

The Great Dahmane el Harrachi

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Ten years ago, I spent a few weeks with a friend in the Belleville neighborhood of Paris. Every evening, as I walked down the final block to the apartment I passed in front of a noisy Algerian café. At one end of the café a dozen men were usually leaning against the zinc countertop of the bar, arguing and laughing, while another forty or so men (always men, I never saw any women) sat at a half dozen tables playing dominos, cards or checkers. The café had none of the aesthetic appeal of Paris's many brasseries and welcoming neighborhood cafés. The tile floor was dirty, covered with cigarette butts, scraps of paper and matchboxes, the yellow walls were unadorned, and the light from the overhead fluorescent bulbs barely filtered through the nicotine smog.

But there was music; yearning, epic music, which made me slow my steps, that made me want to take a spot at the bar and drink in the melodies pouring from the stereo speakers. I never went in (mostly out of respect; I'd walked into similar scenes enough to know how one 'curious stranger' can change the mood), but, as I passed by, I always asked the few patrons lingering in front of the café who was playing on the stereo. The answer was often 'Dahmane' or 'El Harrachi'. The great Dahmane el Harrachi spent almost thirty years of his life performing in similar cafés throughout Paris, and twenty years after his death his songs still spoke to the Algerian immigrant experience.



Abderrahmane Amrani was born on July 7, 1926 in El Biar, a neighborhood on the heights overlooking Algiers, and grew up in El Harrach, a large suburb 10 km east of the heart of the city. Like most children of his generation, Abderrahmane went both to Koranic and public elementary school. In his mid teens he started working as a cobbler, before taking a job, which he would hold for seven years, as a conductor on the tram between El Harrach and Bab el Oued. A self-taught musician, it was around this time that Abderrahmane started to perform under the name of Dahmane el Harrachi (his father, Cheikh el Amrani, was the muezzin of the great mosque of Algiers, and disapproved of popular musicians). Before long Dahmane, who was a virtuosic banjo and mandola player, was accompanying the Chaabi legend El Hadj Menouar, and Cheikh El Arbi on tours throughout Algeria.



In 1949, Dahmane left Algeria and moved to France, where he first spent five years in Lille, then four in Marseille, three in Lyon, and three in Metz, before settling in Paris in the early 1960s. By the time he settled in the 'City of Lights', his reputation and recordings had already made him one of the Algerian community's most loved singers. He performed weekend after weekend in the cafés of Paris, singing songs that expressed the frustrations, regrets, and hopes of the thousands of emigrants who spent their days working at the Renault factory, and their nights dreaming of their neighborhoods, villages, and families left behind in Algeria.

His audience was torn between the Algeria of their hearts, and the France of their livelihoods. At a time when the French army was engaged in a violent war with Algerian freedom fighters, the French worried that this generation of emigrants were a 'third column' of revolutionary infiltrators, while many of their Algerian compatriots scorned them as unpatriotic cowards, enjoying the safety and comforts of exile. The music of Dahmane el Harrachi was their refuge.

On the last day of August of 1980, on one of his return visits to Algeria, Dahmane el Harrachi died in a car accident on the coastal road between Ain Benian (west of the capital) and Algiers. He was 54 years old. Today, his son Kamel el Harrachi, who was born in 1972, is keeping his musical legacy alive. Kamel's first CD is scheduled to be released this spring.

There are several recurring themes that run through much of Dahmane's repertoire. The bedrock of his musical universe, however, was his constant longing for his 'home'. In 'El Bahja yal Bahia' he praises Algiers and Oran. He sings, 'El Bahja (a nickname for Algiers), the shining light, full of life and charm, with your winding streets and renovated palaces, your hidden gardens, and shady boulevards. El Bahia (a nickname for Oran), the flirt, at the crossroads between Spain, Africa, and the Orient, your bay is sung by the poets, your name is carried throughout the world by our musical breeze'.

↔ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'El Bahja yal Bahia'](#)

Dahmane's second original composition was inspired by the Algerian struggle for independence. In 'Bilad Elkhir', or 'The Good Country', he sings, 'How can I forget my good country? How can I calm my heart, full of joy when I think of you? I want to thank Algeria, the door to paradise, God has blessed her. From the southern Sahara, to Tlemcen in the east and Annaba in the west, Algeria is ours, God has blessed Algeria'.

↔ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Bilad Elkhir'](#)

Some of Dahmane's most famous compositions had moral lessons. In 'Elli Yzraa Errih', or 'Who sows the wind', which is one of his masterpieces, he sings, 'He who sows the wind shall reap only dust, so it goes for the life of man. He is cold-hearted, he is stone-faced, and every day brings him its share of misery. Beware of this man'.

↔ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Elli Yzraa Errih'](#)

In 'Lezem Esmah Binatna', or 'We have to forgive each other', he tries to heal some of the wounds of the Algerian war. 'The solidarity and brotherhood that we knew in the past must once again return; it will be the source of our future happiness. If we soften our hearts, our future will be brighter. Those who tried to divide us are the cause of all these conflicts and all this pain. What happened is done, let us forget what separates

us and not provoke our enemies'.

↳ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Lezem Esmah Binatna'](#)

The song 'Ouine Houma Hbabna', which translates as 'Where are our brothers?', deals with similar themes. Dahmane sings, 'Where are our brothers? Where are the neighbors, the people we grew up with, the people we can trust? My family has forgotten all that I've done for them, only those who have forked tongues are strong enough to walk the line, to keep going. Heed my advice; never listen to the words of a liar, they only light fires that burn friendships'.

↳ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Ouine Houma Hbabna'](#)

Dahmane also wrote many songs about women. In 'Yal Hajla', he compares a beautiful woman to a partridge. He sings, 'The hunter saw you as the sun was rising, you stay hidden behind your beauty. You are desired. Your mysterious look and your feet painted in henna can't soften your heart of stone. When he first saw you his heart burst with joy, his love for you made him sick. He thought the hunt was over, but he has no chance. The next hunter is already waiting for his turn'.

↳ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Yal Hajla'](#)

The song 'Zouj Hmamat' tells the story of a man split between two women, one traditional the other modern. 'You who are so hungry for friendship and love, why do you spend your nights alone looking at the stars? If your heart is suffering it is because you have known love and separation. Your eyes go back and forth; you look at two women with the same desire. One of them wants to travel and see the world, the other wants to stay close to her fields, anchored in her culture and traditions'.

↳ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Zouj Hmamat'](#)

In 'Dak Elmaqnine Ezzine', Dahmane compares a beautiful woman to a dove. He sings, 'This dove that I set free has taken my mind with her. I have lost the key that opens my house, my fortune. The dove is free, coming and going as she pleases, visiting friends and family, her life is nothing but joy'.

↳ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Dak Elmaqnine Ezzine'](#)

This final song, 'Ya Rayah', is Dahmane's most famous. Recorded in the mid-1960s, 'Ya Rayah' distills the anguish of the Algerian immigrants of his generation. In 1993, the Franco-Algerian singer Rachid Taha's version of this song was a massive hit. Dahmane goes for the jugular, 'You, the candidate for exile, how far are you willing to go? Sooner or later you will tire and return to your source, your country. You have visited rich countries; you have wasted a lot of your time. You will never achieve anything in a foreign land. It was your destiny. Your heart is heavy. Your youth is gone and time is wearing you down. Happy is he who lives a joy as deep as my misery. Listen to my advice; before you rush after money and wealth, think hard about what is most important to you'.

↳ [Dahmane el Harrachi 'Ya Rayah'](#)

This post draws on the work of Rabah Mezouane, Ahmed Hachelaf, and Achour Cheurfi. Special thanks to Zineb Senhaji for her translations of the lyrics.