



Watcha Clan

The Marseille collective mix up music from around the Med. **Elisavet Sotiriadou** caught them in London.

"Shalom, Salam Alaikoum, Shalom," is how Watcha Clan greet their audience and invite them on a trip that takes us from the south of France, around the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Sahara Desert. The heavy beats and singer Sista K's voice and energy drag everyone into the music, which moves you along in a trance-like dance.

Traditional songs from Africa and Eastern Europe are part of Sista K's heritage. With her mum being from Lithuania and dad a Jewish Berber from Algeria, she is a mix of different cultures and influences that she naturally brings into the music. Watcha Clan come from Marseille, a city full of inspiration with a versatile music scene, and see themselves as nomads, travelling from country to country, not only geographically of course but also in terms of their music.

One of their songs is about nomads being free men, but nomadic people struggle today, finding it hard to survive because the authorities want them to settle down and they're losing their freedom to move between countries. "It's a very important concept to have in mind today, to be free to move, because people are not free to move. We have had a bad experience with visas; another band member Nassim who comes from Algeria didn't get his visa to come to London and play with us. And we have other examples of musicians we want to bring from Algeria to France, but we cannot. So it's a problem in Europe, in England and France," says Clement.

I meet him and Sista K on one of London's coldest wintry nights, in Brixton Jamm's green room, which is flooded by orange red light from a bare lightbulb dangling from the ceiling. Matt, the bass player, is sitting behind us. He is from Corsica and the cold has made him hide inside his many layers of clothes just like a turtle withdraws in its shell. The band has been touring from Sweden in the north, where the audience was on fire, to Greece in the south, where they got the opportunity to jam with Greek musicians. Now in London, they are headlining Components' monthly night with their debut performance in the UK.

"We just came from Greece, Thessaloniki and Athens. It's the same culture, it's Mediterranean; we jammed with musicians who know a lot of the standard traditional rhythms we play. We can jam easily with Greek musicians and we hope to return to Greece and play with musicians there," Sista K says, when I tell her that I recognise music which has a Greek reso-

nance to me. But even in Scandinavia, where their music is perceived as more exotic and not resembling much of the Nordic folk music sounds, the band believes the electro beats make people accept the music more easily.

In the beginning, some ten years ago, Watcha Clan was an acoustic band; the electronic music was added on later. The idea is that, "Young people can discover traditional music through the electro music and old people can discover electro through the traditional music," says Sista K.

Clement says that traditional music does not have to be played exactly in the same way as musicians did a hundred years ago. "[It] is something that needs to be alive, and to be alive it has to be shared by young and old. To make people dance you have to play this music with a modern approach." He plays the accordeon, keyboards and his laptop.

Watcha Clan recorded their album *Diaspora Hi-Fi – A Mediterranean Caravan* in Algeria, Morocco and Spain and then went to the studio in France to mix and finalise it. They got help with the production from Transglobal Underground's Tim

Whelan. So how do they decide which direction a song is going to take when it undergoes a Watcha Clan transformation? "We try a lot of things. We have five or six versions of each track before deciding and we ask others what they think. We like to experiment, we choose... I don't know, but we never choose alone," explains Clement.

On their album's 12 songs, Sista K sings in six languages: French, Arabic, Yiddish, Jewish, English and Spanish. I ask her to pick a favourite or the language that best expresses feelings. Probably French, she says, it is a poetic language in which she knows exactly what it is she wants to say or how to say it – but it all depends on what emotion you want to convey. "Hebrew is very spiritual for me, and Arabic too. Hasidic songs are very powerful, they give you the 'Yes!' feel, you get up and are happy, and it is so sweet to speak in English, everything has a good sound for the song and the reggae."

Watcha Clan are touring around Europe in March and April. For more info, see: www.myspace.com/watchaclan

