Interzone" in William Burrough's Naked Lunch, which was written during Burroughs's stay in the city.

We had been trying to reach Bachir Attar, leader of The Master Musicians Of Jajouka. Leah knows him from New York, where he lives half the year with his wife, the photographer Cherie Nutting. It was our hope that he would escort us on a visit to his village of Jajouka < magick, mystical site in Morocco's Rif mountains. Bachir's father led The Master Musicians in the 60s, when Brian Jones made his famous visit, and was also there in the 40s and 50s when Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Brion Gysin and others visited this (then) little known village to hear the wild trance music being made there. When his father died, Bachir took his place as leader of the group and master soloist on the rhaïta (the split-reed horn used in these parts, sort of similar to an oboe or clarinet).

We heard through Absalom, the desk clerk at the Hotel Continental, that Bachir would be in town this afternoon. We left word that we would return by 2:30, and arranged a price of 400 dirhams with Achmed, our driver, to visit the Souq-al-Ahad (Sunday market) out in the country about 25 miles from Tanger.

We returned to find that Bachir had called, and would come in one hour or so. Suddenly he was there in our room, fresh from a visit with Bowles and Mrabet, Bowles's long-time protégé. We would drive to Jajouka < two and half hours away < with Bachir and his brother Mustapha in Bachir's white Mercedes (car of choice here if y'cn get it), sleep there that night, and arrange for our driver to collect us near there in the morning to continue our route to Fes.

We renew acquaintances in the car and talk about music. Bachir and the musicians have just come from a festival gig in Spain, and will kick off their first US tour next month in NYC, the day after I depart with Sonic Youth on our own US tour to support Washing Machine. Just my luck.

We stop in Ksar el Kabir two hours later, the night dark and raining lightly, to buy groceries for the 13-man

musical 'family' awaiting our arrival at the hill. We shop in a funky, bustling market medina < little alleys with headless chickens hanging and fresh fruits and vegetables, dogs and kids running around, smoke from cooking meats clouding the lanes, wild smells of all sorts everywhere. At the butcher's shop; we buy an entire leg of lamb, which is quickly and expertly hacked into segments with a giant cleaver, and wrapped in pages from the local newspaper.

New stop is the house of Bachir's sister. In Jajouka there are no phones, no electricity or running water. Bachir must use his sister's phone to call an official in Rabat concerning the copyrights to the Brian Jones Presents The Pipes Of Pan At Jajouka record, which The Rolling Stones have finally allowed The Master Musicians to re-release (The Stones have controlled the copyrights all these years). Money from this release will bring much needed funds to the musicians.

Bachir's sister's place is the first Moroccan house we get to enter. It is one of a number of two-storey cement structures situated in a field of rubble, stones, dirt and rubbish. The houses appear to have been spirited to this dusty patch of ground, all notion of sidewalks, grass, or paved streets left behind. Little kids were running about in the dirt of broken bricks and those ubiquitous black plastic bags which litter this entire country.

Inside, the house was sparse and serene. Curtained doorways in the main room led to a kitchen, bedrooms, and other rooms. We exchanged awkward smiles with family and kids as Bachir made his calls. Another musician named Tahir joined us here and we set off for the final stretch to the village.

I'd heard about the mountain road up to Jajouka - a rutted, rock-littered track climbing into the hills of the Rif, and it was exactly as described Moroccan soil is fraught with stones, boulders and detritus of all sorts, glacial debris so thick that farming here must be an arduous task at best. Near Jajouka, Mustapha and Tahir got out and walked so the Benz wouldn't bottom out. As we pulled into the village the headlights flashed across small blue-washed houses and thatch-roofed sheds the rusty color of the earth.

We drove up to the madrassah, or clubhouse, where the musicians lived, in strict segregation from the women of the village. Here they do all the cooking, cleaning and caretaking for themselves. There were a few lamps glowing, and a couple of men were hanging out on a little porch under the roof of the lodge.

All manner of wild Moroccan men slowly appeared, welcoming us warmly. There were old wizards in point-hooded djellabas (a long, loose outer garment worn in Arabic countries) and younger guys in T-shirts. Soon we were drinking super-sweet mint tea and tuning Bachir's guimbri (a three-stringed mandolin of sorts) to match an old, battered Ampeg electric guitar which he had dragged out of his little room off the porch and placed in my hands. It seems this guitar was left here by Chris Stein of Blondie sometime in the late 70s. Bachir tapped a small amplifier into a generator line which was used to give the madrassah some semblance of electric power for certain brief periods each night. Hand drums came out and soon we were all jamming.

Before I even realized what was happening I was stepping out onto weird sonic wings of sound against the guimbri, drums and Tahir's violin accompaniment. It was so immediately relaxing there, on that wild African porch, with the rain falling lightly in the dark night, that I really didn't think twice about it.

Has joints were rolled and the sebsi (wooden pipes used for smoking kif) came out. The Rif is thick with kif growing in every hollow, and Jajoukan kif is reportedly the best; it was certainly milder and smoother than the harsh stuff we sampled in Tanger, which Bachir had sniffed and scoffed at. Normally kif is a combination of marijuana and black tobacco, which are grown side by side in the same soil, and cut together for smoking. In Jajouka, however, they dispense with the tobacco altogether, which is why the stuff was so smooth. At the time I thought it wasn't very strong at all, compared to how I had imagined it would be, because we smoked it all night and never really felt out of sorts. Tonight, however, as I write this in Fes on the hotel balcony, I am pleasantly high after smoking only a couple of sebsi-bowls: perhaps the setting in Jajouka was already so far out that the kif could add little more to it.

We jammed several surprisingly easy improvisations, feeling each other out. Bachir had one pedal - a digital delay - similar to one I often use, and its gentle slapback reminded me of modern African gtr sounds I have heard. Perhaps they sank in more than I had noted because it seemed my primitive/sophisto gtr and their sophisto/primitive rhythms fitted together effortlessly.

Brian Jones had found Jajouka through Brion Gysin in the 60s, at a time when everyone else was looking to India for mesmerizing trance rhythms. The repetitive sound-structures of The Master Musicians have so much in common with rock music (as beat music plus melody riffs) that it felt totally natural for me to play with them. There was no ego involved, and I felt able to play comfortably, without addressing the great divide between us - in culture, age, or sound.

At one point Bachir held up a large drum, skinned on one side like a tambourine, near the amp. Its chamber re-amplified the feedback from my guitar, causing the drum head to vibrate madly, creating a great low throbbing sound. Even this insane amplified distortion didn't phase these wizened guys, cause them to freak out or condescend. They understand sound, and took it as such.

Before we ate, Bachir set up an improbably large pair of spkrs to play us some new record company remixes from the Brian Jones record, to which modern distorted gtr and heavy bass had been added. The record company is going to try and 'sell' the music to a new audience by trapping it in modern sound FX.

The men soon retired to dine in their sleeping chamber, leaving Bachir, Leah and I to eat alone on the porch. We ate a delicious meal of skewered lamb and vegetables, followed by more kif and more mint tea, as rain beat down on the dry land off the porch. The men had all commended Leah and I for being good luck in bringing the rain with us. Here, now, it is a blessing for their dry village.

During the meal I was stunned to hear the insane gtr sounds and infinity loops of my East Jesus CD, which I had given Bachir, blasting out over the village. It played until I could stand it no longer and asked him to turn it off. I could only wonder what the elders made of this strange dinner music, but it was kind of thrilling hearing it come crashing out at midnight under the cloudy skies of the Rif.

Dinner finished, over sweet hunks of melon dessert, the others filed back to their places on the porch, and out came the rhaitas, the oboe-like horns that can get loud as fuck. The real music was about to begin. Four horn players serenaded us into the very early morning with their most incredible delirious incantations.

The rhaita players work together in a round-like fashion against the drums, similar to Balinese music, where a complex phrase is divided between the various players, each holding down overlapping parts of the same phrase by breathing in sequence rather than simultaneously - the result being that the music never need pause to catch its breath. With no beginning or end it quickly ascends to a repetitive, ecstatic, trance state.

The musicians conjured this impressive model of the infinite before our eyes. No wonder Ornette Coleman

clicked with these players (and the fathers of some of them) back in the 70s when he and Bob Palmer came here to record *Dancing in Your Head*. These guys are still out there in that same space Ornette was exploring with them back then. Across cultures and oceans.

I had my small mini-DAT running all night, as they alternated vocal chants and rhaita/drum meditations.

Slowly, personalities took shape: Bachir, the young leader here, dark and intense, directing the musical flow as his father once did, cueing changes in pattern or section with a tip of his instrument. Younger brother Mustapha supports him as key drummer, holding down the shifting rhythms. An older drummer in a dusty brown djellaba with black sailor's watchcap, his face fixed in a happy, constant, dim sort of grin, drumming his drum. A round faced rhaita player, cheeks puffed up as he played.

We decided that Laarbi, a rhaita player in his eighties and with no front teeth, was one of the two wizards of the group. With his white-peaked djellaba, bare feet, and craggy crow's face, he seemed otherworldly: beatific, benevolent, wizened. He calmly kept up with the younger players.

Tahir, who had travelled up from town with us, was the lead violin player of the group. A dashing and handsome man in his middle age, he was not of the Attar family and did not normally live in Jajouka, but rather down in Ksar el Kebir. His violin, played upright on the knee rather than under the chin, would define much of the melodic content of the music, riffing solos across the the mesmeric patterns of the horns and drums. He had played with Ornette, and possibly for Brian as well.

The funniest was Berdouz, 82, previously biggest kif smoker in town before recently giving it up for good, and formerly a key member of the group, who played for Brian alongside Bachir's father, way back when. Now a respected elder, I knew of him as a featured character in Steven Davis's book, *Joujouka Rolling Stone*. He knew four phrases in English, and used them interchangeably for every situation. His rap, no doubt glommed from hippy kids filing up here in the 70s, went: "Thank you very much! Eberrying Outtasite! Berry Gut!" Bachir referred to him as the Charlie Chaplin of Jajouka. He kept us laughing all night, and repeatedly refilled the sebsi for Leah and I. He almost reminded me of old photographs of my father's father - uncannily so. (Dark for a summer with much sun, I have been mistaken for Moroccan a few times already).

Before turning in, we bade goodbye to the old sharif (holy man) from a nearby village. Once Bachir's father's best friend, he had lain on the floor all night, taking everything in, without saying two words. It was 4am as he led his donkey out of the darkness and hopped on for the one-hour trek across the hills, but not before much laughter and flash pictures freezing his image there atop the unfazed mule. We gave him 100 dirhams for a well-building project in his village; in return he promised to pray for our continued success. Then the sharif was gone into the African night. The second of the night's two white-robed, graying wizards. I wondered if he would really appear in the photos we snapped, or if he was a fleeting apparition after all.

Flashlights in hand, we walked a short path through low brush to our sleeping quarters. Gazing upwards, I noted the rain clouds had lifted, opening up the vault above. I had never seen this many stars so clearly in all my travels. The Milky Way shone clear like some jewel-encrusted belt; Africa, north coast, far from the world.

Leah and I were to sleep in Bachir's father's house, now padlocked and unused. It was blue-washed, like so many other buildings here, and built on a square plan with an enclosed inner courtyard open to the sky. A primitive palace of sorts, it was exquisite in design and simplicity. We poked around a bit by the light of the gas lamp but soon fell asleep in a corner of one long blue room, dressed with tapestries, candles, and rugs for us, knowing there would be little sleep ahead if we wanted to make a quick survey of the village before departing to Ksar el Kabir to meet our driver. If it had not been so late we might have puzzled over why they admonished us to lock the door behind us for the night.

We wake to a cloudy morning and Mustapha pounding on the steel doors to the place, our human alarm clock. The house is even more beautiful by daylight, green plants growing in the courtyard offset against the tranquil blue. At first I fail to recognize Laarbi, the wizard, who accompanies Mustapha. In jeans and a short sleeved shirt, he is now the rural farming gentleman, his white djellaba hung on a peg somewhere.

We breakfast back at the madrassah, eating figs, they tell us, from the same tree Mick Jagger ate from in 1989 when finally he followed Brian's footsteps to Jajouka after The Stones had recorded a song with the musicians in Tanger for the *Steel Wheels* album. Ever the strategist, Jagger arrived with a film crew in tow, his journey to the village documented and used as publicity for The Stones' upcoming tour.

All the musicians materialized to wish us off. These people, who have so little to a Western eye, were among the most hospitable souls we'd ever met.

We walked down the rock-strew path through the village, visiting the temple where their Saint, Sidi Hamid Sherq, was buried. Here in the courtyard grew a large tree around which circled a great chain to which anyone deemed crazy or infirm would be chained for a few days, until they were 'cured'. We passed the goat-god Bou Jeloud's cave high up in the hills, an opening in the rock from which the skin-clad God is said to prance forth during the most frantic revelry which accompanies certain extended yearly celebrations in Jajouka, bringing manhood to the young boys, fertility and prosperity to the village.

We continued on past local village women and children, a well building project, and on down past the last white-and blue-washed buildings to the paved road, where the Benz was now parked and waiting.

We raced to town, late to meet our driver, the situation with his picking us up in Kabir very uncertain to begin with. The town was full of activity. We waited, concerned, in a cafe by the main station with Bachir, Mustapha and Tahir. We were just about to give up hope when Farouk, our driver, pulled his minivan into view. Goodbyes were said, and we were off, leaving Jajouka behind us...

There are a number of recordings available featuring both versions of The Master Musicians. Some of the best are contained on *Joujouka Black Eyes* (Sub Rosa), which features the Hamri-led group, and the Bill Laswell-produced *Apocalypse Across The Sky* (Axiom/Island), which features the Bachir Attar group.

This article is adapted from Lee Ranaldo's *Moroccan Journal*, a work in progress. A different version appears in the current issue of the American magazine *Yakuza*. Thanks to Andrew Bowser for the edits.

Editor's note: The Wire became aware of the conflict which exists between the two versions of The Master Musicians in August 1995 when we ran an earlier article on the music of Joujouka (issue 138) which profiled the group led by Mohammed Hamri. Much of the conflict, which at times has become extremely acrimonious, seemed to centre around the issue of who had the rights to rerelease and receive royalties from the Brian Jones recordings. Whether the issue has been fully resolved is still unclear. If anyone cares to cast any light on this unfortunate episode, then our Letters page is open.

