

Pious Performances: Musiqa Ruhiyya and Islamic Popular Music in Fez

CHRISTOPHER WITULSKI



From July of 2012 to June of 2013, I am continuing my dissertation field research in Fez, Morocco. This is my fifth visit to the country and my sixth to North Africa. While here, I am progressing in my study of the Moroccan dialect of Arabic before engaging intensive ethnographic research with musicians from across the spectrum of *musiqa ruhiyya*, loosely translated as ‘spiritual music.’ I focus on professional musicians and ritual leaders of various popular music genres, including those from Sufi and Gnawa paths. In each case, I question how these professional musicians constantly negotiate the space between “popular” and “religious,” always adapting to the competing economic and spiritual demands of their public positions. These strategies highlight the how the concepts of sacred and secular, popular, even entertainment or ritual, escape simple categorization. Furthermore, each of these members of Fez’s *musiqa ruhiyya* community is firmly a part of the incessant process of defining and redefining how Islam is, and should be, practiced in everyday life. Through the presentation of specific religious practices on stage and the dissemination of these

performed ideologies through the recording industry and festival circuits, they use their artistry, creativity, spirituality, leadership, and practicality to create and support an idea of what a publicly manifested Islam looks like.

My previous research centered on the Gnawa, once a population of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans forcibly brought to Morocco through the trans-Saharan slave trade. The ritual activity that comprises the focal point of Gnawa practice involves a spirit possession ceremony, an event led by a group of ritual musicians. After years of marginalization as social, economic, and religious outcasts, their music gained the attention of the parade of American and European artists who came to Morocco (especially Tangier) after World War II and during the civil rights movement in search of oriental or African inspiration (the Rolling Stones,

Led Zeppelin, Bryon Gysin, Randy Weston, Ornette Coleman, etc.). Their music, often described in terms of its bluesy grooves, is now featured across the country in major music festivals and on innumerable world music releases.

Additionally, while in Fez I accepted various invitations to perform on the violin and banjo with malhun, ‘issawa, and hamadsha ensembles, genres that straddle this divide between the pious and entertainment, in concerts ranging from private parties to the stages of the Fez Festival of Sacred Music. I contribute coverage and photography on the Morocco’s musical traditions and contemporary activities for the View From Fez, a prominent English language news blog, and Afropop Worldwide. Currently, I am writing my dissertation and teaching courses in American Popular Music.

Christopher Witulski is a PhD candidate in musicology/ethnomusicology. He is a former FLAS fellow (Arabic, Summer 2007) and recipient of a Fulbright IIE student fellowship.