

Maurice El Medioni: The Birth of PianOriental



Maurice El Médioni

“Jews and Arabs share the same musical story. We, the Moors, Arabs and Jews were kicked out of Spain in 1492 and in our baggage was the same music.”

Maurice and the music co-star in this film. They drive the narrative forward and interweave in its structure, bringing together connections and sometimes delicate associations which cross time and culture. In this film the private and the public co-mingle as Maurice shows his skills to the camera in the privacy of his living room and talks about his experiences. When we see him on stage at concerts we see the rapturous crowds applauding and ululating to his intoxicating music.

The film is driven by the beats of Maurice's life from his birth in 1928 to today: his personal journey; abandoned by his father, raised by his single mother in abject poverty in the bustling Arab quarters of Oran; the first time he played the piano aged seven on an ancient out of tune Steinway; as a teenager listening to the American GI's playing Boogie and being invited to play along with them; playing in cafes and bars and being introduced to Rai by his Arab music compatriots; his forced exile, along with his family from Algiers to Marseilles; his succumbing to family pressure to become a tailor and his determination to forge a musical career, honing his own unique style – his occidental left hand pumping out boogie, jazz and Cuban rhythms, while his oriental right hand plays in Arabic, Andalous style; struggling to keep the bailiff from his door whilst raising a family on his meagre musicians income; becoming a celebrity in Paris playing the Faubourg in Montmartre; achieving recognition on the world music circuit, culminating with his recent BBC Radio 3 World Musician of the World Award; to this day Maurice continues to play at international concerts, from playing with Cheb Khalid at the recent Barbican concert in London, to his guest appearance at the Jewish Culture and Music Festival in Krakow and his performances at the Arab World Institute in Paris. The sad little boy in the backstreets of Oran has certainly come a long way.

The backdrop to this extraordinary personal story is the world in turmoil; the Spanish civil war, war torn Europe, the rise of Fascism and the atrocities perpetrated against 6,000,000 Jews in the Holocaust; the war of Independence in Algiers; the rise of the Arab/Israeli conflict in the Middle East and the present day struggles worldwide. Still Maurice plays, his two hands flying across the piano keys, his broad infectious grin bringing hope and joy to his audience - Jew, Arab, Christian and Muslim alike. His music may not bring about world peace but we could all learn a thing or two from this remarkable optimistic old man, this two handed genius.

In the film, Maurice is joined by Iraqi-born oud player Khyam Allami, on whom the Iraq war of 2003 had a profound affect, and which in turn affected his musical direction.



Khyam Allami

“Songs about home become more potent the longer you’ve been away”

“As a displaced artist I feel I have no place to comment on, or be affected by the recent revolts in the Middle East. I have not lived as part of the environment that fuelled the desperation, which made Mohammad Bouaziz set himself on fire. Nor have I lived years in fear of suicide bombers, assassinations or occupations as my family and friends have had to.

As a human being, I am both overwhelmed with joy by the courage of those bravely demonstrating and deeply disgusted by the repression of the governments in question. I support the demonstrators wholeheartedly. I want to hear my generation's voice resound across the globe, freely expressing that which our parents' generation couldn't. I would like to see the people of Baghdad and Damascus walking and talking freely in the streets. Maybe then I can walk beside them and be happy with them, for them”.

Khyam decided to take up the oud, the instrument of his childhood, partly out of melancholia and partly out of the need to reconnect with his roots and search for his true identity.

In the words of Daniel Barenboim, who in 1999 founded, with the late Palestinian-American philosopher Edward Said, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (whose musicians comprise both Israelis and Arabs):

“In a piece of music, the very fact that two or more voices exist simultaneously lends them both legitimacy, and in Western music there is no such thing as a one-sided narration.”

This perception, that everything is connected, the need always to unite logical thought and intuitive emotion, applies aptly to the musicians in our film, whose innate creativity blends east and west in an instinctive sense of cultural connectivity.

Using words from his diary, Maurice speaks of a world passed and a world that should never return. His new life begins from the memories of the old as the strength of the music bears out his anger and his joy, his poverty and his struggle for a better life. He talks of his childhood while every day he sits on the beach in Marseilles looking across the water to his beloved homeland. We see images of Oran, the cultural centre of Algeria. Old footage and new footage allows the audience to visit the places to which Maurice can never return.

The sounds of Maurice's youth is embodied as far back as the 1930s with Josephine Baker and Charles Trenet and even the ironic music from the film *The Immigrant*, *El Emigrante* sung by Juanito Valderrama, followed by the big band music of Glen Miller and Benny Goodman. In his youth he played with and was very influenced by some of the greatest Arabic musicians from Tunisia and Morocco and the very early Rai music of Blaoui el Houari and Housine Slaoui. Maurice reinterpreted Blaoui's famous song *L'Mirikan*, the song that enunciates the arrival of the Americans troops in Algeria and Morocco. In the 1950s he sang with some of the most famous Jewish/Arabic singers of the time from Oran – Blond Blond and Line Monty. In the 1960s he played with Samy Maghribi, Lili Labassi and Reinette L'Oranaise on the song "Don't Forget You Are an Expatriate". All these songs and influences are important to the film as a way of drawing on the music of the dispossessed and showing that Maurice is not alone in his dislocation.