

Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila hit out at 'racist' rhetoric

India Stoughton

January 15, 2017 Updated: January 15, 2017 04:55 PM

They've been called "the lost voice of a disenfranchised generation", "the voice of the Arab Spring", and the band "out to stir a musical rebellion in the Middle East".

Over the past year, they've sold out venues across the United States and Europe, singing exclusively in Arabic as they toured to promote their fourth album, Ibn El Leil (Son of the Night).

Lebanon's Mashrou' Leila have come a long way since they began jamming together at the American University of Beirut in 2008, and these days they find themselves at the centre of a media storm.

They have been characterised as rebellious, ground-breaking, provocative, controversial and even revolutionary – so it is easy to forget that the main reason they are among the most successful performers from the Arab world is the quality of their music.

Much of the rhetoric, according to the band's frontman Hamed Sinno, comes from international media.

"This sensationalism, it's almost racist," he says. "It's not OK to look at a band from the Arab world and say, 'This is just a band'. There almost has to be a justification for why people should listen to five brown males, and it's always that, 'This is the voice of the Arab Spring', or 'the sound of the underground' – and it's literally just untrue and extremely reductive.

"It's so perversely inconsiderate of all the people who have actually suffered and died and been imprisoned for voicing actual political opinions about the Arab Spring."

Sinno is speaking in the run-up to the band's next appearance in the UAE, where they will perform at the Wasla music festival at Dubai Media City Amphitheatre on January 20.

The band – which consists of Sinno and Haig Papazian, Carl Gerges, Firas Abou Fakher and Ibrahim Badr – is expected to perform a diverse set featuring tracks from their latest album and its predecessor, Raasük, as well as older favourites, including Fasateen and Raksit Leila.

The concert will be accompanied by a visual show made up of dozens of film clips tailored to match each track and drumbeat. It's a set that should showcase the evolution of the band's sound, which has moved away from its rock roots to become steadily more electronic, more complex and poppy.

Ibn El Leil was written over a period of two years, during which time Sinno was mourning the death of his dad in 2015.

"I think from the get-go it was very obvious that there was going to be more of a dancy, nightlife feel to a lot of the tracks because we were all in that place," he says.

"We were quite frankly just in clubs all the time, so it was fairly obvious from the beginning that it was going to have more influences from that kind of sound."

The album deals with serious themes: death and mourning, the dark side of drinking and club culture, and questions about identity and escape. The lyrics are poetic and at times esoteric, rich with metaphor and personal allusions. Musically, it is as lively and upbeat as ever, the driving beats and catchy melodies overlaid with the distinctive bittersweet wail of Papazian's violin. The result is an interesting tension between melody and meaning.

"It wasn't a conscious decision to contrast these things, but it probably just was where we were," says Sinno.

"It's funny when you think that these things that wouldn't necessarily go together are actually the way people live through stuff. Getting wasted all the time was actually part of the mourning process."

<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-life/music/lebanese-band-mashrou-leila-hit-out-at-racist-rhetoric>