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Algeria 14 February 1994 and beyond: For Aziz Smati on Valentine's Day

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In honour of the determination of people like Algerian TV producer, Aziz Smati, who was shot exactly twenty years ago today, we must support all those who wield song against suicide belt, and wage art against fundamentalism, writes Karima Bennoune.



Group of four men smiling at camera

Aziz Smati (2nd from left) with Cheb Khaled (in red) during a November 1993 shoot. Photo courtesy of Aziz Smati

Twenty years ago, on 14 February 1994, the Armed Islamic Group sent a Valentine's Day message of hate to Algerian performing artists and the youth who loved them by gunning down Aziz Smati, beloved producer of the local equivalent of MTV. His legendary show, Bled Music (Bled means "country" or "homeland"), burst onto our screens in 1989 during a unique moment of political opening in post-independence Algeria. As the country lurched away from single party rule, and single party thinking, the programme was an intoxicating glimpse of what a truly North African freedom could look and sound like. It featured unmistakably Algerian tunes introduced in uniquely Algerian argot by the dreamy Samia Benkherroubi, a college student who effused a very Algerian warmth from the small screen.

Meanwhile, the Muslim majority country's late 80s democratic experiment was exploited by fundamentalists who flourished in the petri dish of instant multi-partyism, and in the 90s declared a jihad against the entire society that would kill as many as 200,000 people (and to which the state also responded with further abuses). Looking back at that period, Samia remembers that "We thought our revolution was done. But we were had by the Islamists who were much better organized than we were."

As fundamentalism burgeoned, one of its targets was music. In the municipalities the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) controlled after the 1990 elections, the party banned music at weddings and public dancing. Samia and Aziz received threats and insulting letters. "Stop this show. You are against the Qur'an. Music is forbidden. You'll see what happens to you."

I asked them whether there was something inherently antifundamentalist about creating their programmes in such an environment. "For us, making a show about music was completely normal,"

Aziz answered. "Music has always existed in Algeria. Even our parents never said it was haram. Just because extraterrestrials come and tell you it is forbidden, I will not believe them. And I continued to do what I was doing."

Things got worse. The Islamists sent threatening letters to merchants who sold cassettes. Finally, as they unleashed widespread violence in 1993 and 1994, they would assassinate singers like the working class "Cheb Hasni" whose hit about heartbreak, "Don't cry for me, just say this is my destiny," (*"Metebkish Hada Mektoubi"*) took on a whole new meaning. "He sang especially about love," Aziz reflects. "He was loved by the youth. It was to make people afraid. 'Everything you love we will kill.'"

In such an environment, what Aziz Smati and his colleagues did became a life threatening endeavour. The producer's reward for giving young people an hour a week to forget the turbulence around them in front of the TV ultimately came in the form of four bullets, paraplegia and a wheelchair.

Aziz had started on the radio as the director of a show called "Le Local Rock," but he dreamed of creating a bona fide "Hit Parade à l'Algérienne" on television. As Aziz tells me, "there were very few Algerian singers who had access to the TV. They played a very Middle Eastern music, but the music of chez nous, the Raï, wasn't heard. They said it was a vulgar music and shouldn't be on TV."

Raï - whose lyrics often cover worldly topics like love and wine - is a sort of North African hybrid hip-hop that started as Bedouin music. Aziz Smati's Bled Music played the first Raï clips shown on ENTV, the national station.

Everyone loved Bled Music. I was a huge fan from the moment I stumbled across the show one night in my father's living room on the outskirts of Algiers. When I first met Aziz and Samia in 2008, I had to keep myself from asking them for their autographs. Back in the day, the show's creators and cast were inundated with fan mail. There was no Billboard chart in Algeria, so Samia asked viewers to write in with their preferences, and they used those to rank the songs. "The show tried to make Algerian songs accessible," Samia told me. "It became very popular, because it was watched by all the social categories and ages."

Bled Music, and the 1993 follow up Rockrocki, revolutionized both the music and the language considered ready for prime time. On air presenters and guests spoke like real people did, rather than sounding as though they were in 7th century Arabia. As Samia explains, "to be on Algerian TV you had to sing in classical Arabic that we learned in school." Aziz recalls that on his shows they "wanted to speak Arabic as it is spoken in the street and that everyone understands. It was a mix of Arabic, Kabyle [Tamazight] and French." They also covered cultural news and interviewed breakout performers. "Artists and singers gave their vision of things," Samia says. "And they couldn't do that elsewhere. They had freedom of language, a new and free expression. This was possible because of who Aziz was."

Hamid Baroudi, the Algerian ethno-pop singer whose haunting anti-Gulf War song Caravan to Baghdad topped the Bled Music charts for a long time agrees. He wrote to me this week to say: "During the 90s, Aziz was a visionary. He was twenty years ahead of his time." For Baroudi who has gone on to tour the world with Peter Gabriel's Womad Festival, Aziz's achievement was not only creative but also civic. "I saw a child of the radio use his microphone with no holds barred to give voice to a society that was living the darkest years of its modern history. He wrapped all of this in unprocessed music, before entitling it with the slogan - "Bled Music" - made in Algeria. Twenty years later I realize that this show is still relevant."

Given the significance of his work, and his personal popularity, the attempt to kill Aziz Smati on 14 February 1994 terrorized the entire country. Neither he nor his presenter had the means to take special security precautions. After being shot four times on the street on his way to work by a young man he mistook for a fan, Aziz was rushed to Beni Messous hospital outside Algiers. Junior doctors wept outside the operating room where their colleagues fought to save the producer's life from 11am until midnight.

Samia learned of the attack, which took place during Ramadan when the fundamentalists killed the most, as she arrived at the studio to film. "Time stopped for me. In those days, we were afraid all the time because every day we learned of the assassination of one of our friends. However, we continued our work, like automatons. We continued to work because it was our only way to fight back. Still, I think that until 14 February we were blind to the dangers we ourselves were facing every day."

That same day Samia's then-fiancé, the well-known radio host and actor Mohamed Ali Allalou who had long worked with Aziz, was in Berlin and - despite a fierce hangover from drinking to forget the violence back home - was promoting a film called Youcef at a festival. "In the hotel lobby, there was a famous Indian star. I knew I had been a fan of this face since childhood, but couldn't remember his name. Shashi Kapoor?" As Allalou collected himself in preparation for his screening, someone interrupted. "Mister Allalou. Telephone." It was a friend calling to say simply, "They shot Aziz this morning." Allalou remembers that as he heard this news from his "martyred city of Algiers," he "fell into the arms of Shashi Kapoor and cried just as they do in his films."

Still, like Algeria itself, Aziz would not let the fundamentalists kill him. After a 12 hour operation, he came back to life. As the newspaper *Le Matin* said on its front page the next day, "Today, Samia and the Rockrocki team are not in mourning. Although the perpetrators of this attack and the supporters of fundamentalist terrorism might not like it, Aziz remains with us. To produce other shows, to strive for another culture." But he would never walk again.

In keeping with the stubborn artistic determination that enabled him to take on Algeria's cultural establishment, he has not allowed even an assassination attempt to derail him. While he lives every day with the harsh, life-changing consequences, he has never given in. Aziz now makes art from his wheelchair, and so has beaten those who sought to silence him. "Yes, I am not going to stay in a wheelchair doing nothing," he asserts. "If I fought for life, it is to continue doing what I was doing."

He directed a stylish and moving clip for a campaign against Algeria's discriminatory family law by 20 Ans Barakat (Twenty Years is Enough!), an Algerian women's rights group. Remaining defiant, Aziz shows bareheaded women protesters on the streets of Algiers, and Hassiba Boulmerka, Algeria's gold medal runner, appears in the shorts that earned her death threats from the same fundamentalists who had taken aim at him.

In recent years, he collaborated with Mohamed Ali Allalou and writer Mustapha Benfodil on a multimedia book project about the city of Algiers called *Alger Noormal*. Aziz compiled the soundtrack that accompanies the text, a CD "of the noises and songs of Algiers - young people who scream, chanting in stadiums, all mixed together." In addition, he has produced a related video whose evocative images and haunting soundtrack trace the post-independence history of Algeria. President Boumediene proclaims the start of the 70s agrarian revolution to the sound of oud; the ruling National Liberation Front's 1980s corruption is denounced in Algerian rap; and the victims of FIS and Armed Islamic Group atrocities in the 1990s are memorialised to the beat of outraged Algerian rock.

Samia Benkherroubi's assessment of Aziz Smati's achievements, and the meaning of this 2014 anniversary, is that "the Islamists and the terrorists did not manage to destroy everything. There are

many of us who are still around, fighting against their obscurantist ideas.” Their story is not just a history lesson. Across Muslim majority regions of the world today, artists remain on the frontlines. Other Aziz Smatis spin dreams of music, words and light, whether in Mali, Somalia, or Afghanistan. They defy extremism and offer hope and even humour to its opponents, and all too often, like Aziz, they become targets for fundamentalists.

The danger is not hypothetical, but these artists understand the criticality of their mission. For example, Pakistani playwright Shahid Nadeem and his Ajoka Theatre Company have tackled everything from blasphemy laws to burqas, and faced banning and bomb threats. Why continue? As Nadeem said recently after a 7 February performance of his play “Burqavaganza,” “if we abandon this space, there will be nothing left.”

History repeats itself. Shahid Nadeem’s colleague, distinguished theatre professor and playwright Asghar Nadeem Syed survived a gun attack in Lahore on 21 January. Shahid Nadeem explains that Syed has long been an opponent of religious extremism, and three years ago wrote a popular TV series called “Khuda Zameen se Gaya Nahin Hai” (God has still not left the Earth) about the threat of Talibanization in Pakistan. According to Nadeem, this is one possible motive for the attack on his colleague. Thankfully, like Aziz Smati, Syed remains alive.

In any case, such crimes have primary and secondary victims. Those around the targeted person are also dramatically affected. Samia Benkherroubi had to flee into exile shortly after the attempt on Aziz’s life, leaving behind her beloved family and work. Today, she says “I want to believe that what happened to us will not happen again. But, I am aware that this is just a dream. All you have to do is look at what is happening in Egypt, in Libya, in Syria to see the same methods being reproduced. But we also are continuing to fight, in my case through feminism and the promotion of equality between men and women.” She now trains new generations of Algerian women’s rights advocates for the Mediterranean Women’s Fund.

In honour of the determination of people like Samia Benkherroubi, Mohamed Ali Allalou, Shahid Nadeem, Asghar Nadeem Syed, and most of all Aziz Smati, we must support all those, who like Aziz, wield song against suicide belt, or wage art against fundamentalism. That is why on 14 February 2014, we should send this Valentine’s message of love for Aziz and his work from the countless thousands of us to whom he brought improbable joy in harrowing times. The forces of regression put him in a wheelchair and took away the use of his legs, but still he stands taller than most ever will.

Karima Bennoune

P.S.

* <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune/for-aziz-smati-on-valentines-day>

* Karima Bennoune is the author of the book *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* which, inter alia, tells the stories of Aziz Smati, Samia Benkherroubi, Mohamed Ali Allalou and Pakistan’s Ajoka Theatre.