

## News



BAKHU MOHAMED REDA



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Clockwise from below: rocking out Moroccan-style; Lebanon's RGB and Morocco's Hicham Bajjou perform with Music Matbakh at this year's Boulevard; the beautiful setting for the Gnawa festival, Essaouira; Casablanca's notorious Bigg

## MAROC'N'ROLL

Ed Stocker examines the booming Moroccan festival scene in-between partying in Casablanca

The rapper bouncing about on stage in baggy streetwear can't be more than five foot. But MC Anou isn't the latest child hip-hop protégé to emerge from the US, he's a 12-year-old from Fes playing on the opening night of Boulevard festival in Casablanca – an annual knees-up that has been quietly fermenting Morocco's alternative music scene since its inauguration nine years ago.

Boulevard is part of a growing number of events that have sprung up in Morocco over the last few years. There's now a festival to suit every taste, from Tanjazz in Tangier to the Mawazine Rythmes du Monde festival in Rabat. But what marks Boulevard out from its more famous competitors is the music it bills – hip-hop, fusion and, most controversially, heavy metal – genres rarely associated with the country.

Focus often turns to the traditional music festivals like the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music in June, featuring everything from Gnawa music to Sufi dervishes. Fes attracts an international crowd, counting Bono, Bernadette Chirac (Jacques' wife), and queen Rania of Jordan amongst this year's guests, and providing king Mohammed VI with a platform to promote a diverse and tolerant side of society.

Motivation for Fes, and others festivals like Timitar in Agadir and Gnawa in Essaouira, is largely economic. Fatim Zahra

Ammor, director of Timitar, admits that the primary goal of her festival is "to promote the destination of Agadir and make people forget the idea that the town doesn't have any soul." She adds: "We can't continue to just offer tourists sun and sand. People choose travel spots based on cultural events these days."

Look at the way cultural tourism has benefitted Essaouira, which began ten years ago, and you can see why festivals in Morocco are booming. To cater for the new influx of visitors, the town is currently

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building its first five star hotel and has seen its *riads* (guest houses) swell from just one in 1998 to 58 by 2006. The festival budget has also increased fivefold over the same period as a result of sponsorship deals.

The motivation for Boulevard is different. Although revellers from Europe and the Maghreb attend, attracting them isn't a priority for founder Momo Merhari: "There are festivals whose principal aim is to attract foreigners. That's not the case with us." He'd rather promote "marginalised" music with an emphasis on drawing an audience of connoisseurs.

The path hasn't always been easy.

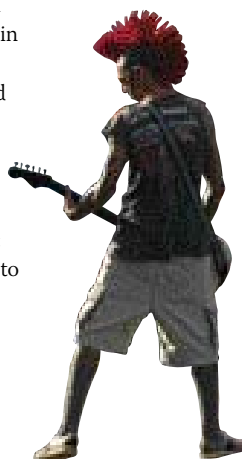
Boulevard has had to battle against the more conservative factions of society opposed to hard rock. In 2003, 14 musicians from the group Reborn were arrested and accused, through their lyrics, of blasphemy against Islam. They went to court and received prison sentences before a sustained campaign by Boulevard and its friends got them off the hook. As Merhari talks, he points to the T-shirt he's wearing – it has a Reborn logo on the front and the slogan 'forgive but not forget' repeated several times on the back.

Boulevard's decision to bill the music that it does, means it's not part of the mainstream Moroccan festival circuit. The 20,000 to 30,000 people it attracts daily is less than Fes, Agadir, Essaouira and Casablanca's massive festival of music, cinema and urban art, Casa Music, at the end of July. But it's a youth festival that has purposely decided upon this go-it-alone attitude. Whilst other festivals fall under the king's patronage, Boulevard has for the moment decided to stay outside this grouping, seeing it more as a subversive means of control than a benefit.

Whatever the past problems, Morocco is beginning to come to terms with its flourishing popular culture movement. Festivals are everywhere – some cater to tourists, others to a newfound internal market. International sponsors, like Pepsi and Nokia, plus support of the British Council means events have bigger funds than ever. Radio too is giving more alternative music airplay and Bigg, law student and rap artist extraordinaire, is a chart sensation plastered over billboards nationwide.

At Boulevard, identikit crowds of young bandanna and baseball cap-clad Moroccans mingled in front of the stage. When Coldcut's Matt Black dropped 'Bienvenue à Casa' by local outfit Hoba Hoba Spirit into his VJ set, the crowd went wild. Welcome to Casa. Welcome to the new face of Morocco. ●

[www.boulevard.ma](http://www.boulevard.ma)



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