

## **European music critics praise Saharawi singer and activist, Mariem Hassan, for her latest album, 'Shouka'**

By CARLOS FUENTES in [Publico](#), Madrid, 19<sup>th</sup> Dec 2010  
(Translated by Nina Murray, Sandblast)

The Spanish album of the year is Saharawi. 'Shouka', the third album from exiled singer, Mariem Hassan, has become a benchmark in 2010 for world music produced in Spain. 50 journalists from 20 European radio stations have chosen it as the fourth best world music album of the season, beaten only by Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars (Rise and Shine), Hindi Zahra (Handmade) and Ali Farka Touaré with Toumani Diabaté (Ali & Toumani) in a final selection of 200 albums from a total of 866 entries. "That traditional Saharawi music is recognised all over the world makes me proud; it fills me with joy to see my people happy", said Mariem Hassan by telephone from a refugee camp in Tindouf (Algeria). "Shouka is the thorn our side, since Spain abandoned us and forgot about us", she said.

Mariem Hassan is a daughter of the Saharawi diaspora. She was born in 1958 in the [Western Saharan] city of Smara, in what was formerly known as province number 53 of Spain. At 17 she fled into exile, crammed with her family into vehicles belonging to her two brothers, ex-soldiers in the Spanish Sahara. Hassan spent 30 years in Tindouf until she moved to Sabadell [some 30km from Barcelona] eight years ago, where she now lives with her two children. She first began to sing with the group, 'El-Ouali the Martyr', with whom she recorded 'Victory for the Polisario', in 1982. Six years later she collaborated on the compilation album of female Saharawi voices, '*A pesar de nuestras heridas*' (Despite our Wounds), and in 2002, she joined guitarist Nayim Alal's group, Leyoad.

### **Spokesperson for the Sahara**

She recorded her last offering, solo album '*Deseos*' (Desires), in Madrid in 2005. Over the years, following a serious battle with cancer, her hoarse and earthy song has become a mouthpiece for the woes of her people. "When the war broke out, music was used to cheer people up during those difficult times. And it has accompanied us in our exile", explains Mariem Hassan. "I sing about life, our traditions, but I also sing about resistance. I am happy that 'Shouka' lets the world know that there is a people who lives in the desert and hasn't forgotten how to sing."

In her album, Hassan picks up the thread of a historical complaint: Spain's unfulfilled promises. And she does it with courageous condemnation. The title song ('thorn', in the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic), reminds listeners of the historical speech made by Felipe Gonzalez [ex-Spanish Prime Minister] on the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1976 in the refugee camps: "For us", the then leader of the Spanish Socialist Party is heard saying, "it is no longer about the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination, but rather it is about accompanying you in your struggle to final victory". But victory never came.

“Shouka is our thorn, the thorn that we carry in our sides ever since Gonzalez visited us and told us that, when he wins, the Saharawi will return to the Sahara, that he would help us. But he won and he forgot to help us”, laments Mariem Hassan. “All the Spanish governments have abandoned us. In Spain they know that the Sahara belongs to the Saharawi, and that we have the right to recover it. We have spent 35 years in the desert; we are refugees. We have been abandoned and we have had enough of waiting”, insists the singer.

But reality is stronger than desire. The latest test has been recent Moroccan repression in the protest camp outside Layounne. “Agdaym Izik”, says Mariem Hassan, “is another key in the Saharawi conflict, just like [Aminatou] Haidar was. They are keys that leave a door open for the world to see what is really happening inside the occupied Sahara. Right now the prisons are full of kids, young people, women, children... they ransacked Saharawi homes to detain men. Why does Morocco want to kill us?”