

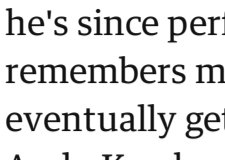
World music

Paris calling

Rachid Taha was just one of the musicians inspired by the Clash's visit to Paris in 1981. John Lewis explores the band's enduring influence in France

John Lewis

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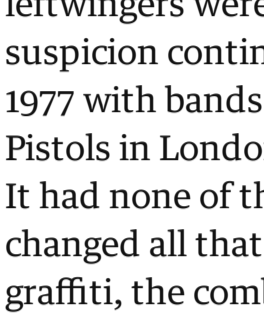


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The French-Algerian singer Rachid Taha has a story about the first time he met the Clash. It was September 1981, and Taha bumped into all four members of the band just before they were due to play at the Théâtre Mogador in Paris. Taha gave them a copy of a demo tape by his band, Carte de Séjour (Residence Permit), an outfit from Lyon who combined Algerian rai with funk and punk rock.

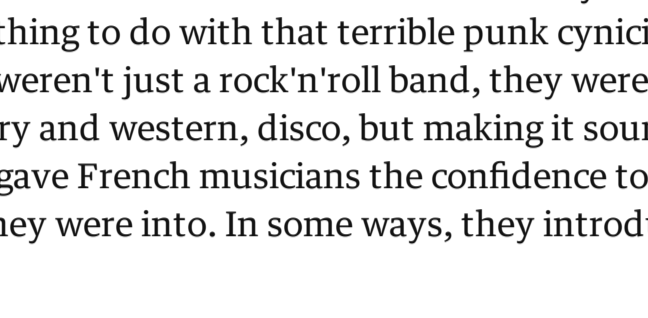
"They looked interested," remembers Taha, "but when they didn't get in touch, I thought nothing of it. Then, a few months later, I heard Rock the Casbah." He cackles mischievously. "Maybe they did hear it after all."

The incident has since gone down in French rock legend. Taha has recorded his own Arabised version of the song, entitled Rock el Kasbah, something he's since performed live with the Clash's Mick Jones. Jones only vaguely remembers meeting Taha in 1981, but both he and Joe Strummer did eventually get heavily into Taha's music. "Joe heard some Rachid tracks on Andy Kershaw's radio show some time in the 1990s," says Jones. "He used to ring me up and tell me about this fantastic Algerian guy that I should listen to. In fact, Joe and Rachid were going to meet up, but then Joe went and died. I'm not sure he knew that he'd actually met him at the Mogador all those years ago."



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Rachid Taha wasn't the only musician to be inspired by the Clash on that seven-night residency. Just as the Sex Pistols show at Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall in June 1976 served as the catalyst for Morrissey, Ian Curtis, Mark E Smith and Mick Hucknall, the Clash's run at the Théâtre Mogador five years later was witnessed by a veritable who's who of French rock. Manu Chao was in the audience with friends who would later form Mano Negra, as was Helno and his ramshackle world music combo les Nègresses Vertes, gypsy rockers Lo'Jo, members of anarchist punk collective Bérurier Noir, and Kortatu, the Basque ska-punk band formed by Fermin Muguruza.



"The gigs were important for many reasons," says Jean-Daniel Beauvallet, editor of the French rock and arts weekly Les Inrockuptibles, who was also at Mogador in 1981. "French pop was always very apolitical. In May 1968, leftwingers were suspicious of music, and pop music in particular, and that suspicion continued for many years. Even when punk kicked off in France in 1977 with bands like the Stinky Toys - who played on the same bill as the Sex Pistols in London - it was very much an arty fashion movement for rich kids. It had none of the anger you got in England at the time. But the Clash changed all that. Mogador '81 was May 1968 gone rock'n'roll: the slogans, the graffiti, the combat fatigues, the air of revolution. It was all there."

"The Clash were militant and hedonistic in equal measure," says Rachid Taha. "And that was exciting to me. You could be a rebel and be in the biggest rock'n' roll band in the world! It was also clear that they loved music. Joe Strummer had nothing to do with that terrible punk cynicism. By the time of Mogador '81 they weren't just a rock'n'roll band, they were doing hip-hop, reggae, ska, country and western, disco, but making it sound their own. I think that's what gave French musicians the confidence to do the same with whatever music they were into. In some ways, they introduced us to the world."

Andy Kershaw sees the Clash's influence on a certain generation of French musicians as immeasurable. "It's clear that Rachid has been incredibly influenced by Joe Strummer. His demeanour, his stage movements, his vocal style, even his dress sense. I think you see that in a lot of French bands - they do like their leather trousers, don't they? But it's also the musical effect that the Clash had on people. It came down to the Clash having very broad enthusiasms themselves. All that silly punk rock nonsense about 1977 being 'year zero', when Joe was pretending he'd never been in a pub rock band and Mick was pretending that he'd never been a Mott the Hoople fan. I think that the Clash were at their best when they relaxed and let all those influences come through. You look at London Calling and it's like the history of rock'n'roll - blues, country, ska, reggae. By the time you got to Sandinista, there was hip-hop and world music creeping in too."

At Mogador, the Clash were joined onstage by Futura 2000, a graffiti artist and rapper from Brooklyn who they'd met earlier that year while playing a residency at Bond's in New York. Futura 2000 sprayed hip-hop tags on a huge fresco behind the band ("We were choking on the fumes all night," says Jones) and then took to the front of the stage to rap on The Leader and This Is Radio Clash.

"Hip-hop was still in its infancy then," says Beauvallet. "There hadn't been any big rap hits in America or England, let alone France, at that point. A lot of the big names in French hip-hop, like Supreme NTM or Assassin, were heavily influenced by the Clash. I'm pretty sure that NTM were at Mogador."

The Théâtre Mogador - a magnificent music hall near Gare St-Lazare - squeezed in around 500 more than its official 2,000 capacity each night for the sold-out residency. The Clash - along with their large retinue and support acts the Beat and Wah! - stayed out in a tower block on the eastern banlieues of Paris. "There were too many of us to stay at a fancy hotel all week," says Jones. "So we were out in what looked like a rough estate in the suburbs. I remember hearing a lot of hip-hop and Arabic music that week. Generally, we spent a lot of time in France. We played proper tours there, not just one date in Paris, like most British bands did, but the whole country. They went mad for it. They love their rock'n'roll."

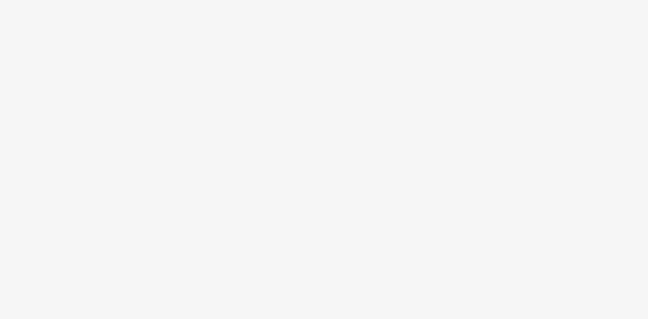
"In France, they just got the Clash immediately," says Philippe Manoeuvre, chief editor of the French magazine Rock&Folk and another punter at the Mogador. "There was never any backlash. I remember the NME being very picky about the second Clash LP and later stuff like Sandinista, but the French just ate it up. Joe Strummer was immediately understood in France. Something in his haircut, his style, his leather jacket was really right with the French public."

Manoeuvre's magazine has been championing a new generation of bands in the Clash mould, like 16-year-old rockers Second Sex ("when they played their first concert, people were pinching themselves - they were so like the Clash!" says Manoeuvre), les Shades, Naast, the Plasticines, the Parisians and Brooklyn. None of the members of these bands were even born when the Clash played Mogador. Most of them feature on a new French punk compilation called Paris Calling.

If the 1980s wave of French punk from the likes of Mano Negra, Bérurier Noir, les Nègresses Vertes and Rachid Taha were drawing from the Clash's methodology - the haphazard mix of genres, the outlaw politics, the clumsy appropriation of world music sources - the Paris Calling wave of bands take a much more literal influence from the Clash, playing simple 1960s garage rock riffs and three-chord pop songs. They even sing in English, which hampers their chances of getting airplay on French radio, where government controls ensure that at least 60% of output is French language.

"It's pure hedonism," says Yarol Poupaud, who compiled, recorded and produced the album. "These kids are the children of the generation that grew up during May '68. They can see that those political battles are lost. For them, the revolution is in the head. It's in clothes, in the way they look. Forming a band becomes a political act. They sing in English because it sounds cool - most of them don't even know what they're singing half the time! And, while they love the Clash, it's Mick Jones's protégé Pete Doherty who they worship. Many of these bands met at one of the Libertines gigs in Paris, which had a similar effect to Mogador '81."

Others are more sceptical about them. "These bands are all lovely kids, very cute, well brought-up from good, upper-class families," says Jean-Daniel Beauvallet from Les Inrockuptibles. "They went to the best schools in France. But they're all incredibly apolitical. Pete Doherty is their hero - what French kid wouldn't love him? There he is, stumbling around with a Gauloise in his mouth, wearing those tight trousers that French kids love, carrying a slim volume of Rimbaud or Baudrillard. Bands like Second Sex and Naast tell you that they love the Clash, but it sometimes seems that they actually just like the iconography, you know - Mick's trousers, Paul Simonon's haircut. They're more interested in a Mick Rock book of Clash photographs than they are in actually listening to Sandinista. Maybe they should all go and listen to some Rachid Taha."



• Rachid Taha plays the Barbican, London (0845 120 7500), on April 6. Paris Calling is out on April 2 on Tracks Records

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