



Q&A WITH MARYAM SALEH, MAURICE LOUCA & TAMER ABU GHAZALEH

What brought you together and what was the common starting point for this album?

Maurice: When we decided to work together, we didn't really have any particular ideas about what we wanted to create, we came together because we liked each other's work. It was a friend who introduced me to Tamer's music, she was a big fan of his work and she made me listen to his album [Mir'ah](#). At first I didn't quite get it, and after a while I listened to it again and I literally became obsessed with that album. I also love Tamer's latest album, [Thulth](#). And with Maryam, we both worked in Leyla Soliman's theatre piece Lessons in Revolting (2011), and it was back then that we started talking about wanting to work together. Maryam sometimes speaks about dissonance and singing out of tune, which is what some traditionalists have said about her singing. To me, however, Maryam has the ideal voice, it has such a distinct character, you recognize Maryam's voice instantly even if it's a song you've never heard before by her.

Maryam: I had been a fan of Maurice's music as well. There is one particular track in his first album Garraya, it's called [Half Tooth](#), that track is probably an all time favorite for me. With Tamer, we've been around each other's work for a while, he co-produced my first album, [Mesh Baghanny](#), wrote a couple of my songs and he sometimes plays bass in my band, but we've never fully collaborated until this project.

Tamer: For me in Maurice's first album Garrayya, what stood out is that the tools and instruments he uses are all electronic, yet they really give you the Tarab feeling of Arabic music and I was really intrigued by that. I was possessed by the tracks to the extent where I had this crazy idea to do my own interpretation of every track with vocals. I would say the same about Maryam as well, I think she is a unique interpreter of songs.

All the songs in this album feature texts by Mido Zoheir, why did you choose to work with his poems only?

Maurice: Whilst with most of the songs the melody came first and then we would find the right text for it, from the onset the one element we all agreed on is that we would be working with Mido Zoheir's texts. Maryam from the beginning was experimenting vocally using Mido's texts.

Tamer: Maryam has all of Mido's work, both published and unpublished, and she's always worked with his texts, perhaps he's the one poet she's used texts from the most.

Maryam: It's almost second nature to me, working with Mido's texts. I think only five of my songs don't feature his texts. I usually check what Mido is writing or has just written and take it from there, only when he has nothing at all, do I go looking for other texts or write my own. Mido has this knack for articulating what we all feel with such wrenching simplicity, yet his choice of words makes the emotions you feel quite complex and multidimensional. He also has this dark comedy edge running through all of his texts. He is fascinating, quite talented. When you look closer into his texts, he uses everyday language, says things the way we would say them in casual conversations, yet he pens them as poetry, he's a genius!

Tamer: For us, Mido is the best poet of his generation. With him, it's such a spontaneous outpouring of poems, he doesn't think about them or structure them, they just come to him, with abundance.

Maurice: Mido is of his time and place. I think what gives the album such an Egyptian sound is Mido's work more than any other component in the music. His humor and the way he juxtaposes the words are so very Egyptian - take "te'ban 'ala kol sellem, 'aqrab fe kol sa'a (a snake on every ladder and a hand on every clock)" as an example - he embodies a certain state of being, and he's not actually depressing. On the surface, you might think it's about the dire reality and all, but somehow his texts don't bring you down. I don't know how he does that. There are quite a few songs in the album that really get to me, but in a beautifully inspiring way somehow. It's in most of his work, this sensibility, in the songs that Maryam sang from him. He's not nihilistic.

Maryam: He's not nihilistic at all, there is a living part of him that wants to be happy, so letting it all out in poetry is a way of coping.

Tamer: So although the starting point for every song was a melody, then we would settle on the text that works with it, the texts from then on had huge influence on the songs. We had to flesh out the rhythms in quite a few songs to maintain the effect in each verse for example.

Maurice: In other songs, decisions on whether Maryam & Tamer would sing as one voice or two voices, those were based on the words. So a lot of the dramatic and musical decisions were based on the words.

Tamer: When we listen back to the foundational ideas in a song like Teskar Tebky (Drunk, you weep), the major contrast between the words and the music. There is sadness in the words yet the music is not sad.

Maurice: Essentially Mido is the fourth member in this collaboration.

Maryam: yes he is for sure, he's the speaker of the band in some way, we sing his words.

What about the artwork, how did it come about?

Maurice: I've known George's work for very long and I've known him as friend as well. I've always loved his work as an illustrator and we had come to the realisation that we wanted to work on the cover from a visual art starting point as opposed to a graphic design one. His impressions after hearing the tracks rhymed with all of us and he particularly hit it off with Maryam. They started coming up with some exciting and beautiful totally unrealistic ideas at first.

Tamer: He spoke about notions of contrast between beauty on the surface, with gritty and rough around the edge layers underneath. Images such as satellite dishes overpopulating roof tops, anything with contradiction and contrast. A beautiful voice that sings disturbing texts. These are all notions he came up with straight upon hearing the album, so it was clear that he was the right artist to work with.

Maryam: He came up with this idea for a human creature of sorts, a Cairene one, which I found very intriguing, then we somehow found ourselves discussing childhood paraphernalia, those little figurines on top of pencils, pop up children's books featuring miniature cities, we really fed off one another until we brought it back to the ideas that we can actually realise logistically and within budget. We also know George as a stand up comedian, he is amongst the first to do stand up comedy in Egypt, and he has the dark sense of humour that also runs throughout the album.

The instrumentation is quite lush and extensive, was that a conscious choice?

Tamer: We didn't have any decisions beforehand. I wasn't sure if I was going to sing or not, and whether I would be playing oud or buzuq. I wasn't sure what Maurice was playing, I didn't even know he played guitar! I didn't see him coming to the residency with a guitar, suddenly I look and Maurice has a guitar on his lap!

Maurice: This project took its time. We first met in Cairo for a few sessions in December 2012 and we came out with around three songs then. Then in Amman in December 2013, then in January 2015 we went to Alexandria. So a lot happened and changed in that time span. When we first started I was finishing my album [Benhayyi El Baghbaghan](#) (Salute the Parrot) with all the samples I had recorded in the studio for it, going into Lekhfa. Two years later I was playing folk guitar with slide within the same project.

Tamer: when we went to the cabin in Alexandria, we basically took all the instruments we had individually. In Amman also, we used Yaaqoub Abu Ghosh's studio, and he's a bass player and there were so many basses in the studio and what not. So I played bass then.

Maryam: I have pictures of the Tamer in the Alexandria cabin, playing practically every single instrument in the room, even the drums and Maurice's guitar.

Maurice: I didn't know Tamer played bass either! There was also a harmonium at one of the studios we used, so we gave it a go. It's kind of nice, to experiment openly with any instrument in your reach. There was a point when we hit a wall actually, so we just exchanged instruments and played for a bit, and out of that came Makonsh Wakoun (To be and not to be). Our time in Alexandria was great and in Beirut in July 2015 when we went to record, it was great too.

What about the vocals, it's uncommon to have two solo vocalists in independent music in the region working on an entire album together, how did you decide on the parts and the harmonies for example?

Maurice: Tamer didn't want to sing at first actually. Then Maryam and I vetoed it and we told him if he doesn't sing, there is no project. For me actually, one of the most striking elements in Lekhfa, is the contrast between Maryam and Tamer's voices. It wasn't intentional, however it started showing early on into the development of the first songs that it really worked this contrast, in early recordings of Kont Rayeh (I was going) and Teskar Tebky (Drunk, you weep) for example, for me it became really obvious that those were the elements that would make the work stand out.

Tamer: what was interesting and really worked is that it's not often that you hear two voices singing together and you can really distinguish one from the other, because they're in different vocal ranges, but at the same time they create a third voice. So because they're so different and have a different breath, they don't overshadow one another, and their coming together is a third sound, as if it's a third person singing.

This independent movement in music across the region, how do you see it? Do you think in the future we will look back on this movement, musically, as a moment when Arabic music took new turns?

Maurice: It depends from which viewpoint you see it. If you're a traditionalist, you would think that all these attempts are shallow. In my view though, it is definitely a period of experimentation in Arabic music more than any other period since the 30s and as Tamer mentions, it has been almost two decades now since these attempts have been emerging. But I am not necessarily consumed by or interested in how we talk about this period, I am more interested in inhabiting somewhere where there is a certain energy and momentum and that has been the case in Cairo and that is why I live here, and I feel it and hear it in the work of those around me in the region. You also see it in the reactions of those who visit Cairo and come across the pockets of alternative music.

Maryam: But it's hard to really know whether this movement does not have its roots much earlier than 20 years ago, because we didn't live that period so it's hard to know how it felt back then.

Tamer: It's true, but the attempts have definitely multiplied in the last 20 years and the internet has played a key part in accelerating and intensifying this movement. Never before did you have such mobility in non-commercial music across the region, having huge fan bases for Jordanian alternative music right here in Egypt for example.

And how is the situation for alternative artists in Egypt today?

Tamer: So in the region you have no state support whatsoever, so it's even harder for an independent musicians in the region in comparison to their counterparts in Europe, where you have public grants, funded spaces and venues. The cultural sector is generally resourceless, so it makes it a heavier struggle, but what makes up for it, is the demand and thirst for new music, and new art in general, and you see this in shows and online. The counterpart of an Arab independent musician in Europe for example would have a fraction of the following this artist has here in Cairo. So this is where the equation balances out, because there is such a big interest in the work that we produce, it helps us cope with the little opportunities and resources we have to develop and present our work.

Maryam: And it's not in any way a defiance, we continue in this dire situation not out of defiance, it's slightly naive to think so. It's quite disheartening and depressing actually the state of things. But at this point, it's not a choice, this is what we do, we're musicians, we make music, we can't think of ourselves as anything else, whether it makes us really poor and constantly struggling, then that's just the way it is, we can't really imagine ourselves doing anything else. And you lose yourself in developing this profession of yours that is making music, getting better at it, learning more and more about music, listening to more and collaborating with others, and you try to take a step further and beyond in this way.

Maurice: In Cairo, relatively speaking with its population and size, it's of course shocking how very few venues we have, in comparison to many other Arab capitals with a fraction of Cairo's population yet with more venues, not even relatively speaking. But it has kind of always been like this for independent and alternative music. I was in a band in the mid 90s and that was the time when the crackdown on rock music gatherings kicked in. I co-founded a band and we met and rehearsed for an entire year, yet we never had a single gig. A lot of people stopped making music around then. So even back then it was quite underground and DIY, you would find a small space, rent out gear and your friends would come hear you play, that was pretty much it. We never had any venues where you would breakthrough as a band and start performing there.

Tamer: When Culture Wheel opened in 2005, it is was such a big deal!

Maurice: There is a younger generation that started performing more actively in the couple of years after 2011, where there was a power vacuum and quite a few venues and spaces opened around that time, then quickly came the crackdown on any independent cultural spaces where people congregate and we went back to pre-2011, so there is this perception that it's the worse time for independent artists these days, but in my view it's not, because it has always been like this. This is the environment we grow up in as alternative musicians in Egypt.

Maryam: But it's important to mention that DIY and alternative bands all around the world struggle, in Egypt it's worse of course, but it's still within the global challenge faced by artist that don't break into mainstream.

Maurice: Actually what I noticed from touring that it is indeed a global issue. In some cities where I played in Europe, Madrid for example, there was only a handful of mid level venues. You would either have the big concert venues, or the small obscure bars/clubs where you

would play in the corner to a small audience, and you have festivals. We've even been hearing of such alternative venues closing down in London. So it seems to also be connected to the economical situation in the last decade.

How do you explain all the influences heard in your work in Lekhfa and in your solo projects?

Maurice: The most intriguing music for me nowadays is not music coming from the places we're used to - Europe or the US for example. There are more interesting inspirations coming from regions that we can call third or developing world. I think this is because of the accumulation of worldwide influences within musicians in the latter regions that gives birth to music that is different from the fusion we've been hearing in world music for example. So for my generation, we were naturally immersed in the music of our region and we also listened to rock, jazz and other international genres, so it's only natural that you would hear all of this in our music. I've heard a band recently from South Africa (The Brother Moves On), and it was the same thing, their music was very much of its time and place, as well hearing rock and other influences within it and the outcome is something totally new that I had never heard before. Mahraganat music is a great example with how it became very popular in Europe and there was no fetishism involved, there is a novelty element of course, but Western audiences related to it as totally new dance music. I also noticed this shift throughout my years touring in Europe. At first, we would only get booked within Arab culture related events and festivals, and now it's changing and we're being programmed within festivals that are not for world music or for Arabic music, instead we're being programmed for musical reasons and the feedback from audiences makes it clear that they relate to our music because they hear something familiar yet new. This makes me believe that the present and future of new music is no longer in the confines of the dominant cultures.

Maryam: I am slightly uncomfortable when I am asked to elaborate on the influences within my music, because first and foremost, I enjoy making music and when audiences hear my music and they enjoy it, I feel I've succeeded at transmitting my thoughts and ideas regardless of where I come from or where the audience comes from or what I've been listening to.

Maurice: I think what Maryam says is exactly the point, it is so natural the process of making music and whatever ends up in our music is not the doing of a conscious process, so when you're asked how come you have such Western influences in your work, at first it's a surprise. What is also important to note is that growing up in somewhere like Egypt, even though in the 80s and 90s you had singular attempts from Arab artists such as Sabreen in Palestine, there was no way of getting hold of any alternative music from within your region, so at the point when I started looking for anything alternative (other than the mainstream you hear on TV and Radio), it was easier to find alternative Western music than alternative Arabic. So you would have makeshift kiosks in the street that would sell bootlegged cassettes of Pink Floyd or Guns n' Roses, or you could write a playlist for them and come back after a week and they would have it for you on tape. So that was the reality for anyone growing up in Egypt curious for anything alternative. You realise later on when you grow up that there were alternative attempts within your own country and region that you didn't hear about because you didn't have access to them.

Tamer: Even Sheikh Imam right here at home in Egypt, very few people knew about him because there was a blackout on his music and you wouldn't know about him unless you

grew up in a musical or alternative household.

There is something twisted about this album, what can you tell us about that?

Maryam: Song structure wise, Lekhfa is not so unconventional actually.

Maurice: Lekhfa is deceptive in some way, it invites you in as if it's on your side but really it isn't!

Tamer: If we say that in mainstream music, you find conventions in song writing or in how songs progress and in their structure, this is not necessarily a natural way of making music and in alternative there are no conventions. So we don't go into a song consciously thinking that we want to twist it in this or that way, in fact with all the songs in this album, and our work individually, the compositions lead us somewhere and we go with them, so in the end some songs are not radio friendly, or they don't contain rhythms as they're usually heard or sometimes we even end up with various rhythms in the same song.

Maurice: And in that process we do notice sometimes that a particular song starts sounding a little bit 90s for example, and we were OK with that. I guess it's only natural that the outcome is in some way twisted, because each of us is twisted in his or her own head, so it's hard for our music to come out straight!