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NATACHA ATLAS - ANA HINA


2008

WORLD VILLAGE - HARMONIA MUNDI

HARVEY BROUGH: PRODUCER, ARRANGER

GUARDIAN

Natacha Atlas
Ana Hina
★★★★★



(World Village) £12.99

A year or so ago, Natacha Atlas gave a remarkable, low-key London concert in which she broke away from the fusion of Arabic pop, electronic beats and belly-dancing that made her famous, and instead presented a subtle acoustic set, backed by a band led by the pianist and arranger Harvey Brough. Now, using Brough as her producer, the singer known for her rousing work with Transglobal Underground and Jah Wobble has at last recorded an intriguing acoustic album. She starts with cool, mature reworkings of songs made famous by the Lebanese diva Fairuz and the Egyptian star Abdel Halim Hafez, with her controlled, slinky vocals matched by a tight, gently rhythmic backing. Then she moves on, bringing a Middle Eastern edge to the folk song Black Is the Colour, before adding Latin influences on La Vida Callada and brassy swing on the cheerful El Asil. It's a mature, varied and entertaining set, and it promises to transform her career. **Robin Denselow**

DAILY MIRROR

ALBUMS



NATACHA ATLAS AND THE MAZEKA ENSEMBLE
Ana Hina ★★★★★

The latest from multi-talented, extraordinarily beautiful, Belgian-born, British-raised Natacha puts the latest Brit school-nurtured songstress in sharp perspective. Fronting a new, finely-woven acoustic ensemble, her vocal is as gently intoxicating and agile as ever. The voice is the perfect vehicle to travel across a songscape drawn from Arabia, Appalachia and Scotland. With arrangements mixing traditional and modern influences, this is musical global warming at its finest.

TIME OUT

Natacha Atlas
★★★★★
Ana Hina World Village
Having previously set her Middle Eastern songs to electronic beats, the woman who once described herself as 'a human Gaza Strip' (she has Muslim and Jewish ancestry and now lives in, er, Essex) makes her first acoustic album, inspired (except for a great version of the folk standard 'Black is The Colour') by the Egyptian sounds of the '50s and '60s. Her voice is as fluid and curvaceous as ever, but for the first time the crisp arrangements reveal the drama in the detail. *Bella Todd*

OBSERVER

16 NATACHA ATLAS
Ana Hina (World Village)
A ★★★★★
 After previous loop-heavy albums, Atlas takes an intriguing career pivot with a superbly produced acoustic album. She leads us to an imaginary cafe that could be in the Lebanon, but as well as the Fairuz covers there is a Nina Simone song, tinges of tango and a delicious setting of a Frida Kahlo poem. Exquisite and courageous. **Peter Culshaw**

SONGLINES

REVIEWS
Middle East
Natacha Atlas
Ana Hina
World Village 450005
Full Price 155 mins
★★★★★
Musical maverick takes a turn towards the acoustic
Quite apart from her own prodigious talent, Natacha Atlas has always been extremely shrewd in her choice of musical partners. Jah Wobble, Nitin Sawhney and Transglobal Underground are but some of them and, on her latest recording, she adds the maverick arranger Harvey Brough to the list. At first listening, *Ana Hina* seems to represent an abrupt left turn, as there is not a loping drum-loop to be heard and droning synthesizers are replaced by a tastefully arranged string quartet. And, while half of the tracks are Arab classics, many of the arrangements owe more to tango than *raqs sharki*. Not that any of this should surprise us, for Atlas has always been an unashamed magpie when looking for inspiration.
The influence of Lebanese superstar Fairuz is never far away and three of the songs are by her mentors and composers, the Rahbani Brothers. However, where their orchestrations can drown you in syrupy sweetness, these renditions have a steely restraint. There have been moments in Atlas' recent albums when she has edged towards the maudlin but here we find a deeper wisdom and even *joie-de-vivre* in its place. She clearly enjoyed working with a new team of musicians, and most notable amongst these is the singer and guitarist, Clara Sanabras. A darling of the early music fraternity, her contributions are utterly enchanting and the duet on 'La Vida Callada' is pure delight. Just as Natacha Atlas' future looked a little uncertain, she presents us with something alluring, intriguing and extremely witty.
Bill Badley
TOP OF THE WORLD ALBUM
TRACK 3
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BBC - WORLD REVIEW 03/11/2008 - MARTIN LONGLEY

Singer Natacha Atlas is now recording in London rather than Cairo, but perversely this is her most traditionally Arabic album, at least in terms of its nostalgia. Working with musical director Harvey Brough, she's chosen a classicist acoustic approach, as opposed to her usual electronic reinventions of Middle Eastern and North African sounds. Natacha's fluttering voice is very prominent in the mix, allowing the space to savour every detail of her ornamented phrasing. Around half of the songs have a 1940s or 50s aura, sensitively interpreted by an orchestra of serpentine strings, ney flute, oud, percussion and a horn section that includes Julian Siegel. The Egyptian star Gamal Al Kordy makes a notable contribution on accordion; an apt inclusion given his involvement in many of the original recordings of these songs.

It's not all Arabic traditionalism, though. The Atlas/Brough songwriting partnership has produced four originals and a pair of arrangements, which revisit ancient folk forms, both Western and Eastern. Two of the originals possess strange echoes of other songs, with the title track evoking both Jacques Brel and James Brown's *It's A Man's World*.

A reading of *Black Is The Colour* follows Nina Simone's formula; just voice, piano and strings, sung in English. There's also an eerie version of a Frida Kahlo poem, in its original Spanish, sung as a duo with baroque guitarist and oud player Clara Sanabras, who this time opts for a pinging ukulele. And then, Brough re-arranges *Hayati Inta*, taken from the last Atlas album, driving all night down the highway of doom. *El Asil*, from the book of Egyptian singer Abdul Halim Hafez, is followed by a lush arrangement of a tune that's at least 500 years old, with an exquisite ney/accordion conversation as its introduction. Such diversity might sound excessive in print, but the experience of gliding down these wayward alleyways produces a seamless sensation of high creativity, tastefully programmed. *Ana Hina* is set to be one of the year's finest albums.

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THE TIMES - 24/05/2008 - DAVID HUTCHEON

Atlas's seventh album feels like the most satisfying work of her career. Backed by an acoustic group, she channels the spirits of Arab superstars Abdel Halim Hafez and Fairuz on Beny Ou Benak Eih and La Shou El Haki respectively. But the new song sandwiched between them, Ana Hina, is even better. A cover of Black is the Colour is a smart counterpoint to the Mediterranean feel of the

rest of the album, but the standout moment is La Vida Callada, a dramatic duet with the Spaniard Clara Sanabras, based on a Frida Kahlo poem. All in all, rather wonderful.

DAILY TELEGRAPH - 24/05/2008 - MARK HUDSON

Born in Brussels of Egyptian and British parents, but raised in Northampton, singer Natacha Atlas became the face of the 1990s world-dance-fusion scene with digital adventurers Transglobal Underground. But here, after a string of patchy pop crossover albums, she goes with the world music zeitgeist, taking a more rootsy, acoustic approach - but with a contemporary twist.

Nay flute, wheezing accordion and elegantly sleazy strings create a sultry, retro-cabaret feel into which Atlas and arranger Harvey Brough throw blues and Celtic elements and a beautifully moody tribute to Nina Simone. If Atlas's voice sounds underpowered at times, her high-pitched warble wreathes itself around these intricate melodies in a way that suits their mood of dark nostalgia.

FINANCIAL TIMES - 24/05/2008 - DAVID HONIGMAN

Natacha Atlas has lent her trademark vocals - never taking the direct route between two notes when fractal quarter-tone deviations are possible - to a bewildering array of settings, from beat-laden dance to ambient to orchestral. Ana Hina is her first fully acoustic album, with a series of painstaking arrangements from Harvey Brough. Many of the songs are Arabic classics; one new composition, "He Hesitated", imagines a marine pausing on the threshold before kicking down a door.

Let's talk perfection here for a moment. Natacha Atlas could record an a cappella rendering of the Wasilla, Alaska telephone directory and you'd want to own a copy. The voice of the Belgian-born Atlas is that good. Here, with the Marzeeka Ensemble, she has achieved a balanced and satisfying collection of Arabic-styled retropop songs. The album has the flow of a well-told story, with each song showcasing Atlas's acclaimed vocals. Atlas and her backing ensemble will leave you with a new appreciation for the style of Arabic popular song recorded decades ago!

Ana Hina culls from the catalog of Lebanese singer Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers, her frequent composers. It includes the opening cover of "Ya Laure Hobouki" ("Oh, Laura, my love to you") and later "La Shou El Haki" ("Why the need to talk") and "La Feetab Alayi" ("Don't blame me"). Add in a pair of songs recorded by Abdul Halim Hafez, "Beny Ou Benak Eih" ("What's between me and you? I wish you'd tell me.") and "El Asil" ("Sunset"), and you will know for certain that Atlas has benefited from her time in Cairo immersed in Arabic music and culture. She would have a winner with only this material, but her other selections for Ana Hina are equally imaginative. An arrangement by Harvey Brough based on a Nina Simone solo piano version of the Appalachian folk song "Black Is the Colour" finds a perfect home here, as does "La Vida Callada" ("The unspoken life"), a poem from the diary of Frida Kahlo sung by the gorgeous voice of Clara Sanabras, who weaves her vocal threads with Atlas's. There is more to hear and you should hear it all!

The Marzeeka Ensemble is a huge part of the Ana Hina milestone. Harvey Brough has already been mentioned. The accordion of Gamal Al Kordy is as tasteful as you will ever hear and blends with the rest of the crew for phenomenal results. Fairuz herself would have been impressed by the strings of Peter Hanson (violin), Everton Nelson (violin), Julian Ferraretto (violin), Bruce White (viola), and Ian Burdge (cello). Roy Dodds (percussion), Aly el Minyawa (percussion, backing vocals), Andy Hamill (bass), Clara Sanabras (baroque guitar, guitar, and oud in addition to vocals), and the brass of Dave Prisemen (flugelhorn, trumpet) and Julian Siegel (tenor saxophone, clarinet, soprano saxophone) and Antonio Gil Martinez (backing vocals on "La Vida Callada") complete the ensemble.