

February 17, 2010

---

**Michal Shapiro**

Posted: February 15, 2010 04:17 PM

## **They Are Not Palestinian**

They are Arabic, and they are Muslim. Their land was colonized by a western power (Spain). Then, when that power grew weary of the colonial burden, another nation (Morocco) claimed the land as historically theirs, and a huge security wall was built to quell resistance.

Now these people live in poverty and in refugee camps, but keep the dream of their own independent state alive. Most Americans do not know anything about them. The Arabic world has not taken them up as a cause célèbre. They are the people of Western Sahara, or Saharawis.

Why am I writing about this, in a music column? Because one of their greatest spokespersons is also one of world music's great singers, and she has a new CD out, called "Shouka" and it's wonderful.

Mariam Hassan has a huge voice, full of power and heart. She has dedicated that voice to singing the music of her people, keeping their culture and their cause alive. Listen to the video, and marvel at her strength, and also, enjoy it! Because obviously, she is having a blast and she invites you too as well.

Here's a little bit about the role of women in Saharawi life: Mariam has said "There is no freer woman in the Islamic world than the Saharawi woman." And indeed, as journalist/author Rosa Montero has written "The Saharawi women assume complete responsibility for life. In the stony, barren hell of the Algerian desert they manage the camps, organize daily life, run the schools and hospitals, care for the children and the elderly, and look after the men..."

And if you are wondering about the use of electric guitar, that penetrating instrument has become a mainstay in a genre we now call "Desert Blues." It is indispensable in the music of the Tuareg (best exemplified by the wonderful band "Tinariwen") and the Saharawis. The techniques and modes of playing traditional acoustic instruments are easily transposed to it, and with the addition of some great bluesy riffs, you've got a magical crossover sound.

*Something to watch out for: Link TV will shortly be premiering an excellent profile of Mariem Hassan. I'll keep you posted.*

**Books & More From Michal Shapiro**

---

---