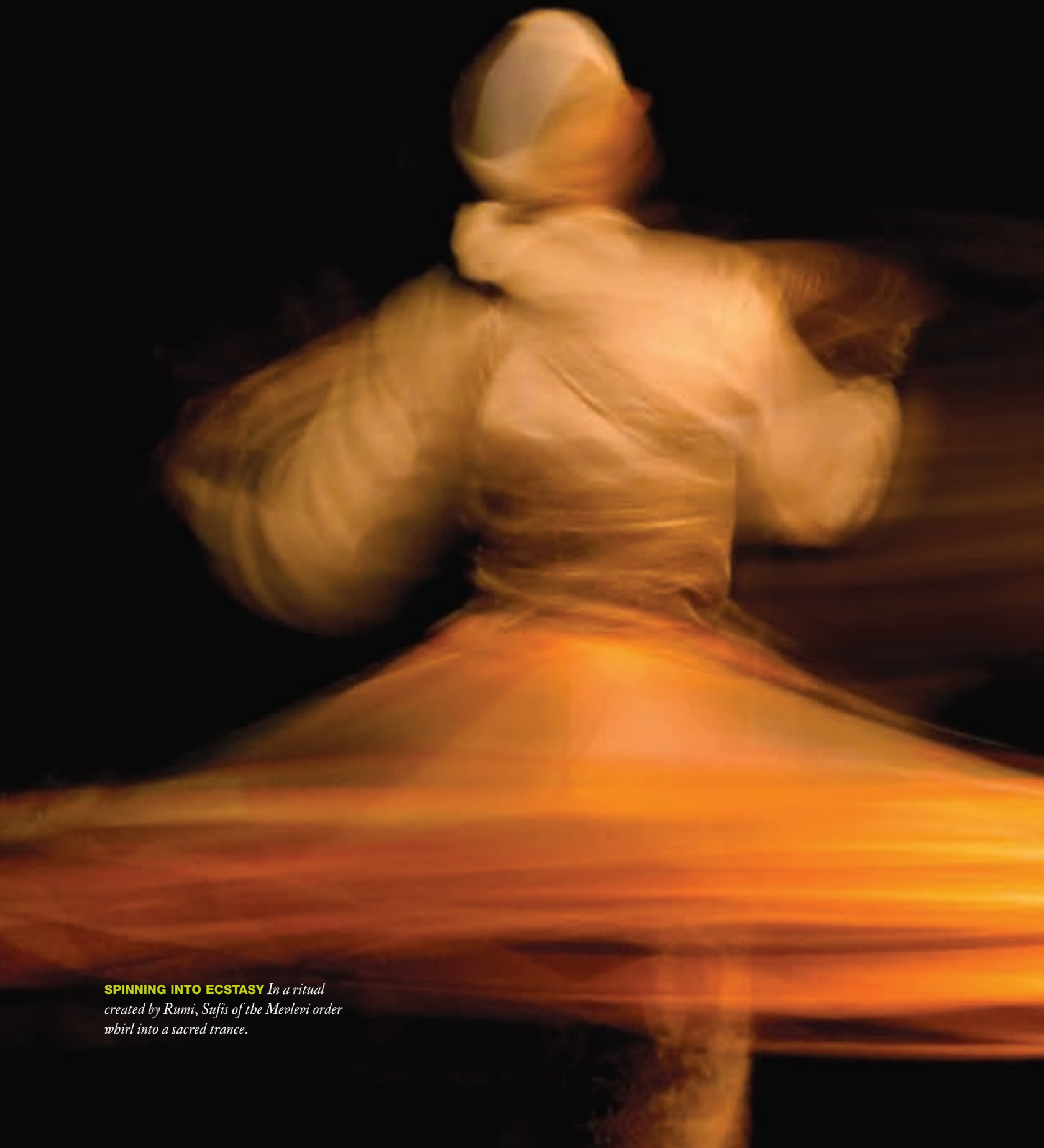
Founded in the wake of the first Gulf War, Morocco's Fès Festival of World Sacred Music celebrates

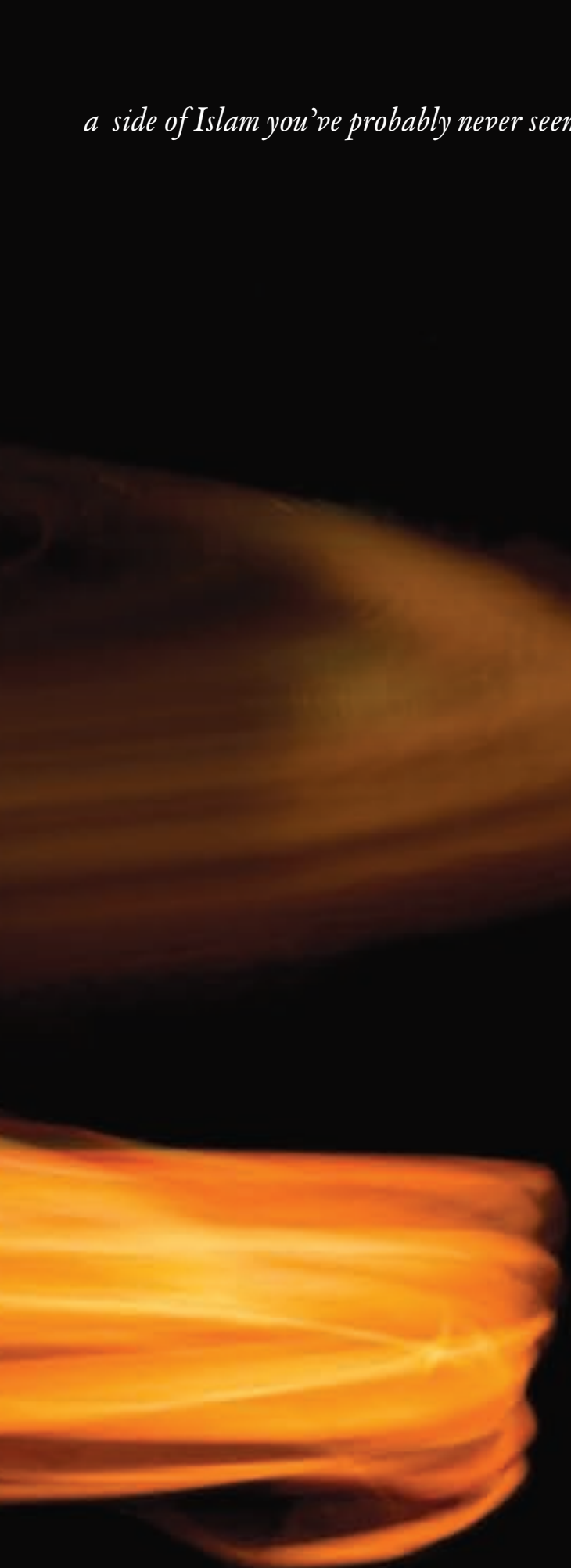


SPINNING INTO ECSTASY *In a ritual created by Rumi, Sufis of the Mevlevi order whirl into a sacred trance.*

a side of Islam you've probably never seen before.

Sufi Nights

By KRISTIN BARENDSEN

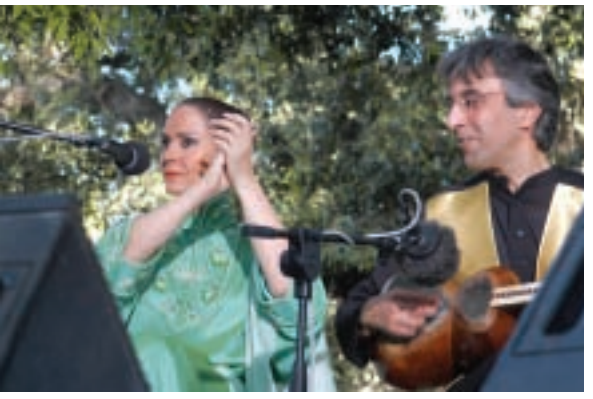


Music is a most powerful form of spiritual expression; it is also the medium most likely to bring humans together.
—King Mohammed VI of Morocco

In the garden courtyard of a museum in the Fès medina, under an oak tree so old it shades the entire audience, an Iranian woman robed in green sings the poems of Rumi. Parissa's eyes are closed in divine intoxication as she connects to something electrifying and transmits it through an otherworldly wail, a woman's call to prayer. Then, startlingly, the city's call to prayer overlaps her voice with the urgency of a siren, starting low and rising in successive cycles in counterpoint with Parissa's music. The song becomes one morphing continuum the length of the concert.

I am riveted, listening from the inside. Already I feel this music working under my skin, expanding my perception of a country called Iran well beyond that of a shrouded, angry place that I pray the United States will refrain from bombing. Now, it's the home of this sublime music and the source of a feeling I won't soon forget.

After the concert I ask Parissa, through a translator, whether she thinks music has a role in diplomacy between East and West—for example, between America and Iran. "One hundred percent," she says with a broad smile. But her main message is about how to listen. "If we pay attention inside, we can connect with the music," she says.



SONGS OF PEACE *Parissa and the Dastan Ensemble mesmerize an audience that includes Bono and The Edge.*

This concert was one highlight of the Fès Festival of World Sacred Music, an annual 10-day celebration held in a living medieval city in Morocco. The festival is a Tower of Babel of languages, religions, and cultures. But as festival attendee Fahmi Filali explains it, "Since we don't have the chance to understand each other [through words] to have a dialogue and find a solution, we must find a common language, and music provides that." Sacred music conveys that our religions, however divisive they may be today, share the same source.

Mohamed Kabbaj, Casablanca's mayor, founded the festival in the wake of the first Gulf War in an effort to promote interfaith dialogue and to show the more open side of Islam that the Western media usually ignores. The festival underscores the image—both PR spin and truth—that Morocco is an eminently open and moderate Muslim country, a geographical and philosophical gateway between the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The festival enjoys the strong support of Morocco's King Mohammed VI, who writes, "Music is a most powerful form of spiritual expression; it is also the medium most likely to bring humans together."

In today's Morocco, Arabs live harmoniously with sub-Saharan immigrants and the indigenous Berbers, having resolved most imperialist struggles centuries ago. The country sheltered Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition; its Jewish population peaked at 300,000 by 1948, but dwindled to less than 10,000 following the creation of Israel. Although Morocco is now 99.5 percent Muslim, the festival draws on the country's reputation for tolerance, focusing on music of the three Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) and adding other traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism) to the mix each year.

If attitudes toward women are another yardstick of openness, on the streets of Fès it's common to see a woman wearing a *hijab* (headscarf) or *jellaba* (hooded robe) walking arm in arm with a woman in a T-shirt and jeans. Although the country's literacy rate remains at 40 percent for women compared to 66 percent for men, the festival's new director, Naïma Lahbil Tagemouati, is a Berber woman and former university professor who says her gender has created no obstacles in her job. King Mohammed VI granted women more power with his 2004 family code, the *Mudawana*. He is generally opposed by Islamic fundamentalists for his pluralistic policies and his staunch support, unique in the Arab world, of the U.S.-led War on Terror.

THE SULTAN'S PALACE

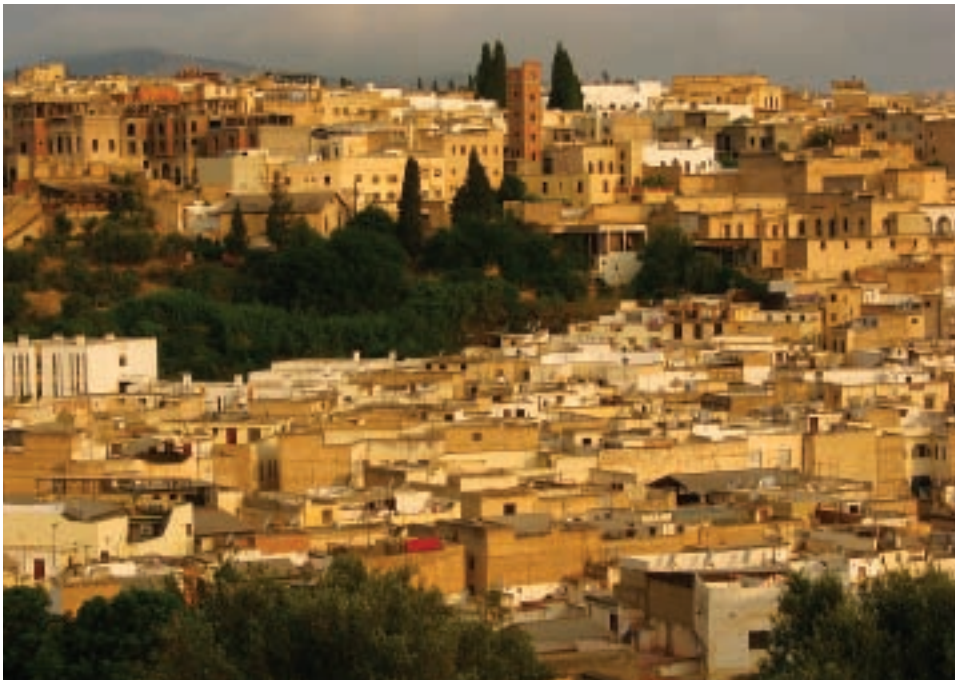
At the festival's heart is Sufism, a mystical Islamic tradition (born in Iraq) that's dedicated to divine love and the cultivation of the heart. While some mullahs denounce music as *harām*, heresy, Sufism embraces it as a path for reaching God. To the Sufi, listening takes precedence over speaking: Only through deep listening can one hear the call of Allah.

This year's festival honored Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī, the Afghani philosopher, who, 800 years after his birth, is among the most widely read poets in the world. Festival singers performed his poetry in Turkish, Persian, Arabic, and Urdu. I could understand only one word, "Allah," but I could feel Rumi's divine passion—perhaps even more clearly without the words.

In *Sound of the Soul*, an excellent documentary film about the festival, scholar Ahmed Sidi Kostas retells a Sufi saying. "The mind is a horse that leads you to the sultan's palace—the door—but does not enter with you in it," he says. "So the mind can lead you to the level of knowing the existence of God, but not to communicate with God and know the essence of God. That's a different dimension."

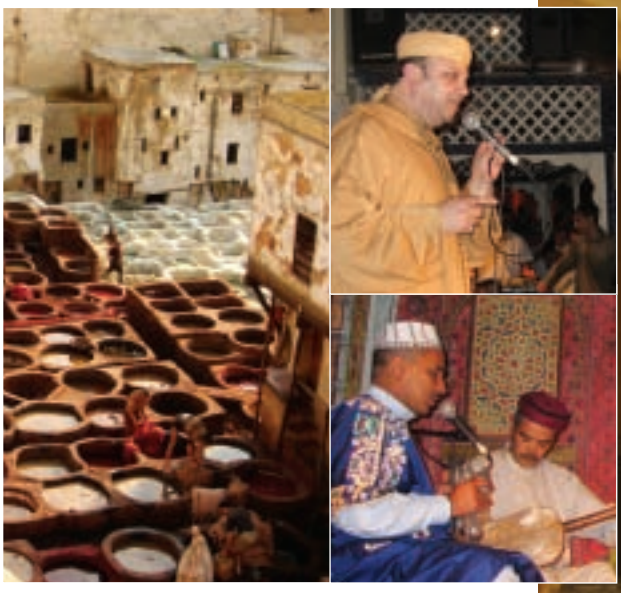
In an effort to step through that door, Rumi created the dance of the Whirling Dervishes, called *sema* in Arabic and Persian, meaning "hearing." A sema ceremony was a high point of the festival.

A group of 20 men sat in a circle, chanting in unison as one muezzin-like voice rose in melodic calls to prayer. Then six

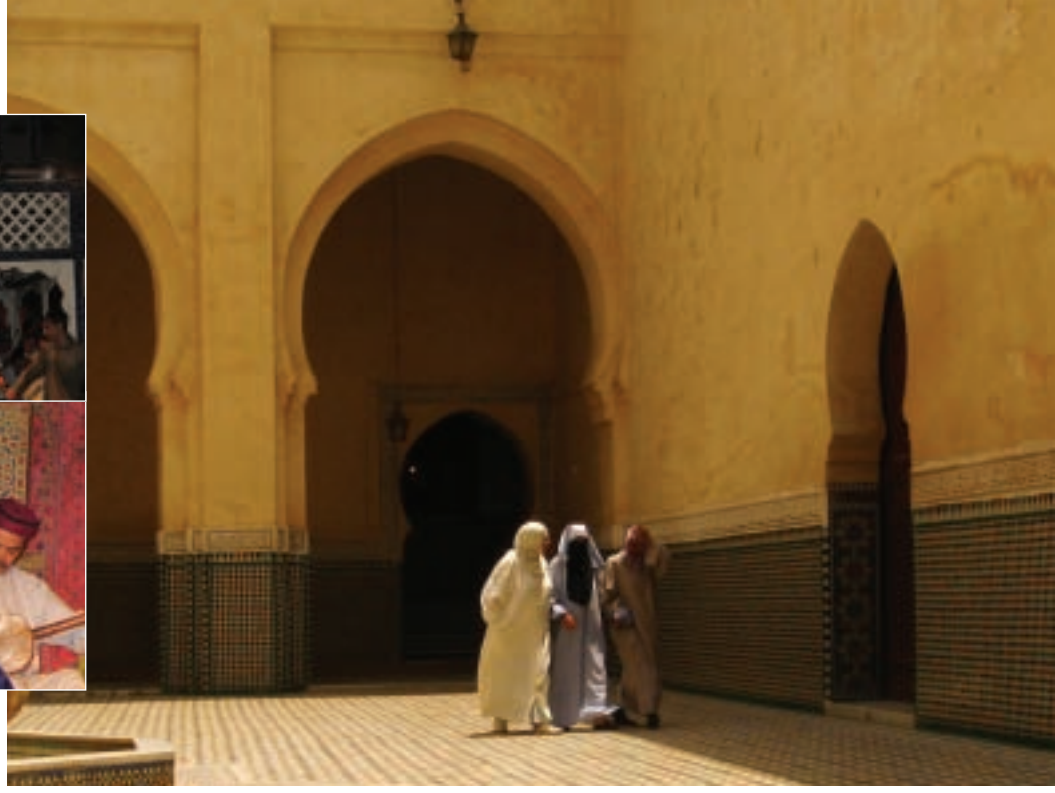


THE OLD CITY AT DAWN *Founded in 789 CE, the Fès medina is the world's largest urban car-free zone.*

Musicians: © Catherine Bendayan; Fes at dawn photo: Kristin Barendsen; Previous spread: © J Marshall - Tribaleye Images / Alamy



THE TANNERY *(upper left) Curing leather the old way.* **SUFI BROTHERHOOD** *(upper right) Sheik Touhami Harrak rocks the Kasbah.* **GNAWA MUSIC** *(lower right) Rituals of spirit possession and release.*



THE WARRIOR KING'S MAUSOLEUM *The remains of Moulay Ismail lie in Meknes, near Fès.*

men stood and began to turn, slowly at first, their white skirts lifting, arms graceful and lyrical like swans. They spun faster, heads moving in wide circles and eyes half open, their faces serene, ecstatic. Somehow at the center of their whirling was stillness. Watching their blur for more than an hour created the same motion in my mind, and the same silence, leading me turn by turn across the threshold of the sultan's palace.

Each night into the wee hours, Moroccan Sufi brotherhoods, or Tarīqahs, offered free concerts in a palace courtyard inside the old city, framed by a sumptuously tiled archway. These intimate Sufi Night ceremonies revealed a range of ritualistic styles, from a cappella chanting to spirit possessions.

After the charismatic performance of Sheikh Touhami Harrak one evening, student Achek Mehdi, who had traveled 215 miles just for that concert, said, "We can be Muslim or we can believe in other religions, but we come here together to listen to this music because we can have the same goals in this life, to have a spiritual life, a simple life. Because this is something beautiful and magic, and we must share it." Mehdi continued, "I'm not Sufi, but I think that everybody in the world has a spiritual side. That's why I think that maybe everybody in the world is a little bit Sufi."

The Ouled Kamar Gnawa Ensemble performed for a beyond-capacity crowd. An ethnic group and religious order descended from former African slaves, the Gnawa play deeply hypnotic trance music marked by funky bass rhythms, call-and-response singing, and the clatter of metal castanets. The musicians, robed in bright colors, danced athletically, sometimes holding candles to their flesh. Their faces glowed with exertion and euphoria.

Suddenly, a young man in the audience went into convulsive fits, while a guard held him upright to keep his head from bashing the ground. I watched with alarm as his friend followed suit until both were carted off, flailing. A third prostrated on the stage for at least a half hour; the musicians didn't miss a note. Behind them, a white woman and a black woman thrashed wildly. A fight broke out between guards; a French photographer deliberately smacked my camera, and I snarled at him like a cat. As I later learned, all this was normal and expected for Gnawa ceremonies, which invoke *mluk*, ancestral saints said to drive out evil spirits and cure psychological ills.

A UNIQUE PLACE ON EARTH

Perhaps the most alluring aspect of the festival is its frame—the medina, or old city, of Fès. Founded in 789, Fès is the world's largest living medieval city, with ancient traditions kept alive partly by choice, partly by necessity: Its maze of 9,400 cobblestone streets is too narrow to admit cars, so everything must be carted in via pack animal. Horses shoulder cases of Coke, while donkeys serve as garbage trucks, nibbling at their bounty when their master looks away.

As you wander lost through the medina, down dogleg and dead-end streets, you'd better keep one eye over your shoulder to avoid being trampled, and the other eye on the "faux guide" who has attached himself to your elbow and is attempting to browbeat you into accepting a mint tea at his cousin's Berber carpet shop—or into making a commission-rich purchase at the tannery, where artisans cure leather the old way, standing in vats of red dye

Kristin Barendsen writes about yoga, travel, and the arts from her home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has published articles about yoga in 12 countries on four continents.

All photos this page: Kristin Barendsen

reeking of pigeon dung and cow urine. Go at sunrise when the light is soft and cool, raking across the textured and patinaed walls that fall toward each other, held apart by wooden braces. At that hour, no one is awake save a hooded figure picking her way along the cobblestones with a cane and an old man in a red tassled fez who offers you a most delicious mint tea with a secret herb inside.

Festival director Tagemouati compares a Fassi building to its inhabitants: "Outside it's very modest. Inside it's rich and marbled. You have to pay attention." She adds that the medina's infrastructure was in particular decline through the '80s and early '90s, but the festival has aided rebuilding efforts by bringing more money from both Moroccan and foreign tourists.

For Sufis, music is part of education. Because if people are relaxed, and sitting, and listening, then that's the teachable moment. —Sufi scholar Ahmed Sidi Kostas, Sound of the Soul

THE RED CARPET

That money was in abundance on opening night at Bab Makina, an outdoor venue of castle-like walls surrounding an ancient medina gate. The red carpet was rolled out for royal guests (Morocco's Queen Lalla Salma and Jordan's Queen Rania) and their attendant swarm of paparazzi. Almost no headscarves were visible in this crowd of Moroccan elite, who were clearly there to see and be seen, waving to friends as African American diva and humanitarian Barbara Hendricks sang Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. Despite its sacred import (the Virgin Mary at the cross), the piece seemed a bit stiff as a festival kickoff. But in her encore Hendricks sent a shock wave through the audience with a bone-chilling rendition of the Negro spirituals "Oh Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome"—songs of slavery and freedom of the African people.

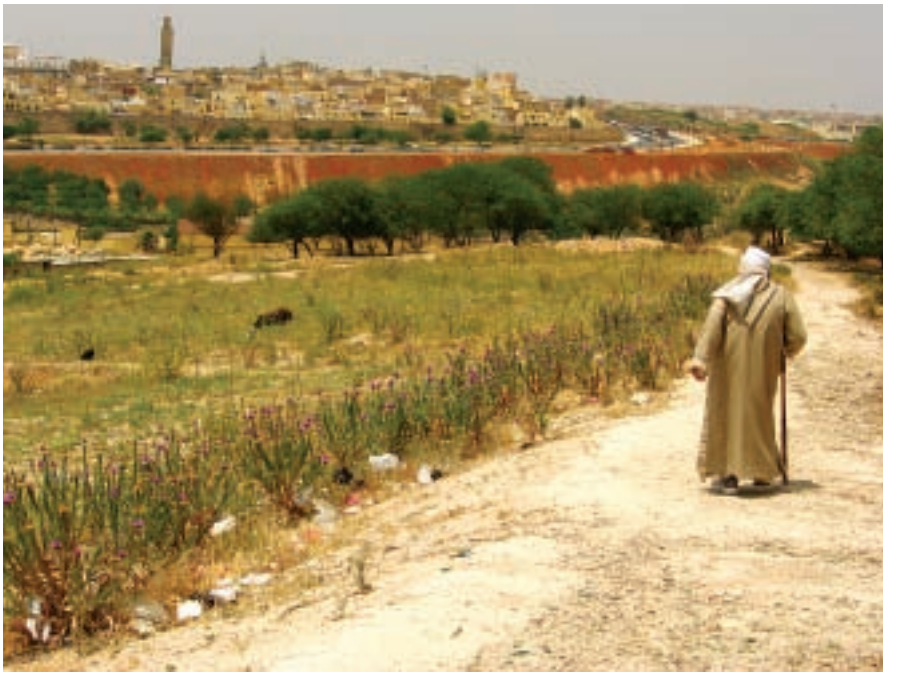
Afterward, I spoke with Hendricks about how music can foster dialogue between nations. "Most of us live in a world full of noise and distraction, where it's more and more difficult to have a conversation," she said. "With music, the audience has the opportunity to bypass that cerebral baggage and have a conversation on another level—the spiritual. It's a way of preparing the heart for a much more difficult conversation: the political one."

Other nights, this large venue featured South African '80s rocker Johnny Clegg, Brazilian jazz pianist Tania Maria, and Benin-to-Brooklyn Afropop star Angelique Kidjo—all of whom were chosen more for their popularity and cultural diversity than for their connection to the sacred.

Tagemouati admitted that her biggest challenge is balancing the theme of sacred music with the goal of filling venues. "Moroccans want to see Western big names, and Westerners want to see Moroccan musicians," she said, adding that a musician like Clegg fits the theme from a cultural point of view. "Johnny Clegg supports Nelson Mandela, and his music creates a bridge between deep South African rhythms and Western music."

Also on the theme of cultural diversity, French singer Claire Zalamansky performed Sephardic Jewish songs of Spain, an underground tradition for women in medieval Moorish times. Vasumathi Badrinathan explored the profound and evocative ragas of Indian classical Carnatic music. Angelique Kidjo broke down the barriers between performer and audience, inviting children of all colors to dance on stage (including a faux guide I recognized from the medina).

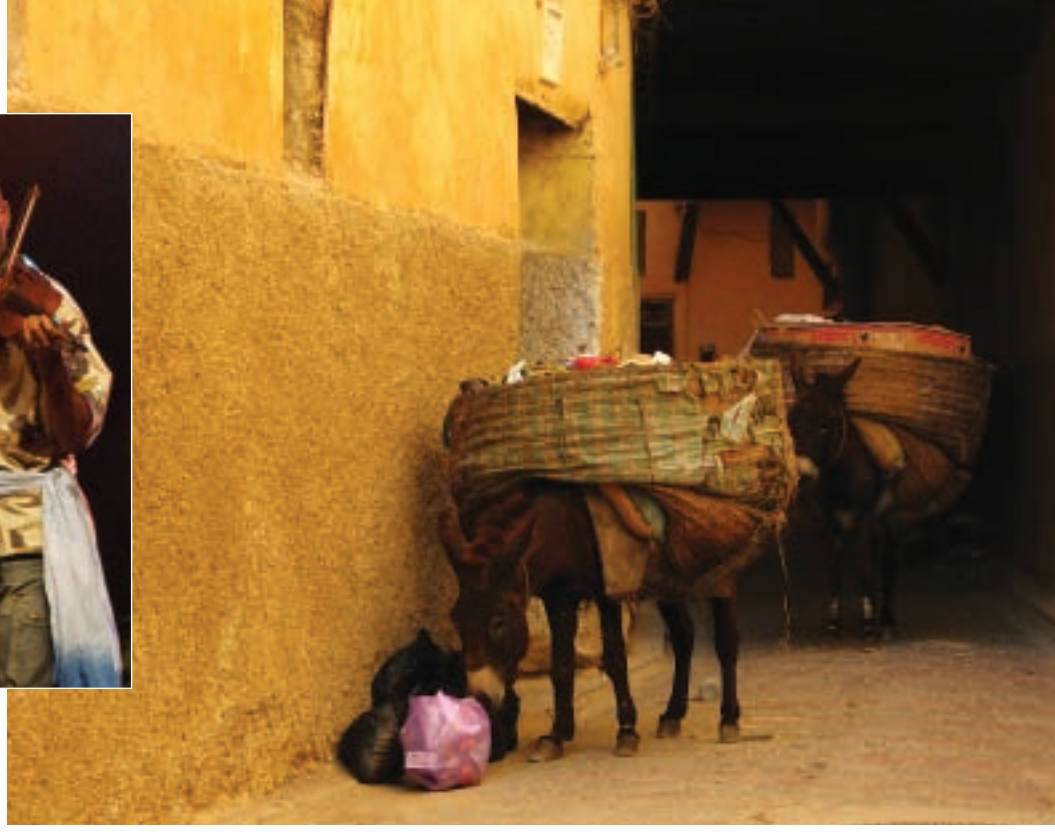
But when a Qâwwali group, Sufis from Pakistan, played at Bab Makina, their animated singing with tablas and harmonium could not hold the attention of the locals, many of whom instead held loud conversations on their cell phones and with friends across the aisles. Perhaps for Moroccans, the sacred permeates the everyday, in the same way that the call to prayer sounds five times daily and people work right through it, pausing at a more natural moment to perform their prostrations. Still, the gabfest created a culture clash with Westerners, who expected more reverence at a sacred concert—and who created further disturbances by



THE PATH TO FÈS *Moroccans wear the jellaba, a traditional hooded robe.*

Photo: Kristin Barendsen

TANIA MARIA *(upper left) Samba meets jazz.*
JOHNNY CLEGG *(lower left) The "White Zulu" reinvents tribal rhythms.*
AMARG FUSION *(upper right) A Berber musician plays the violin.*



GARBAGE COLLECTORS *In the medina at dawn, donkeys collect (and eat) yesterday's remains.*

changing seats continually in search of quiet spots.

BRINGING THE FESTIVAL INTO FÈS

Free sunset concerts at Bab Boujloud, the medina's main gate, attracted a more boisterous, involved crowd of locals—a crush of young men cheering up front, and families dancing and playing in back. All went wild for Majda Yahyaoui and her band's Gnawa/jazz mix and the Berber rock group Amarg Fusion. With three free concerts per day, this year's edition invited local participation more than ever before. Tagemouati says the outreach effort is working: 75 percent of Fès residents attended at least one concert during the 2006 festival.

Perhaps the festival's strongest connection with the local community manifested through a concurrent 10-day festival of children's theater and music organized by the Association Fès Dhar El Mehraz, an NGO. Hundreds of children from a shantytown-like neighborhood in Fès, many suffering from a lack of education and basic facilities, performed high-quality original theater pieces, mime, and traditional music for the audience members intrepid enough to find the venues.

The Fès Encounters, a series of panel discussions on the topic of globalization from a spiritual perspective, offered cerebral fodder for French intellectuals. Scholars and artists addressed such questions as, "How can we marry modernity with sacred values such as faith, culture, and heritage?" The simultaneous English translation was difficult to decipher, making the experience less enlightening for those of us who were less fluent in French, and proving once again the festival's main message—music communicates across cultures better than words.

The festival weathered political turbulence this year, following a split between founders Mohamed Kabbaj and Sufi scholar Dr. Faouzi Skali, who left along with the World Bank's Katherine Marshall, a key figure in the Fès Encounters. The two started their own six-day festival on Sufism, including symposia and music, which debuted in April. Tagemouati took up the reins of the Sacred Music Festival, along with artistic director Chérif Khaznadar, a French world-music guru.

FULL CIRCLE

The Fès festival expanded my musical vocabulary significantly, lodging new, haunting rhythms in my psyche. It also prepared me to meet and befriend locals, including two young women—a banker and a lawyer—on my post-festival trip to the Rif mountains. We bonded on our shared opinion of the Bush administration and talked about headscarves, feminism, boyfriends, Israel, and gay rights. As a parting gift, my new friends gave me a gorgeous jellaba the color of henna.

Now when I think of Islam, images of burkhas and bombers are overwritten by memories of these women and their hospitality, visions of the Gnawas and Whirling Dervishes—and the memory of being lost inside the labyrinthine medina of Fès. Clearly Islam is far more complex and multifaceted than the mainstream U.S. media portrays it to be. Rumi, Sufism, this music festival, and even Morocco itself embody the face of Islam that is all-inclusive, that demonstrates openness within itself and invites other religions in—to listen with the heart. +

+ Interested in attending next year's festival? Visit YogaPlus.org and click on "2008 Fès Festival Travel Tips." To read about other interesting performers from this year's festival, click on "Fès Festival Performers." To read a poem by Rumi, click on "The Reed Flute Song."