

Tell Me Why

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (April 2022)



Marrakesh Midnight II, Andrew Roy Thackeray

*Tell me why you cried, and why you lied to me
Tell me why you cried, and why you lied to me
–Lennon and McCartney*

Marrakesh is a flat city, situated on a fertile plain that faces the distant Atlas mountains. It is a red city as its ancient ramparts, that still stand, are made from the sun-baked mud that is abundant in the vicinity.

I remember one day going for a long hike, out of the old city gates into the open no man's land between the old city and the

new. A group of Moroccan women, most unveiled, with colourful head bands and floral dresses were celebrating one of the stages of what looked like an all female pre-wedding celebration.

They were singing in the style of the Haouz which is the flat area around Marrakesh and that has its own musical style. The poly rhythmic clapping was like a Flamenco group with a touch of West African influence. I was mesmerized and stood a polite distance away as I was a single and unaccompanied man and did not want to violate the usually strict code of honour that separates men from women in this somewhat medieval society. I regretted the lack of a tape recorder as it would have worked had I had one.

One thin dark woman, who looked like a gypsy, eyed me warily at a distance. She sang and clapped her hands. She was the only one not looking at a woman in the centre of the group who I concluded must have been the bride to be. The cultural gap was enormous. There was no way I could honourably approach her and she could not come up to me and say as in Europe or North America, "Hello, I say you admiring our singing and clapping, why don't you come and join us."

No, I suspect she would carry the memory of me that day for some time to come. "Who was that bearded young man standing beside his bicycle? He must be some sort of Nsara (Christian) European. Is he married? Does he have children? If not, why? I have seen European films. Why cannot I invite him to join us. Maybe we would fall in love. Maybe he would convert to Islam and marry me? Maybe, maybe..."

As for me, if I had met her as I had managed to be a guest of a few traditional Muslim Arab and Berber families I would have discovered that she went to a local school, went to the mosque, visited the Gnawa spirit possession ceremonies, swooned to the latest Moroccan TV singer and dreamed of escaping to France or Spain. Hers is a world in transition,

following the patriarchal code, thinking it is right but perhaps feeling that somewhere, out there in the land of the infidels something too was right.

I stood there for as long as I could without appearing to gawk, and then slowly, reluctantly turned back. I got on my bike and drove to one of the gates of the old city. I got off my bike and started walking back to my house. I took out my key, opened the door and brought my bike into the sunny Moorish courtyard.

Zubeida was making tea and she had a plate of sweet pastry Gazelle horns that I gobbled down. The Radio was on and Haj Mohamed Bouzobaa the singer from Fez was singing. I had the daily paper *Le Monde Marocaine* beside the table and I read his obit:

Rabat – Haj Mohamed Bouzoubaa, the great master of the art of Malhoun, died early this morning in Fes at the age of 75. The deceased will be buried Wednesday after the Asr prayer at Al Lakbab cemetery in Fez. Born on August 20th, 1939, Haj Mohammed Bouzoubaa was a major figure in the art of Malhoun in Morocco. Bouzoubaa enriched the repertoire of the Fez radio with over 170 songs and Kassaides (poems). He also worked as a teacher of music at the Conservatory of Music in Fez.

I thought that perhaps I should go to the funeral but as I only had met and played with his students at the Conservatory I decided not to. I would send a card to the family.

I had been at the Conservatory learning how to sing and play an old Qasida, four hundred years old. I had worked out a rough translation of the some of the words with my teacher and I admired the way Bouzoubaa lingered on every word. Here is my rough translation. It needs a lot more work.

*Her beauty appears to the world clearly
See Mercury coming to you, O traveler
Above the globe, amazing ignorance
See Neptune lighting up the deserts
He put in creation, the rich who have everything.
See Saturn visibly coming towards you
Above the seven of perfect secrecy
War of men, O you who sleep,
See the movement of the stars
They enlightened with their brilliant light are ignorant.
And know the truth if you want to be pure
That comes to you from an enlightened science
The one who responds very quickly to the challenge
Must protect the beasts
Can the hedgehog go to war against the ogre?
We know the eagle among the hawks
He fears the slightest noise and the beasts on the top of
the mountains
Passing through the caves and its beautiful procession
Tell him who is neither weak nor boastful
That Mohamed Ben Sghir is a sword drawn.*

Hearing the word "procession" I thought back to the women I had just seen singing and clapping and then I started to daydream.

"Sidi (Sir-a respectful way to call your boss)" Zuebeida asked me, "More tea?"

"God bless you," I said, "No more."

I was expecting Roger. He was British, a composer, a jazz player and someone who had spent years at the Conservatory in Fez as well as here in Marrakech. We had met during one of his visits and struck up a friendship. Although typically English in every way I discovered he had a Jewish grandmother and so

he was just as interested in the history of Jewish culture in Moroccan as that of the Muslim Arabs, Berbers and Black Moroccans.

His fiancé Vanessa was an ethnomusicology student at London university. She was doing her doctorate on Berber women's music and would often go to her village in the Atlas mountains to do fieldwork. We were to be guests of the writer and musician Paul Bowles, who had recorded traditional Moroccan music in a survey that he conducted in 1959.

We went to Tangier to visit Bowles. When I had introduced us to Bowles, he marveled that Israel now had a cultural attaché here in Morocco. He quietly admitted that he had discovered that his mother had been an assimilated German Jewess and perhaps that is why he had such a tolerance for Moroccans of all creeds and colors.

He said, "Although there is the usually religious prejudice against Jews, there is an undercurrent of ambivalent sympathy for Jews in Moroccan culture. I heard it in a number of proverbs that I have collected. Here are one or two for your interest:

" A Jew in a room is better than a vile man"

And "Do good even to a Jew, God will save you from enemies and envious people."

Then of course there is the famous line, | "Do not trust a Jew even if he has become Moslem even though he remains so for forty years." But you came here to discuss Moroccan music, yes?

Roger had not come unprepared. We had been working on a series of recordings together, Moroccan inspired but filled with sixties-like popular music and snatches of pattern music. Bowles listened to our recording carefully. When it was over, he paused, took a long draft from his cigarette. He said,

"It took me a while to realize that each generation has a certain musical universe or signature. I cannot do what you have done. I recorded traditional Moroccan music, but I was writing Broadway and art music from before WWII. That is my imprinting.

My novels developed after WWII, so as a musician I am throw back and I have written for people your age. The Marrakesh Folk Festival as you know is on next week and I know that you are returning there for the two nights of concerts. It is the same spectacle every year, but it is worth it, as you get a Cook's tour of pretty traditional music from all over the country. This is the first year in ten that I am not going. I was supposed to meet a famous rock star after the concert at the Café Berber in Marrakesh after the second night. His name is Richard Starky. He wanted to spend time with me, but I will write you a note, apologizing for my absence and ask you to sit in for me. I find texting and smart phones impossible to use."

Roger and I held are breath. My heart was pounding. I then consciously started breathing, took the note in my hand as if it was a simple piece of paper and then the four of us entered into an in-depth discussion of why the styles of Moroccan music were the way they were.

Bowles believed it had to do with waves of migration, each new group bringing and then protecting their own style. Roger thought each style corresponded with an ecological niche and I argued that one should never underestimate creativity. Bowles chimed in and said " That is what Paul McCartney said when he was my guest here a few years ago. I am inclined to a combination of all three theories but then again, I am now simply a writer of stories."

Bowles was the consummate Anglo-American gentleman. You felt that you had gotten to know him, but he was always holding something back. We did not care. We were going to have dinner

with Ringo Starr.

We took the country bus from Tangier to Marrakech. It took fourteen hours. It was a constant coming and going of Moroccan peasants and their animals, chickens, roosters and goats. The radio played Moroccan's pop songs non-stop and so when we got back to our house Zubeida had prepared a feast, a Ramadan soup, Harira, carrot and apple salad, a chicken tajin(stew) with prunes and some rice for me. She had just bought large round fresh Berber bread from the local baker and Vanessa, Roger, and I sat down and ate. The next day was the festival.

The Marrakesh folk festival takes place in a large open-air stage amongst the ruins of an old Moorish palace, the Badi. There is an enormous wide performing space dissected by a stage that comes into the first ten rows of the audience to give a sense of space and three dimensionality. The lighting is perfect, and the acoustics are first rate. We were seated among the VIPS and other diplomats as I represented the State of Israel and was a curiosity for the diplomatic community. Loads of leg space and a great diagonal vision of the whole stage.

There are about twenty acts with a short intermission, about an hour and half of performance, each act about five minutes out of what in traditional settings could go on for hours if not days. The highlight of the night were the performances of three ethnic groups, the Taza, the Ahwach and the Gnawa. Most of them dress in white turbans, daggers on their sides and the women in more colorful outfits and black head scarves with jewelry. Here is how some are described in the program. I could not have done it better.

The Taza war dance. Dressed in their brown striped djellabas, loaded rifles in hand, they dance to their drums. As if summoning their courage or celebrating after a victory they play with their muskets, they move in faster and faster rhythms, they gather in a circle, they shout

with one voices and let their rifles fire in the air, bursting in flame and leaving a curlicue of smoke as they end their piece motionless to much applause.

The Ahwach is the Berber dance of the Atlas mountains. At night in the village square or in the courtyard of the Kasbah, the castle like stronghold of the village, the men stand in a group playing their frame drums in complex rhythmic patterns while the women sway towards and away from the. The men sing and the women answer. The circle, undulates, moves out and moves back in as the singer improvises poetry in the Berber language a distant cousin of the ancient Egyptian tongue preserved in the mountain fastnesses of this Kingdom. As abruptly as they start they come to a quick and unified end. We are left wanting more, hoping to travel to visit their Kasbah one day and see them dance and sing in the moonlight after the harvest.

The three of us were smitten. I laughed to myself that the Israeli government was paying me to show up to this kind of cultural event. I would have paid the air ticket and expenses out of my own pocket just to be here.

There was a VIP reception afterwards and I chatted up members of the Moroccan press and other musicians and critics. One colleague, Ahmed, a Moroccan Arab said, "Morocco is a Muslim country but it is multilingual and multi cultural. One day I think that will be a good enough reason to leave the Arab league. We are living in the 21st century you know."

The tea was to die for and the sweet cakes and biscuits were heavenly. We got into the cab and within ten minutes we were at the Berber Café overlooking the Jmalfna, that open ended circus like fair ground with its dancers, sorcerers, acrobats and food stalls.

He was seated in the corner. He had longish hair, a beard, that distinctive nose, a pin striped suit and was sipping a

cup of tea,. "Mr. Starky I presume?" He looked at me and laughed, "Doctor Livingstone I presume?" he answered in that familiar warm Liverpool accent. "Do you mind if we join you?" "Sure, I am waiting for someone, but he has yet to arrive."

Roger and I did not get a word in edgewise. Vanessa suddenly went on a Beatlemania speech for two minutes, then she talked about her research, then she told Ringo which Beatles albums were her favorite. Then she stopped talking, felt a wave of embarrassment and broke into tears. Roger handed him the note from Bowles. Ringo read it and said, "I do not know who this guy is and I have no idea what he may have wanted. Someone has been taking the piss out of me! " I started stuttering and tried to explain what was fast turning into what would be one of the most notable misunderstandings of my career. I feared I was in the middle of a horrible cluster fuck.

Ringo was annoyed and turned to Vanessa and said, "Tell me why you cried," and then turning a hostile eye on Roger he said, "and why you lied to me?"

Before any of us could respond, he said to us, "I was supposed to be meeting with the Israeli cultural attaché to arrange a music scholarship in the name of the late Brian Epstein. At least that was what his sister told me."

It took me a full minute to regain my composure as we had been losing it like we were a bunch giggling, bumbling, idiotic teenage fans.

I finally regained my composure and said, "Please allow me to introduce myself ... "

[Table of Contents](#)

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty

years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)