



Y.A.S: loud and strong

THE SULTRY LEBANESE VOCALIST IS CONQUERING THE WORLD

Getting in touch with Yasmine Hamdan (known in the music world as Y.A.S) is virtually impossible. Earlier this year she was walking the red carpet at the Cannes Festival with her beau, Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman. More recently, she gave her first TV interview on France 2 while backed up by rehearsals. Later she was rehearsing again before running off to a dinner. Then she was off to Marseille for a promo trip. Afterward she gave Y.A.S's first major concert at the Nouveau Casino.

It's a hectic rhythm, but Hamdan is not complaining. Since the launch of Y.A.S's *Arabology*, an Arabic electro-pop album, the Lebanese singer has become a star. The album's producer, Mirwais, is a music legend credited for many of Madonna's biggest hits, including "Music." The label is Universal. Hamdan was featured on the covers of French rock bible *Les Inrocks* and *Trax* magazine, minimalist clothing showing off her sexy curves. Star photographer Jean-Baptiste Mondino shot her portrait. Celebrated director Stéphane Sednaoui created the clip of the hit "Get it Right." She has her own personal stylist, Laila Smarra.

At 33, and only four years after moving to Paris from Beirut, the sultry brunette's dream of modernizing the tradition of Arabic song has come true. But while her previous Soapkills project mixed trip-hop and languorous vocals, Y.A.S is a wild mix of electro punk, pop and addictive hooks that just make you want to get up and dance. Hamdan grew up between Greece, the Arabian Gulf states and Lebanon; Mirwais is Afghani, Italian and French. With that multicultural approach and influences ranging from Billie Holiday to Kraftwerk, Oum Kalthoum, Daft Punk and Arvo Part, Y.A.S strives to create a new kind of fusion between East and West. Just don't pin the "World Music" tag on her work.

"It's a bit of a strange project, that's why it's so exciting," says Hamdan as I catch her running to her Montorgueil street flat between two appointments. "You can really have fun mixing different worlds." Hamdan doesn't find such a task daunting, nor is she worried about being out of her comfort zone. On the album she easily goes from singing in popular Palestinian, Egyptian or Lebanese. And electro-pop wasn't really in her register when Mirwais approached her, but she quickly turned around playful, rhythmical songs that could work on faster beats.

On "Yaspop," she reinterpreted one of her favorite childhood songs, "There's a Fly in My Panties." The result: a socio-political comment on Middle-Eastern conflicts. "There's an American in my garden...There's an Afghani in my purse...A Syrian in the Litani river...An Egyptian in my bra." On "A-man," a free interpretation of Kraftwerk's "Man Machine," Hamdan drew inspiration from the jazz classic "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," on which Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald argue about different pronunciations of tomato, potato and vanilla. The result: a song contrasting different Arabic dialects and subtly addressing social taboos like politics and sex.

But while the French media promptly labeled *Arabology* an "anti-integrist" manifesto, Hamdan insists that the political angle is just one of the many themes on the album. "I can't ignore what's going around me," she says. "I think there's a whole generation in the Middle East that can identify with our songs. I always try to have many layers to my songs."

And with her deep, sensual voice, lustrous jet mane, almond-shaped eyes and provocative stance, Hamdan might just be the woman of choice to sugarcoat this controversial message, especially in the Middle-East. A Shia Muslim living in Paris' hippest area (the second arrondissement), singing in Arabic about eroticism, politics and other taboos, she's the perfect ambassador for Lebanon's chaotic but seductive culture.

Shirine Saad