



Akli D.

Akli D is a Berber performer and songwriter born in rural Algeria, an artist whose unique style combines North African Chaâbi music and the folk traditions of the country's Kabylie region mixed with everything from the American protest song to the Mississippi blues and even echoes of m'balax, Senegal's modern pop music.

These rich ingredients have been cooked to perfection on 'Ma Yela' ('If There Was'), his new album, on Because Music, produced by the legendary Manu Chao whose own 1998 album 'Clandestino' was a landmark in global Latin fusion. Chao, of course, was also responsible for Amadou & Mariam's worldwide hit, 'Dimanche à Bamako' in 2005.

Akli D – Akli Dehlis - was born in Kerouan, a small village in the Kabylie region east of Algiers. He is a Berber, the non-Arab people who, since prehistoric times, have inhabited the southern Mediterranean coastline from Egypt to the Atlantic. The Berbers dominated North Africa until the Arabs conquered it in the Seventh century.

For as long as he can remember, Akli D was surrounded by Berber music. Indeed, his mother was a traditional folk singer so it was perhaps inevitable that his musical ambitions began to crystallise when he reached his teens. Akli D's early favourites were such popular Kabyl singers as Idir and Cheikh El Hasnaoui et Slimane Azem although the family's radio also picked up the popular music of America and France.

In March 1980 police stopped the writer Mouloud Mammeri from entering the town of Tizi Ouzou to give a lecture on ancient Berber poetry. Students took to the streets in the Kabylie region and later in Algiers and, on 20th April, the security forces stormed Tizi Ouzou University. These events, known as the 'Berber Spring', centred on the language issue – the Kabyles see their cultural and linguistic heritage in pre-Islamic North Africa.

The Berber Spring marked a bitter new era in Algeria, resulting in tens of deaths and hundreds of political prisoners. For the young Akli D it eventually meant exile in Paris.

He became a street musician, playing in public squares and in the Parisian Metro. Little by little, he tried out many different musical genres - blues, rock, reggae, folk - all of which later influenced his compositions.

Akli D's other passion was cinema. It led him to take an Actor's Studio course at the Café de la Danse in Paris, at which time 'mektoub' (destiny) intervened in the shape of an American patron. Akli D moved in San Francisco where, in addition to his studies, he played at the Cafe Internationale and other clubs, performing his wholly original and totally eclectic collection of songs.

Eventually returning to Paris – Akli D also spent some time living in Ireland after his American experience – his career became totally centred on music. Akli D accompanied two female singers in a chaâbi-saharian blues combo called El Djazira and went on to form his first group, Les Rebeuhs des Bois.

The band played the city's café and club circuit, enabling Akli D to properly hone the songwriting skills reflected in 'Anefas Trankil' – 'Let Him Be' in the Berbers' Tamazight language – his debut album, released on the small Next Music label in 2001.

There is one small café that Akli D has always particularly favoured. It is in the Menilmontant area of Paris, a quarter heavily populated by Arab and North African communities. The café encourages spontaneous musical encounters, a place where people pick up guitars, bendirs and derboukas and jam through the night. And it was in this particular café that Akli D met Manu Chao.

He was mesmerised by Akli D, an artist who read Kabyl poetry over folk, gypsy-jazz and Chaâbi music. This initial meeting led to Chao's offer to produce Akli D's second album resulting, of course, in 'Ma Yela'.

While Akli D's first album emphasised his cultural roots and identity, 'Ma Yela' embraces a wider musical spectrum and lyrical concerns. The songs are a radical call to action, speaking of everything from aid to Chechen orphans and the fight for registration of illegal immigrants to the battle of Algerian women against the family code, a commitment that so distinguishes this extraordinary talent and his unique new Algerian music.