CRAC Alsace, Centre rhénan d'art contemporain, is located in Altkirch, France, at 18 rue du Château. Contact CRAC Alsace at +33 (0)3 89 08 82 59 and info@cracalsace.com. Access the future, present and past of CRAC Alsace via www.cracalsace.com.

The Emotional Last Mile: A reflection on music and how it affects us. A program conceived by Benjamin Seror as an extension of his solo exhibition Fascination that ran at CRAC Alsace from November 2021 to February 2022.

Conversation with Hajer Ben Boubaker, historian and researcher. This conversation took place in April 2023.

Benjamin Seror: I didn't know Hajer Ben Boubaker personally before meeting her to record this conversation, but I had the pleasure of listening regularly to her Vintage Arab podcast and more recently to the programs she produces for France Culture. Hajer Ben Boubaker approaches music through the prism of memory, which takes as its starting point a conversion between a Tunisian mother who shares with her daughter a passion for Egyptian musicals.

We listen to music everywhere. But what does this music say about us? What does it tell us, and can we learn things from it that we can't attain anywhere else? Hajer Ben Boubaker has invented a way of telling the story of Arab popular music and the way it is transmitted. Together, we discussed the challenges of telling this story orally, where a position straddling the practices of historian and documentary maker enables us to invent a tool adapted to the popular dimension of this object of study.

Hello Hajer Ben Boubaker, today I have the pleasure of being in conversation with you. You run a podcast called Vintage Arab, among many other activities, so perhaps you could start by introducing yourself. I'd be curious to hear how you describe your work, how you name it, how you define it.

Hajer Ben Boubaker: Hello, I'm delighted to be talking with you about these subjects that fascinate me so much, the role of music and other things. I think I've gained a bit of confidence in the way I present myself, and also things have changed between the time I first launched Vintage Arab as an enthusiast and today. But I think I'd like to start by saying that what defines me and a large part of my artistic activity,

let's say, is that I'm passionate about music, particularly Arab music, though not only that. Even if it's true that, in terms of the music I engage with in my work, it's the central element, so to speak. And it's more or less what led me to do all the projects I've been doing over the past few years. I was passionate about this music and sharing these stories with others. I initially wanted to share with those around me, and then later with strangers who were able to listen to the podcasts and get in touch with me to talk about them, or perhaps sometimes just to talk. Not necessarily about the podcasts, but about themselves or what the podcasts provoked in them, so to speak. Later on I did a few different things that involved writing more of a scientific, journalistic style on themes around Arab music and the cultural history of Arab immigration to France, more specifically from the Maghreb region. So that was a second string that was added to my activities. The world of sound creation was unknown to me, in any case: it's a field that I learned on my own. So today I very much define myself as a sound documentarist, because I find that my practice has evolved through different projects and also because I now work in radio. I work for France Culture where I make documentaries, and not only on themes that deal specifically with Arab music, as is the case for *Vintage Arab*, so things have evolved and I'm now more confident in defining myself as a sound documentarist, a sound creator even, but that's a bit more difficult to claim perhaps.

B.S.: Creator? Of course.

Hajer: But I still feel _.

B.S.: It's a process.

H.B.B.: Yes, there's a confidence that comes with creating, and then there's an aspect of the job which... even though you're working for a major national radio station, creation remains an integral part of it. All the more so as all the development, all the encounters, all the projects I've been able to carry out have led me to really think about creation in terms of both storytelling and working with sound. Beyond working on music, it's taught me other things, so I think I can also define myself in this way today.

B.S.: I don't find the complexity of naming this field all that trivial, because as far as I'm concerned—and we'll come back to this in the

interview—there's something akin to invention in the field of podcasts, it's a space for telling a story, which is a space that I find very singular. This is of particular interest to me as part of the research that I'm undertaking, and this conversation is taking place within this context. What in our stories or in our feelings is specific and can be transmitted through music? How can we think about the question of music, both in our feelings and in our transmissions? So there's something very special about having invented this podcast. I'm surprised that I haven't heard the word historian until now, but as we talked and prepared for this interview, you told me a bit about your background. And for me, there's also something interesting about the podcast becoming a space, a tool for writing history. It's not quite a question yet, but do you mind using that word or not?

H.B.B.: Not at all. It's true that when you asked me the question, it wasn't what immediately came to mind. I define myself as a historian, and that's something I've made my own, because formally, in France, *historienne* means someone with a doctorate. And I didn't finish mine. There was a whole process around doing a doctorate, funding it, not funding it. The research environment in France is very tough, so I decided not to go down that road, and at the same time, I didn't necessarily need a doctorate to claim the word. I think I work quite seriously and I'm confident enough to know that my approach is that of a historian. But it's true that it's a bit rare. Well it's not that it's a bit rare... Often, when people ask me about the work I've done with Vintage Arab, they immediately put me in this historian category, which doesn't bother me at all, but the creative aspect is a bit sidelined, and I think it's increasingly important for me to assert the fact that I am also actually creating material. While I have zero doubts about working as a historian, I have no problem of legitimacy. And that was Vintage Arab's approach right from the start. I think I needed (because it's more or less the way I work and think) to tell the story of songs, artists, musical movements and even historical facts through music, with an academic and scientific approach. In the sense that it's based on things that are quite formal historically, quite factual. It's explained in that sense. And that's where things are tied to creation because for me that approach wasn't enough, it didn't necessarily make things accessible. Maybe it even locked things into something serious or rather fixed, whereas I don't think it's fixed. Especially when it comes to music, I think you can allow yourself the freedom to work as a historian, while also creating and having a sensibility. In fact, this aspect is largely sidelined in historians'

academic work. Sensibility and subjectivity don't come into it. For me, the idea, my intuition, was to succeed in combining the two to some extent.

B.S.: Agreed, and so the space of sound creation also allows us to inject, or at any rate to use sensibility as a theoretical tool that also contributes to the construction of narratives, what it is you're explaining.

H.B.B.: Yes, for me, it's a vector, a facilitating medium. After all, I do have a relationship with sound and orality that lends itself to this. I think it's much harder for me to write than to tell.

B.S.: Okay.

H.B.B.: To formulate a discourse, to be discursive. Ever since I was a little girl, I think that's always been my strength. Writing, on the other hand, is more difficult to me, so I said to myself, because it's about music and because I felt like there was a real need to make people hear, not just to speak in a fixed way, but to leave enough space for discourse, songs, sound bites. It seemed to me to be the most democratic medium.

B.S.: Had radio ever been an option you considered in your career and education?

H.B.B.: No, no. Though radio is something that's part of my upbringing, my upbringing in the sense of my family environment, because my mother listened to, and still listens to, *Radio Orient*. It's a radio station that broadcasts in both French and Arabic, which is precisely why my mother listens to it. Because the news broadcast is in Arabic, because the radio broadcasts a lot of Arab music, a large part of the radio's musical offering is music from Arab countries. So yes, there really was the fact that programs were broadcast in Arabic. And that's something I grew up with, though I never actually considered going into radio. That evolution in my career happened after Vintage Arab, when I started working on projects that I felt were important to pitch to public radio, as a public service. I specifically wanted to work with public service radio stations.

B.S.: Okay.

H.B.B.: Because I wanted to tell stories that are rarely heard on public broadcasting, a space which is supposed to be (or at least have the ambition to be) welcoming and enable all listeners to discover something or to find their way around—these are two different things. But I think they're related, and I wanted these listeners to hear France Culture, which is a radio station that I discovered much later myself. My parents never listened to France Culture. They still don't listen to it. It's not part of their environment at all. But for me, it came a bit later, when I went to university and even a bit later when I discovered this radio that offers diversity, a diversity of stories told, of formats, taking a step back on current affairs, which I've always liked and which is also part of the station's identity, and which favors documentaries, which is a format that has always interested me from the moment I discovered it, whether in a more audiovisual format or in a radio format. I owe my discovery of sound documentaries to France Culture.

B.S.: Was there a place for music in your education? Did you study music or is it something you took up in a more amateur way?

H.B.B.: No, no, no. I started out as an amateur. I studied History and Political Science. So I learned a lot from these studies, in all sorts of ways. Particularly in History, Cultural History, where there were aspects that gave us a less event-driven view of things. But in any case, I never studied music as such, it's really an education that I made my own later on. As I always say, I don't approach music as a musicologist, I approach it as a historian. Even though it's something I'm passionate about, it's my training as a historian that allows me to approach research that concerns, shall we say, a socio-historical prism of music. And not as a musicologist. Though I did try to learn music.

In particular, when I lived in Tunis, I took lessons on the Oud. I don't think I'm very good at it, but it was important for me to try and learn to play an instrument that's been part of my life the whole time. And part of my family too. And it was also an opportunity for me to understand Arab music styles. So it gave me another kind of access to what I knew only by ear.

B.S.: Why don't you play anymore? Could we see you one day, one evening in a concert hall or something?

H.B.B.: I don't think it would be very pleasant. I'm not very good, but I do have an Oud. I don't practice much, but I've kept it and maybe at some point I'll feel like really investing myself in it and improving. It's a question of time. And then I've got other instruments I'm interested in. I know I really want to learn to play the Qanoun, which is this sitar shared by several countries that play it, which for me is probably my favorite instrument, but it's not the easiest to learn. And in France, it's not always easy to find someone to teach you, who can help you learn this instrument.

B.S.: Is this question of radio broadcasting something you could also imagine teaching one day if the university ever asked you to present this tool to other historians? Does it strike you as a tool that could one day become like a canonical tool to work with?

H.B.B.: Well, I'd love to. Because I've always been interested in teaching, and not necessarily just radio, but even subjects like, I don't know, I could see myself giving a course on the history of 20th century Egyptian music, because it's a subject I know well. I think it would be interesting and it would also be a step forward in the way we teach the history of these countries in France. And indeed, even in these countries, it's not necessarily what's favored, to approach history through the cultural prism and to see the evolution of musical proposals between what's called classical, popular, there's a whole field. And radio too... So I think it would be interesting in the sense that I work a lot with archives. When I work on a documentary, it can be a musical archive, as in Vintage Arab. Because sometimes music plays the role of an archive, while oftentimes in podcasts the music is just the music, even though it can constitute an archive that can explain something, an event or a political stance. When I started out in radio, this practice came quite naturally. I'm someone who collects or searches through a lot of sound archives. This was already the case for music: I have a fairly extensive vinyl collection. I'm not at all a digger, as they say, but I am looking for very precise stuff. I already have an idea of what I'm looking for, because I like it or because it makes sense for my research. I can give you an example: when I have the time, I try to work on the history of a Tunisian record label, and so I'm interested in having vinyls from that label at different periods. To tell as much, let's say the visual history, because there's also a history of images in music, as the history of the evolution of the label's catalog. You can't find it just like that, you can't find the catalog with everything that's ever been recorded, so you have

to reconstruct it in some way. It's this kind of approach that interests me. And with radio, that's kind of what happened too. In my biggest documentary, in the sense of the largest hourly volume, I'd like to say, I did a France Culture documentary series on the *Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes* [Movement of Arab Workers], which is a militant political movement from the 1970s. And there were very few INA [Institut national de l'audiovisuel] archives, because it was an underground movement and immigrants weren't given a voice at the time, so I built up the archives on my own in two years of research. In other words, I managed to find people who had kept tapes, cassettes, sometimes militant films and newspapers. We're dealing with something else in terms of archives, but it's still an archive that takes on another form, and that's a practice that I've really delved into in my radio work. And it would be really interesting to present radio from that point of view too.

B.S.: On this aspect of how to show or transmit archives: when you work for two years, are these two years framed by your work at France Culture, or are these things that you had already started to research and archive on your own?

H.B.B.: On the subject of the MTA [Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes], I had a precise idea of making a podcast from the very beginning. So I started doing some research, then I proposed it to France Culture and it came to fruition. It's a bit of a two-stage process. There's the individual research on the movement, with the idea to possibly make a podcast, and ultimately, the desire to feed myself on this history, to build up the archive, to understand, to conduct interviews. And then there was the work of production, all of a sudden you have to be able to tell this history to people who don't know it. So here I am continuing my research, and I also knew very clearly that by doing this I was creating an archive. Because there had never been anything done about this history, so I knew it would also constitute an archive for other historians. So it's very pleasing to see that it has come to fruition and that it has indeed constituted an archive in the sense that it's the first time in fifty years that people have testified on the subject, and so there's a better understanding of that history. But at the same time, the documentary will be useful, not just to researchers, but to anyone interested in the seventies in France.

B.S.: And then trigger other research and consolidate information. So do you do this work of gathering material, or researching, or recording? Do you record things yourself? How do you research? Perhaps that's a more precise question: in what way does sound orient your research?

H.B.B.: Well, for example, in the case of the MTA, I was convinced that it had to be done, I had a precise idea. In fact, I'd started a podcast, the first Barbès Blues episode on Vintage Arabe, without any sound material. And a person I knew contacted me and said "actually my uncle was part of the MTA". This was surprising because we'd never talked about it, and she said, "I've got a tape to show you". So she gives me an archive from 1975, an audio cassette of immigrant radio programs that were recorded and distributed in Sonacotra immigrant housing and cafés. In these broadcasts, which are really like a radio program, people defend their rights, housing rights, talk about the fight against racism, play Palestinian songs, talk about the Palestinian cause... So in this case, the archive comes to me. Sometimes I look for them and sometimes they come to me because of the subject matter or because of chance encounters. And it's true that now when I find an archive, sometimes I say to myself, wouldn't it make a good documentary? I'm not always sure it will actually work but I often ask myself that question. When it tells a story, when I feel that it tells a lot of things and that it deserves to be explored, I say to myself "take the time to research it, take two or three days to look into it" and determine if it's simply a nice sound extract or if it's actually a lead towards something else.

B.S.: Right, and so the podcast itself has helped to generate encounters and things that have come your way. Are there any other similar stories that have happened to you? Have you found an audience? How do you know the podcast's audience?

H.B.B.: So it's still a bit vague, even if I have some ideas. I can see that there are people who follow me a lot, who regularly contact me on social networks. I'm on social networks a lot and I see a real advantage in that I share what I like, not so much about myself as a person but more about what interests me, and that allows certain people to react. I see that there are people who react on a regular basis, so sometimes I feel like I know them, though I don't know them more than that. But I feel that I'm able to tell who are the favorite singers of some of my Twitter and Instagram followers. It already says a lot about someone I think, to

guess what their musical tastes are. Sometimes people confide in me, they tell me. People ask me for podcast recommendations about singers.

B.S.: On social media?

H.B.B.: Yes, on social networks and sometimes in person. Because I sometimes do conferences and meet people, and they approach me to give feedback. It's true that it's usually positive feedback when someone takes the initiative to talk to me. But it does lead to conversations, and there's also feedback that only lasts a moment. Where a person will confide in me about their relationship with music, their family history, and that's always very moving. I even remember getting messages from students saying, we used your podcast as part of a presentation at the university, and I think it's great to know that a little podcast on Soundcloud is being used by students. I couldn't have wished for a better outcome. So yes, I get feedback, I even get requests and I think that's pretty cool, even if sometimes I don't think I can answer positively. But it's all about interaction.

B.S.: Have these interactions ever led to a later episode?

H.B.B.: Yes, it's also happened through meeting people I don't know very well. But there are also people who ended up becoming part of my life, or at least people I ended up working with. I'm thinking in particular of an episode about Farid El Atrache, which I did with Bachir, who is actually one of the members of Toukadime. Toukadime is a DJ duo, they were among the first in France to work with Maghrebi music on the radio, at least in recent history. Ten years ago, at a community radio station in Rouen. Anyway, we didn't know each other but we realized that we were both very familiar with the work of this Egyptian-Syrian, Egyptian-Syrian-Lebanese singer, well, it's complicated, but in any case, he's definitely Syrian, and he grew up in Egypt. And we thought, if we put our two brains together, we could come up with something. So I was really able to work with him on this theme, but also on the theme of Arabic samples in rap music. And then there were other podcast episodes that actually emerged out of a conversation or a meeting. For example, the only podcast I've ever done for which I was paid—there's just one. We mentioned it at the beginning, I very rarely accept this type of invitation. It's happened to me, but I very rarely do it when I don't feel like it. It was for a cultural center, the FGO-Barbara in Barbès. They

were working on an edition of the Magic Barbès Festival and I'm very attached to this district, the 18th arrondissement, and I really appreciate the work of the artistic director of the festival. So when they asked me to do a podcast on Cheikha Rimitti, I thought yes, I'd really like to do it with them. I'd already thought about doing it, but then it all happened very quickly because now there was a framework, an expectation, and there was a way of honoring this artist as part of the festival that I thought was really cool. So, yes, there are podcasts that come from discussions and meetings, professional or otherwise, and yes, I think the next ones could be a bit like that. In the tradition of encounters, not necessarily professional encounters, but encounters. For example, I did two episodes in Arabic for Radio Alhara, the Palestinian web radio station. It came about through a discussion with a friend, Léopold Lambert, of The Funambulist, who said to me, "It's starting up", it was at the very beginning of the radio and I said to myself, "In fact, you should propose something". I talked to Youssef about it, and I thought how great to have a Palestinian web radio in the middle of a pandemic, and that's really why I made these two podcasts in Arabic. I don't know if I'd have jumped at the chance to do them if it hadn't been for Radio Alhara.

B.S.: Did you get other kinds of feedback from this? Other opportunities or broadcasts?

H.B.B.: Well, the episode was broadcast live and that was the first time I'd ever been broadcast live. It was a departure from the podcast format, which was before I started at France Culture. And I remember there was a comment section on Radio Alhara, the web radio where you can see people's reactions, and in fact, it was very moving to see reactions in Arabic, which doesn't happen very often. It's not the language I'm usually approached in.

B.S.: In that context.

H.B.B.: And there's a podcast where I talk with my mother, and it's actually the only one where my mother agrees to speak because it's in Arabic. My mother, she speaks French very well, but she felt much more comfortable talking about these things in Arabic. I even saw comments that say "oh so cute - Omm Hajer, Hajer's mother". It's really the way you call someone in Arab countries, you say the son of or the daughter of, and I found it very moving... I didn't know if the person was

in Palestine, if they were somewhere else, there wasn't necessarily a geographical indication. But it was very moving to see these reactions in my mother tongue.

B.S.: Are there times when there are physical encounters around the podcast? Do you meet people or do you broadcast live, has this ever happened to you?

H.B.B.: Yes, it's happened to me twice. There was the Cheika Rimitti podcast at the FGO-Barbara, and it was really embarrassing for me, so I hid backstage.

B.S.: To hear yourself?

H.B.B.: Yes, with loudspeakers and everything, horrible. I still can't do that today. There was another broadcast as part of the Douarnenez festival, which was about Algeria, a broadcast of the podcast I did on Cheb Hasni, and there again, I had to escape from the collective listening session. I do love these moments when it's others' sound creations, but I have a lot of trouble hearing myself talk.

B.S.: Right. So it's not yet a format that seems...

H.B.B.: No, it's very difficult, in fact, I can't even listen to my _. It's starting to get better, but then, documentaries are a bit different. I speak very little in documentaries, so I can quickly skip the part where I talk, when I'm on France Culture, I can very quickly skip the part where I'm speaking. But on Vintage Arab, it's impossible.

B.S.: Yeah. Does the Vintage Arab format continue in parallel with your work at France Culture? Are they different formats or do they overlap?

H.B.B.: Well, there was a pause of over a year. For a lot of personal and professional reasons, I had other projects that took up all my time and I didn't really feel like rushing through an episode just for the sake of launching an episode. As I'm also self-financing, I don't want to put any pressure on myself either. I don't have to answer to anyone, and that's still my way of doing things even if I know that sometimes people give me "it's been a long time" feedback. I'm aware of that. But within this economic framework, which for the moment is a choice, I don't want to sell it to a podcast studio because I wouldn't want them interfering with

what I say, if I wanted to say things that would be problematic or whatever. But now I'm getting back into it in the spring, and I'm getting back into it with fairly precise ideas. It's been the same from the start anyway, I never set a rhythm for myself. I didn't want to say to myself that every month or couple months I'd put out a new podcast, because it's really about inspiration after all. It's not just empty talk. I don't just stand in front of a microphone and say what I have to say, it's often texts that have been worked on beforehand.

B.S.: It's not improvised, and it's not something you already know. Every show is prepared.

H.B.B.: Actually, I could do it like that, and already have. To tell stories, comment on music, and I think that factually I'm holding my own. But I do want it to be storytelling, and I don't think it's very telling to stand in front of the microphone and say "I love this song because my mother loves it, and besides, in 1967 everyone was listening to it because there was a war and the war was lost". I don't think it's interesting to do it like that. And yes, I think I need it to be a bit immersive, so I need to work on the text a bit before I can get past the recording stage.

B.S.: I'm interested in this idea, because for me, there's a whole dimension to the question of transmission that I find really fascinating. What specific things can be transmitted orally as opposed to in writing? And how are these tools different? Which brings me to this question: for you, what's different in this space as opposed to an academic space where we could talk about music in writing, and how did the podcast come to be a tool that seemed more self-evident and meaningful to you?

H.B.B.: I felt it was part of the oral tradition, like music. Well, sometimes I play music without words, but if we assume that there's music with text, we're on the same register, even if I'm not doing the same thing as the artist I'm broadcasting. I feel that, even if part of the text is actually written, it was written orally, which means that it's not the same working method. When I write a text, I sit down in front of my computer, my notebook, and I write. In this case, it's often in my head that I come up with a story, sometimes even orally, I actually talk to myself out loud and tell the story, I come up with the beginning of an episode and then I write it down. It's a bit weird.

B.S.: So you also take notes when you speak?

H.B.B.: I don't record myself very much. First I start telling the story and then I say to myself, well, that would be good, so I can make notes afterwards, notes that are always quite partial and reworked later on, because even if I put everything back in order and it's a complete text, sometimes I read it as if I were going to record the podcast and I say to myself, that doesn't sound oral enough. I can see that in fact, orally, I don't do it the same way. So I make a note of my edits. And it's really the act of reading it out loud that guides me. Even if it's written work, if it's been written for a while, it's really the way I speak orally that matters in the way I write the text, because I find that it's a good vehicle for transmission. It's something that suits me. Perhaps it's also linked to the story of how I acquired this knowledge. Of course, there were readings and research, but I rarely work on artists or singers about whom I know nothing, or about whom I've never heard anything. It could happen, but it's primarily an oral exchange that brings someone to my attention. Maybe I follow this pattern without even realizing it.

B.S.: So, is it often through family or friends, or is it also through oral accounts from people you don't know at all? Is this an important dimension?

H.B.B.: A lot of it comes down to family, and in the case of Vintage Arab, it came first and foremost from my relationship with my mother. I don't know if it materializes it, but there is something about the bond with my mother that I've invested in this podcast. It's really about our shared passion for music, as she's the one who gave me this knowledge base. And it was also interesting for me to have these discussions with my mother because when I was quite young, I already had an ear for the music she listened to. From early on, I had the impression that there was an equal dialogue on the subject, i.e. she was very surprised that I was also interested in the music, I don't think many people asked her about it anyway, and so there was a real desire to explain things to me, why this is good or bad. Of course, I was able to distance myself from her subjectivity. We don't agree on everything, musically speaking, but there was a certain transmission of information. For example, she's always tried to provide a biography, even a partial one, of the artists she listens to, because she knows them well, they're the ones she grew up with, so there's a lot of that. And I think I've reinvested that dialogue into my way of doing things. There are things I really discover via

Vintage Arab. I take someone like Naïma Yahi, who's a great historian, and I meet her through Vintage Arab, and it's in discussing certain artists that I already knew from listening that I say to myself, actually this person's career, or this song, says something more than just, "a song" per se. It's also about the person's background, or a related historical event. I think it's interesting that this relationship with the way music is told often comes up through discussion. It's true that there are also things I discover by reading, but that's more rare.

B.S.: Right, and does that imply a form of resistance to the written word? Would the story told in Vintage Arab be resistant to being transmitted in any other way?

H.B.B.: No, because I could see myself writing a book about music. But I don't think I'd go about it in the same way. I think I would be recognized, because I don't think you disappear behind the pen, even when it's academic language. But no, in fact, for example, I've already been asked to turn Vintage Arab into a book and I can't seem to find the relevance of transcribing the podcasts as they already exist.

B.S.: Is this something you've done before, transcribing them?

H.B.B.: Well, I've received transcripts of the podcasts and every time I say to myself, "No, you have to dig here, you have to dig there, we're on another tangent". I always end up telling myself that maybe I don't want the Vintage Arab book to be just like the podcast. I want them to have two different lives. But I have to admit that it makes me wonder. I do hear arguments from people, from publishers, who tell me that it can actually be done. But I say to myself, if people can listen to it, why buy a book where things are written down?

B.S.: It also touches on the question of the academy. Is there a space where this document could also function as academic work? Is this something you'd like to see?

H.B.B.: One of the arguments I found interesting (counter-arguments to my argument that "people can just listen to the podcast"), was that written information can be accessed more easily than if you listen to the whole podcast again, because at such and such a moment you explain, that Nizar Kabbani, the great Syrian poet, wrote this poem in such and such a year because there was such and such a thing going

on, and he worked with this one singer. And at the same time, I don't know if I'm totally convinced...

B.S.: You can't read while you cook, right? It's a complicated thing.

H.B.B.: In any case, I think that if there's going to be a transcription, I don't know, maybe I'm saying that I'm not really interested in this format, but in fact, I might end up doing it for X or Y reason. But I don't think I'd ever accept a transcription without adding something to it. Because I think it's an oral form that has to... well, this podcast has to stay a podcast and if it has to appear in writing at some point, it has to be rethought in some way.

B.S.: And your mother's relationship with music: is it something she also developed as a music lover or did she practice or learn it in some way?

H.B.B.: As an enthusiast, in an environment... Well, my mother was born in Tunisia in the early '60s, so she had brothers and sisters. I mean, she grew up in a musical environment. What's more, she was born at a time when someone like Oum Kalthoum was still alive, so she grew up with people who listened to that all the time. So there's this musical environment and she also creates her own music stars. She's someone who's always listened to a lot of music—I'm talking about her youth—but also as a mother she listened to a lot of music and made it into a ritual. There's certain times of the day when you can be sure, when you go back to my parents' house, that there'll be music playing. Something really weird happens if there's no music at a certain time of day. So it's part of the ritual, she's self-taught. She teaches herself a lot of things and that's why I think she's also a walking encyclopedia, i.e. she learned by listening to songs she knows well, and some artists even very well. Today, she's someone who, at her age, still knows lots and lots and lots of songs by heart. She also learned by reading the magazines of the time which, despite being magazines for young people, have become enormous sources of knowledge on Egyptian music, for example. My mother subscribed to the equivalent of Star Club, I don't know what it's called in France, but Salut or Fan2 and those magazines we also knew, but in fact for her it provided a fairly precise knowledge of things, just by having access to these more fan-oriented publications. Fifty years after the fact, she has a very detailed knowledge of Egyptian music, for example.

B.S.: And in your relationship, did you discuss this music early on or did it come about rather late? Is it part of your family rituals? Apart from listening to it, do you talk about it together?

H.B.B.: We've talked about it often. When I was young, I used to ask questions about who is singing, who isn't. It happened with Egyptian cinema and musicals especially. There, all of a sudden, you've got people in front of you, there's a scenario, things are happening. And I'm always asking the question, "Who's that? Who's the actor? And who's this one? And what song is that?" And I remember that one of the first artists I asked her about was Farid El Atrache. I questioned my mom in a way that makes her laugh a lot today, because what's more, this isn't factually true (I was very small) but I said to her: "who's the little fat guy?" in Arabic. He's not fat at all, it just slipped my mind. And so she explains to me that he's a great singer. So at first it started as a very childish dialogue, well, with a child. It wasn't just that he's a singer, he sings well, but he's a *great* singer, he's Syrian, so there you have it, with lots of precise facts and little by little, the exchange became more serious, so to speak. But it's still pretty good-natured, of course. I don't think she necessarily realizes how much she knows, so she doesn't take herself too seriously when she passes on information. And it can give rise to debates and lead from one idea to another. This is how I learned who the screenwriter of a particular film is—for example, I didn't learn about Youssef Chahine because I'd seen his most award-winning films, but through watching his musicals. So I knew who Youssef Chahine was, the director, even before I knew he had a real international stature, and the same goes for Omar Sharif. Omar Sharif is a very telling example, because I've always known him very well.

B.S.: It's a different relationship, a different world in Egyptian comedies.

H.B.B.: Yes, well, I knew him very well from when he was young in Egypt, so it seemed very odd to me that he should appear on French television to advertise the tiercé [bet on the horses].

B.S.: Yeah, exactly.

H.B.B.: And I didn't really want to believe it was him. Similarly, when Samia Gamal appeared in *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs* [*Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*] with Fernandel, I didn't understand what she

was doing on French TV. Because I'd already seen her in the movies and I knew who she was, but it seemed very odd to me that she should suddenly appear in a French film. And so yes, there are things like that which are of the order of transmission. Omar Sharif had an international career that my parents didn't know anything about. They've never watched his films internationally. But it explained that he was a great gambler, which is why he did a Tiercé commercial.

B.S.: So this research has led me to... I'm trying to sketch out a theory, well I don't know if it's really a theory, but there's something that interests me. In trying to understand the place that music occupies in our lives there's one dimension that I find very intriguing, and that's the fact that a lot of what we listen to is really sentimentally charged. We can commute to a meeting at the bank while listening to stuff that makes us cry or go to job interviews and listen to music in the waiting room that makes us angry. For me, there's something very strange: how do we cultivate an emotional relationship like this? How does music specifically help us cultivate this emotional relationship? And in working on this question, there's a dimension that interests me. I realized some time ago that music can occupy something quite similar to the way dreams affect our understanding of things. That is to say, dreams train us to live through difficult or stressful situations, they prepare us to live through very difficult things. I have the impression that songs accompany us in these spaces, at least a certain type of song, which is where my little theory takes shape, it's something I call the "last mile" or the "emotional last mile". When you take public transport, there's always the problem of getting to the station, you arrive, you take a train, you take the metro and then you take a bus, and sometimes, when you live in the countryside, there's a final mile that means that instead of using public transport, you have to take your car. This is the point where public transport becomes an individual form of transport, and for me there's something between sociology, history and all the tools of the social sciences that enable us to describe some of the emotions and some of the problems we encounter. I feel that music has a way of helping us to travel that last mile, it's something we take with us, to more intimate places, those places we bring with us. We can spend the day working in the library, reading things, but we'll take the music home with us and listen to it in different places, we'll go to clubs. And I have the impression that music has this role of bringing things back into our private lives, things that sociology, or history for that matter, work on, help us to reflect on, help us to question. And so based on this sketch

of a theory, I ask myself, what do you imagine people who listen to Vintage Arab bring home with them, into their intimate spaces, into that hypothetical last mile?

H.B.B.: It's not an easy question. I have the impression, at least through the feedback I get—I can't speak for all the listeners—that I bring them home, or at least those who share this heritage with me, in one way or another. In any case, that's the kind of comments I've heard from people who are very different from me, not the same nationality, not the same gender, not the same age. So I find it interesting to see, and that's one of the strengths of transnational music. Because we're talking about music that's often listened to in more than just one country, the linguistic aspect is very strong. But it's true, yes. And sometimes, in fact, I get feedback about music that I didn't grow up listening to. I've made them my own. Take, for example, the case of Cheika Rimitti, the Algerian singer I was talking about earlier. My parents didn't listen to her growing up, I discovered her later on. And people actually told me "that reminds me of home, that reminds me of my grandfather." I remember very well that for this podcast two people said to me that the singer reminded them of their grandfather. And it wasn't in relation to her, it was about another singer, a very, very old one, one of the first Algerian singers recorded on 78 rpm, also from Oran: Cheikh Hamada. Two people—they weren't even the same age—said that their grandfather used to listen to him. I often get this type of feedback, about something that's a family affair, or from a place where there are memories, beautiful memories, or sometimes there can be comments where there's something painful because the person is no longer there. But this familiar side always comes back. I have the impression that this last mile is a bit of a road home for some people.

B.S.: Is that where you would like to go? Does that impulse make sense to you?

H.B.B.: Well, not that much, actually. When I started Vintage Arab, I really wanted to do something that would first of all touch and speak to those who share this heritage. Though I didn't make this my sole objective, I really wanted it to speak to them. But I didn't think it would. It's very moving when I get intimate feedback about family, about a place that's often a country of origin, or a country left behind or something, because I thought I'd just be addressing people who really like this music, for whom it's not just a fad and who take it to heart, in

the sense that it's music that deserves to be talked about in a serious, sensitive, serious, factual way, as for European musical genres. When I say serious, I don't mean to confine the podcast to something serious, but in any case, it shouldn't be treated as a superficial fad. And unfortunately, any music in non-European languages is usually confined to a rather superficial term, "world music", in France, Europe and the United States. I didn't want to get into that. But I didn't expect that I would be setting foot in someone's home via this podcast. It wasn't...

B.S.: You didn't think you'd make people cry? That's not the scientific purpose of the exercise.

H.B.B.: No, sometimes I'm aware that what I say can be perceived as moving, because it can be felt that I'm feeling that way. But I didn't think I'd make people cry or that I'd touch some sensitive areas. Sometimes even for me it's hard to perceive where that somewhere is, that point of intimacy that triggers memories, that triggers an emotion. You see, sometimes I don't know what it is about me that triggers that. So it's quite disconcerting to see that this podcast can sometimes provoke such emotions in people.

B.S.: Can this become an academic tool? A tool we can work with, that precise space of feeling, transmitting this story through listening, through the way it will touch people?

H.B.B.: I'd find it a bit difficult to say that right off the bat. I have the impression that my approach is more to say to myself, go for what you like, what you love and what moves you. After that, I'm happy if it resonates with other people's sensibilities, and it's really that kind of feedback that I find most touching. But I find it hard to go looking specifically for what might move people, I'd find it a bit of a stretch. I still want to consider myself as the compass in my approach, and be happy that it can be joined by other people's experiences or even touch people on things that I don't know at all. Because, for example, I didn't have a grandfather who listened to Cheikh Hamada, and I discovered this singer rather late in my career, so it's wonderful that it should touch people. But it's not about me, it's not about my personal history. Yeah, I think looking for it might not be the right approach. Though I am aware that there are subjects that deserve to be treated with more sensitivity and care. One day I'd really like to do a Vintage Arab episode on Palestine in music and Palestinian music, which is not the same

thing. Because you don't approach things in the same way when you're Palestinian, and sometimes things have been appropriated by Palestinians, sometimes not. There are songs that refer to Palestinians from the very first note and then there's music really made by Palestinians. This is pretty much at the idea stage but for example, right now, I'm thinking that we need to take real care. Because it's not just my own sensibility that's going to be involved, it's a story of how a cause and a people traverse music, how certain songs become symbols that go beyond, how they can become a symbol of the Palestinian people, whereas sometimes the song is not even by a Palestinian person. So, we're really on a subject where it's interesting to ask ourselves, what place do I give to the Palestinians, to their musical productions? In fact, most of the best-known Arab songs about Palestine are not performed by Palestinians. A lot of it is Palestinian poetry, by Mahmoud Darwich and other poets, but the performing artist is not Palestinian. It's interesting to wonder when we give them a voice. And in the Arab world, the least known songs about Palestine are those written by Palestinians.

B.S.: Is this a project that we_, no, it's not quite something yet?

H.B.B.: It's something I'm thinking about right now, I'm giving it a lot of thought. I've already given a talk about this, as a more boring format. It's interesting, but it's also more boring to talk about it. But yes, I sometimes wonder. To take another example, when I'm working on Raï music, it's important to put the spotlight on someone like Cheikh Hamada, who is a very old singer but who is nonetheless at the origin of what Raï is today, at least in its foundations. It's important for me to put the spotlight on this figure who for all intents and purposes passes under most people's radar, at least in France. It's not part of the story of Raï because this person hasn't done any concerts, isn't an international star. Raï evokes people like Cheb Khaled, Cheb Mami, or others, it doesn't refer back to a singer who was sixty in 1950. So we're really on to something here. Beyond the fact that I like it musically, I think it's important to give it a place because, to come back to history, it's actually part of the history of raï.

B.S.: That may be a very vague question, but what's so special about telling this story through music? What does using music have to say that other tools can't?

H.B.B.: Personally, I think that music— though maybe not all music—is something popular, of the people. You can define popular as you like, but in any case, it's something that's easy to share from the moment there's a sound recording, and for me, it can say a lot about history with a capital H just through how people experienced it. How people, by making this or that song, experienced the political moment. I'm quite interested in approaching it that way. Beyond questions about the musicality of the song, its structure, what musical genre it fits into, what period of the musical genre it fits into, and how the singer adds something by adding horns, I also ask myself, what does it say—sometimes it's clear whether or not there's a message—what does it say about society, about a moment in general? While we can't always know a song's creative context, we can ask ourselves about the moment it's released, in such and such a year. I often ask myself this about songs that aren't necessarily political. Sometimes they just fit into particular historical moments.

H.B.B.: Songs that have been through something. I think it's really interesting that you underlined the word "popular" and it jumps out at me now when I hear this aspect. It's the fact that a song has passed through, been heard, been a shared mass object that also makes it interesting. Because the song has inevitably picked up things in passing through all these ears.
In fact, I realize that I often talk about artists who have had a real popular following. I rarely talk about artists who are unknown in the Arab world, or in the country in which they work. It's often people who _.

B.S.: There's certainly a lot to find there, but that's not what you're interested in.

H.B.B.: Yeah, I often think that people had good taste at the time, I'm into it musically. And it's also true that these artists, or at least the artists I choose, had a popular resonance, which says more than just the work itself.

B.S.: Right, these gestures were very public, evaluated.

H.B.B.: Music that was accepted or not, because sometimes there can be people who were listened to, but not liked, or not liked by the authorities or part of the audience. People who may have made the headlines.

B.S.: Who took a stand. Taking a public stand also says something about the existence of the songs.

H.B.B.: Of an artist's works, yes. And it reminds me of what I was saying about whether or not I'd do a piece on music about Palestine and Palestinian music. I realize that every time, when I have names in mind, it's people who have had a real echo. As for non-Palestinian Arab artists, it's about those who sang for the cause, because that's often what it's all about, singing for the Palestinian cause, and in the case of Palestinian artists, it's those who have an actual echo in Palestine and in Jordan, where there are many Palestinians. These are people who have an audience, who are widely listened to, even if the scale isn't always the same. And I sometimes say to myself that I approach these artists through history with a capital H, but other times, I focus on telling the story of a place. For example, when I work on Barbès, I try to tell the story of the place, and sometimes I suggest names of music that I suspect was played there. I might not know any more than that historically, but I know they might fit into the local history. As for Raï, although I was talking about Sheika Rimitti, I really wanted to tell the story of Orania, Oran and the Oran region, where this music was born. That's why I decided to use a singer who only grandparents listened to.

B.S.: Very good. We've come to the conclusion of this conversation. Thank you very much Hajer.

H.B.B.: Thank you for the invitation.

B.S.: Do you have a secret project or work, something you haven't had a chance to complete yet that you're working on? Or is it too secret for _?

H.B.B.: I'm working on the return of Vintage Arab. I'm telling myself that I'd like to record at least two episodes this spring, which is not bad. And I'm working on an LSD [La série documentaire] episode for France Culture which is going to take me a long time, like everything else. Sometimes I tell myself, but why are you going to the trouble? And at the same time, that's what I like to do. But, once again, it's a kind of investigation, even if I don't present it like that in the end. But often it's subjects that require me to do a lot of research, to dig into areas where there aren't many elements but where I know I can potentially find more. There's one documentary that I'm preparing on a fairly vast territory stretching from Morocco to Egypt, and it's a topic that isn't

widely covered. But I'm very keen to keep digging and I know that a four-hour format is good because it would also be about developments in this part of the world, North Africa... But yes I know that a format like LSD lends itself well to it, so that's the idea here, we're working on it. When I say we, I mean that the LSD teams are aware of this ongoing project and I hope to make it public soon, but in any case we're not at all in the recording phase yet, we're really in the research phase. Well, I'm in the research phase, writing, fine-tuning the project and also finding the right voices, because the difference between a podcast and a documentary is also that I hand the microphone to somebody else. I really enjoy doing that, so now it's about finding the right people to talk about it.

B.S.: Great, we'll be listening and very curious to find out more in the coming months or years.

H.B.B.: Thank you very much.

—Interview with Hajer Ben Boubaker, recorded in April 2023.

The Emotional Last Mile was mixed by Victor Donati (R22), transcribed by Héloïse Prax and translated by Thomas Patier.