

Finding My Religion:

DJ Cheb I Sabbah on the sacredness of dance clubs and his own spiritual life

David Ian Miller

Mix devotional songs from ancient cultures with modern electronic house rhythms and what do you get? If you're the Algerian-born San Francisco DJ Cheb i Sabbah you get modern music that preserves the integrity of the original, a global fusion of prayers to a consortium of deities, a sacred soundtrack with an irresistible dance beat.

Cheb i Sabbah, 60, recently released "Devotion," his seventh album on Six Degrees Records. Recorded and produced entirely in Delhi, India, "Devotion" fuses music from India's religious traditions — Hinduism, Sikhism and Sufi Islam — with electronica. On Tuesday nights he spins North African, Middle Eastern and South Asian beats at Nickie's Bar in the Lower Haight, as he has for almost two decades.

I spoke with Cheb i Sabbah by phone about the sacredness of dance clubs, the divine feminine, his Vedic and Jewish spiritual practices, and the transformative power of music.

The Wikipedia entry on you says that you became a DJ "more or less by accident." Is that true?

It is more than less true. There were little groups of friends of mine who used to go to hairdressing classes at night. This was when I was 15 years old. We would work six days a week at salons, and two or three nights a week we went to classes so we could get our perm and coloring certificates, things like that. And one of us gave up hairdressing and became a DJ and photographic assistant. I was always with him at his club when he was spinning, and one time he had to do a shoot with his photographer for a few days, and he said, "You have to replace me." Fortunately I knew all the music. So I did it. And from there I founded my own club and became a DJ.

When you are working at a club, what sort of experience are you hoping to create for people?

An experience of community, of sharing something that is a gift — that's the goal, really. As a DJ you have one or two hours when you have this fantastic feeling of participating in a kind of trance. That feeling is largely missing in Western culture — it's also being lost in the other cultures where it actually came from. Before and after that experience you go back to the everyday, which is all up and down for all of us.

The life of the DJ or of a musician is like everybody else, but you have those times, those windows, where you actually share the music and you participate in a kind of ritual. I'm not talking about Friday night disco dancing, which is fine. I guess it's needed; people need to let go. Clubs are the places that, instead of going to the square in the village and celebrating something that has to do with nature or the seasons or marriage, in the West we often go to clubs to find this kind of communion.

It sounds like you're describing a club as if it were a temple.

Well, there is a connection. I actually did a CD release party in San Francisco for "Devotion" at a club called Temple. The main room, where we had 1,200 people, was decorated like a shrine.

What was the inspiration for "Devotion"?

I had made a couple of albums previous to "Devotion" in India. One was based on the raga, the classical form of religious music in northern India, and the other was based on bhajan, which are devotional songs. "Devotion" is a third form of singing in India, called kirtan. It's also devotional, but it's call and response. So the idea was that this album would form a trilogy of sorts. Also, I wanted to include music representing the three major faiths in India — Hindu, Sufi Islam and Sikh.

What attracts you to Indian devotional music?

If you look at Indian music, it's really all based on ragas and devotional songs. That's true of the music in neighboring countries as well, like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal. Even though the religions are different, the music comes from basically the same source. I think there's a power in that.

Can you tell me about your process of creating a recording? How do you choose what musicians to work with, and what do you tell the musicians about the goal of the project?

The musicians on "Devotion" are specific ones that I knew or wanted to work with. For example, Anup Jalota, who plays two tracks on the album, is one of the biggest kirtan and bhajan singers in India. Some of the other singers on the album work in and out of Bollywood, so everyone is very professional, and it all came together pretty quickly once I explained to them what I wanted to do. Then it was a matter of matching the musicians that I thought would work best with each specific song. Step three was adding the electronic part.

These devotional songs are generally heard in temples, concert halls and homes. How does bringing them into the studio and adding an electronic element affect their sacredness, if at all?

Well, I think the electronic part enables me to expose these artists to a different public in the West that wouldn't otherwise be aware of it. And that helps both the music and the musicians who are playing it.

Let's talk about your background. You grew up in Algeria during the 1950s and '60s, and your family were Berber Jews. What was it like being a Jew in Algeria at that time?

It was a lot better than in the previous century. A century before, generally speaking, for Jews in Algeria and in a lot of different Arab lands, it was a question of who was ruling. Is the person sympathetic, neutral or hateful toward the Jews? In Algeria, Jews lived in what we call the mela (ghetto) under the most poor, dirty conditions, with very little education. They were basically second-class citizens. But that changed in 1870, when there was a whole system of assimilation that was put into place by the French government. Jews at that time were automatically given French nationality.

Was your family very religious?

Not Orthodox, but very observant. We kept kosher and went to shul (synagogue), you know, for all the holidays — weddings, bar mitzvahs, circumcisions and all that ... I remember that I always prayed before I went to bed. By the time I got to class to learn Hebrew for my bar mitzvah, it was very emotional for me. I guess I was already a believer in something higher than myself.

Your family eventually fled to Paris, two years before France ceded its former territory to Arab nationalists. How did the war affect you?

The Algerian War was a major factor in everybody's lives. My uncle had a little hairdresser shop, and his place was bombed. At around the same time there was a really important classical singer, Cheb Raymond, a Jew, who was assassinated. That was another signal that it was time to leave, at least for the Jews.

The Jews were kind of caught in the middle during the war. On the one hand you had the right-wing French extremists, and on the other side you had the Arab Muslims. By 1960, my father could see where things were going, and he moved us to Paris. I was 13 when I left Algeria. We left by boat, with just a mattress and a few boxes.

Do you still consider yourself a Jew?

Yes, of course. I'm not as religious as my parents, but that doesn't mean I'm any less Jewish. I observe the main holidays, but I've also delved into other practices.

You discovered Vedic culture in India in the '60s. How did that happen?

Well, the '60s of course was an opening to the Eastern philosophies for many of us. There was a search going on for new ideas and ways of looking at yourself. So we went to Morocco and looked, went to India and looked, and based on what I saw and understood I opted for an Eastern approach. I think maybe if I had stayed in Algeria I might not have discovered all that, but being in Paris in the 1960s, and then

coming to America in 1968, and being in the middle of musicians and performing theater, that is what you encountered and that's who you met.

There were many different associations, different trips over the years. At some point the mother of my children and I were caretakers for Lama Govinda, here in Mill Valley. Lama Govinda was this great Austrian Buddhist who went to Sri Lanka in the '30s and became a Tibetan master. At another point, I was also the head cook at Zen Center in San Francisco.

What appealed to you about Vedic culture, in particular?

One thing was how old it is — how it influenced so much about the Near East, Middle East and Europe. I read recently that most languages in the world have Sanskrit words or roots. So, to me, it was like going back to the source. The music was another thing that attracted me. So was the fact that in Vedic culture there is a special place for worshipping the feminine. It's like the male doesn't exist without the female and vice versa. They are not divided, and they are worshipped equally. I think this is largely missing in monotheistic traditions.

You are still practicing the Vedic path. What does that involve?

It involves a certain practice with mantras, repetition of sacred syllables. And it involves the way you eat. Ayurveda is a big part of the Vedic lifestyle because food is the number one medicine, and for me that includes a strict vegetarian diet. I also do what's called Bhakti yoga, which is the yoga of devotion.

I take it that this isn't the kind of yoga that most people know about in this country, which involves mainly physical poses.

It's a whole other thing. Hatha yoga is good for staying in shape, but that's not what is going to bring you to enlightenment. Bhakti yoga is the way we try to fully surrender, which is the most difficult thing for any and all of us, because the ego is always there. We always feel like, "Oh I'm doing pretty well. I'm doing yoga. I'm doing this or that." But without totally surrendering, it doesn't mean much.

Surrendering to what or whom?

To your deity or to the mother, which in India they call "ma."

You have been a featured artist of venues like the Arab Film Festival, the Arab American National Museum. As a Jewish DJ, albeit one who has incorporated elements of Eastern spirituality into your life, how do you explain your appeal to Arab fans?

When it comes to music, there isn't a lot of difference between Jews and Arabs, at least not for Jewish DJs and musicians coming from an Arab land. During the '60s, there was a slogan created by Jews in France that you'd see in books and movies: "We are all Arab Jews."

What does that mean?

That means you are a Jew from an Arab land, but your culture is basically the same. You eat the same, you dress the same. The religion is different, but it doesn't matter. If you are Cheb Khaled or Rachid Taha, the two biggest Algerian singers, thousands of people will go to see them and millions know about them. And if you look at their band, half of the members are Jewish. Jews and Arabs have always made music together and they have learned from each other. You see the same thing in India. You have Hindus and Muslims. They learn from each other, they play together, There is no problem.

The Jewish holiday of Passover is coming up a couple of weeks. Will you be having a seder?

Yes. I'll be with the mother of my children, my children and my grandchildren.

And what kind of seder will you be doing?

It will be simple vegetarian food. And the ceremony will probably be mostly in English, so everybody can follow along. It is a celebration, as everybody knows, about moving from bondage to freedom and all that. That's the important message. To me, it doesn't matter really what language it is.

It's a sort of a universal story, isn't it? The story of a people — in this case the Jews — who were enslaved and seeking freedom from their oppressors, which took a lot of time, 40 years in the desert, to achieve.

The struggle of the Jews at that time is no different than the situation for many people today — the Tibetans struggle with the Chinese, for example. I think it's important to make clear that different people struggle at different times. When it comes down to it, we are all human, and we have the same joys and aspirations and we are hit by all these negative things that may happen to us — diseases, old age, death. But besides that there are some people right now who are maybe tortured or killed or maimed ... people in prison. I think it's important on Passover to be reminded of all that. This relates to the whole planet, not just Jews.

Will there be any music at your seder?

Yeah. I mean, there could be. Actually, I have a very beautiful tape of another Moroccan Jewish singer doing the seder.

I was thinking you might be singing, not DJ'ing, but maybe not.

Well, when I get into it, I do like to take off (with singing). I have all of this music stored in me, music that I grew up with and that we always heard around the house or at weddings and bar mitzvahs.

So maybe it will come out again?

Oh, it always comes out. It always does.

Finding My Religion wants to hear from you. Send comments on stories and suggestions for interview subjects to miller@sfgate.com.

During his far-flung career in journalism, Bay Area writer and editor David Ian Miller has worked as a city hall reporter, personal finance writer, cable television executive and managing editor of a technology news site. His writing credits include Salon.com, Wired News and The New York Observer.

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