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She's one of Mauritania's few female politicians, an advocate of equal opportunities and arguably the country's leading musician. She's also survived years of persecution and a media blackout because of her outspoken views. Rose Skelton meets the 'Light of the Sahara'

PHOTOS BY ROSE SKELTON

With a brightly coloured veil covering her head, and a pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses perched on her nose, Malouma sits re-stringing her ten-stringed Mauritanian harp, or *ardin*. The traditional Moorish instrument, hailing from the nomadic communities that eek out an existence amongst the dunes of the Sahara desert, has been dismantled by an aircraft crew on Malouma's last international tour to promote her new album, and she's not very pleased about it.

Suddenly one of her mobile phones rings. I watch as she hurls words in Arabic at the device, and her face becomes stony. "I'm sorry," she apologises, as I wonder what next will hold up our interview. "That's the president of my political party. I have to go to a senate meeting."

With that, and a firm promise that she'll be back within the hour, she rustles out of the room and leaves me sitting on her sofa, wondering how this remarkable woman manages to juggle being one of the country's most famous singers, as well as one of its very few female senators.

Malouma Mint Moktar Ould Meïddah was born into a family of *griots*, a caste of musicians looked down upon in this staunchly traditional Muslim desert nation. It was this lower social status that inspired her at the age of 16 to start singing songs that broke every imaginable taboo in society.

"I was a revolutionary," she says when she eventually returns from her meeting. "Because I was born into a caste that wasn't equal in society, I had the opportunity to play the role that people imagined I would play. I thought, well, since we aren't important, I'm going to stir those people up a little."

The first song that gained the young woman attention, in the 80s, was a song called 'Habibi Habeytoug', or 'I Love to Love my Love'. This was followed by a song about divorce, in which she spoke openly about men who divorce their wives for, as she puts it, younger, more charming models.

"In our society, you can't say things like that. And especially not a young girl, a woman. That brought

me many problems, until the point where I couldn't go out alone. People threw stones at me," she adds with a touch of sadness, remembering the first years of what was to become a rocky relationship with the Mauritanian authorities and public.

In the early 90s she was banned by the ruling political powers from national media and concert venues, having used her music to support reconciliation between black and Moorish communities who to this day remain painfully divided. She was hidden from journalists, refused a permanent address, persecuted by a regime that had taken power in a military coup in 1984, and despised everything she stood for.

"I have always been a real bother to the government," she says, smiling. "I have a political repertoire, summing up everything that's going on amongst politicians, and I have always highlighted their faults and wrong doings towards the people. Yes, I was really a bother to them."

But Malouma is part of Mauritania's new democratic dawn, where freedom of speech will hopefully be enjoyed by outspoken activists like her. In March this year, the country held its first democratic elections since independence from France in 1960, with the military regime handing over power to a civilian government in widely regarded free and fair elections.

In January, Malouma was elected to the senate, just one of 56 people who now sit in the upper



Playing at the 31st Musiques Métisses festival in France

DOMINIQUE LABROUS



house of parliament. Although it clearly demands a lot of her time and energy, it's a role, she says, that doesn't contradict her life as a musician.

"For years I have waged my fight as an artist, using music, and today I feel that I must continue my combat. But," she adds, "it's going to be an official fight now," and she laughs as she envisions her grand plan to put her country to rights. And even though she is one of only a few women senators, she says it doesn't bother her.

"I don't take much notice of the differences that exist between men and women," she says, brushing off the ever-present inequalities that dominate Mauritanian life. "And I'm used to being surrounded by men. You could say that I like being with men, to show them that I can be stronger than them." Malouma's eyes twinkle behind her glasses and she lets out a powerful laugh that makes her manager, a man, mutter, "it's true, it's true."

With this kind of strength, and her disregard of public opinion and invisible but powerful social laws, it's no wonder that she is a feared and, I sense, often disliked figure in Mauritanian society.

When she arrives at the press conference for the official release of her new album *Nour*, meaning 'light', the room is occupied by 50 or so women, all dressed in their colourful veils, sitting at the front of the room hanging on to the singer's every word. The other half of the room – men – sit at the back and talk on their mobile phones and hold loud discussions amongst themselves.

But Malouma isn't put off by them. As she battles on in her rustic French (Arabic is her mother tongue) to her half-rapt, half-dismissive audience, she holds up a solemn hand and demands, "Can I have some silence please, I'm talking," and an icy cold, warmed by female applause, shivers through the room.

Just as social laws are hard to change in this traditional society, musical laws also must seem to innovators like Malouma, hard to shift too. Traditional Moorish music is



Above left: Malouma with her ardin.
Above: the market at Nouakchott

played on the ardin, a *kora*-like instrument with between ten and 14 strings played by women, the *tidnit* (the four-stringed lute), which is played by men, and percussion instruments. Songs are passed down through informal family music schools; new songs are rarely composed.

Malouma grew up with her family in the south of Mauritania and started learning music at the age of six, taught by her father. She remembers this time with great fondness.

"We were just a few tents in amongst the sand dunes. Every night, we would come together with our instruments and practise what we had learnt that day."

As she starts to play the mesmerising, and almost gritty notes of the ardin, the calabash

"I like being with men, to show them that I can be stronger than them"

resting on the floor and the wooden neck of the instrument leaning against her shoulder, she transports into the room the haunting sounds of the desert, the howl of the wind, the feel of the sand swept against the skin.

"The women would play the accompaniment and the men, the solo," she remembers of those nights of music. "The man who played the most new compositions would the next day have a sheep killed for him," she chuckles. But her soft face betrays a deep sadness as she says, "those were beautiful times. But now that music has disappeared and no one understands it."

As well as a musician, Malouma's father was an intellectual, and the only person in her community to own a radio. It was through her father that, as a young girl, she



had access to diverse music styles from all over the world.

"When I came to Nouakchott [the capital]," she remembers, "I brought with me African, Western and Arabic music cassettes. But people found it weird and would ask me where on earth I found this strange music."

Despite her love of new and different music, Malouma's ultimate aim was to preserve and further the traditional Moorish music of her childhood. On her latest album, she fuses instruments like the ardin, with the deep bluesy vocal tones of the desert and the vibrant effects of electric guitars and keyboard beats. Collaborators such as Tunisian-born Smadj, who successfully blends his *oud* music with electric dance rhythms, have had a hand in this ultra-modern but beautifully paced album that manages to carry the raw air of the Sahara with it as it climbs the European music charts.

The album's tone is testament to the kind of diverse woman Malouma is. During the day I spend with her at her home in Nouakchott, I get the feeling I have been allowed to see the whole woman, from the irritated house-keeper who scolds her house staff for making too much tea ("tea, tea, tea, that's all these Mauritians do, drink tea"), to the mum'sy woman who wipes the rice off my hands when I make a mess at lunchtime, to the mighty, beautiful woman on a mission who won't let anyone – least of all a man – stand in her way.

But she is also someone who has lived great sadness and suffered persecution simply because of who she is, and she lets us see this in her music too. Under the stars but shielded by the desert wind by a colourful canvas tent, Malouma sings songs from her new album to the divided audience after her press conference. With two stunning singers beside her, she starts to sing, almost sob, the words of 'Habib', a song dedicated to a close friend recently deceased. And it is there, with her rich voice reverberating through the crowd, that I find myself in tears. ●

MAURITANIA FACTS

Climate: Mauritania's extreme aridity means that only 1% of the land is arable, the rest of the country is desert

Population: 3 million

Independence: from France in 1960

TIMELINE

1978
First post-independence president Moktar Daddah is deposed in a military coup

1989
Race riots caused by border dispute with Senegal

1993
The US ends development aid over Mauritania's treatment of its black population

2007
First democratic elections won by Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi

EXCLUSIVE

TOP OF THE WORLD ALBUM



A track from *Nour* appears on the

covermount CD and you can hear Rose Skelton talking about Malouma on this issue's podcast