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## Past masters

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**Since the 1960s, Western musicians have been making pilgrimages to Jajouka, a tiny Moroccan village of 600. Jace Clayton considers a musical identity crisis created by overseas demand for ancient authenticity.**



The Master Musicians of Jajouka (featuring Bachir Attar) – not the Master Musicians of Joujouka. Each band claims the other is an impostor act. [Brigitte Engl / Redferns](#)

It's a hippie's dream: a brotherhood of musicians live together, exempt from work. They hang out all day, drinking tea, smoking weed, jamming. This is their lifelong duty, a form of worship, a Sufi manifestation of physical endurance and spiritual healing. Songs aren't learned and studied so much as lived. Now and then musical luminaries come to visit.

Reality dissolves into myth with the Master Musicians of Jajouka, a north-west Moroccan ensemble of musicians who play *taktouka jabalia* (literally "drums of the mountain"), a rustic, weathered folk genre defined by long melody lines and brisk drumming in varied time signatures. The group – which has attained cultlike status in the West – says its power derives from the patron saint of Jajouka village, a Persian named Sidi Ahmed Sheikh who arrived in 800AD. But his is not the only magic to have touched Jajouka's hills. The Master Musicians' contemporary status and modus operandi are attributable directly to secular saints with *baraka* no less potent: beat writers, rock musicians and jazz stars.

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Tangier's midcentury heyday as a relatively unpoliced International Zone saw it transformed into a hive of cultural activity and a home-away-from-home for a druggy subset of international socialites. In the 1950s the American authors Paul Bowles and William Burroughs and the British painter Brion Gysin all fell under the spell of Jajouka's pipes and swirling devotional rhythms. Gysin was so smitten that he and a native Jajoukan named Mohammed Hamri opened up a restaurant, 1001 Nights, where Tangier's expats could experience evening performances by a rotating cast of the village's musicians. In the late Sixties Gysin brought Brian Jones, the Rolling Stones' guitarist, to Jajouka. The British hippie was overwhelmed, and soon set about recording the first Jajouka album.

The 1968 field recordings used as the source material for *Brian Jones Presents the Pipes of Pan at Joujouka* focused on one ecstatic corner of the Jajouka repertoire. During a

masquerade rite called Boujeloud, a boy in goatskins rampages throughout the village, accompanied by a young transvestite dressed up as the infamous Moroccan djinniye Aisha Qandisha. It gets loud: at the climax, the Master Musicians sound like a chorus of quarrelling bagpipes, or a cloud of bees continuously shifting direction. These are ghaitas, wind instruments that cry out in an eerie clarion tone. Tireless, muscular drumming creates a polyrhythmic rumble. This is music made to be played outdoors, to move spirits and echo throughout the hills. It careens between appreciable complexity and sense-saturating chaos. The band has serene moments, but Boujeloud's large-ensemble intensity has become its signature sound, in large part because of Jones's album.

Back in London, Jones edited his recordings down and added sound effects like flange, echo and phasing. His intensive post-production manipulation contrasts sharply with the "hands-off" documentary ethos on display in most field recordings from the Sixties and Seventies. It also highlights one of the paradoxes of contemporary Jajouka: the African music's authenticity is adjudicated (if not invented) primarily by Britons and Americans.

In an excellent study of Jajouka, the ethnomusicologist Philip Schuyler notes that Gysin was "vehemently opposed to having the musicians listen to the mediated, disembodied sounds of other people's music". He even banned radios among the Jajouka musicians staying with him. At the same time, "he seemed to have no objection to having their music recorded and heard by others", and brought in foreigners like Brian Jones to record and alter their music as they saw fit.

In his liner notes, which make no mention of his FX spree, Jones wrote: "What exists here is a specially chosen representation of the type of music which is played and chanted during the festival. The pieces and therefore the climaxes are necessarily shortened... Anyway, we hope to have captured the spirit and magic of Joujouka."

Gysin's contribution to the liner notes further crystallised the bizarre mix of admiration and condescension at play in the expat love for Jajouka. "My own music turned out to be the wild flutes of the hill tribe," he wrote. "The secret of [this] tribe, hidden even from themselves, was that they were still performing the Rites of Pan under their ragged cloak of Islam." Gysin considered himself to be sharing a secret about the Jajoukis that even they do not know: these seemingly devout Sufis were in fact worshipping a pagan god, a goat-footed one at that.

For the record, Gysin got his insider info from an early 20th century tract by the Finnish sociologist Edward Westermarck. The Boujeloud-Pan conflation continues to this day, though the musicians themselves deny any connection. The Princeton professor Abdellah Hammoudi makes a detailed refutation of Westermarck's thesis in his 1993 book *The Victim and its Masks: An Essay on Sacrifice and Masquerade in the Maghreb*.

But Gysin's Beat friends didn't know he was wrong, and they loved thinking of Jajouki rites as honouring anarchic, darkly sexual, primal forces. So they ignored the musicians' story and swapped in an older, more appealing one. According to the Beats' oft-repeated formulation (Pipes of Pan!), Jajouka rites are not Muslim, Arab, nor even particularly Moroccan: they're simply old Greek imports whose origins were lost amid the dust and disarray of north Africa. "In Morocco," Gysin wrote in the liner notes, "magic is practised more assiduously than hygiene."

Jones died less than a year after he finished condensing the Moroccan field recordings into a narrative journey for his western rock audience. The posthumous release of *Brian Jones Presents the Pipes of Pan at Jajouka* garnered the villagers international attention: the original was eventually decreed one of the first “world music” albums, and the reissue was produced by Philip Glass.

But Jajouka music remained virtually unknown within its home country. While western rock kids, jazz heads and hippies were turning on to an obscure group from the Rif foothills, the Maghrebi zeitgeist was forming around a young band from Casablanca. In the 1970s, the theatre-troupe-turned-band Nass el Ghiwane revolutionised the very concept of Moroccan popular culture, retailoring the aesthetic of rock icons like Mick Jagger along the way. The neo-roots *chaabi* music of groups like Nass El Ghiwane and Jil Jilala held a newly independent Morocco in thrall. The majority of internationally-known African musicians – Khaled, Youssou N’Dour, Miriam Makeba – reached a worldwide audience on the back of enormous homeland popularity. Jajouka bypassed that route through quirky twists of western interest and patronage.

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*Brian Jones Presents the Pipes of Pan at Jajouka* was many westerners’ first exposure to Moroccan music, and Jajouka albums remain a popular point of entry today. Billboard listed the Masters’ 1992 release, *Apocalypse Across the Sky*, as one of that year’s top 10 best-selling world music albums. The village has continued to receive western visitors: Jones was followed by the free jazz legend Ornette Coleman (whose wailing horns made for an easy fit), Mick Jagger (with video crew), Billy Corgan of the Smashing Pumpkins, the Sonic Youth guitarist Lee Ranaldo and dozens of lesser-known pilgrims.

Jajouka’s large global platform has created a strange problem, one enabled and exacerbated by the music’s relative obscurity. For most of the last decade, two bands from Jajouka – a town with a current population of approximately 600 – have both claimed to be the Master Musicians. They are differentiated by a single transliteration choice. It’s the “Master Musicians of Jajouka” versus the “Master Musicians of Jajouka (featuring Bachir Attar)”. Each band lists the Brian Jones album and an eponymous 1973-1974 release in its discography. Each says *they* collaborated with Ornette Coleman and Bill Laswell. Each band’s website displays a scanned document from William Burroughs, and each cites it as evidence of *their* authenticity. (Heroin addict, wife-killer, trust-funded avant-gardist: Burroughs was an unlikely candidate to settle disputes over musical stewardship in rural Africa).

The argument over the “true” Master Musicians matters only because so much money rides on it. Western music industry royalties can go a long way in the Rif. Plus there’s the matter of touring. Audiences want the real thing, not ersatz imitators or greedy splinter groups. In an era when international pop stars are manufactured by image consultants and viral marketing campaigns, genuinely representative bodies from far-flung locales are more in demand on the world music circuit than ever.

Perhaps predictably, the local scene couldn’t care less. The American percussionist Grey Filastine visited Jajouka in 1996 to meet the band and study their rhythms. Afterwards, he

travelled a bit around northwestern Morocco. “Every time I went to a tape stall in the Rif region,” he recalls, “I would ask for *taktouka jabalia* and get cassettes of other groups, wearing similar clothes, playing the same instruments, and even many of the same melodies. But I couldn’t find Jajouka for sale.” The Master Musicians (neither of them) just aren’t that popular at home. They sometimes play weddings and events near their village – but other bands generally get more of that work.

The western interest has not faded. The Irish producer Frank Rynne is currently helping to organise a Jajouka festival in June. Rynne claims to have spent more time in the village than any other westerner, and he has produced two albums by the Master Musicians of Joujouka. His curation reveals the genre’s most gentle face. “I am firmly of the belief that the music of Joujouka needs no adulteration,” he wrote in an e-mail. Rynne records for weeks on end, working with a modest mobile studio; only recently did he switch to multi-track recording to better capture the bass drum, “that single beat that really locks all the music down”. Jones’s edits presented Jajouka as a genre of dramatic, rock-tinged crescendos; Rynne’s reveal it as something more casual – the type of music a flute and drum duo or quartet can play all day without collapsing from exhaustion (the entire 1995 album *Joujouka Black Eyes*, for example, contains only four minutes of the Boujeloud rite’s frenzied bagpipe sounds).

The British Asian percussionist Talvin Singh produced an album by the Master Musicians of Jajouka (featuring Bachir Attar) in 2000. His production credits include, ominously, “atmospheres”. In the album opener *Up to the Sky, Down to the Earth*, Singh places Attar’s horn in the reverb-drenched distance, then doubles it on keyboard, further muffling its original sound. Decisions like these make bare Singh’s distaste for the band’s trademark ghaita flutes, and his drum’n’bass breakbeats are as ham-fisted as Jajouka’s shifting polyrhythms are subtle. Working with Attar in his London studio, Singh dated timeless music by fusing it to club techniques that sound old-fashioned less than 10 years later. Ancient Sufi traditions are not necessarily enhanced by atmospheric synthesizer washes. (Bachir Attar’s band is represented much better by a brand new album recorded at a Paul Bowles tribute concert.)

Brian Jones recorded Jajouka more than 40 years ago – clearly neither of today’s Master Musicians retains any singular “essence” from that line-up. There is no essence; the Master Musicians’ unusual debate is at odds with the Jajouki musical tradition, in which songs are learned over years, in communal lessons woven into the fabric of daily existence. One of the defining aspects of folk music is openness: if you can play it, it’s yours. Like speaking a language, the ability to perform unwritten music confers – *is* – its own legitimacy. Both Master Musicians share a repertoire with each other and with other local bands. More and more, this delightful genre rings out across the Rif and around the world, multiplying without consensus (and accompanied by acrid online battles, hotly-disputed Wikipedia entries, contentious open letters and sporadic protests outside of concerts). The wealth and variety of music from this tiny section of North Africa has enough power to fuel much rejoicing and debate for years to come. The Master Musicians of Joujouka played in Portugal in 2006, the Master Musicians of Jajouka played in Portugal in 2007. Both camps have new albums in the pipeline.

*Jace Clayton is a writer and musician who lives in Brooklyn.*

Wheels, recorded with Bill Laswell, Peter Gabriel and toured with Ornette Coleman in the 90s.

The 2006 "Joujoke" concert only happened because it was advertised as Bachir Attar and the Master Musicians of Jajouka. When some other troupe showed up, they were kicked out of the country.

There is the real thing, and the rip offs.

The Master Musicians of Jajouka led by Bachir Attar pictured above (Abdellah Bohkzar, Mohktar Jaghdal and Mohamed "The Mohkadem" el Attar) where led by Bachir's father in until 1982 and all played on the Brian Jones Record in 68, in the Adelphi record from 72 and with Ornette Coleman in 1973, 1996, 1998 and in 2009 (3 days ago in New York in fact after after their most recent US tour which you sketchily fail to mention).

Ask Ornette Coleman, Bill Laswell, Steven Davis or Peter Gabriel or how about a real Master Musician, Bachir Attar, what the real deal is instead of relying on an email from a "producer" of self interest.

**Brian Jones, San Francisco**

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