

"Fusion" Musics and Tunisian Identity
in the Age of the Global Stereo

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Tunisia wears its hybridity on its sleeve. Quite literally, a walk through the residential suburbs of Tunis, La Marsa or La Goulette, proves just that; when walking past a café you are as likely to see a middle-aged man in a smart Italian business suit wearing *chechia*, a distinctively Tunisian felt hat, as an older gentleman in *djellabah*, a heavy brown Berber cloak, sporting a “Yankees” cap and pair of sneakers. Superficially, these hybridities between local and inter-state, old and new, and “traditional” and “modern” are everywhere, on the street, on restaurant menus, and in the every-day colloquial Tunisian Arabic, *darija*, a combination of local Arabic and French with a spattering of Italian. These demonstrations barely scratch the surface though; hybridity is by no means skin-deep in Tunisia. Fusion and hybridity are not patterns that Tunisia or Tunisians put on to go out in the morning and take off at night like the imported second-hand American, British, and Brazilian t-shirts that women of all ages picked up for a few hundred millimes at the Sunday market in La Marsa. Fusion is a deeply rooted ideology, a meaningful pattern of life for Tunisians, whether explicitly or implicitly realized, that has had, and continues to have, profound effect on the development, internalization, and presentation of Tunisian identity throughout. Hybridity characterizes both internal identities among Tunisians and is an important component in Tunisia’s presentation of itself to other Arab states, to Europe, and to the world.

Tunisia has always been a crossroads for cultural contact. Even before Carthage’s heyday, the region that is now the metropolis of Tunis was a major Mediterranean trading port for the Phoenicians and Romans. Carthage was symbolically “sewn with salt,” and later, Arab conquest leveled and ransacked what was left of Roman temples and Christian Basilicas to piece together their mosques, adding layer upon layer to Tunisia’s complex patchwork cultural history. The great mosque in Kairouan—one of the most important holy sites not only for Tunisian

Muslims, but for the religion of Islam—is a powerful illustration of Tunisia’s hybridity. In the tradition of Islamic architectural spolia, you’d be hard-pressed to find two identical columns or capitols in the entire mosque complex as so many different Roman and Byzantine temples were sampled and recycled for its construction (see Photographic Appendix, Figure 1).

Since declaring independence in 1956, Tunisians have identified, in nationalist spirit, as “Tunisian,” while subscribing on another level to the cloaking identity of “Arab” and participating in the imagined community of the “Arab world.” Simultaneously, Tunisians have maintained and continued to develop strong cultural, political, and economic affiliations with Europe and the Western world by locating their country’s identity as “Mediterranean.” The influences of indigenous groups, particularly the Berber, who identify themselves as the “Imazighen” (the singular of which is “Amazigh”), should not be overlooked either, as they too have been a part of shaping contemporary Tunisian identity.

As is so often the case with nations tied together by profound hybridity, the Tunisian identity thrives mainly on a theory, though not always a practice, of cultural inclusion. It is an interesting exercise to compare the Tunisian inclusionary identity with two of the societies most influential in the state, the identities of “Arab” and “French,” both of which have historically been characterized as exclusionary in regards to cultural practice in general, religion, linguistics, and in some fields of the arts.

Music is a powerful medium through which individuals, groups, and entire societies articulate and question greater affiliations, perform and present ascribed and self-ascribed identities, create and preserve a shared cultural history, and respond to changing relations with others both locally and trans-state. Music is more than just a window to cultural phenomena or

social history; it is part and parcel of inventing, manipulating, and displaying the constellation of habits and values that compose our various collective and personal identities.

In this paper I will explore how contemporary Tunisian musicians have engaged with and adopted various “foreign” or “external” musics by melded them in myriad intricate and often controversial ways with the tunes, rhythms, and symbolic meanings of their own historically local musics. Equally, or perhaps more importantly, I will address how audiences throughout Tunisia have received these musical “fusion” projects and movements and will touch upon the responses of Tunisian diasporic communities and cosmopolitan cultural formations within and beyond the borders of the country.

I will present two case studies, the work of Anouar Brahem and the group “Kantara,” a musician and an ensemble, respectively, that define themselves as Tunisian and their musics as distinct mixtures of Tunisian and various other inter-state genres. In detailing these two individual examples of current projects, I hope to set bases for comparison and generalization about musical hybridity between genres, bridging of the local and the inter-state, and transcending “old” and “new” in present-day Tunisia.

These two case studies will act as means of contextualizing for questions most fundamental to an understanding of contemporary hybrid music in Tunisia: what does “fusion” mean to musicians and audiences that enjoy or despise the concept and practice of “fusion,” and how does this definition reflect and shape Tunisian identities? How do Tunisian musicians who identify themselves as creators of “fusion music” define and frame what they see as their genre? What is the role, if any, of fusion music in shaping the embodiments and implications of being Tunisian, looking both inwardly and outwardly towards the east and the west, in an age of

“global stereo,” an age where lightening-speed trans-state musical dialogue has become commonplace?

Specifically, I will address the reactions of eleven Tunisian interviewees to a series of questions that have stood as the framework for my research over the past four weeks. These questions, however seemingly simple during the design and proposal of my project, have proven to be far more complexly nuanced with each interview. The Tunisians I spoke with were eager to critique and deconstruct the terms with which I posed my questions and often suggested their own vocabulary. Interpretations of my research queries, both meaning and sentiment, were occasionally “lost in translation” as most of contributors that participated in this project were non-fluent or non-native speakers of English. Several of the interviews were conducted in French or Arabic with the much-needed and greatly appreciated translation, interpretation, and assistance of Hatem Bourial, the esteemed advisor for this project. Attempts at clarification of specific research questions were made at every opportunity. Though the need for a translator is never optimal when conducting anthropological or ethnomusicology ethnography, I felt my weak linguistic skill in Tunisian Arabic and inability to speak French mandated the assistance of a translator for all interviews not conducted in English.

The research questions that resonated most soundly were questions that addressed the audiences for fusion music, representation of Tunisia and Tunisians abroad through fusion music, and “modernization” of Tunisian music through fusion. Inquiries were also made regarding the possible connection between Tunisian’s reception of fusion musics and Tunisia’s history of cultural openness and relative liberalism in the Arab world. Also relevant were discussions of what I will call an “anxiety of authenticity” in preserving historically Tunisian genres of music like the *ma'luf*. The eleven interviewees offered their candid opinions of how

they, and other Tunisians, see “fusion” musicians and their musics. They offered as well their frank opinions about “fusion” as a positive movement, explicitly or implicitly, breaking down the barriers between the constructed dichotomies of “local” and “foreign,” “traditional” and “modern,” and “old” and “new,” responding to the question of whether “fusion” musicians and their musics are bridging gaps between peoples and places by creating meaningful and lasting trans-state and trans-cultural linkages. Central to an understanding of fusion’s success, interviews also addressed the components and characteristics of a successful fusion musician.

Before taking up the case studies of Anouar Brahem and Kantara, we must first “set the stage” by describing the environments in which these musics first came about, both before and after the use of the term “fusion,” as we know it today, came into common usage.

Musically, Tunisia has always been an open port to outside influence due to its history of multiple cultural occupancies, its geographical location as the most northerly point on the African coast, and perhaps, to a locally-specific culturally understanding of the very definition of what it means to create, listen to, appreciate, and develop new tastes in music. An informed understanding of the history of imported and indigenized music in Tunisia and the significance of the *ma'luf* particularly in shaping national identity can be helpful in contextualizing more current musical migrations, re-worked expressions, and explicitly hybrid musical projects and collaborations.

Arab-Andalusian influences have played a particularly significant role in shaping both the musical and cultural characteristics of Tunisian classical music. From the tenth to the seventeenth centuries, Muslim and Jewish refugees fleeing Christian conquest and harsh persecution in Spain sought refuge all across the Northern coast of Africa. These immigrants are thought to have brought with them musics that are now known collectively as *al-musiqa al-*

andalusiyya, the music of Andalusia. These immigrants established the four sub-genres of *ala* (“instrumental music”) in Morocco, *sana* (“work of art”) in Algeria, *garnaḥi* (“from Granada”) in Western Algeria, and *ma’luf* (“familiar” or “customary”) in Eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya (Davis 2). All Maghrebian (North African) Arab-Andalusian classical musics share the large-scale form of the *nuba*, a form Davis described concisely as “a song-cycle characterized by unity of mode, or melody type, and diversity of rhythmic-metric elements” (Davis 2). The song texts, written in classical Arabic, regional dialects, and mixes of classical and regional dialect typically carry romantic themes focusing on love, wine, and nature. Most *nubat* tell epic stories of the divine and the worldly, love lost and love gained, homelessness, longing, joy and regret (Anderson 3). The ambiguity of some such topics have been exploited by Sufi sects particularly in expressing love as both divine and worldly, nature as an important route to heavenly ascension, and wine as the elixir of God (Davis 2).

Muslim refugees left Seville and came to settle in Tunis during the first wave of migration, between the tenth and twelfth centuries. *Ma’luf*, the Tunisian branch of *al-musiqa al-andalusiyya*, arrived relatively early on in the history of Muslim exodus from Spain. I was followed by the other three regional genres that arrived from Cordoba, Valencia, and Granada between the twelfth century and 1492 when Granada fell to the Spanish. Both popular belief and research have shown that these patterns of migration were responsible, at least in part, for shaping the subtly nuanced musical differences between the four rival schools (Davis 2).

In Tunisia, the modern-day canon of *ma’luf* recognizes only thirteen known *nubat* (the plural of *nuba*), though it is said that once, in the early days of *ma’luf*, a different suite or program existed for each day of the year as well as for major events and holidays (Anderson 3). It’s difficult to fathom that even a master musician who devoted his life to the *ma’luf* could

manage such a repertoire of hundreds of tunes in dozens of scales, modes, and rhythmic patterns, especially as the body of *ma'luf* music existed exclusively as an aural tradition until attempts at transcription, initiated by Baron Rudolfe d'Erlanger, began in earnest during the first few decades of the twentieth century (Davis 44).

The Rashidiya Institute for Tunisian Music, named for Muhammed al-Rasid Bey, an early aristocratic patron of *ma'luf*, has been the heart and soul of Tunisian classical music since its founding in 1934. The aim of the music school and acclaimed musical ensemble of teachers and students has always been the “conserving and promoting [of] traditional Tunisian music and [the] encourag[ment of] new Tunisian composition” (Davis 51). The Rashidiya was established as, what Davis called, the “indigenous” counterpart to the French music conservatory, which was founded in 1896. The Rashidiya and the *ma'luf* are inseparable; neither would exist as we know them today without the other. To many Tunisians, the Rashidiya is iconic, a nostalgic reminder of musical history, and a great source of pride. Especially for the older generations, but by no means exclusively, the *ma'luf* and the Rashidiya have become beloved national symbols.

While the theoretical aims of the institution seem universally agreed upon, controversy does exist surrounding the appropriate methods of translating these goals into practice. Many see the Rashidiya as an almost oppressively conservative force with a habit of privileging the old over the new. Some see the *ma'luf* and the Rashidiya as suffering from a stifling “anxiety of authenticity,” an obsession to maintain the “original” *ma'luf*. No matter how musical conservatives struggle to “authenticate” the *ma'luf* they are playing now, the reality of the matter is that the school has re-shaped the arts of teaching, playing, and presenting Arab-Andalusian music from the very beginning. Whether you examine the standardization of the once entirely aural repertoire in transcription of sheet music or the enlargement of the *ma'luf* orchestra to

include a large violin section in the style of Egyptian and Western ensembles, change at the Rashidiya and change in the *ma'luf* are everywhere. Miriam Touihri, oud player and fusion-music enthusiast in her early twenties, is a tried-and-true supporter of the *ma'luf*. She has been attending the monthly concerts held by the Rashidiya ensemble on and off since she was a young child and I was lucky enough to accompany her to one such show held in the Municipal Theater in Tunis. When prompted about the role of the Rashidiya as an institution of preservation, Touihri commented, "I want to preserve it like this but I don't think that the *ma'luf* that we are learning now is the authentic one. I think Arab Spanish people were singing a different kind of song." There is, perhaps, an imagined sense of authenticity that has been ascribed to this music, which has, in reality, continued to morph ever since its arrival in Tunisia.

There is a fear of stagnation among many involved in the Rashidiya and it is for the love of *ma'luf* and a love of music that both students and teachers alike feel that the *ma'luf* must continue to grow. Due in part to frustration over the recent lack of creativity in the genre and a worry that the repertoire of *ma'luf* has become entirely fixed, musicians and enthusiasts are hungry for new compositions and musical expressions (Anderson 8). Some contemporary musicians, like Riadh Sghaïer, feel the Rashidiya and *ma'luf* conservatives, "just don't [want them to] touch *ma'luf*, [because they think] *ma'luf* is holy." Sghaïer continues, "but *ma'luf* is mine. It is our (Tunisians') heritage and if my interpretation moves people, than that's perfect!" Rabiaa Zammouri, a graduate of the Rashidiya Institut Supérieur and young composer for television, radio, and stage, also feels that, "Those who understand the *ma'luf* know that it is very rich...but [that] the classical *ma'luf* is related to a special period in history when people could only play the *ma'luf*. Now we must open up to other forms of music. We cannot confine our inspiration to the past" (Anderson 8). Mounir El Mehdi, a man deeply invested in the Rashidiya,

stressed a similar sentiment; “It’s very important to preserve it [ma’luf] *and* to develop it. What’s the problem with Rashidiya is the lack of creation. People come there to train; they get good training. People come there to learn the past; they learn the past. But then nobody is able to *create* in the Tunisian style. The function of Rashidiya is not to create and this is stupid.”

The Rashidiya’s role, as it was envisioned, was not only to train musicians to imitate and reproduce the old repertoire, but to encourage the production of new music in a similar vein. There is a sense from many that the Rashidiya should simply encourage appreciation of all truly expressive Tunisian musics. The idea that music must be an honest and heart-felt expression of emotion is common among all sophisticated Tunisian music enthusiasts, and the question every musician, fusion or otherwise, must ask of him or herself, is always: “Is my music moving?” The Rashidiya must, if not now, soon, make a greater effort to acknowledge musicians and music-lovers’ demands for freedom of new creation and the right to access the *ma’luf* as their own cultural heritage. If it truly seeks to be representative of the Tunisian people, the Rashidiya mustn’t close itself off by constructing artificial walls around the genre of *ma’luf* or ignore the reality that there are important and exciting musical scenes in Tunisia beyond the institution.

The history of “fusion” musics in twentieth and twenty-first century Tunisia is difficult to outline mainly because the term itself is rarely used colloquially beyond theoretical discourse. Adding to the confusion, when used, “fusion” connotes and refers to any number of styles, measures of musical quality, projects, instrumentations, missions, and ambitions. When used theoretically, the term is used in a most liberal, all-inclusive sense; there are dozens of Tunisian musicians who have considered their individual creative projects to be “fusion” at one point or another during their careers. Each Tunisian music enthusiast seems to have his or her own list of influential artists, and research becomes a challenge when a new cache of significant names is

presented at each interview. There is much research and documentation needed in this area to go beyond the basic groundwork of sketching out the web of musical, cultural, and historical connections between Tunisian fusions. The bricks laid by the musicians who first self-identified as innovators of “fusion” music set a strong foundation for the builders of new ideas. Contemporary “fusion” musicians rarely forget to acknowledge their founding fathers both verbally when discussing their own works and symbolically in their music.

According to Hatem Bourial, playwright, writer, and amateur Tunisian music historian, contemporary Tunisian fusion musics as we know them today got their start in the 1970s when several popular bands from overseas found their way to Tunisia, typically via French routes, and began to influence musicians. The fusions at this time were often politically charged and musicians focused on making explicit links with their own music to protest songs from abroad. One of the most influential bands to these early fusion musicians was “Quilapayún,” the legendary Chilean folkloric group known for their contribution to the “Nueva Canción” (literally “New Song”) movement during the Popular Unity Government of Salvador Allende. The ensemble was exiled to France during the September eleventh right-wing military coupe of 1973 and settled there for over a decade (Quilapayún). Also hugely influential to early Tunisian musical fusions were “Nass El Ghiwane,” a ‘60s Moroccan fusion band commonly referred to as “The Rolling Stones of Africa” who were known for mixing tunes and instruments from the local musical heritage with current politically and socially-charged subjects (Nass El Ghiwane). The third major sonic and social contributor to early Tunisian “fusion” styles was “Jil Jilala,” a Moroccan band of the ‘70s that rode on the coat tails of Nass El Ghiwane’s success and continued the movement of political song in Morocco (Jil Jilala).

By 1981 it was Anouar Brahem, now one of Tunisia's most beloved musicians, who was beginning to test the waters and make waves in Tunis, and soon, across the country. Brahem, Tunis-born *oud* (Arab plucked lute) player, got his start in the renowned Rashidiya music school studying *ma'luf*, but his music, which he began presenting in annual or bi-annual festivals, quickly took a distinctively personalized turn. During trips and longer stays in France, Brahem found inspiration in Jazz and various European musical paradigms. As is easily observed by a listen to his chronological discography, Brahem began to educate himself more and more about these foreign musics and found creative ways of melding them with his own Tunisian musical background. Brahem's new Tunisian-jazz jam sessions are the root of the "fusion" music concept, in the popular sense of the word, and today Tunisian fusion enthusiasts in their forties and fifties are more than likely to cite "jazz jam sessions" or "Tunisian-Jazz" as their personal understanding of "fusion" (Hatem Bourial).

Anouar Brahem's influence was felt by musicians in Tunis and across the country, and by the '90s, a veritable explosion of interest in exploring new mixtures of musical expression had created something of a subcultural movement. Some of the most significant projects include those of Mohamed Zinelabidine, Mourad Sakli, Lotfi Bushnaeq, and the collaborative projects of "Nouba" and "Hadhra" by Samir Agrebi, Fadhel Jaziri, Riadh Sghaïer, Mounir El Arqui, and others. The short list included here could include innumerable others depending on how one frames and defines "fusion," a matter I will address in the section to follow. Now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, "fusion" continues to expand. From saxophonist Riadh Sghaïer's interpretations of *ma'luf* songs on saxophone, to Brahim Bahloul's music played on recreations of ancient Berber instruments, Riadh Fehri's collaborative ventures including "Kantara" Arab-Appalachian music, to Dhafer Youssef's haunting *oud* melodies all the way

from Paris, and Nabil Khemir's music for "rayjam," a hybrid electric *oud*-guitar (see Photographic Appendix, Figure 2), "fusion" seems a thriving and diversifying route for musicians (Hatem Bourial).

This short account of the history of "fusion" music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is only a start in piecing together an understanding of what these musics and musicians have meant and continue to represent for Tunisians of various ages, regional backgrounds, economic levels, degrees of interest and involvement in music, and education level. The question "what does fusion mean?" simply does not have a single answer here in Tunisia. Of this I am sure, even having conducted only these first eleven interviews and from casual conversation with Tunisians about music.

So often, Tunisian's responses to this question reflect the interviewees (and by extension, Tunisians') understandings of music's most basic meaning, its links with history, society, culture, and globalization, and its relation to other art forms, the Arab world, and the West. In an eloquent statement about music and humanity, Miriam Touihri, a young *oud* player, simply defined "fusion" as,

"...just a mixture of musics from all over the world...it's the case of all the musics in the world. Fusion exists. There is not a music which is authentic or a music just for these people, th[ese] nation[s]. Every music has been influenced by other music because nations are mixed and every nation brings its music with them...The music is an evolution. It's not a static thing. It tells people about the history of this nation...I think fusion is the translation of [the] evolution of nations of people."

Present in this definition is a sophisticated understanding of music as an ever-fluid cultural medium, music as a marker and conveyer of cultural history and symbolic meaning, and an idea of sharing fusion as a presentation of identity and self.

Emina (who chose to be identified by first name only), a young violinist trained in both Western classical music and Tunisian *ma'luf*, has a similar understanding. She adds, "...of course, one kind of music can be influenced by another and that has been happening all the time since human beings have been near music ..." Mounir El Argui, playwright and stage director at the Maison de la Culture Ibn Khaldoun in Tunis, also sees a profound expression of humanity in the concept of fusion. He defined fusion in Tunisia simply as "a dialogue between east and west [that] basically becomes an expression of humanity."

Emina mentioned also though that, "when it comes to the modern use of this term [she] think[s that] what they (Tunisians) mean is not just one kind [of music] being influenced by the other, but [musicians] trying to merge some very different things." While both Emina and Touihri point to fusion as an on-going process that has characterized music for a long time now, Emina brings something new to the working definition, a sense that fusion is not just the evolution of a single music, but that "fusion" has come to mean the melding of two or more musics, originally seen as distinct, into a new whole. In the end, "you finally come up with something different which is neither this nor that" (Emina). As described by Riadh Fehri, *oud* player and founding member of fusion band "Kantara," fusion is "creat[ing] a new song in this world. A new family." For Fehri, fusion is, in essence, two people "speaking" through different kinds of music to develop a new, yet somehow familiar, language with which they experience music together. Fehri is consciously mixing musics.

Several other interviewees also pointed to this difference between musicians whose music is simply affected by their environment, an idea of acculturation that leads to the development of a specific musical milieu, and musicians who make an explicit decision to education themselves about two or more specific genres, or cultural musics, and meld them into a new creation. Riadh Sghaïer, fusion saxophonist and active collaborator in the “Nouba” and “Hadhra” projects of 1992, describes this difference as “the non-volunteer-ist approach” vs. the “more volunteer approach.” For Sghaïer, what identifies a real fusion musician, and resulting fusion music, is use of the “more volunteer approach,” the active seeking-out of explicit fusion with specific sources.

In a sense, “fusion” music is indefinable because it is essentially a blending that, by its very definition, does not fit a single given genre or identity of its own. There is no such thing as a “fusion” genre in Tunisia, besides perhaps some remaining connotations of early Tunisian jazz jam sessions as described previously. In Emina’s description of a local musical group in which a few of her peers have recently been playing, she simply states, “I can’t define it,” that they are “just making their own music which is somehow a mixture of different styles.” Laïla Toubel, writer, actor and director of productions at Theatre El Hamra in Tunis, is also unable to pin-down “fusion” citing its constant mutation and evolution as the main source of trouble. In reference to fusion-style shows that feature several musicians in collaborative events at her theater, she argues that, to her, “fusion” cannot fit any one definition because “[fusion is] like a puzzle. It’s something in process....It’s not a fixed expression. [It’s] just moving and it may change...What they’re playing is not classical. What they’re playing is not traditional. What they’re playing is not Arab music. But, it’s Arab words on European instruments and sometimes with European and American rhythms” (Toubel).

Some respondents give more specific definitions of “fusion,” though they often admitted that other Tunisians were more than likely to have their own personal understandings of the term. Jihed Mejrissi, composer, devout metal-head, and fusion enthusiast, agrees that “fusion” is evidence that music is a constantly evolving form of expression and recognizes that “We [Tunisians] are different because we have our music and we are at the same time homogeneous.” For Mejrissi, fusion music is an articulation of Tunisia’s simultaneous heterogeneity and homogeneity, Tunisia’s struggle to project what is uniquely Tunisian and its identity as a hybrid of the “local” and the “global.” More specifically though, Mejrissi says, “There are probably two kinds of fusion. Fusion into a main genre or type and fusion among or between genres. You can have fusion between metal and jazz and at the same time you can have fusion between some progressive metal and some, say, avant-garde metal.”

Other artists and musicians see “fusion” as uniting musics temporally. Mounir El Argui, playwright and stage director at the Maison de la Culture Ibn Khaldoun, reflected on his work with the famous, and relatively early fusion show, “Nouba” and “Hadhra,” remembering that they were really “pick[ing] up the traditional arts and...involv[ing them] in a new design just in over to create a new pattern in music, and that was somehow...creating a mixture or a melting pot or whatever you want to call it, because we took from the tradition and we expressed it so differently.” One of his more recent projects, a piece that focused on developing a stage production centered around and originating from 1930s recordings of *kamenche* (Arab bowed fiddle), is truly a fusion across time. By juxtaposing the old and the new, El Argui created a hybrid of his own imagining; “if [we] play a motif, people will listen to it and they wont even need to see what’s on the stage because the music already is enough by itself. So sometimes I would just add somebody wearing something from now-a-days but everybody would be

somehow in the thirties or forties because of the power of music.” In his fusion music for the ensemble “Ifriga,” Brahim Behloul bridges a temporal chasm by writing new music for re-imagined and reconstructed Tunisian instruments that were used before the influx of *al-musiqa al-andalusiyya*, instruments that are, for all intents and purposes, extinct beyond their use in Bahloul’s project.

When posed the question “what is fusion,” Nabil Basti, organizer of programs at the Adbellia and Festival International in Carthage, responded that according to his interpretation of the common understanding, “fusion” is “talk[ing] about the musical sentence itself. It’s classical, traditional, or mixed with other expressions and other backgrounds.” In his experience at the summer festival over the past few years, Basti has come to recognize two branches of fusion. These are, as he describes, people from the Northwest and the South [who are] are just readapting their traditional music to modern patterns...[and] another trend that consists of taking the traditional stuff and playing it with modern instruments.” The definition between the two types is therefore somewhat geographical suggesting, perhaps, different regional audiences. Overall though, Basti sees two audiences, not necessarily associated with the definition between the two styles; “One side is coming just because the songs are traditional and they know them and they just want to listen to the sounds. They don’t care about the instruments and the arrangements. Another sector in the audience, they just want to come to have fun.”

Having now approached a cumulative definition of the term “fusion” in Tunisia and touched briefly upon some of the key figures in the richly diverse history of hybrid music, elaboration in the form of the following two case studies aims to give a clearer picture of two individual expressions of “fusion” while also establishing reference points and contextualization commentary and critiques made by the eleven Tunisian interviewees.

Anouar Brahem is a household name in Tunisia. He is, quite arguably, the most adored popular Tunisian musician in Tunisia and with diasporic Tunisians around the world. Brahem enrolled at the National Institute of Music in Tunis at age ten where he studied Tunisian *oud* and Arab classical music with *oud* master, Ali Sriti. For four years, Brahem took daily lessons at Sriti's home immersing himself in Tunisian and Arab musical history. All the while though, he had an ear at the "global stereo;" he wanted not only to hear his own music projected beyond Tunisia, but couldn't help, and never was ashamed of, his fascination with the songs and sounds that made their way into his own sonic space. Increasingly interested in foreign musics, Brahem looked first to geographic and cultural neighbors: Mediterranean musics and old Iranian styles. Later, his curiosity led him to explore classical Hindustani Indian music as well (Driss 3). Finally, he found jazz and could not turn back. Once Anouar Brahem had jazz in his ear, his *oud* echoed these influences even in compositions that he considered to be more strictly "Tunisian" or "Arab" than fusions. His interest in jazz took him to Paris in 1981 but he was back in Tunisia by '85 ready to premier his new collaboration with Turkish and Tunisian musicians and French jazzmen. His performance in '85 earned Brahem Tunisia's Grand National Prize for Music. His musical collaborations and developing hybrid styles continued to appeal to growing audiences in Tunisia and abroad, and by the '90s he was well recognized across Tunisia, in Paris, and with cosmopolitan audiences everywhere (Driss 4). Since 1981 he has traveled back and forth between Europe and Tunisia and toured extensively.

For many Tunisians, the beauty and appeal of his music is located in its indefinable character; Brahem is simultaneously rooted in Tunisian (and Arab) musical tradition and extremely receptive to the paradigms and musical concepts of Jazz. The majority of the Tunisians I interviewed for this research hold Brahem's music in the very highest regard. Not

only were they enthusiastic about sharing their appreciation of his music, but many become visibly excited and expressive when they begin to talk about their personal relation to his music. While some had difficulty articulating exactly what it was about the music that made them love it, those who were fans of Brahem were quick to identify themselves. For many, Anouar Brahem's particular style has a unique and powerful ability to "wake up emotions," as Toubel described, and connect people on a visceral and sentimental level. Fusion musician, Riadh Sghaïer, is a big Brahem fan and said of his music, "It moves me...I enjoy his way of saying his music and doing it, and the simplicity of what he is doing too. It's basic; it's pure." Mejrissi, and others, liberally and enthusiastically pronounced Brahem to be a genius emphasizing chiefly that,

"Anouar Brahem is an innovator...[he] is a well-trained musician, and obviously knows how to...I don't know...there is something about him composing, writing music, that you can not describe. For example, if you write poetry or you write music, you feel there is a sort of flow that just tells you what to press and which keys should you touch and which instruments you [should] use and stuff like that..."

Mounir El Mehdi, a man profoundly invested in the Rashidiya and who also appreciates the concept of fusion, described Brahem's music as "deep" and deemed it "very successful" mainly because of Brahem's grounding in Arab classical music.

Both Tunisians and Brahem fans abroad often use words that border on the magical and supernatural to describe Brahem's music. Stéphane Olivier, whose comments are posted on Brahem's official website, describes Brahem as "the *Oud*'s conjurer, a master at bringing out the acoustic magic this age-old traditional Oriental lute carries in its calabash, all the musical heritage of the Arab and Islamic worlds" (Olivier 1). Admittedly, there is something soulful and

“human” about the timber of the *oud*, and when Anouar Brahem plays solo improvisatory sections, it can be near impossible sometimes to discern whether he is simply playing oud or singing along, which he does on occasion (refer to Musical Appendix, Track 1). I myself was caught off guard by this phenomenon when attending Anouar Brahem’s most recent concert at the Jazz à Carthage Festival in April of 2009 (see Photographic Appendix, Figure 4). The audience was intently glued to the stage as Brahem’s brand new quartet, Klaus Gesing on base clarinet, Björn Meyer on electric base guitar, Khaled Yassine on percussion, and Brahem on *oud*, took control of the sold-out show, a premier of new repertoire and the quartet itself. In keeping with Brahem’s tradition, and making a statement about his identity as a Tunisian musician, the group traveled to Tunisia, to Carthage, to hold their first show before beginning an extensive tour to Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Sofia, Budapest, Vienna, and Zurich (Jazz à Carthage by Tunisiana). Perhaps it is the connection of the oud to the human voice that has a hand in creating such an almost spiritual experience for Brahem’s audiences. Dozens of immortally famous Arab singers, from Uum Kalthoum to Tunisian artists like Fethia Khairi, Mohamed Jamoussi, Oulaya, and Hedi Jouini, are known for accompanying themselves on *oud* or playing solo *oud* as well.

When first beginning my research, I was taken a-back by the exotification and spiritualistic vocabulary used to describe Anouar Brahem’s music in internet biographies and in the program notes for the Anouar Brahem Quartet’s performance in Carthage in 2009. I had been expecting some exotification as soon as I hear Brahem called a “world musician.” Most successful “mainstream” musicians, as many of my interviewees described Brahem, who produce numerous albums under labels like ECM, have sizable audiences abroad in Europe and the United States, and who have come to market themselves as “world musicians,” are bound to be exoticize in this way. There is undeniably something brilliant to be celebrated in the minds of

creative musicians, but to say that Anouar Brahem, the “magician of the *oud*,” is “creat[ing] a completely original universe” and that “Admirers of Anouar Brahem in Tunisia, like elsewhere, [are] hypnotized by the tender instance of his musical climates and the un-imitatable ability that he has...to invent new relationships with other musical forms,” seems over-the-top (Jazz à Carthage by Tunisiana). The man is simply composing new music by drawing from his own musical experiences and research both in Tunisia and abroad. Stéphane Olivier, likely a Frenchman, but above all, a cosmopolitan, continued his description of Brahem as “the *oud*’s conjurer,” by saying that Brahem is a “culture smuggler ever inclined to adventure beyond his own limits, pushing back musical frontiers without ceding an inch of the aesthetical standards forged across time and tempered in a profound respect for tradition” (Olivier 1). Not only am I surprised by how Olivier manages to use “culture smuggler” as a positive description, I am confused by how Anouar Brahem could possibly be described this way. Olivier’s comments, centralized on Brahem’s homepage, seem to come from a strictly external perspective. It is much easier to call someone a musical thief or a thief of culture when one is sitting on the periphery looking inward and passing judgments. Many Tunisians composers and musicians, as far as I have come to understand, understand music to be an important and personal cultural entity, but, at the same time, as Mejrissi put it, “Whichever riff you like, this is your root. This is your music. It is free for you and if you like it, [you] just listen to it.”

Brahem, who now identifies as a “world musician,” seems somewhat preoccupied with constructing and authenticating his image as “Tunisian” for audiences both internally and abroad. By titling albums like, “Le voyage de Sahara” (“the voyage of the Sahara”), Brahem is, in a way, self-exotifying, even self-essentializing, associating everything that is “Tunisian,” with the Sahara though he himself, a city boy born and raised in Tunis, knows that Tunisia is much

more (see Photographic Appendix, Figure 3). Associating himself with the desert seems an awkward authentication as the music he pays tribute to on “Le voyage de Sahara,” *ma'luf* in the titles of “Nouba” and “Halfaouine,” and Arab-Andalusian Spain in “Cortoba,” have nothing whatsoever to do with the desert of southern Tunisia where Berber influences dominate (refer to Musical Appendix, Track 2, 3, and 4).

The question of Anouar Brahem’s identity as a musician and the identity of his music are wonderfully illustrative of how fusion music and music in general are conceptualized in Tunisia. When posed the questions “Who is Anouar Brahem and how would you describe his music? Is he a Tunisian playing Tunisian music or something else?” I received various responses, none of which simply labeled Brahem as a Tunisian creating Tunisian music or a foreign musician composing Jazz. These responses articulate and define the space in which fusion musicians and their musics exist, a liminal area between Tunisian and “global,” “international,” “western,” or “European.” While most respondents recognize Anouar Brahem as a Tunisian musician, Riadh Fehri, fusion musician and contributor to project “Kantara,” laughing at the suggestion that Brahem was a jazzman. He clarified, “Anouar Brahem is not jazz music. It is world music. Anouar Brahem is my friend, my very [good] friend. [His music] is not jazz music.”

Riadh Sghaïer, a Tunisian fusion saxophonist currently playing new expressions of familiar Tunisian tunes, agrees that Brahem is doing something very special and that he can not strictly be defined as a classical Tunisian *oud* player or as a jazz artist. For Sghaïer, Anouar Brahem’s music belongs to the world. Those of a younger generation of musicians whom I interviewed seem to agree with Sghaïer; Mejrissi first described Brahem as “a root-less Tunisian musician who is playing, who is yearning to join Tunisia, with his *oud*, to his Parisian atmospheres” but later tempered his statement, “well, root-less is a pretty brutal word...I guess

all I care for is that he is a musician. But sometimes you feel from the titles and stuff that he wants to go to wonderland, to his own wonderland which is wonder-Tunisia probably.” Touihri, who is about the same age said, “he [Brahem] is a Tunisian playing world music. He wants to be known all over the world and maybe he doesn’t like traditional ways of music.”

Brahem’s fusion is a particularly interesting one to investigate simply because the genre of jazz is typically an inclusionary one. Jazz has been, and will continue to be, a music composed of many diverse styles, schools, and disciplines. Jazz is, perhaps by its nature, a “catchall” genre that has morphed almost un-recognizably in its many interpretations both temporally and geographically since its inception in Afro-America culture. Why is it then that Tunisians, and Brahem himself, refuse to define Brahem’s music as jazz? From my research thus far, I believe it is Brahem’s personal musical education and deep study of Arab and Tunisian classical music that places him in this liminal space, his own “Tunisian wonderland,” as Mejrissi described it, between jazz and strictly Tunisian music. Perhaps his music is not considered “jazz” because the Tunisian people, or at least a certain audience, have “taken back” Brahem, welcomed him back into the fold despite the fact that he is abroad much of the year and not even truly a resident Tunisian. They have chosen to hold him up as a national icon. Mounir El Argui, who first chose to define Anouar Brahem as simply “an artist,” argues that “he has his masters here [so] basically he belongs to here (Tunisia).”

The matter of identifying specific audiences for Anouar Brahem’s music has much to do with whether he can be tagged as truly iconic of Tunisia and Tunisian music. While the idea of “fusion” is a concept embraced by many, or perhaps most Tunisians, there are certain audiences, particularly those of young working and middle class Tunisians, who do not feel connected to the inter-state appeal of Anouar Brahem’s music or to the consumerism that has characterized the

production of his albums and the fanfare of his grand shows in Tunisia. Toubel, a great appreciator of Brahem's music, offered a personal observation, that "now, something is happening in these late years [with] Anouar Brahem...it is kind of implying a snobbish effect. Now we just go because it's something like an international icon, but on the other hand we don't really care about the music and you don't really listen to the music because it's more a social event." While there may in fact be a "snob appeal" to Brahem's music, this accusation was a touchy subject for many of my interviewees and led several of them into heated defenses of Brahem's music as honest and meaningful and defenses of his audiences as devoted to the music itself. Mejrissi dismissed the idea of "snob appeal" in general saying, "really, if you want to show off, you can go to any disco club. I doubt that the people you want to show off to really care if you go to Anouar Brahem." When asked if appreciation of Brahem's music had anything to do with projection or display of "high class" in Tunisia, Touihri commented that this labeling of "high class" and "low class" music has everything to do with an artificial dichotomy between "sophisticated" and "popular" music. For Touihri, in essence, Brahem has recently acquired snob appeal primarily because his music is related to jazz, which is seen as a sophisticated and "lofty" music in Tunisia. Secondly, the development of the "snob factor" is due to the labeling of other musics as "popular." The division that results in "low" and "high" music in Tunisia, she argues, is made by the ticket cost. Therefore, "this music (Anouar Brahem) belongs to [those] who can pay, and it's a pity" (Touihri). In this way, Anouar Brahem's music cannot be representative of the Tunisian people as a whole. Despite the fact that Brahem's music is now easily accessible and downloadable via the Internet—there are no music copy write laws in Tunisia to speak of, a topic for another project all together—and ripped and pirated CDs typically cost less than a dinar (currently about 71 cents) at local corner music shops, lower and middle-class Tunisians still

have little interest in engaging with Anouar Brahem's music. She remarks that, "They know this music is for high class [Tunisians] and they don't buy [these] CD[s] even when it is one dinar [because they know they] can not see this man...so there are people Anouar Brahem is not representing" (Touihri). Indeed, why would anyone wish to associate or identify with a music that has been presented to them, by a Tunisian nonetheless, as of them but not of them, Tunisian but somehow inter-state, classy, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan in a way that they feel they could never achieve.

Jazz is extremely popular in Tunisia, particularly in urban regions like the Tunis metropolis. It appeals mainly to audiences in their forties and fifties as well as, more recently, Tunisian youth. Mounir Hentati, Assistant Director for the Center for Arab and Mediterranean music based in Sidi Bou Said, described for me a program for young people, supported by his organization, that connects Tunisians with Jazz musicians in the French-speaking community in Belgium. This program offers an exchange and provides master classes put on by Belgian jazzmen (and women presumably) in Tunisia and opportunities for Tunisian jazz artists to travel and play abroad. Hentati asserted that "we [the Center for Arab and Mediterranean Music] believe that jazz has its place in this country and that there are links between 'our music,' broadly speaking, in terms of improvisation and all that, so people like jazz here and I believe jazz is quite open to all expressions." Interestingly enough though, Hentati stated quite firmly only a few minutes later in the interview, "I don't believe in fusions." He continued,

"I believe that musicians can meet and can dialogue, but mish mashing...I don't believe that much and I don't think that we, here, at least at the center, we have welcomed any... type[s] of music that is called 'fusion' today. I don't think it's welcome here. We believe that we are open to all expressions, provided that they

are authentic. We believe that dialogue is possible between musicians, that there are channels and possibilities, [but fusion], I don't know if it is really a good idea and the experiences so far conducted, I do *not* believe that they are really to be counted on."

His feelings about fusion seem more than a bit hypocritical given the goals of his institution as he sees them.

...Anouar Brahem is a Tunisian musician that decided to perform within, more or less, a framework or format which reminds us of jazz, but if you listen to his music, I don't know if you have listened, you know, to all his CDs from the beginning up to now, he is still the Oriental, the Arab, the Tunisian musician."

Despite Hentati's attempt to assert that fusion does not exist, his very definition of Brahem as both a definitively Tunisian-sounding musician and as someone successfully playing within the frame of Jazz suggests otherwise.

While attending Brahem's concert in Gamarth in the spring of 2009 I was struck by the realization that there are, in fact, a number of musical and extra-musical connections between the genres of jazz and classical Arab or Tunisian music. Watching the quartet pass the tune from musician to musician and taking turns leading and laying down new riffs reminded me of both solo *Taqsim*, the virtuosic improvisatory sections that I'd marveled at during the Rashidiya concert, and improvisatory jazz sessions I had participated in and watched in the United States. This core concept of improvisation is, musically, the main intersection and "jumping-off" point for Anouar Brahem's personal style of fusion and is partly responsible, I feel, for his the success of his musical amalgamation. Also similar between the two musics is the importance of audience reaction and involvement, which is critical to creating the appropriate atmosphere for Arab

classical musics and most subgenres of jazz. Encouragement, in the form of exclamations and clapping from the audience during or after particularly creative lines of *Taqsim* or brilliant solos during a jazz session are part and parcel of what these musics mean to the performers and audiences.

As obvious as they may seem to me, these intersections I've just described are constructed connections according to some. Ahmed Achour, the director of L'Orchestre Symphonique Tunisien, the premier ensemble performing both Western classical music and new Tunisian compositions for symphonic orchestra, had some strong words to say about Anouar Brahem's work. Just after attending a performance of selections from Mozart's "The Magic Flute" and a Haydn Cello Concerto featuring a student from the Institute of Music in Tunis, I made my way back stage to ask a few quick questions of Achour. I suspected he might not be the most positive supporter of Tunisian fusion music, but I hadn't imagined he would tell me, with a look of disgust on his face, that "jazz and Arab music have nothing in common" and that "they should not ever mix." Exasperated at the very idea of fusion, he argued quite bluntly that, "there is no natural way to successfully combine Arab music and jazz because they share nothing at all." He likened fusion musics, the concept of musics mixed together, to a crowd of people speaking several different languages simultaneously, no one comprehending any other. Furthermore, to Achour, Brahem's music is a fad, a fashion that will soon become passé. It was remarkable to hear all of this from a man who has composed and arranged a great many works inspired by Arab music for his Western symphonic orchestra. By my own definition, Achour is, himself, a creator of hybrid music though he does not recognize this definition.

We turn now to the second case study, the music of "Kantara." Kantara, the Arab Appalachian band now internationally celebrated, was conceived in 2005 in Nora Dempsey's

living room. Dempsey, who works at the American State Department in Tunis, is exceptionally proud of her role in introducing and bringing together Riadh Fehri, an already well-established classical Tunisian and fusion-style oud player, and Brennan Gilmore, American multi-instrumentalist bluegrass musician. In the buzzing Fehri Riadh Conservatoire de Musique tucked away in Sidi Bou Said, I happened upon Dempsey who was picking up her daughter from a violin lesson. She expressed her excitement that I was researching fusion music in Tunisia and eagerly described Kantara's inception,

“I love music and I got to know Brennan. I [already] knew Riadh [to be] the most talented person I ha[d] ever met in Tunisia. He's a naturally creative person and Brennan is also a brilliant mind and so I thought, God, these guys have to meet...we were just going to practice to do the national anthem for the embassy for the 4th of July and then none of us could believe how good the Appalachian music sounded with traditional Tunisian music” (Dempsey).

Brennan and Riadh were also struck by how “eerily” the two musics seemed to mesh. Dempsey described Kantara's beginnings as, “so interesting because it was born of the human spirit,” a new creation that seemed to spring so naturally from the meeting of the two musicians who soon became fast friends.

Fehri and Gilmore each invited musical friends to join in the project. From previous collaboration in “Walker's Run,” Gilmore invited Zach Blitter (upright base), Brian Calhoun (guitar), and Ann-Marie Calhoun, fantastically talented and award-winning American fiddler who has played and toured extensively with Walker's Run, Jethro Tull, and the Dave Mathews Band. Fehri welcomed musical friends to the ensemble as well: Lassaâd Hosni, *darbuka* master

and perhaps the most well known percussionist in the country, and vocalist and manager of the group, Amel Boukhchina (Kantara 1).

There is something wonderfully warm about Kantara's missions. The people I have spoken to thus far who are involved in the project are extremely enthusiastically about the band's role in their own lives and in the audiences they have touched. Though it started small, the group has toured quite a bit now across Tunisia and the United States (including a performance at the Kennedy Center) and at several venues in Italy, France, and Morocco. Kantara will release a full-length self-titled album in fall of 2009 and are continuing to grow and explore new musical possibilities.

The music itself is quite a creative mixture. Besides playing innovative renditions of American classics like "Shady Grove" and "Wayfaring Stranger" (refer to Musical Appendix, Track 5 and 6) with *oud*, *darbuka*, and lyrics in Arabic, Kantara has written new pieces as well which seem to truly borrow equally from both musical heritages. During an interview in the green-shaded garden of his music conservatory where I studied *ma'luf* violin for four months, Riadh Fehri described Kantara to me as a "sharing," an equal "fifty-fifty." Indeed, Mounir El Argui, the artist who has previously used music as the backdrop or "carpet" for various theatrical shows, spoke of a similar concept, emphasizing that fusions must be truly equal exchanges. In El Argui's opinion, when one music dominates another, for instance, as Western music has come to dominate many musics around the world, ethical fusions are not possible. In good fusion, the two musical cultures must be presented as equals.

Fehri asserted, in essence, that there is very little difference between American and Tunisian cultures and American and Tunisian musics, suggesting that when you listen to one music independently you can almost hear the other in the back of your head. He described the

Kantara project and fusion music in general as “communication music,” music that is a “big bridge” between continents, between peoples, and between people (Fehri).

Kantara’s identity is inalienably connected to its mission to encourage meaningful cultural understanding and exchange. Kantara wishes to present itself as a symbolic expression of how beautiful and peaceful an Arab-American relationship can be. The members of the band see linkages between Tunisian classical music (or Arab music) and American bluegrass and old time as both musical and historical. Citing common histories of displacement and immigration, Kantara describes the two cultural histories of Tunisian and Appalachian music as, “lead[ing] to a third path, not yet walked [or perhaps not walked previously], where the melodies of the Scots-Irish seeking a new life in the Americas meet the musical tradition of Iberian Muslims expelled during the reconquista of Spain and Portugal” (Kantara 1). From the periphery, this historical link seems somewhat forced, but it is a meaningful connection for the ensemble itself so it is not to be overlooked.

Musically, Riadh Fehri describes the relation of Arab music to Appalachian music as the intersection of two planes; if American music is a vertical plane and Arabic is a horizontal one, Kantara is the “unifying point” where the two meet, the musical common ground. For Fehri, common rhythmic patterns, similar modes, and shared instruments like the violin and mandolin compose the musical framework and allow for the successful creation of Kantara’s hybrid Arab-Appalachian music. He commented specifically that Lassaâd Hosni’s contribution on darbuka sometimes makes him think, “My God, country music was created to be played with *darbuka*” (Fehri). As bizarre as it may sound at first, there is something comfortable and natural sounding in the incorporation of percussion in songs like “Just one Moment” where the drum mirrors the rhythmic strumming of the Gilmore’s guitar or the familiarly Scots-Irish feel in “Blue Ridge

Mountain Home/Tamalyn” where the *darbuka*, or perhaps *bendir*, could easily be mistaken for a *bodhrán*, an Irish frame drum (refer to Musical Appendix, Track 7 and 8).

The motivation for the Kantara project became clear after just a few moments speaking with Fehri; “All day in [the] news, on TV, my children, Arabic children, and American children see many wars and many problem in this world. I think this little project, this vision, is a big project for change. I want to change this vision in this world into positivity.” Fehri defends the importance of his musical fusion over other forms of exchange and education because, as he sees it, “in this moment, [there] is not very good communication [between the] two people (Americans and Arabs). [There is some between] American people [and] Arabic people but this communication is commercial, of politic[s] ...[there] is no social communication, [there] is no love, there is no communication for [the] sentimental [things].” It is music, and specifically fusion music, he feels, that has the unique power to create bridges between peoples who have constructed and are fixated upon the socio-cultural, political, and religious differences between themselves and others. Fusion music has the power to reveal underlying commonalities, as superficial as they may seem in musical rhythms and modes, and ultimately bring people to see more clearly that it is our humanity that connects us all. Politics fall the wayside, if only for the duration of a song or a concert, and allow music to demonstrate a cultural understanding that could, in the hopes of Kantara and many others, one day become a way of life.

As Touihri put it, “the word is linked together, not only in music, [but in] everything else. We haven’t an authentic thing for one nation that the other hasn’t. We share. We share the knowledge.” It comes as no surprise that Brennan Gilmore, guitarist, mandolinist, and vocalist for Kantara, was awarded the prestigious American Secretary of State’s Award for Public Outreach in the fall of 2006 for “ground-breaking efforts to engage non-traditional audiences and

promote Arab-American cultural understanding through music” (Kantara 1). Though one can only guess at what the Secretary of State meant to imply by “non-traditional audiences,” Brennan and Kantara’s vision of education towards cultural understanding was duly recognized.

The Fehri Riadh Conservatoire de Musique in Sidi Bou Said is steeped in these same sentiments; it is a place where students of all backgrounds, many of whom are children of American or French expatriates residing in the Tunis area, can engage with music. The school offers both Western classical music lessons as well as Tunisian *ma’luf* for violin, *oud*, and percussion. One Saturday morning, as I was heading out of my violin lesson, Riadh Fehri, of whom I knew very little at this time, invited me to join a motley crew of Tunisian, American, and French children in the foyer of the conservatory who were setting up rows of white lawn chairs and music stands for an orchestra rehearsal. I gladly stayed; it had been far too long since I had played anything besides Bach preludes and new *nubat* for my *ma’luf* lessons in the solitude of my room. Imagine my surprise when Fehri handed out an arrangement of “Angeline the Baker,” a classic Appalachian tune, and one of my personal favorites since childhood, to the orchestra of eager children. A single base player joined the two sections of violins and a *darbuka* teacher who had been just passing through added himself to the mix as well. “Ear-bending” is the only way to effectively describe this first experience of mine with Arab-Appalachian music, but I was hooked by it. Fehri nodded at me from across the room, gesturing for me to play through “Angeline the Baker” once as a solo to get the orchestra going; then we were off.

The question of the role of Tunisian fusion music within the country and beyond its borders was one that the group of interviewees seemed to struggle with. Musical fusions and collaborations with goals as explicit as Kantara’s are rare, and for most fusion musicians and groups, any aims for their music beyond “art for art’s sake” are far more subconscious, implicit,

or are suggested merely by their fan-base. Touihri thinks that music is perhaps one of the best ways for Tunisians to tell their story to the world. She hopes that perhaps the conservatism and pessimism that characterized the older generation's reaction to change is letting up. Nursing her cappuccino in a loud café in downtown Tunis, she spoke passionately about Tunisia's relation to the world,

“[the old] population which assumes the wars and assume[s] everything, [they] have to fear...the older generations, they [are] afraid [of] the foreign countries. They say ‘they just colonize us, they make war, they don’t allow us to go wherever we want,’ and they are afraid of music...Now youngsters are just wanting to show people, ‘I am not so terroristic. I have a civilization and a great one,’ and if I just stick in my place and say ‘they don’t like us’ nothing will change” (Touihri).

Touihri continued to describe the possible roles for fusion citing, among others, fusion music as a way to promote tourism; “When a musician performs in another country, maybe he will bring tourists to Tunisia.” Emina, a peer of Touihri's, does not necessarily see these possibilities as the main goals for fusion music. Though she suggests that fusion may be an effective way of introducing Tunisian music to those abroad who have never heard it before, her understanding of music is more focused on the art as a creative venture that should, perhaps, be kept away from politics. She explains, “when you're making music you shouldn't really be concerned [with]...you just have to feel the music and do whatever expresses your feelings and your way of being, so you're not to make music and think ‘so this is going to help do that sort of thing’ (have an explicit purpose beyond an artistic one)” (Emina). Mejrissi, a young musician as well, seems

to agree more with Tourihi's position and points out that in his own field, oriental metal, "It (fusion music) has already done it; it has already brought people together."

While the Tunisians I spoke with do not all necessarily see fusion's role as a positive one in presenting Tunisia to the world, making connections, and bridging gaps, fusion musicians are, at least to some degree, working to deconstruct the dichotomies between "local" and "foreign" in an age of rapid globalization where the radio, TV, and Tunisian soundscape have been flooded with music from Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. Through fusion musics, the idea of the "traditional" is further confused; who but the musician and his audience can define whether Riadh Sghaïer renditions of *ma'luf* played on saxophone and accompanied by electric guitar, *darbuka*, and accordion are "traditional" or "modern?"

Fusion musics, especially new and sometimes seemingly bizarre concoctions, are skeptically received in Tunisia. This skepticism is more than reasonable as so many contemporary bands are taking the easy routes, simply audio sampling, throwing together rhythms and tunes into entirely artificial and superficial mixtures that some audiences find pleasing to the ear. In general, Tunisians have such strong national attachment to the *ma'luf* and other classically Tunisian musics, that it is to be expected that they "love to protect the music," and that "even one person [trying] to arrange something [would] always [be] criticized in newspapers. It (fusion) is not accepted easily" (Touihri). There is a set of characteristics that most every Tunisian who is interested in fusion seems to identify as critical for the musical success of a Tunisian fusion artist. Several, though by no means all, touted Anouar Brahem as the model embodiment of these principles.

Firstly, and most importantly, the musicians must be deeply rooted and educated in his or her own genre or musical background. Secondly, and many count this point as equally

important to the previous, the musician must be well versed in the music(s) he or she hopes to blend with his own. The fusion musician needs to be more than simply well trained in each specific music; he must be a master of each to be fully aware of subtle musical nuances. Most of those interviewed agreed that the development of the fusion must be organic and natural. It must, as Emina articulated, “come from inside and not just [be someone] try[ing] to come up with something just to come up with something different.” The musician must be innovative, creative, and push the limits of what the audience expects, but he mustn’t simply put things together in the hopes that they will jive. As so many of the interviewees described, the Tunisian fusion musician must be guided by an inner understanding of where musics intersect. It is on this common ground that he can begin to phrase his own “musical sentence.”

A deep understanding of classical Arab music theory and practice is particularly essential as tonal specificities, like the Tunisian brand of the Arab quartertone, make some combinations, like *oud* and piano (attempted by Anouar Brahem) or *oud* and mandolin (used on a regular basis by Kantara), extremely challenging. Important also to everyone I spoke with is the requirement that the music produced by fusion be moving to its audiences. The music must bring people to the edge of their chair, if not to their feet; as with all music in Tunisia, fusions must have a poignant song.

Tunisian Fusion musicians, however skeptically received, do have an eager audience within the country. A range of responses were returned to the question of whether Tunisia’s acceptance of fusion, in principle and practice, relates to Tunisia’s history of hybridity, liberalism, and openness to religious and social freedoms. Many did not feel that they could respond to this question effectively, as they had no other contexts to compare with Tunisia’s. Others cited the diversity of audiences, young and old, high class and low class, and other factors

as too specific to allow for generalization about Tunisia or Tunisians. Touihri argued that compared to the success of *rai* music in Algeria, which combines French and Arabic lyrics, Tunisian's reactions to fusion are generally more conservative.

Overall though, many of those whom I interviewed agreed that Tunisia's history of openness has at least something to do with the development and general popularity of fusion musics in Tunisia. When first approached with this question, Mejrissi stated simply that "It has nothing to do with being Tunisian," but that perhaps, being "born and raised in a place that is open minded" may encourage one "at a certain point [to] began to look for music." He continued, "It's probably something you acquire rather at a certain point in your life. You are either open minded, you listen, you accept new genres of music, or you stay in the same little circle that you'd prefer to not get out of" (Mejrissi). The audiences for fusion in Tunisia certainly are open-minded, a trait that may have more to do, as Mejrissi argues, with family upbringing and individual personality than greater social history and cultural context. Mounir Hentati, associate director of the Center for Arab and Mediterranean Music in Sidi Bou Said, took the other point, saying in reference to open-minded Tunisians interested in fusion, that,

"We (Tunisians) are bound to do that (create and accept fusion). I mean, if you look at our music, you will see the many influences. Tunisian music is just kind of a melting pot and Tunisia has always been this crossroads and melting pot of many civilizations ..."

Tunisians, however much they may sometimes catch themselves in the head-lock of a fight to preserve what they deem "authentic" Tunisian music, cannot escape the hybridity and liberalism that has woven its way, over centuries and millennia, into their understanding of what is Tunisian and what is music. While most Tunisians are unaware that their cultural history is

reflected in their current musical, fusion musicians seem more conscious of their hybridity because it is more explicitly part of their formation and presentation of self. Fusion musicians have the ability, because their expression of identity is so patently hybrid, to make opaque the transparency of fusion and hybridity in Tunisia, to make explicit what is otherwise almost entirely implicit. A clear presentation of Tunisian hybridity through fusion music may be jarring to an audience whose ears are unprepared, but on some level, whether implicitly or perhaps more explicitly in the future, Tunisians will always, as Mejrissi phrased it, “keep [their] identity though this identity is very absurd and hybrid.”

Preservation of Tunisian music is not only on the minds of the Rashidiya; other institutions like the Center for Arab and Mediterranean Music, founded in 1991 by a presidential mandate straight from the desk of Abidine Ben Ali, operates under the Ministry of Culture and Heritage Conservation. The Center’s missions are to preserve and promote “traditional” Tunisian music. Mounir Hentati, Assistant Director at the center, stressed that the institution is “dedicated to music in all its aspects” and that “it is not a good idea just to preserve,” that “mummification is not [their] aim.” The Center has many roles, as Hentati described, not only “fighting against a loss of memory” through support of audio field collection, but also actively promoting contemporary musical creation through festivals, workshops, and master classes. Hentati was hesitant to put forth an answer to one follow-up question, whether fusion-style musics might be a vehicle for conservation of Tunisian music through a modern expression.

Responding similarly to this question of preservation, Emina chose simply to answer, “probably not.” Mejrissi, a musician and student of Emina’s same generation, first stated, “You do not make music in the goal to preserve all music. You make music because...when you listen to this music you feel that something inside you...that this is something good that is

harmonious.” However, later, when talking about his own compositions, he identified his use of Arab and Tunisian musical instrument samples as a gesture towards his own past, as a way of “taking [his] music to another dimension.” He added as well that as a young person, if he were to “listen to an old piece of *ma’luf* in Tunisia, or *oud*, [he would] not enjoy it as much as [if he were] listening to the same portion with guitar or with *oud* and a guitar playing” (Mejrissi).

Several of the interviewees I spoke with from various institutions, Laïla Toubel at the Theatre el Hamra, Mounir El Argui and Nabil Basti at the Maison de la Culture Ibn Khaldoun, and the three fusion musicians, Riadh Fehri, Riadh Sghaïer, and Brahim Bahloul, would agree with Sghaïer’s statement that, “The best way to get it (music) to the people is to phrase it [in] the way they can hear...to work on the musical sentence that we have and then to use fusion in instruments, in rhythms, and also in the way we create the music itself. Doing fusion is just about speaking another language with the basic same music.”

Whether individual musicians and audiences recognize fusion as “preservation” or “conservation” of older culturally Tunisian musics appears to be mainly a matter of opinion and definition of terms. Fusion is not a way of protecting *ma’luf* and other Tunisian musics from change and evolution; it is not a mummifying agent, but if nothing, not even the Rahidiya’s conservative watchful eye, can fix and contain a music in time and space, perhaps fusion is a living and temporally relevant way of maintaining Tunisian musical tradition. It is a way, as Nabil Basti put it, of “listen[ing] to the “authentic” music, but not played in an “authentic” way.” Fusion music is tradition presented in a way that speaks to the global stereo, to modernity, and to a Tunisia that is no stranger to globalization.

The discourses of “globalism” and “globalization,” are hot topic in current anthropological and ethnomusicological discussion and research, and are fraught with challenges

especially in describing and theorizing connections between groups of people. Undeniably, it has become increasingly difficult to trace and chart-out the peripheries of so-called “cultures” and to define the borders between groups of people. Well-established ethnomusicologist, Thomas Turino, suggests a new pattern for describing cultural networks in his paper, “Are We Global Yet? Globalist Discourse, Cultural Formations and the Study of Zimbabwean Popular Music,” published in 2003. His concept of the “cultural formation,” a social unit composed of people with shared habits relating to most realms of life, is extremely helpful in talking about audiences for particular musics. The cultural formations that Turino terms “trans-state cultural formations,” including “immigrant communities,” “diasporic formations,” and “cosmopolitan formations,” are relevant to a discussion of Tunisian hybrid musics (Turino 9). Most important here are the structures of diasporic and cosmopolitan formations.

Intended and actual audiences for Tunisian fusion music abroad fall into either, and sometimes both, of these two groups. Musicians like Anouar Brahem and Dhafer Youssef particularly, who have either moved or lived abroad for extended periods of time, immediately align themselves as personally diasporic and therefore at least somewhat representative of the diasporic Tunisian population in France, other European countries, and the United States. Research about diasporic Tunisians and fusion music is difficult to conduct from Tunisia, but would be an excellent topic for continuation of this project in the future.

Cosmopolitans, “defined by constellations of ethics, aesthetics, technologies, objects, and social style—habits and sources for living,” “exist across multiple sites in a number of states, and...may represent a small minority within a given country” (Turino 13). Unlike diasporic formations, cosmopolitan formations are characterized by an “absence of an original homeland as a key symbol.” Turino further explains, “ideas, practices, and technologies of a given

cosmopolitan formation travel through communication loops independently binding people culturally who are not, otherwise, related by location or heritage” (Turino 13). As soon as one steps into the discourse of “cultural hybridity” or “fusion music,” one simultaneously encountered a discourse of cosmopolitanism, a group rooted in an experience of rootlessness. When Tunisian fusion musicians speak of a desire to connect with musics and audiences beyond the borders of Tunisia, beyond what is considered “traditional” music in Tunisia, they are speaking as cosmopolitans in Turino’s sense of the term. They are simultaneously grounded in both a local identity as Tunisian and in the cultural commonalities that they share with other people, cosmopolitans, around the world.

Interviews with fusion musicians are brimming with references to this inter-state phenomenon, whether one looks at Kantara’s mission to connect musicians from Tunisia with those in the United states to promote peaceful relations or Mejrissi’s assertion, “whichever riff you like, this is your root.” Musicians that define their music as “international,” “global” or “world music” automatically locate themselves as part of this cosmopolitan community of hybrid or fusion musics which are, and have been, created in numerous locations around the world. The concepts of “modernizing,” “internationalizing,” or “globalizing” Tunisian music to be seemingly more “relevant” or meaningful to Tunisians in the twenty-first century is a concept that belongs to a cosmopolitan mentality as well. President Abidine Ben Ali’s support of fusion musics, through his involvement in institutions like the Center for Arab and Mediterranean Music that encourage both preservation of Tunisian music and creation of new music, identifies him as a cosmopolitan and makes a statement about how he wishes to present Tunisian musical culture within the state and to the world. In one such cosmopolitan gesture, Ben Ali extended an

award of gratitude to fusion musician, Nabil Khemir, the creator of the “rayjam,” an *oud*-guitar fusion instrument.

The discourse of Tunisian “fusion” musics is a relatively recent one developing first in the 1970s in response to influences of internationally recognized political songs like those of Quilapayún. In practice however, musical evolution and hybridization of musics has been part and parcel of the understanding of “music” in Tunisia at least since, if not before, Arab-Andalusian immigration brought *ma'luf* to Tunisian shores in the tenth century. Fusion musicians in Tunisia are musically breaking down, both explicitly and implicitly, socially constructed dichotomies between “traditional” and “modern,” “local” and “foreign,” and “old” and “new” as liminal jugglers of their Tunisian and cosmopolitan identities. An “anxiety of authenticity” continues to perpetuate tensions between some musical audiences in Tunisia. Despite, or perhaps because of this anxiety, Tunisian fusion musicians, through ingenuity, insight, and collaboration, have embraced the rare opportunity to take part in Tunisians’ construction and acceptance of a hybrid identity, one simultaneously rooted in a localized cultural history and fully aware of Tunisia’s active participation in the “global stereo.”

Photographic Appendix



Figure 1. Contrasting columns at the Great mosque in Kairouan

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 2. Nabil Khemir playing the “rayjam,” a hybrid electric oud-guitar (Jackson 1)

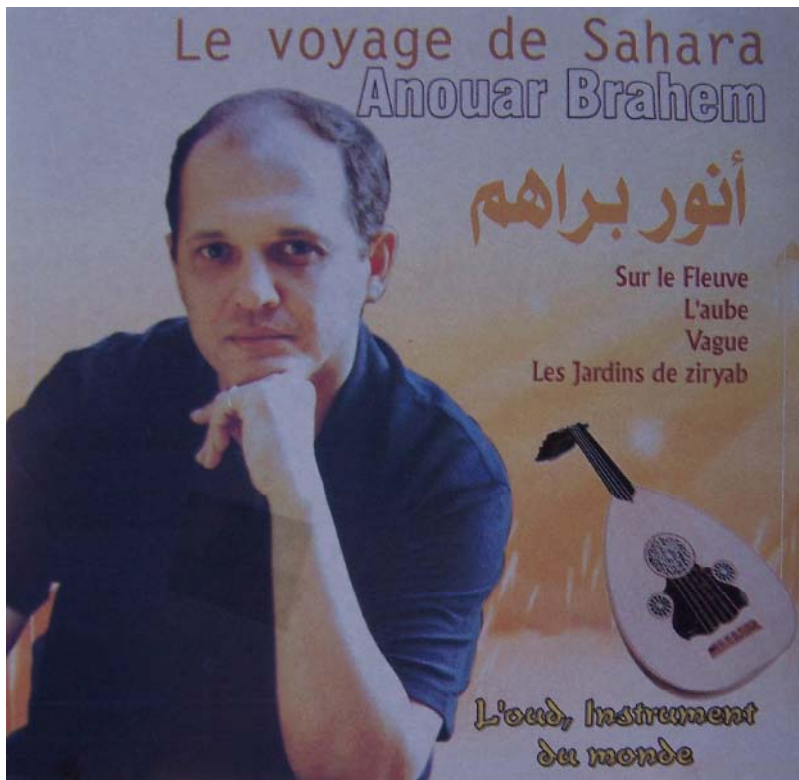


Figure 3. Bootlegged album cover for “Le voyage de Sahara.” Not the identification of Anouar Brahem’s *oud* as an “Instrument of the World.”



Figure 4. Ticket for Anouar Brahem’s spring 2009 concert where he was described as a “magician of the oud.” Note Brahem depicted here as if in a spiritual trance.

Musical Appendix

Track 1. “L’aube” by Anouar Brahem on “Le voyage de Sahara”

Track 2. “Nouba” by Anouar Brahem on “Le voyage de Sahara”

Track 3. “Halfaouine,” by Anouar Brahem on “Le voyage de Sahara”

Track 4. “Cortoba” by Anouar Brahem on “Le voyage de Sahara”

Track 5. “Shady Grove” by “Kantara” on “Kantara: Arab-Appalachian Music”

Track 6. “Wayfaring Stranger” by “Kantara” “Kantara: Arab-Appalachian Music”

Track 7. “Just one Moment” by “Kantara” “Kantara: Arab-Appalachian Music”

Track 8. “Blue Ridge Mountain Home/Tamalyn” by “Kantara” “Kantara: Arab-Appalachian Music”

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