

## Cheb i Sabbah Biography

Cheb i Sabbah—a.k.a. dj Cheb i Sabbah grew up Jewish of Berber (Amazigh) descent in Constantine, Algeria, so the idea of mixing cultures was, you might say, in his blood. He moved to Paris in the 1960s, and, more or less by accident, became a DJ. By the late 1980s, he was pushing boundaries on the dance floor, seeking ways to work African, Asian, and Arabic music into the mix. Then, as the “world music” movement unfolded, Cheb i Sabbah took the inspired step of recording traditional and classical musicians himself and using those tracks to create bold, new creations—effectively, music “composed” by a DJ. With four landmark recordings under his belt, Sabbah recently returned to his native North Africa to gather the raw material for his most ambitious project to date, *La Kahena*, a set of eight pieces created from music by eight different acts, all featuring women singers. Sabbah remains a DJ at heart, but he is also something more—one of the most innovative forces in contemporary dance music today.

“As a DJ, you have ears,” says Sabbah. “This is your instrument; you know what you want to hear on the dance floor. A lot of genuine world music artists are fantastic musicians, composers, vocalists, but they don’t know how to master and mix for the dance floor. They are not acquainted with the technicalities of how to construct songs that are DJ-friendly with breaks or stops, so you can go from here to there. With this insight and understanding, it only made sense to forge forward with producing world music for the dance floors, founding a new approach to the process, bringing our two worlds together. It’s only in the last ten years that DJs have become producers, and you could say that we compose music.” The possibilities in this new realm are endless, and Sabbah makes no secret of the thrill that freedom gives him. “Musicians don’t like to hear this,” he says, “but DJs have no limitations. If you take a *soukous* musician or a blues musician, they are very good at what they do, but if you say, ‘Oh, let’s play some Balinese music now,’ they say, ‘I don’t know about this.’ As a DJ, in a split-second, I can go from here to wherever the next place is.”

dj Cheb i Sabbah now enjoys a worldwide reputation as a magician of the dance floor, from the crowded confines of New York’s Knitting Factory, to nightclubs in his adopted home, San Francisco, to the likes of L.A.’s massive Getty Center, with its capacity of 4500. On stage, he improvises his show using pre-composed tracks and massive, projected visuals, interwoven and juxtaposed as the spirit moves him. Sabbah believes in presenting his one-of-a-kind works to audiences in person, just as he did in Paris in the 60s, with a stack of 45s in front of him. As DJ culture evolved, Sabbah increasingly charted his own course, until the source material he wanted to work with simply couldn’t be found on vinyl. The scratching, spinning and “beat matching” that define the modern DJ’s art are not part of his act at all, so Sabbah is used to having kids watching him pop CDs in and out of players and saying, “Man, this guy isn’t doing *anything*.” But Sabbah has made countless converts along the way. During a recent performance at Seattle’s annual Bumbershoot Festival, he was pleased to notice “hip hop kids” recording the concert with their cell phones. “At that point, it doesn’t matter if you’re spinning vinyl or not,” he says, “Because the beats are there.”

In the late 70s, Sabbah became acquainted with the late jazz maverick Don Cherry while touring with the famed “Living Theatre” in Europe, then, as chance would have it, meeting again more formally when they both relocated to the West Coast and collaborated in Sabbah’s “Tribal Warning Theatre.” He both acted in and directed the theater group, while Cherry composed the music. Kindred musical spirits from the start, it was no surprise when Cheb i Sabbah joined Cherry’s act and a new road began to unfold. “He liked his concert to be just one piece of music,” recalls Sabbah, “so I would play the transitions in between each song. There was nothing like all the software that’s out there now, but I started making beats. Then he would play on top of those beats and then we would know, okay, this is a solo here and we work with those beats. He was the inspiration.” Cherry became his “mentor,” insisting that Sabbah had found his gift to the music world and that he stay with his path of spinning international sounds on the dance floor.

From there, Cheb i Sabbah developed his concept of recording his own base tracks, and created a totally unique catalog of CD releases, starting with *Shri Durga* (1999). From the start, Sabbah has set his sights high, always aiming for great music, not merely ethnic flavor. *Shri Durga* was created from tracks recorded with Ustad Salamat Ali Khan, one of the most respected classical singers in Pakistan, and his four, enormously talented sons. Salamat had long resisted pressure to record popular and even semi-classical music to expand his audience at home, but somehow, Sabbah won his confidence in a far bolder undertaking. He recalls, “I said I would like to take some ragas and introduce them to ears for which it’s

too much, but add enough of a modern element to open things up. He said go-ahead. In Morocco you deal with the *baraka*, the blessing. You get the blessing from a person who has that kind of power and gives you the power to accomplish what you want. So I received his blessing.”

This groundbreaking work was followed by *MahaMaya* (2000) and *Krishna Lila* (2002). Each album has its own distinct character. Sabbah says, “*Shri Durga* and *Krishna Lila* are not remixes. *MahaMaya* is a collection of remixes from *Shri Durga* by most of the UK, South Asian underground. However, *Shri Durga* and *Krishna Lila* are totally produced albums in the sense that you get raw elements, and then from there you add bass, drums, loops, samples, and overdubs. *Shri Durga* happened to be ragas, and then from *Shri Durga*, I went into *bhajans*, which are devotional songs, much like ragas, music accessible to everybody in India.”

On *As Far As* (2003), Sabbah marshaled his complete repertoire of techniques into composing music, spanning three continents and nine languages. His DJ mix includes songs by Egypt’s Natacha Atlas, Guinea’s Sekouba Bambino, alongside his remixes of Don Cherry and jazz legend Paul Horn. This ambitious album set a new standard for bringing world music eclecticism to young listeners. “Wherever you go in the world,” says Sabbah, “the predominant listeners to music are the younger generation. For music to survive, it has to reach them. So we are being defined by modern music, but at the same time, let’s dig into our culture and make a bridge that could lead to people understanding each other and getting along better.”

*La Kahena* is Cheb i Sabbah’s most personal album because it takes him back to his North African roots. The recordings he made himself were mostly done in Morocco. “We say that Morocco has rhythm and Algeria has melody,” says Sabbah, “because Morocco has all the West African influence.” History inspired Sabbah throughout the making of *La Kahena*. The album is named for a mysterious yet legendary woman from Algerian history who, like Sabbah, was both Berber and Jewish. La Kahena was a commander of armies famous for rallying the Berber tribes against the invading Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. “That was in Algeria,” says Sabbah. “The Berbers fought against the Arabs and thus were known for being fiercely passionate. After her valiant struggle, La Kahena asked her two sons to convert to Islam in the name of ending the turmoil. Her head was cut off and brought to the caliph of Egypt. Interestingly enough, those two sons were the ones sent to conquer Spain. That was like the gift at the end of her life.”

Much of the music on *La Kahena* connects with this history. Tracks by traditional ensembles B’net Marrakech and Ouled Ben Aguida reflect Berber traditions. Khadija Othmani conveys the matrilineal noble culture of Algerian Tuaregs. The Gnawa master Brahim Elbelkani brings the spirit of sub-Saharan African mystic healers, originally brought to Morocco as slaves. Nadia introduces the first music Sabbah remembers hearing in his life, elegant, Andalusian songs performed at weddings and celebrations in Constantine, Algeria. And Cheba Zahouania delivers the freewheeling spirit of *rai*, a music born in the pleasure-loving port city of Oran, Algeria, where many Andalusians fled after their expulsion from Spain. To complete the collection, Michal Cohen, a Jewish singer of Yemenite descent, shares a song based on a poem by Shalom Shabazi, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite Jewish mystic. “There is a big element in North Africa of Jewish, Andalusian and classical tradition,” says Sabbah. “Jews maintained and are largely responsible for having kept that tradition alive in both Algeria and Morocco.” Andalusian music preserves the memory of a time when Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived in a spirit of tolerance and artistic freedom in medieval Spain—Al-Andalus. It’s a fitting connection, because that spirit of openness is reinvented for a new era in Sabbah’s work.

For Cheb i Sabbah, the strength of *La Kahena* is its variety—eight songs by different groups from different regions. In the studio, Sabbah labored to create the best possible presentation of each group. But during the recording sessions in Morocco, he worked casually, meeting informally with the musicians and then taking them to the studio to record two songs each. Sabbah says, “I don’t try to direct them. I just take what they give me. These artists have their own unique style of making music. They’re not studio musicians. They already have a hard enough time being in separate rooms, one with the lute and headphones, and then four other women in the other room, also with headphones, playing percussion and singing the chorus. At one point I had this group of elder women called *Haddarates*. They normally get invited to homes, weddings and celebrations, so this was completely new. They were having a blast because the studio was somebody’s house. In one room the ProTools was set up, and then the other room was at the far end of the courtyard. We communicated through cameras and monitors. It was an amusing

sight for them to do such a recording. But you can't do this kind of work without separating the different sounds.”

Sabbah's insistence on having female singers posed a particular challenge when it came to the Gnawa. “I went to Brahim Elbelkani,” he recalls. “You know, he doesn't do that often, but I said to him, ‘I know you are the *maalem*, the master, but I want you to sing with women.’ So he got his sister-in-law, her sister, and his daughter, and we had Brahim Elbelkani with a female chorus.”

With *La Kahena*, Cheb i Sabbah's life and art come full circle. An innovator in one of the most contemporary musical realms, he is clearly committed to creating new forms. “But at the same time,” says Sabbah, “the more important focus for me is to keep the tradition alive. You take *Haddarates*: there aren't many people wanting to learn this style of singing and preserve their tradition. There are only two or three *Haddarates* groups in Morocco at this moment. Once they go, it's over, then what?” From dance floor DJ to defender of ancient traditions, Sabbah is a true musical iconoclast and visionary on the contemporary scene.

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