

Where Bob Marley meets Gaddafi

Former MediaCorp Radio Gold 90FM DJ **STEVEN SHALOWITZ** is on a round-the-world journey after leaving Singapore. Having fallen off a camel last week, the Chicago resident completes his tour of Libya

THE road from Ghadames to Nalut is dull. Apart from the odd nondescript village or rest-stop manned by the lonely, there is precious little to encounter on the 310km drive between the two northwestern Libyan towns. Even the stray camels on the pebbled terrain look bored.

The lacklustre journey contrasted starkly against the two spectacular days my travelling companions and I experienced in Ghadames, a historical oasis town on the ancient caravan route. With its white-washed walls and labyrinth of enclosed alleyways, it is every bit worthy of its Unesco World Heritage Site status.

After wiping our sticky fingers after eating the deliciously sweet dates purchased at a roadside stall, we soon exhausted all forms of entertainment. Guidebooks had been read and images on digital cameras shared. On this, our last full day in Libya, for one final time, Mohammed, our guide, tested us on the simple Arabic he taught us over the last two and a half weeks.

Mohammed took the exams seriously, remaining stern-faced until the end when he broke into a smile in asking the Arabic for “flat tyre” (*goma maflug* in Libya). We learnt this when our four-wheel drive experienced one on our first day in the desert.

FROM TRAVEL GUIDE TO ROCK STAR

Fellow traveller Charlotte, a resourceful Belgian businesswoman, broke the spell of boredom when she produced a cassette purchased at a hole-in-the-wall music shop in Ghadames. It was cut by the 34-year-old Mohammed, four of his brothers and a cousin who make up the group, Wa'aed (“promise”). Yes, our trusted guide moonlights as a composer, guitarist, pianist and drummer.

Wa'aed was formed in 2001 in Mohammed's hometown of Al-Aweinat, located at the base of the **A c a c u s**



TUAREG DESERT PEOPLE: Mohammed the guide is also a musician and part of a popular reggae band.

Mountains in southwestern Libya. The group followed its 2002 maiden album, *I Hope to Travel*, which sold 8,000 copies, with a 2004 release, *I Live*. All 12,000 units ran off the shelves as did royalties, the guide lamented, from coveted copies made by enterprising music lovers.

Mohammed anticipates that the band's 2005 *The Candle of My Life*, recorded in his home using European imported equipment, will sell out all 20,000 units produced.

The mood brightened on the bus as we heard Wa'aed in action, a mix of sophisticated tracks, including traditional Libyan music and, curiously, reggae. In fact, Mohammed proudly acknowledged

that Wa'aed essentially bills itself as a reggae outfit. That the group should so accurately capture the reggae vibe is surprising. After all, Wa'aed's members are Tuareg, a desert culture spanning from Mauritania to Libya, which is a long way from Jamaica, *mahn*.

Mohammed confessed that while there are other bands in Libya playing reggae, he humbly listed Wa'aed's accomplishments, which include air-time on national radio and TV and performances at festivals nationwide.

MUSIC OVERCOMES HARDSHIP

It seems music runs in Mohammed's family. While his tunes made us forget the bleak landscape racing past our windows, he recalled how his father left his village in the mid-1950s to seek employment in the capital, Tripoli. Without prior training, he took a job as a tuba and trumpet player in the military band under then King Idris, a position he held for six years before returning to his village and becoming mayor for the next 20. Today, the self-taught musician spends time tending his vegetable garden.

The beat went on in Libya, according to Mohammed, even during the 11-year United Nations embargo imposed against the country beginning in 1992 (for its implication in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland).

Until 2003 when the embargo was lifted, both Arabic and Western music – including reggae – infiltrated the country through neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt. Today, regional and international sounds are heard over satellite TV and in music shops.

REGGAE RULES ON THE STREETS OF LIBYA

Dog-eared posters of Bob Marley, reggae's most recognisable icon, hang in these shops throughout Libya, alongside pirated cassettes of his music, and the likes of Mariah Carey and Colombian songstress Shakira. Even Eminem's vulgar tunes are on the market.

“What does the country's leader, Colonel Mu'amar Gaddafi think of Wa'aed's reggae sound?” I asked.

“I believe he attended one of the festivals where we played,” Mohammed smiled, and added: “But I didn't get the chance to ask him what he thought of our music.”

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LIBYAN LULL: The writer is well-armed for a peaceful sojourn in the desert. (Insets) Throughout the country, posters of Western singers Bob Marley and Eminem (left) are seen, alongside those of Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi (right).