

RANGO

Trance-inducing music from Sudanese mystic healing ceremonies, hip-quaking Nubian wedding melodies, ritualistic tales of an Arabian Dracula and songs recounting the mysterious disappearance of sardine rations in the Egyptian army – all played on vintage 190-year-old rango xylophone with spirit manifesting gourd resonators, simsimiyya & tanbura lyres retrofitted with electric pickups, and shakers made from recycled aerosol cans, performed by the Cairo-based RANGO collective.

Sudanese music migrated to Egypt as the by-product of two waves of mass immigration following Mohammed Ali's conquest of Sudan in 1820. The Egyptian ruler decreed that Sudan pay a tax in the form of slave workers to serve in the Egyptian army and musicians amongst the reluctant recruits bought folk melodies and instruments from Sudan to Egypt, creating a new repertoire of songs in exile which told of their longing to return to their homelands along with humorous marching refrains which helped pass the long hours of military service. Later, during the 1860s the growing market for Egyptian cotton led to a second influx of workers and the slave communities sought solace from the harsh realities of their everyday lives through the music of the outlawed *Zar* ritual, a healing communion with unseen entities which was thought to cleanse the soul and relieve suffering.

Musicians and *Zar* practitioners alike believed invisible spirits and Djinn (Genies) could manifest through the music performed at the *Zar*, and as such the musical instruments associated with these rituals were revered for their magical ability to transcend different realms and dimensions. It was thought that Sudanese spirits could cross the threshold into this world through the huge gourd resonators which hung under the wooden keys of a Sudanese xylophone called the rango and from the vibrations produced by the plucking of the strings on a ritual lyre called tanbura.

Following the abolition of the slave trade in Egypt towards the end of the 19th century, Diaspora communities from Sudan, Ethiopia and other African nations congregated in the Egyptian cities of Cairo, Ismailia and Alexandria. *Zar* chants from the former cotton workers, Sudanese folk melodies from the conscripts and popular Nubian songs evolved into a new form of dance music heard at Sudanese wedding celebrations and other social events, performed on rango and tanbura and accompanied by ritual percussionists and dancers.

While this fusion of sacred and secular music was well received in the Sudanese communities, there was much widespread concern about *Zar* in wider Egyptian society. Sudanese musicians held a complex belief system that had evolved over several centuries combining elements of shamanic-type practices along with recognition of Muslim prophets and Christian spirits – ultimately worshiping a trinity of Gods: Yawra Bey, the king of the Muslim Spirits, the child spirit Lady Racosha and Red Djinn, leader of the Christian spirit world in Sudan.

While the code of the *Zar* master, or sanger, forbade sensitive ritual melodies being performed at public celebrations, unfounded murmurings and whispers in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s about the music's role in the enchantment of husbands, lovers and black magic ceremonies (fuelled by an unfavourable portrayal of *Zar* musicians in Egyptian cinema) drove its practitioners underground - fearing persecution from a society that did not understand the complexities of Sudanese mysticism.

Rango-driven wedding celebrations continued to be performed widely until the 1960s, until this strand of Sudanese music faced a separate threat to the religious opposition towards Zar. The rango instrument was made with a special type of gourd resonator fashioned from a Sudanese vegetable not found in Egypt and as such the only rangos in circulation were fragile, vintage instruments from Sudan. Gradually, the old instruments began to break, largely due to the relentless pummelling they were subjected to during frenzied performances at weddings. Musicians in Ismailia experimented with making a new instrument called *kazan* using recycled tuna cans and wooden boxes as resonators but found the younger generation of Sudanese musicians were uninterested in playing the new invention. With the passing of many old masters in the 1970s both the knowledge to construct instruments and the undocumented repertoire of Rango songs in Egypt were lost to history. Coupled with the popularity of guitars, accordions and the growing dominance of Arabian pop music, the rango fell from favour, its magical properties forgotten, and by the late 1970s it became all but extinct in Egypt.

It was not until the production of a documentary on this long-lost music for Nile TV in the 1990s, that the last surviving player of the rango, the enigmatic Hassan Bergamon was rediscovered living in Cairo. During filming, the TV crew recorded the recollections of a legendary *simsimiyya* musician from Ismailia called Mohammed Waziery who spoke with great nostalgia and respect for the melodies performed on the rango, mentioning in passing the name of a young musician whom he had once studied under a rango master from Ismailia.

Until this point it was commonly assumed that the rango and her masters had been dead for nearly twenty years. Several researchers had tried in vain to uncover living practitioners and the hiding place of surviving instruments, but the rango remained lost. Inspired by Waziery's passion for the music of the rango, folk music researcher Zakaria Ibrahim set about tracking down Hassan Bergamon.

Bergamon had been a devotee of the rango since his early years, having skipped school to practice the rango and then perform at wedding parties through the night in his hometown of Ismailia. Although Hassan's mother was a fourth generation Zar Sanger, his aptitude towards music led to some family tensions. Hassan's uncle would apparently lock the door of the family house at night in a bid to stop his nephew's obsession with the instrument, but Hassan would escape with his mother's help by climbing out of a back window using a rope ladder and continued to play the instrument under the guidance of master rango musician Mohamed Almaz. When the residents of Ismailia were evacuated from the city in 1967, following the six-day Arab/Israeli War, Hassan was relocated to Cairo where he continued to play rango in a group led by Baba Abas Mastora but as interest in the instrument declined Hassan retired from performing rango to concentrate on playing percussion and singing in Zar ceremonies.

Following the completion of the TV documentary Hassan began to assemble a new band, supported by Zakaria's El Mastaba centre for Egyptian folk music (home to Port Said's *El Tanbura* and *Bedouin Jerry Can Band* from El Arish). Incredibly, after a long quest in the Zar communities of Cairo and Alexandria, Hassan and Zakaria managed to locate and secure two rango xylophones (complete with their original vintage gourd resonators) which were entrusted to the collections of the Mastaba centre by the families of former masters who had kept the instruments following the passing of the old musicians back in the 1970s. With this vital musical link to the

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past re-established the new band began to take shape, comprising veteran drummers and Zar singers, along with a floating collective of singers and ritual dancers wearing mangor belts made from goat horns & playing shakers fashioned from empty insect replant cans filled with shells.

Hassan's *Rango* ensemble made their stage debut in Egypt in 2001 and have since appeared at prestigious venues including *The Great Library* in Alexandria and *The Palace of Prince Taz* in Cairo. In the autumn of 2009 the collective made a triumphant month-long tour of the United Kingdom, which included a sell-out show at the Barbican's *Transcender Festival*.

Bride of the Zar is their debut album.

Contact:

Michael Whitewood

30IPS

Tel: 0044 7789 391 001

Email: michael@30ips.com

www.30ips.com/rango



RANGO *Bride of the Zar* UK PRESS: CD REVIEWS

SONGLINES MAGAZINE



“Music that penetrates the bones like an X-ray”
“An album of huge variety, energy and depth”

Rango is the name of a wooden xylophone and of a tradition that stretches back to Sudanese tribal culture, to forgotten languages and the cryptic liturgy embedded in the cult of the zar. It's a ritual trance ceremony believed to cleanse the soul and relieve suffering – a form of therapy by way of tambura, simsimiyya (lyre) and, of course, the rango, instead of a psychiatrist's chair. *Bride of the Zar* follows on from a thrilling EP released last autumn to coincide with the Rango tour. Anyone who saw their gig at the Transcender Weekender in London will know how hypnotic, entrancing and often wildly ebullient a musical spectacle it is. This is music that penetrates the bones like an X-ray. The rango, played by Hassan Bergamon from Ismailia in Egypt, has bulbous gourd resonators under the wooden keys, reputedly inhabited by the spirits of the Rango masters who previously played them. The only three such instruments known to exist are each at least 150 years old, and Bergamon is the last living master of a fascinating and truly magical tradition that all but died out almost 40 years ago. A haunted, heavyweight tambura rhythm opens the album as Bergamon gravely appeals to the zar spirits, so they might manifest themselves through the powerful vibrations of the strings. On 'Holeela', befeathered frontman TuTu plugs in a gloriously frenetic electric simsimiyya, while turbo-charged singer Sheikha Zanieb sandblasts the studio mics with a zar song about the suffering of women on 'Free Mind'. Revealing of both the social and sacred traditions of rango, it's an album of huge variety, energy and depth.

****Tim Cumming

Published in Songlines Magazine Issue 68 June 2010



“Electrified sound as heard in Cairo's Sudanese quarter ”

Deep, trance-like Rango may be from Egypt but they play music brought in by 19th-century Sudanese immigrants. The group is named after a xylophone instrument with phallic resonating gourds. Rango player Hassan Bergamon is the last of his kind. The music was played for healing ceremonies called zar and the woman on whom it was focused — the “bride of the zar” — often went into trance. Other tracks feature the electrified sound as heard in Cairo's Sudanese quarter. With bluesy vocals, plucked tanbura, vibrant percussion and funky rango, this music is so powerful the Egyptian studio feared they might get possessed by spirits.

****Simon Broughton **Published in the London Evening Standard Friday 30 April 2010**



“Witty and life-affirming”

The voodoo party brew of Sudanese/Egyptian collective Rango, *Bride Of The Zar* (30IPS) is a fabulously irreverent, vivacious collection, with highlights including *Major* (which transforms a military march into a frisky rhythm), the jubilation of *Henna Night* and *Baladia Wey*.

The songs bring together rabble-rousing exhortations (mostly delivered by the band’s frontman/dancer TuTu), Islamic traditions, folk superstitions and nostalgic melodies: it’s a deeply unusual yet witty and life-affirming blend.

Arwa Haider **Published in Metro 23 April 2010**



“Polyrhythmic explosions of love, possession and pure joy”

CD of the Week

Rango, led by Hassan Bergamon, delve into their sacred, magical repertoire as well as music from street weddings and half-remembered Sudanese army songs. *Bride of the Zar* (a magico-healing ceremony) delivers a wide palette of sounds, which range from a slave’s entreaty to old gods, to polyrhythmic explosions of love, possession and pure joy.

Tim Cumming

Published in The Independent 1 May 2010

The Daily Telegraph

“Leaves you itching to hear this live”

Based around a 190-year-old xylophone through which spirits are believed to manifest themselves when played, this Sudanese trance music has a spacey, elemental drive reminiscent of cult Congolese sound system Konono No1. The tumbling syncopations playing off against grinding amplified pharaonic harps and hyped up voices create a mood of mass exaltation that leaves you itching to hear this live.

****Mark Hudson Published in The Daily Telegraph 8 May 2010

FINANCIAL TIMES

“An intent trance”

Once, all the best Nubian weddings resounded to the rango, a vintage wooden xylophone with gourd resonators. But with the rise of DJs playing Arabic pop, the instrument fell into disuse. Rango, the group, are reviving it, under the hammers of its last surviving player, Hassan Bergamon. *Bride Of The Zar* sets the rango against the Egyptian lute, the simsimiyya, and clouds of percussion. The album passes in an intent trance, with truculent songs of the Sudanese in Egyptian exile, culminating in an erotic wedding dance.

****David Honigman Published in The Financial Times 24 April 2010

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

“Irresistibly cheerful”

A zar is a healing ceremony, traditionally practiced by women in Egypt; in neighbouring Sudan, it's been officially proscribed because the tanbura is seen as socially subversive.

Rango denotes the nine-member collective supporting Hassan Bergamon, the sole surviving player of this instrument, which he learnt to play clandestinely, gradually developing the repertoire we hear here. The songs all follow a call-and-response structure, and the music is rough hewn, but the atmosphere is irresistibly cheerful.

Michael Church Published in The Independent On Sunday 8 August 2010