

## Listening to the Past: Music as a Source for the Study of North African Jews

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On 19 November 1938, the Brigadier General of Meknes sent a confidential letter to Yves Sicot, Director of Political Affairs in Rabat, regarding, “a subversive disc pertaining to Allal El Fassi.”<sup>1</sup> But a year earlier, on 3 November 1937, al-Fassi, nationalist leader and future founder of Morocco’s *hizb al-Istiqlāl* (the Independence party), had been sent into exile in Gabon by the French Protectorate authorities, while members of his “inner circle were imprisoned, fled, or went to the Sahara.”<sup>2</sup> The Brigadier General noted that, “we have evaluated approximately 1,000 records made by Maalem Lili Labassi, of Jewish origin, in relation to the exile of Allal El Fassi.”<sup>3</sup> He continued, “It seems difficult, due to the high number [of records], to withdraw it from circulation.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Algerian Jewish artist’s “*Lellah yal ghadi lessahra*” (O you, who is going to the Sahara) recently released on Polyphon and bearing issue number 46.117, was causing panic among French political and military officials—in Morocco but not Algeria. Between 1938 and 1940, “O you, who is going to the Sahara” was subjected to repeated ban in the Protectorate, while hundreds of copies of the record were seized and destroyed. Today, nearly eighty years after its release, it is all but impossible to find a remnant copy of the controversial recording anywhere.<sup>5</sup> And yet despite this physical absence, “*Lellah yal ghadi lessahra*” remains in heavy rotation

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1. “Disque subversif relatif à Allal El Fassi,” (Meknès, 19 November 1938), in Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN)/IMA/200/193.

2. Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 136.

3. *Maalem* (*mu’alim*), meaning “master” in Arabic and having a similar status to *cheikh* (*shaykh*), was a common honorific given to North African musicians of a certain stature. Lili Labassi was born Elie Moyal in 1897 in Sidi Bel Abbès in western Algeria. In addition to a prolific recording career that stretched from the 1920s through the 1960s, Labassi performed regularly throughout North Africa, including stints with the Algeria-based El Moutribia and El Andalousia orchestras (both overwhelmingly Jewish institutions), and served as artistic director for Parlophone records in Algeria. His popularity in the first half of the twentieth century was (arguably) surpassed only by that of Hadj Mohammed El Anka. Like El Anka, Labassi is associated with a move away from Andalusian music and toward *chaabi* (*sha’bi*, meaning “popular” or “popular music” in Arabic).

4. *Ya Moslimine* (*Ya Muslimin*, meaning “O Muslims”) is a standard of the Algiers-based Andalusian repertoire.

5. What can be found, however, is a cover by Algerian Jewish musician Blond Blond (b. Albert Rouimi in 1920 in Tlemcen, Algeria, and d. 1999 in Marseilles, France), a disciple of Labassi, who performed “*Lellah yalghadi lessahra*” throughout his career. The label *Artistes Arabes Associés*, released the track twice—in 1981 on Blond Blond’s “*Musique Algérienne*” LP; and in 1992, on the CD “*La Musique Judéo-Arabe, Vol. 1, Algérie-Maroc*.”

on the contemporary North African stage, even appearing on an episode of “*Alhane wa Chabab*,” Algeria’s equivalent of “American Idol,” in 2015.<sup>6</sup>

So did Lili Labassi—Algerian Jew, French citizen, and among the most popular of interwar North African music-makers—sing (not so) clandestinely about exiled Moroccan nationalist Allal al-Fassi? A similar question could be asked of the mid-century Moroccan Jewish singer Albert Suissa and another political exile: Sultan sidi Mohammad Ben Youssef—later King Mohammad V. In 1954, Suissa recorded “*Ayli Ayli*” for the Olympia label, a joint venture of the Azoulay-Elmaleh firm, which the French censor worried, “contained political allusions.”<sup>7</sup> Only upon taking the shellac record in question for a spin does one realize that “*Ayli Ayli*” is none other than “*Habibi diyali*” (My love), a song still readily accessible by Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians. At the time, “*Habibi diyali*,” performed in the 1950s by a host of Moroccan and Algerian Jewish performers, including Zohra El Fassia and most famously Salim Hilali, had raised the eyebrows of a local Muslim leader from Settat by the name of “Saghir” who brought it to the attention of the French Civil Controller of the region. Saghir claimed that the titular line, “*Habibi diyali, fin huwa*” (“My love, where is he?”) was a reference to none other than the exiled Sultan Mohammad V.<sup>8</sup> Although the Civil Controller immediately brought the song to the attention of Radio Maroc, the station was already well aware of its—existence—it had been playing the record for months.

The Lili Labassi and Albert Suissa episodes immediately reveal a world of North African music long ignored by historians of the region—and one, I argue, deserving of a closer look and listen. These microhistorical musical moments, teased out in this instance through a combination of archival work, record collecting, and oral interviews, position subaltern historical actors themselves at the center of the story. In doing so, a focus on music not only returns a high degree of agency to those who deftly subverted colons and their institutions by sonic means but so too raises a number of important historiographic questions for the field of North African studies. Given the above anecdotes, we might begin by asking: What role did music play in the burgeoning nationalist movements of the interwar and postwar Maghreb? By extension, does Jewish participation in anti-colonial and revolutionary music-making in North Africa allow us to reinsert Jews into the nationalist narrative? If Lili Labassi, Albert Suissa, Zohra El Fassia, and Salim Hilali

6. نسيمه وفاروق-يالي غادي للصحراء.

See :<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3qPNCUT3u0>.

7. “El Maleh to Monsieur Le Directeur du Service de l’Information,” (Casablanca, 23 February 1955), in CADN/1MA/200/193.

8. “Emissions arabes de Radio-Maroc,” (Settat, 14 January 1954), CADN/1MA/200/193.

seem revelatory in this regard, we could similarly turn to Raoul Journo, the Tunisian Jewish vocalist and ‘udist whom the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) thanked in 1958 for his musical services to their cause.<sup>9</sup> But before probing this, we might wonder aloud about a series of far more basic questions. First, how do we account for Jewish preeminence in North African music and the recording industry from the end of the nineteenth century through the end of colonial rule?<sup>10</sup> Second, what does music tell us about the Maghreb that we did not already know—about Jewish-Muslim inter-connectedness, about gender, about space (public and private, sacred and secular), and about crossing borders and boundaries? Finally, what did the Maghreb sound like—and why have these sounds persisted for so long? Here, *l’affaire Labassi* again might provide some answers about a Maghrebi musical past about which we know curiously little.

### Search and Seizure: “O you, who is going to the Sahara”

On 30 May 1940, in the midst of the Battle of France, the French military in Morocco once again banned Lili Labassi’s “O you, who is going to the Sahara,” this time on the grounds that it was “causing disorder” among “native” troops.<sup>11</sup> Two months later, police raided *Art et Industrie*, the Casablanca-based art objects and record store of Moroccan Jewish impresario Raoul Hazan, in search of the disorder-causing disc.<sup>12</sup> To their surprise, not a single copy remained. Despite coming up empty handed, search and seizure efforts were telling then and continue to be for the historian now. In the raid on *Art et Industrie*, the absence of phonographic contraband had little to do with compliance and almost everything to do with the popularity of the Labassi record—coupled with the efficiency of Hazan’s distribution apparatus, which had sent some eight hundred copies of “O you, who is going to the Sahara,” to dealers in Rabat, Meknes, Fez, and Agadir. The police commissioner’s report, based on Hazan’s commercial correspondence and interviews with Mena Haziza, the “Moroccan Jewess” who oversaw the store’s record section, provides three initial takeaways. First, it enables the historian of North Africa to follow an internally oriented cultural product along a mostly horizontal

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9. See Mehenna Mahfoufi, *Chants kabyles de la guerre d’indépendance Algérie 1954-1962: étude d’ethnomusicologie, textes kabyles, traduction française et notations musicales* (Paris: Séguier, 2002), annex 1, no page.

10. From its formation in 1911 through the early 1930s, for example, the mostly Jewish El Moutribia remained the premier “indigenous” orchestra in Algeria, while its Muslim president, Mahieddine Bachtarzi, was the only non-Jew on the *musique arabe* roster rolls at the *Conservatoire d’Alger* through the end of the 1920s. In Sadiq al-Rizqi’s, *al-’Aghānī al-Tunisiyah*, written in the 1930s but first published in 1967, the author notes that the professional class of Tunisian musicians at the time was almost entirely Jewish. The early North African record catalogues of Pathé, HMV (Gramophone), and Polydor speak to this phenomenon as well.

11. “Ordre: Commandement des Troupes du Maroc,” (Rabat, 30 May 1940), CADN/IMA/200/193.

12. “Contrôle des disques,” (Casablanca, 23 July 1940), CADN/IMA/200/193.

axis in the Maghreb.<sup>13</sup> Thus, that “O you, who is going to the Sahara” was recorded in Algiers, pressed in Paris, shipped back to Algeria, moved overland into Morocco at Oujda, and then fanned out across the Protectorate, renders questions of border-crossing and transnational movement central to the story. Second, tracing the travels of these sound objects, allows for long ignored cities (Agadir) and commercial and entertainment establishments (record stores) to gain a foothold in the narrative. Third, it demonstrates that music, in this case tangible and subject to record keeping, was far from ephemeral.<sup>14</sup>

So where did police officials find the “politically-charged” Lili Labassi record? In cafés and brothels, mostly. In a series of August 1940 police reports from Fez documenting the hunt for “O you, who is going to the Sahara,” the *café maures* of Hadj Said Bouchouiha and David Assaraf and the *maisons de tolerance* of Fatma bent Abdesselam and Mercédès Bohbot, in which the subversive disc turns up, take center stage—entangling Jewish–Muslim licentious spaces and relations in the process.<sup>15</sup>

### Giving Voice to the Past

Despite a general lack of scholarly engagement with the North African soundscape, a minority of historians, anthropologists, colonial and indigenous musicologists, and expatriate observers have been giving voice to the Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian past for some time. While an exhaustive historiography is impossible here given limitations of space, one need mention the pioneering work of Alexis Chottin in Morocco (1931 and 1939); Edmond Nathan Yafil in Algeria (1904 and 1907); Baron Rodolphe d’Erlanger and Sadiq al-Rizqi in Tunisia (1930-1959 and 1937; and 1967, respectively), who pushed back against the notion of a silent Maghreb in the first half of the twentieth century by transcribing and describing its musical sounds.<sup>16</sup>

13. In Patricia Lorcen’s edited volume *Algeria & France, 1800-2000: Identity, Memory and Nostalgia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), Julia Clancy-Smith argues that, “most studies of identity in Algerian colonial history employ a colony-metropole perspective that privileges vertical exchanges spanning the Mediterranean from north to south and back again. This approach, however, creates bounded entities—France/Algeria—severed from the Maghreb and its many histories” (3). Clancy-Smith thus proposes another “line of inquiry: a horizontal axis to investigate the problematic of identity and physical displacements” (3).

14. In Ziad Fahmy, “Coming to our Senses: Historicizing Sound and Noise in the Middle East,” *History Compass* 11/4 (2013): 305-315, Fahmy quotes from Richard Cullen Rath’s “Hearing American History,” *The Journal of American History* 95, 2 (2008): 417-31, on the so-called ephemeral quality of sound: “One problem that came up immediately when I set out to write sonic history was the belief that, unlike a document, sound is ephemeral, going out of existence even as it happens. [...] This comparison is misleading, if not mistaken” (417).

15. “Procès-verbal de saisie de disques,” (Fez, various dates, August 1940), CADN/1MA/200/193.

16. See Prosper Ricard and Alexis Chottin, *Corpus de musique marocaine* (Paris: Heugel, 1931); Alexis Chottin, *Tableau de la musique marocaine* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1939); Edmond Nathan Yafil (with Laho Serror), *Majmū’at al-Aghānī wa ’l-Alhān min Kalām al-Andalus* (Algiers, Imp. Express Sauveur Solal, 1904); Edmond Nathan Yafil and Ahmad Amin Dalay, *Majmū’ Zahw al-Anīs al-Mukhtaṣṣ=*

More common in the literature for much of the second half of the twentieth century, however, has been the relegation of music to parentheses, footnotes, and casual asides—valuable to be sure but not always for reasons originally envisioned by its authors.<sup>17</sup> In the classic *Le Maghreb entre deux guerres* (1962), for example, Jacques Berque demonstrated a passing knowledge of Andalusian musical genealogy when longing for the days of turn of the twentieth century Algerian musicians “Mnemmech [Abderrahmane Mnemèmche], Menzino [Mouzino], and Sfindja [Cheikh Mohamed Ben Ali Sfindja].” But so too did Berque show his hand when leaving out the pioneering work of the above mentioned Edmond Nathan Yafil, simultaneously the grand redactor of the Andalusian tradition of Algiers and Sfindja’s most important disciple, and accusing other Jewish musicians like Sassi (b. Alfred Lebrati) of contributing to an atmosphere of “decadence,” echoing a rhetorical trope employed by certain French colonial figures and Algerian nationalists dissatisfied with Jewish overrepresentation in indigenous music-making.<sup>18</sup>

As in the academic realm, popular engagement with North African music has tended to treat its subject as static, ancient, and unchanging. American author and composer Paul Bowles, for example, who made a valuable series of Moroccan field recordings for the Library of Congress in 1959, wrote of the 12 December 1959 services at the Benamara synagogue in Meknes as, “a kind of musical antique shop of folk-melodies, many of which are authentic old pieces.”<sup>19</sup> When Rounder Records finally released Bowles’ recordings of Jewish liturgy four decades later under the title of “The Sacred Music of Moroccan Jews” (2000), ethnomusicologist Edwin Seroussi, who penned the liner notes, was quick to point out that the Hebrew prayer “El Hay ram gadol,” included on the compilation, was set to the melody of Moroccan Jewish musician Samy ElMaghrebi’s scandalous 1955 hit,

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=*bil-Tabāsī wal-Qawādis*, (Oran: CRASC, 2007); Rodolphe d’Erlanger, *La Musique Arabe*, vol. 1-6, (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1930-1959) and *Mémoires tunisiennes hispano-arabes, arabo-berbères, juive, nègre: recueillies et transcrites* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1937); and Muḥammad al-Sadiq Rizqi, *al-Aghānī al-Tūnisīya* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisīyah lil-Nashr, 1967).

17. This lacuna is not limited to music. See Susan Gilson Miller, “Filling a Historical Parenthesis: An Introduction to ‘Morocco from World War II to Independence’,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19: 4, 461-474.

18. Jacques Berque, *Le Maghreb entre deux guerres* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1962), 391. Abderrahmane Menemeche was the master teacher of Mohammed Ben Ali Sfindja who in turn was the master of Saül “Mouzino” Durand and Edmond Nathan Yafil. The notion of musical decadence, employed by figures as diverse as Alexis Chottin in Morocco and Abdelkader Hadj Hammou in Algeria, inspired “revival” in the form of musical congresses, the creation of conservatories, and the formation of mostly-Muslim orchestras across the Maghreb in the late 1920s and through the 1930s.

19. Paul F. Bowles, “Meknes,” in “Folk, Popular, and Art Music of Morocco,” *The Paul Bowles Moroccan Music Collection* (Washington, DC: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1959-1962).

<http://archnet.org/system/publications/contents/10114/original/DTP102499.pdf?1431229939>. Accessed: 23 November 2015.

“*Qaḥṭanec maḥloul*” (“Your kaftan is open”).<sup>20</sup> Bowles, who set out to capture a vanishing liturgical tradition, inadvertently demonstrated how adaptive that “musical antique shop” was as secular tunes were adopted for sacred use within moments of their release.

Since the 1980s, a small coterie of international researchers (almost entirely anthropologists and musicologists) has made music the centerpiece of their work on North Africa. In providing for a social history of the early twentieth century audible past in the Maghreb, scholars like Mustapha Chelbi and Nadya Bouzar-Kasbadji have demonstrated that music can not be regarded as simply derivative of or distinct from political history but instead that the two are mutually constitutive. In Chelbi’s *Musique et Société en Tunisie* (1985) and Bouzar-Kasbadji’s *l’Emergence Artistique Algérienne au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle: Contribution de la Musique et du théâtre algérois à la renaissance culturelle et à la prise de conscience nationaliste* (1988), Jews are regarded as at once indigenous to and inseparable from national forms of cultural production. In doing so, the authors immediately challenge two tendencies of North African historiography: 1) the tendency to accept the wholesale success of the French *mission civilisatrice*, the self-congratulatory work of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, and the supposed deracination of Maghrebi Jews as the twentieth century wore on; and 2) the tendency to treat minority (Jewish) history in the Maghreb as separate from majority (Muslim) history. Chelbi and Bouzar-Kasbadji illustrate that there is no North African history without music and there is no Maghrebi musical past without Jews. The shift from treating music as marginal to the narrative to music as central to it and engagement with the significant presence of Jews in North African music for much of the twentieth century has been taken up dutifully by Algerian literary scholar Hadj Miliani for decades. Since the 1980s and through the present, Miliani has published widely in a variety of academic and popular forms including an unparalleled monograph on *rai* music, *L’aventure du rai. Musique et société* (1996), which in addition to providing a social history of the Oran-based genre, did not shirk from detailing the early contributions of its Jewish practitioners.

Over the last ten years, Miliani’s *L’aventure du rai* has been joined by a handful of important works on North African music, many of which have skillfully wedded ethnomusicology with anthropological approaches and archive-based historical work. Ruth Davis’s *Ma’luf: Reflections on the Arab Andalusian Music of Tunisia* (2004) and Richard Jankowsky’s *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia* (2010), the first English-language texts of their kind, have provided for a real sense of how Tunisian ‘national’ musical

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20. Paul Bowles (notes and editing by Edwin Seroussi), *Sacred Music of the Moroccan Jews* (Cambridge: Rounder, 2000).

traditions emerged, were mythologized, and contested in the twentieth century while at the same time pushing back against exclusionary forms of cultural nationalism by spotlighting the very real musical contributions of Tunisian Jews and blacks. Two edited volumes, *Palestine, Israel, and the politics of popular culture* (2005), co-edited by Ted Swedenburg and Rebecca L. Stein, and *Génération: un siècle d'histoire culturelle des Maghrébins en France* (2009), co-edited by Driss El Yazami, Yvan Gastaut, and Naïma Yahy, should be added to this short list for their application of these methodologies to the under-told story of North African musical production in the French metropole.

In the last few years, a call has gone out from scholars of North Africa and the Middle East recognizing the need for and utility of serious engagement with the region's historical soundscape. In the edited volume *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa* (2011), Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel Schroeter implore North Africanists to rethink the "Judeo-Islamic experience" in part by moving away from an ocularcentric view of the past, noting that "Jews have become almost invisible in the Maghreb, yet for a new generation of researchers, they are everywhere part of the landscape: the objects of memory, nostalgia, and research."<sup>21</sup> In discussing Hadj Miliani's contribution to the volume, Gottreich and Schroeter point out that, "the incontestable Jewish element in this profoundly North African musical tradition stakes perhaps the strongest claim in Muslims' collective memory of Jews."<sup>22</sup> Miliani, of course, draws attention to this point himself in his chapter, "Crosscurrents: Trajectories of Algerian Jewish Artists and Men of Culture since the End of the Nineteenth Century," writing that, "today, when the Jewish community has all but disappeared from the Algerian social and cultural landscape, it is these figures above all who live in collective memory in Algeria."<sup>23</sup> One of these figures, Edmond Nathan Yafil, was the subject of Jonathan Glasser's article, "Edmond Yafil and Andalusian Musical Revival in Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Algeria," published in a special Maghreb-focused issue of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)* in 2012.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Glasser's expertly researched contribution was "the first article devoted to music published by" *IJMES* editors Beth Baron and Sara Pursey, "and one of the first in the journal's history."<sup>25</sup> The inclusion of the Yafil piece "inspired"

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21. The notion of ocularcentrism, a modern privileging of the visual over senses like aurality, is closely associated with the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Martin Jay. Ziad Fahmy has recently applied the concept to his work on early twentieth century Egypt in *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). See Emily Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, *Jewish culture and society in North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 3 and 12.

22. *Ibid.*, 16.

23. *Ibid.*, 178.

24. *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*, volume 44, number 4, (November 2012).

25. Beth Baron and Sara Pursey, "Editorial Forward," *IJMES*, 44: 4, (November 2012), 620.

Baron and Pursey to incorporate an entire roundtable on North African music in the volume.<sup>26</sup> In advocating for an embrace of North African music beyond “the purview of specialists,” Jonathan Shannon, the roundtable’s curator, reminds the reader of just what music offers:

It’s not so much that music mirrors society in these cases: music issociety, bringing together all the social forces and contradictions of culture, politics, and history in a set of performance practices. Music offers important insights into nationalpolitics, colonial and postcolonial histories, formal and informal economies, global flowsof culture and capital, reform movements, heritage politics, gender dynamics, religion, the peace process, rebellion and revolution, and so on.<sup>27</sup>

Framed in slightly different terms, historian Ziad Fahmy writes that, “simply put, a historical narrative that incorporates available sensory data is an embodied history, more convincingly connected to everyday people and to historical social realities.”<sup>28</sup> Those historical realities, in which—to take an example from Fahmy’s work, ““Ali Pasha Mubarak’s late XIX<sup>th</sup> century survey of Cairo counted over one thousand coffee shops compared to just 264 mosques,”<sup>29</sup> contradict depictions of North Africans and Middle Easterners “as living in near silence”<sup>30</sup> and remind us that music and other sounds deserve the historian’s eyes *and* ears.

**Mazal hay mazal [(S)he’s still alive]/Where do we go from here?**

O you who is going to the land of the gazelles!

If you find my love (*ghazal/gazelle*)

Tell him/her: S/he’s..s/he’s still alive (*mazal hay mazal*)

No one can replace him/herin my heart...

O you who is going to the Sahara (*lallah yal ghadi lessahra*)

See my love (*ghazal/gazelle*)

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26. *Ibid.*, 620. At the time of writing, Jonathan Glasser’s *The Lost Paradise: Andalusí Music in Urban North Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) had just been published and will no doubt prove to be pathbreaking.

27. Jonathan Shannon, “Sounding North Africa and the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44: 4, (November 2012), 775.

28. Fahmy, “Coming to our Senses: Historicizing Sound and Noise in the Middle East,” *History Compass* 11/4 (2013), 306.

29. *Ibid.*, 310.

30. Shannon, “Sounding North Africa and the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44: 4, (November 2012), 777.

I'm not hopeless, I will see him/her again  
S/he's always, always alive!

Lili Labassi, "*Lellah yal ghadi lessahra*" (O you, who is going to the Sahara), Polyphon, c. late 1936 or early 1937

So we ask once again: Did Lili Labassi invoke Allal al-Fassi amidst a flurry of violin improvisations in "O you, who is going to the Sahara"? Considering its issue number—46.117, which corresponds to Polyphon recording sessions that took place between late 1936 and early 1937 and El Fassi's arrest and exile toward the end of 1937, the answer is a definitive "no." In fact, this was the dissenting opinion of the Civil Controller of Casablanca, who in a 9 December 1938 letter to Yves Sicot, Director of Political Affairs in Rabat, noticed that temporal discrepancy, writing: "this disc [of Lili Labassi] has been in circulation for almost a year and half, that is to say, well in advance of the arrest of Allal El Fassi, of which he could not possibly have made allusion to."<sup>31</sup> The Civil Controller also recognized, however, given the androgyny of the above lyrics, how one could transform what was meant to be "a love song" between a man and a woman—especially when recalling its popularity in houses of ill repute, "into a political song in memory of Allal El Fassi."<sup>32</sup> Given all of this, another set of questions emerges: What did Moroccans hear in Lili Labassi's "O you, who is going to the Sahara"? Did it sound differently in 1937, 1938, and upon its re-release in 1951?<sup>33</sup> Was Lili Labassi's strikingly similar "*Mazal haye mazal*" (S/he's still alive), released on the Pacific label in the early 1950s, in which the Saharan element was played down, constitute a response to French restrictions? Finally, how can we explain the song's enduring popularity into the present?

In but one example culled from a short stack of archival documents, a musical history of the Maghreb begins to unfold before us. Indeed, the archives in North Africa, France, and beyond abound with intelligence reports, confidential memos, and legal disputes related to music, musical theater, radio, and television and still other documents not necessarily focused on the musical arts but which make reference to them nonetheless. These materials provide for fresh approaches to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia including histories of musicians, their audiences, and of course, those who eavesdropped with increasing interest. It is thus incumbent upon the historian of the Maghreb to uncover those sounds in formal and informal archival spaces alike. The

31. "Le Controleur Civil, Chef de la Région de Casablanca to Monsieur Le Directeur des Affaires Politiques (Section Politiques) in Rabat," (Casablanca, 9 December 1938) in CADN/IMA/200/193.

32. Ibid.

33. See "Répertoire Algérien," in "Polyphon, Production Polydor, Paris, 1951," in the Audiovisual Department of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNF).

records themselves, which are sometimes found in national libraries but too often languish in attics and bric-a-brac shops from Tangier to Tunis and from Tunis to Tel Aviv, contain aural histories of topics concerning and comedic while also capturing references to lesser known musical genealogies and laying bare linguistic peculiarities. Musical ephemera, from record catalogues to artwork on record sleeves, similarly deserve our attention.

Finally, as observers like Hadj Miliani have long noted, it is individuals like Lili Labassi whom North Africans remember—above political and religious figures—to this day. So why have these memories persisted among Muslims and Jews in the Maghreb and beyond? Only a close listening to the past will tell.

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ملخص: الاستماع إلى الماضي: الموسيقى كمصدر لدراسة تاريخ يهود شمال إفريقيا.

انطلاقاً من ثلاثينات وخمسينات القرن الماضي، راقب المسؤولون الفرنسيون تسجيلات صوتية باللغة العربية في جميع أنحاء البلاد المغربية. ونظراً لاعتقادهم أنها تحتوي إشارات سياسية أو تخريبية، غالباً ما كان يساء فهم هذه التسجيلات من قبل الذين يحاولون منع تداولها. وتدور هذه الدراسة حول تسجيل مثير للجدل أدلى به الفنان اليهودي الجزائري ليلى عباسي ما بين أواخر 1936 وأوائل سنة 1937، وتتبع المنتج الثقافي الموجه داخليا شمال إفريقيا من أجل تعيين الموسيقى، الطويلة على الرغم من أنها ثانوية وزائلة، في قلب تاريخ المغرب المتحد للحدود القومية. أغنية لعباسي "الله يالغادي للصحراء"، والتي بدت للبعض كدعم للزعيم الوطني المغربي المنفى وقتئذ وهو "علال الفاسي"، لم تسمع فقط بشكل مختلف من قبل الجهات الفاعلة في ذلك الوقت ولكنها حافظت على شعبيتها إلى الآن، وصارت تتحدى فكرة شمال إفريقيا الصامتة من جهة، وتدعو في الوقت نفسه إلى إدراج موضوع اليهود والموسيقى في الدراسات التاريخية المتداخلة في المنطقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: يهود مغاربة، الموسيقى، الراديو، التسجيلات، الصوتيات، الوطنية، ليلى عباسي.

**Résumé: A l'écoute du passé: la musique en tant que source pour l'étude des juifs d'Afrique du Nord**

Depuis les années 1930 jusqu'aux années 1950, les responsables français ont censuré des disques phonographiques en langue arabe à travers le Maghreb. Considérés comme contenant des allusions politiques ou pour être autrement subversifs, ces documents étaient souvent mal compris par ceux qui tentaient de les supprimer. Cette étude, basée sur un enregistrement controversé réalisé par l'artiste juif algérien Lili Labassi entre la fin de 1936 et le début de 1937, suit un produit culturel orienté vers l'intérieur de l'Afrique du Nord afin de situer la musique longtemps périphérique et éphémère au centre d'une transnationale Histoire du Maghreb. La chanson "*Lellah yalghadi lessahra*" de Labassi, qui semblait (à certains) offrir un soutien au chef nationaliste marocain exilé Allal al-Fassi, a été non seulement diffusée différemment par différents acteurs à l'époque, mais a conservé sa popularité à travers le présent, conteste à la fois la notion d'une Afrique du Nord silencieuse et réintroduit en même temps les Juifs et la musique dans des historiographies multiples et superposées de la région.

**Mots clés:** Juifs maghrébins, musique, radio, enregistrements, audio, nationalisme, Lili Labassi.

**Abstract: Listening to the Past: Music as a Source for the Study of North African Jews**

From the 1930s through the 1950s, French officials censored Arabic-language phonograph records across the Maghreb. Deemed to contain political allusions or to be otherwise subversive, these records were often misunderstood by those attempting to suppress them. This study, based around a controversial recording made by Algerian Jewish artist Lili Labassi sometime between late 1936 and early 1937, follows an internally oriented cultural product across North Africa in order to situate music, long though peripheral and ephemeral, at the center of a transnational history of the Maghreb. That Labassi's song, "*Lellah yalghadi lessahra*," which seemed (to some) to offer support for exiled Moroccan nationalist leader Allal al-Fassi, was not only heard differently by various actors at the time but has maintained its popularity through the present, at once challenges the notion of a silent North Africa and at the same time reinserts Jews and music into multiple, overlapping historiographies of the region.

**Key words:** Maghrebi Jews, music, radio, records, audio, nationalism, Lili Labassi.

**Resumen: Escuchando el pasado: La música como fuente para el estudio de los judíos del norte de África**

Desde 1930 hasta la década de 1950, oficiales franceses censuraron discos fonográficos en árabe a través del Magreb. Considerados para contener alusiones políticas o para ser de otra manera subversivo, estos expedientes eran a menudo incomprendidos por éstos que intentaban suprimirlos. Este estudio, basado en una controvertida grabación hecha por el artista argelino Lili Labassi entre finales de 1936 y principios de 1937, sigue un producto cultural orientado internamente en el norte de África para situar la música, aunque periférica y efímera, en el centro de una transnacional Historia del Magreb. La canción de Labassi, "*Lellah yalghadi lessahra*," que parecía (para algunos) ofrecer apoyo al líder nacionalista marroquí exiliado Allal al-Fassi, no sólo fue escuchada de manera diferente por varios actores de la época sino que ha mantenido su popularidad a través del presente, Desafía de inmediato la noción de una África del Norte silenciosa y al mismo tiempo reinserta a los judíos ya la música en múltiples historiografías superpuestas de la región.

**Palabras clave:** Judíos magrebíes, música, radio, archivos, audio, nacionalismo, Lili Labassi.