

MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

WINNER

GHADA SHBEIR (LEBANON)

Ghada Shbeir's debut album *Al Muwashahat* was released in May 2006, just before her country was once again engulfed in war. A respected academic as well as a celebrated singer, Ghada Shbeir is considered one of the leading exponents of Arabo-Andalusian singing and Assyrian religious chants. *Al-Muwashahat* is the plural of *muwashah* ('melody'), a type of poetry-based song invented at the end of the 10th century in what is now Southern Spain. Some of the *muwashahat* on the album go back 1,000 years, but others are relatively recent compositions. Shbeir's swooping melismas get sparse, elegant backing from a small oriental *takht* of acoustic instruments – oud, violin, bass, qanun (plucked zither), ney (flute) and percussion.



RUNNERS UP

LES BOUKAKES (ALGERIA/FRANCE)

Les Boukakes consist of seven members from a variety of backgrounds – Tunisians, Corsicans, Italians and French – who came together to create a sound system that developed into a high-energy band. Their name is a response to unkind comments thrown at them: “boukake” being a phonetic mixture of two typical racist insults. Like Rachid Taha, Les Boukakes are intent on fusing North African grooves, rock guitars and lyrics sung in French and Arabic. Through their energy and musical directness Les Boukakes aim to represent a new multicultural Europe where many cultures blend rather than clash and everyone comes together to dance and celebrate.

NATACHA ATLAS (UK/EGYPT)

Natacha Atlas was born in Belgium, is of Middle Eastern descent, and has ancestral and family links to Egypt, Palestine and Morocco. Her experience of different cultures has most certainly influenced her music. Atlas's ability to blend Arabic music and contemporary Western pop have won her a wide international audience. Atlas is not only a gifted singer but one unafraid of pushing boundaries. This sense of adventure has found Atlas singing on such scores as *Stargate* and *Die Another Day*. Atlas's ability to break down borders and bring different cultures together was highlighted by her appointment to Goodwill Ambassador for the UN Conference Against Racism.

YASMIN LEVY (ISRAEL)

Yasmin Levy's music reaches back hundreds and hundreds of years. She sings in Ladino, the ancient language (a mix of Hebrew and Spanish) of the Sephardic Jews who arrived in Spain in 711 and lived there peacefully with the Islamic Moorish rulers, Christian Spaniards and Gypsies until the Christian re-conquest of 1492. Yasmin's music mixes Ladino verse with flamenco instrumentation: Yasmin is certain that the music that Andalusia's Jews and Moors and Gypsies created together hundreds of years ago helped shape flamenco as we know it. Yasmin has been awarded the Anna Lindh Award for promoting cross-cultural dialogue between musicians from three cultures.