

BIYOUNA “Blond in the Kasbah”

A truly original artist, who is not only very popular in Algeria, but also in the Algerian community in France, Biyouna grew up in the working-class Belcourt district of Algiers in a family devoted to the arts. She first trod the stage when she was still quite young and learned her first dance steps at the age of fourteen. She developed a real passion for singing, and became a member of several companies, starting with Fadela Dziria's company, in which she directed the chorus while playing the tambourine; then she moved to another company which she directed with her partner Flifla, before finally starting her own company in which she was featured as the main singer; at the same time she also became well-known for hosting wedding celebrations. At the age of seventeen, she made her debut in some of the city's largest cabarets. The same year, she was discovered by film director Mustapha Badie who featured her in her first series, based on *El Hariq (The Fire)* by the writer Mohamed Dib. She quickly became a star, beginning a promising career as a television and film actress. After doing several other series, she was featured in a number of made-for-TV movies, wrote some sketches, created her own “one woman shows”, and then took on the role of Madame Biyouna in Algeria's first sitcom. To get some idea of the degree of popularity she attained, she could only be compared with someone of the stature of Coluche in France, with that special blend of humour and generosity that characterizes certain remarkable individuals who truly stand apart from the crowd.

It was only in 1999 that she left her native country to shoot *Le harem de Madame Osmane (Madam Osmane's Harem)* in Morocco, directed by her fellow countryman Nadir Moknèche for whom she became a favourite actress, also playing a leading role in his 2004 film *Viva L'Algérie*, which dramatically increased her stature as a major film actress. Her name became well known in the film world in France. Throughout her career as a dancer and actress, music has always held a special place in Biyouna's heart: she proved it with *Raid Zone*, a remarkable album that was released in 2001, and by a brilliant performance during the first part of the show presented by Fellag at the Opéra Comique in Paris two years later.

The idea for *Blonde dans la kasbah (Blond in the Kasbah)* had been floating around for some time. Biyouna took her time with the album, carefully choosing a Franco-Algerian repertoire that drew on both cultures. Also providing support for the project were Joseph Racaille, who was responsible for the splendid arrangements and Christophe Dupouy, a regular partner of Jean-Louis Murat, who was in charge of sound mixing, not to mention her two guardian angels: her agent Olivier Gluzman who signed her up on an inspired impulse, and her husband, Mokhtar, who keeps an eye out for problems...

From the album's very first track, we are plunged into a luxuriant musical universe. Her voice takes on a note of fantasy in *Taali*, a swaying chant that combines themes written by two major Algerian figures. It is one of those mysterious gems, sung in Arabic, with which the album is studded. Other such gems include the swinging *El ghafel*, written by the great Djamel Laroussi, which has just the right ingredients to become a hit in Algeria; *El bareh*, which is a tribute to El Hachemi Guerouabi, the master of the urban pop style known as Chaâbi; and *Malechamaa*, an intimate paean

to love illuminated by a mood of “flickering candlelight weeping waxen tears”. Finally, there is the amazing *Tsaabli Ouetmili*, a traditional piece that is undoubtedly the first “country Chaâbi” ever recorded!

The titles in French sound like neo-realist short films. The moving *Une blonde platine dans la casbah* (*A Platinum Blond in the Kasbah*) relates the story of the lady who gave her name to the album, who was a devoted fan of Marilyn Monroe and who loved to abandon herself to the enchantment of music: that lady was Biyouna’s mother, who died at the age of 84. The tragi-comic and touching *Demain tu te maries* (*You’re Getting Married Tomorrow*), with its killer breaks, revives the memory of Patricia Carli, a forgotten heroine from the nineteen-sixties, and reveals a new facet of Biyouna’s vocal styling with the suave accents of a sumptuous pop crooner. Finally, we mustn’t forget the irresistible gag song *Les coyotes* (*The Coyotes*), propelled by an attention-grabbing *ska* rhythm.

The album features three VIP guest artists. Didier Wampas sings opposite Biyouna on *Merci* (*Thank You*), a zany piece that recalls Nino Ferrer at the height of his career. The English female vocalist Malia lends her black diva’s voice to the elegant *Bismilah*, centred around the theme of tea, which is equally popular in the UK and in the Maghreb, whether it is taken with a spot of milk or made with fresh mint leaves... Finally, Christophe offers her *La Man*, a mind-blowing title from 2001: he even reproduces the same ghostly ululation found in the original, their two voices blending together for a surrealistic coda during which he sings in Arabic. For Biyouna, a lifelong fan who copied out the lyrics of Christophe’s songs in her school notebook, this collaboration was one of the highlights of the recording.

Biyouna, who has always identified more closely with Algiers than Algeria, is the ultimate icon of a city that has never stopped swinging despite the ever-present political violence and an endless succession of dishonourable compromises. Her exuberant character and frank attitude tend to embarrass in some circles... She could almost be an eccentric character from one of Almodovar’s films, or one of those disturbing divas that haunt Fassbinder’s old films. She is equally at ease with her Parisian friends and with the transvestites of Algiers, who hold her in particular esteem, embodying the quintessential example of free womanhood, devouring all aspects of life with unbridled passion. It is obvious that she savours life to the fullest, animated by a volcanic force, a palpable sense of enthusiasm and her Epicurean philosophy. If the connection with her public is as strong as it is, it is undoubtedly because everyone, both men and women, recognize themselves in her songs, which offer vignettes of daily life and vividly portray small every-day melodramas. Without making a point of it, she unassumingly introduces her favourite themes: freedom, peace, and hospitality, along with a good measure of common sense. Her songs speak of loving relationships and denounce intolerance, narrow-mindedness and stupidity. She never misses a chance to make fun of those who interfere in the affairs of others.

Although references to other singers are necessarily limited by her strong individualism, one can nonetheless mention a certain number of connections with like-minded souls: Big Mama Thornton, a pioneering figure of ancestral blues; Cheikha Rimitti, the “mother” of *rai*; the passionate and intense Edith Piaf; Oum Kalsoum’s great voice of the Orient; another inspired actress-singer, Ingrid Caven;

Yma Sumac, vocalist of the extreme; the radiant “Madonna”, Dalida; or the thoroughly wacky Brigitte Fontaine. There is a little bit of all these legendary figures in Biyouna, but her real strength lies in her own special blend of integrity and madness, rebellion and tenderness. She never cheats; she acts out her songs as much as she sings them, in the manner of a great actress. Sometimes her voice seems to veer out of control, but it is always a controlled skid, an emotional climax that is reflected by a strangled laugh or a strange vibrato that finds its way into the heart of a refrain.

Queen of Algiers and princess of Paris, Biyouna transcends all styles. Her ardent and distinctive voice settles into an enthralling groove that owes as much to Bob Azzam and Maurice El Medioni as to Marianne Faithfull and Jah Wobble. Her music spans the continents and encompasses, at one and the same time, kitsch rock, baroque blues, Arabic swing, reptilian funk and voluptuous pop: it is quite simply a superb collection of outstanding modern popular songs.

While preparing for the release of *Blonde dans la casbah*, Biyouna is shooting a new film with Nadir Moknèche in which she plays a Mafia princess (*La Man*, will be used as the film’s theme song), and she is also preparing for rehearsals of Sophocles’ *Electra*, in which she will play, alongside Jane Birkin, the role of the coryphaeus in a staging by Philippe Calvario. With this brilliant disk and the tour scheduled for the spring of 2007, there is no doubt about it: we are entering the year of Biyouna.

- Pascal Bussy.

Promo naïve 01.56.02.20.00

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