

ESSAOUIRA Gnaoua

& World Music Festival
25th TO 27th
JUNE 2026

27th EDITION • ESSAOUIRA / MOROCCO

PRODUCED AND ORGANIZED BY



ESSAOUIRA FESTIVAL f i d x FESTIVAL-GNAOUA.NET

PRESS RELEASE

GNAOUA 2026 : ESSAOUIRA, WHERE WORLD MUSIC FINDS ITS HOME

Casablanca, April 21, 2026. More than a festival, an experience. More than a lineup, a journey.

From June 25 to 27, Essaouira becomes the beating heart of a constantly evolving musical landscape, where Gnaoua Maâlems, guardians of a living tradition, meet some of the world's most compelling voices. For three days, music moves, transforms, and connects, driven by the energy of encounters, the depth of heritage, and a shared appetite for artistic risk.

Essaouira: a city of roots and horizons

The 2026 edition unfolds around a central thread: port cities. *From Lebanon to Cameroon, Brazil to the United States, India to Ethiopia, and Palestine to Morocco*, the invited artists come from territories shaped by movement, exchange, and circulation. Their music carries that imprint, *hybrid, improvised, constantly reinventing itself*. Built on openness since the 18th century, Essaouira offers the perfect echo.

An opening between fervor and creation

The Festival opens with the **parade of the Gnaoua Maâlems**, a defining moment when the entire city comes alive. A collective, festive and spiritual procession that sets the tone for three days of intensity. It continues on the **Moulay Hassan stage** with a major opening concert led by **Mehdi Nassouli**, joined by the Rwandan troupe **i Buhoro**, Moroccan singer **Sara Moullablad**, Indian vocalist **ganavya**, and French musician **Sylvain Barou**.

Conceived as a multi-voiced creation, the concert delivers a powerful opening, deeply rooted in Gnaoua rhythms and firmly turned toward the world.

Creation at the core

Creation is not a segment of the Festival, it is its driving force.

Maâlem Mohamed Montari meets **Badume's Band** and **Selamnesh Zemene** in a dialogue between Morocco and Ethiopia, while **Mehdi Qamoum** joins the Harlem **Spirit of Gospel** by **Anthony Morgan** for a project shaped by the power of voices.

Bass virtuoso **Richard Bona**, known for bridging African memory and global jazz, will feature **Asma Lmnawar** as a special guest, in a moment at the crossroads of two distinct musical worlds. Another highlight brings **Maâlem Hamid El Kasri** back together with **Carlinhos Brown**, for an intense dialogue between Gnaoua rhythms and Afro-Brazilian traditions, extending a long-standing artistic connection.

Tribute, transmission, and leading voices

This edition pays tribute to **Maâlem Mustapha Baqbou**, who passed in 2025. A major figure of the Gnaoua tradition, he remains one of the most influential Maâlems of his generation, known for his distinctive approach to the guembri and for shaping a lasting culture of musical dialogue. To honor his legacy, **Maâlem Abdeslam Alikkane, Hamza Baqbou, Maâlem Abdelkebir Merchane, and Maâlem Mohamed Kouyou** come together in a collective moment of transmission.

The Festival also welcomes artists with strong and singular identities: the **Harlem Spirit of Gospel by Anthony Morgan, ganavya, 47SOUL, Yasmine Hamdan, Hoba Hoba Spirit, and Oudaden.**

Across the city, more than **400 artists**, including **42 Maâlems**, will perform on stages that range from large-scale concerts to more intimate formats.

The Human Rights Forum: thinking the youth of the world

At the heart of the Festival, the Human Rights Forum stands as a space for reflection in its own right. This year's theme: **Youth of the World: Freedom, Identity, Future.**

Over two days, artists, writers, public figures, and thinkers explore the transformations shaping younger generations today.

Participants include **Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid, Minister of Youth, Culture and Communication**, alongside **Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, Rachid Benzine, Leïla Slimani, Raphaël Liogier, and Asmae El Moudir, among others.**

Transmission and creation: a long-term commitment

Now in its third edition, **the Berklee at the Gnaoua and World Music Festival program** offers a **six-day immersive experience dedicated to musical development.** Open to professional and semi-professional musicians from diverse backgrounds, it brings together participants from around the world, guided by Berklee faculty and internationally renowned artists.

The closing concert shares this collective journey with the public. In the same spirit, the Festival continues its collaboration with **Mohammed VI Polytechnic University**, developing a long-term academic initiative dedicated to Gnaoua culture, its origins, its hybridizations, and its contemporary expressions, while fostering dialogue between artists, researchers, and institutions at both national and international levels.

One city, countless crossings

For nearly three decades, the Gnaoua Festival has established Essaouira as one of the world's leading capitals of living music. In 2026, it reaffirms a simple idea: encounter is not declared, **it is lived. Through artists who embrace transformation in contact with others.**

From June 25 to 27, the world gathers in Essaouira.

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