

Souad Massi

+ Ruba Shamshoum

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 120 minutes, plus 20-minute interval.

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Robin Denselow sits down with Algerian singer-songwriter Souad Massi to talk origins, influences and new beginnings through the art of her music.

Souad Massi became an international star thanks to her exquisite, often gently sad-edged blend of lyrics in Arabic, French and the American country and folk influences that have, she says, 'been my first love from since I was young until now.' As a singer-songwriter and musician based in Paris, there is also an echo of chanson in some of her work, and reminders that she studied classical music, listened to local styles, and played flamenco and rock back home in in Algeria before she was forced to leave. It's an intriguing fusion and she expands her range further with the songs from her new album *Sequana*, which she'll be performing from on Saturday 29th October.

Sequana is a brave, defiant album, both in terms of Souad's lyrics and the music. She has been through a difficult period in her life, she says, and the new songs are concerned with survival and hope for a better future. The title track is named after the Gallo-Roman goddess of the river Seine, who was also the goddess of healing. It was written for her daughters who are 'afraid of the future, worried and angry... I say to them, "you have to be optimistic".' She is, she says, 'concerned with what is happening in the world – a lot of people are angry. I feel we are all prisoners...the world is fragile and I'm afraid for the future of our children.' But her new song 'Dessine-Moi Un Pays' (Draw Me A Country) expresses hope for a land with 'no corrupt rulers and no evil wars,' but is also a song about refugees, influenced, by her own experience of leaving Algeria. Other new songs include 'Victor' (Le Son De La Main), a tribute to the great singer-songwriter Victor Jara, tortured and killed by the Pinochet regime in Chile in 1973. In complete contrast, there's 'a droll, funny song about divorce – no, it's not about me, it's about a friend of mine.'

Then there are the real surprises. There's a re-working in Arabic of 'Hurt', the intense and pained song by Trent Reznor that became a country classic when sung by Johnny Cash, which begins with 'I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel.' Souad says, 'it's beautiful poetry. There are a lot of things I can't express myself, so I say it in this song...a lot of people hurt me.' Even more startling of all is 'Twam', a song by Souad about schizophrenia and a woman for whom 'madness has overtaken reason.' It's a furious, pounding piece, unlike anything Souad has done, with guitar backing from Justin Adams, who produced the album and plays on most of the tracks. His extraordinary career has included production work for Malian desert-blues exponents Tinariwen, playing guitar for Robert Plant, and winning awards for his work with Mauro Durante. A great fan of Algerian music, Justin says his role was to 'colour the whole thing' and help Souad as she explored influences that range from North African, to bossa nova. Souad described Justin as being 'like fresh air.' He will be joining her and her band on stage tonight and is 'hugely looking forward to it.' He's a great admirer of the 'amazing' Malik Kerrouche, Souad's guitarist.

It's another development in what's been an intriguing career. Souad is a Berber, a descendant of those who lived in North Africa before the arrival of Islam. Brought up in Algiers, she studied town planning, but also classical music, and at night played with a flamenco group and rock with a garage band named Atakor. She wrote her first song 'Raoul' when she was seventeen 'and sang it

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to my mum and sisters in the kitchen.’ My mum said she liked it and said, ‘perhaps you should write another.’

This was a time of Civil War in Algeria, following the cancellation of the 1992 election which it seemed the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front would win. The fundamentalists didn’t approve of pop music, let alone female singers, and Souad’s activities put her at risk. ‘It was dangerous, more than I realised. I had threats on the telephone and was afraid. I don’t know who called me, but they said, “we know where you live”. I was suffering from terrorism in my own country.’

In 1999 she was invited to perform in France, sang at the Femmes D’Algerie festival and was signed to a major record label, ‘it was like a dream,’ she says. Her early albums *Raoul* and *Deb* brought her success, and she has built up a strong following across Europe and America as well as North Africa and the Middle East. Her most recent albums included *El Mutakallimûn*, in 2015, in which she responded to the rise of Islamic State with a reminder of the creativity and tolerance of the earlier Muslim civilisations, along with echoes of the idealism and anger that fuelled the Arab Spring. Her last album *Oumnia* was nominated for a Songlines award. Now comes *Sequana*, her collaboration with Justin Adams. This promises to be a memorable concert.

Produced by the Barbican

Performers

Souad Massi vocals
Malik Kerrouche guitar
Guy Nsangue bass
Mokhtar Samba drums
Rabah Khalifa percussions
Mokrane Adlani violin

+ Justin Adams guest



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