

The music of Mauritania, Part One.

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The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is where West Africa and the Maghreb meet- a huge, sparsely populated, country-stretching between Morocco and Senegal, Mali and the Atlantic ocean. The country's name comes from its dominant ethnic group, the Moors (Maures in French), and it is their nomadic traditions and culture that give Mauritania its unique character. The Moors, or Beydane (as they call themselves), are very proud of their music. One of the country's great music aficionados used to tell me, "music is the only thing we have ever taken the time to develop".



Nouakchott, the capital city, is home to the majority of the country's most talented musicians. Moorish music can be roughly divided into 'folk' music and 'classical' music; the first category consists of lullabies, work songs, game songs, courting songs, shepherd songs, and religious praise 'songs', and the second the music of the Iggawen, or griots. Mauritania has no music industry; there are no nightclubs or record labels, there are no publications devoted to music, Moorish musicians rarely give public 'concerts', and the first professional studio in the country opened in 2003. The iggawen, much as they did a century ago, perform primarily at weddings and private recitals. And although (like Wolof, Manding, Pulaar, and Soninke griots) they often sing praise songs, they are above all appreciated for the aesthetic refinement of their poetic and musical skills.

I am obsessed with Mauritanian music and am always trying to introduce curious listeners to its addictive charms. It is not, however, a welcoming music. Like the country, the music of the Moors can seem very austere and dry. It does not meet you halfway, like the Congolese Rumba or Ghanaian Highlife, but instead demands that you take the time to adjust your ears to its modal subtleties and rhythmic pulse.

One of the easiest points of entry is Jakwar, a style of music that was created in 1976 by Jheichould Abba, a blind musician from Atar, in Northern Mauritania. Named after the fast French fighter jets that often flew over northern Mauritania during the Saharan war, Jakwar is dance music. Jheich amplified his tidinit (the traditional lute) and brought the rhythmic drive of folk music to classical Moorish melodies. This next track (like virtually all recordings available in Mauritania) is a cassette-dub of a private recording that was sponsored by one of Jheich's patrons. The quality leaves much to be desired but his music comes through. Stick with it.

↪ [Jheichould Abba](#)

Today, Jheich's musical legacy is kept alive by his son Idoumouould Jheichould Abba. He is the only one of his Jheich's five sons to have learned the tidinit, and is today one of Nouakchott's most solicited musicians.



It is very difficult to capture the power of Jakwar on tape. This music requires the active participation of the public. At a typical wedding, as soon as Idoumou starts to play, the women in the crowd start clapping interlocking cross-rhythms, and the louder they clap, the harder Idoumou plays. As the groove picks up steam the largely female crowd—which is arranged in an oval around an open dance space, with Idoumou at one end of the oval—starts to sway, and then rock, hard. One at a time individual dancers will jump into the oval, cover their faces with their veils, and undulate their shoulders to the beat. This next track is a recording I made, in April of 2003, of Idoumou playing the 'Guera' rhythm from Atar. The recording does not capture the 'surge' of a wedding but gives you a good idea of Idoumou's flanged-out tidinit.

↳ [Idoumou oud Jheich oud Abba "Guera"](#)

The next big change in Mauritanian music came when iggawen started playing Jakwar on the electric guitar. Hammadi oud Nana was the first to take the leap.



Inspired by Jakwar's rhythmic drive, Hammadi realized that the sonic qualities of the electric guitar (sustain, controlled distortion) made it the ideal instrument for Jakwar music. In July of 2000 I invited Hammadi to perform for a few friends. I made this recording on a Sony Professional Walkman using the cheap microphone I had at the time. The sound is not great but this track has got a nice live feel.

[↩️ Hammadi ould Nana](#)

Jakwar's ecstatic repetition is what first got me hooked on the music of the Moors. But the more I listened and learned about 'classical' Moorish music the more I became addicted to the microtonal intricacies of slower styles; in particular to what I suppose you could call 'salon' music. This is a style of classical music that reached its pinnacle with the 1980s recordings of Dimi mint Abba, and which have nothing to do with her internationally released recordings.

These next two recordings feature the singers Nora mint Seymali ould Hamed Vall and Sidi ould Seymali ould Hamed Vall. They were both trained by their father Seymali ould Hamed Vall, who was the first Moorish musician to formally study music; he spent several years in Iraq studying at a music conservatory in Baghdad. Both Nora and Sidi were also, at different times, part of Dimi mint Abba's group; their father Seymali was Dimi's first husband.

First up is Nora accompanied by her husband Jheich ould Chighaly.



This is a recording I made in their living room after midnight on March 28, 2003 as a sandstorm punished Nouakchott. This is a song that they perform frequently at weddings. This recording gives you a great idea of Jheich's slippery guitar playing and Nora's warm voice (the heat of the sandstorm was making her voice crack). Look closely at Jheich's guitar in the picture above...check out his customized microtonal fretboard.

[↩️ Nora mint Seymali ould Hamed Vall & Jheich ould Chighaly](#)

Nora's younger brother Sidi is one of my favorite singer's in Nouakchott. Although he still pretty young (25 years old) Sidi is getting invited to perform at more and more weddings. In this next track he takes his time with 'Lebteyt', my favorite of the five modes that are the building blocks of Moorish classical music. This was recorded just before sunset at the house I was renting on the outskirts of Nouakchott. Sidi accompanies himself on guitar. (In fact, the recording is almost ruined by a loose contact in Sidi's guitar; you'll hear the clicking. I love his vocal performance so much though, that I decided to post the song in spite of the offending noise.)

[↩️ Sidi ould Seymali ould Hamed Vall](#)

The final track I've got for you brings together everything I love about Moorish music and Mauritania. This recording features two young sisters, Hudho mint Abba (16 years old) and Guine mint Abba (14 years old), accompanied by their mother Mukhtara mint Nana on Ardin, an eleven string harp, and their cousin Idoumou ould Jheich ould Abba on Tidinit. This recording was made in a small blue-walled room at 11 pm. You can hear one of our friends preparing and pouring mint tea if you listen carefully!!!

[↩️ Hudho mint Abba, Guine mint Abba, Mukhtara mint Nana, & Idoumou ould Abba](#)

As always, I hope you've enjoyed the music!!

If you would like more detailed information about Mauritanian music in general and the history behind this music in particular, send me an email, and I'll happily send you a more detailed article I've written on the music of Mauritania.

