

ESSAOUIRA
Gnaoua
 & World Music Festival
 25th TO 27th
 JUNE 2026
 27th EDITION • ESSAOUIRA / MOROCCO

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PRESS RELEASE

CLOSING OF THE GNAOUA AND WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL 2026 THREE DAYS WHERE HERITAGE WAS WRITTEN IN THE PRESENT TENSE

Essaouira, 28 June 2026. From 25 to 27 June, Essaouira hosted the 27th edition of the Gnaoua and World Music Festival. Over three days, the city brought together artists, Maâlems, thinkers, young musicians and festivalgoers from Morocco and beyond around one shared conviction: traditions only truly matter when they continue to engage with their time.

With 460 artists, 43 Gnaoua Maâlems, 52 concerts, a Human Rights Forum, and programmes dedicated to training, research and transmission, this 27th edition once again showed that the Gnaoua Festival is far more than a musical gathering: it is a cultural project where concerts, reflection, learning and creation respond to one another.

CREATION AS A GUIDING THREAD

Since its beginnings, the Gnaoua Festival has made fusion its hallmark. Each edition gives rise to original creations, imagined especially for Essaouira, where Gnaoua Maâlems meet musicians from all over the world. These artistic dialogues give birth to original works that make each edition a unique moment.

The 27th edition offered several striking examples of this approach. The opening concert, led by Mehdi Nassouli, brought together Gnaoua art, the Intore dance of the Rwandan troupe I Buhoro, the voice of Indian singer ganavya, Sara Moullablad and Sylvain Barou in a creation where African and Asian traditions answered one another with remarkable ease.

The same artistic demand guided the Festival's artistic residency, which brought together Maâlem Hassan Boussou, Alexandre Herichon, Mohamed Derouich, Jacques Schwarz-Bart, Cheikh Ndoye, Karim Ziad and Meryem Aassid around a creation unveiled as a world premiere in Essaouira.

Other encounters also marked this edition: the dialogue between The Harlem Spirit of Gospel by Anthony Morgan and Mehdi Qamoum, Richard Bona's concert, joined on stage by Asmaa Lmnawar, and the much-awaited return of Carlinhos Brown, nearly ten years after his last appearance at the Festival. Alongside Maâlem Hamid El Kasri, the Brazilian artist offered a generous and unifying closing performance, where Afro-Brazilian rhythms and Gnaoua art recalled the deep ties that connect the two shores of the Atlantic.

At **Borj Bab Marrakech**, **Yasmine Hamdan** gave a magnetic and intimate concert, between Arabic poetry, electronic music and alternative pop, while **47Soul**, **Oudaden**, **Hoba Hoba Spirit**, **Bob Maghrib** and **Bnat Louz & Raskas** illustrated the diversity of a programme faithful to the Festival's identity, where popular traditions, contemporary music and new forms of expression intersect.

A FESTIVAL CARRIED BY ITS AUDIENCE

In Essaouira, the audience does not simply attend the concerts: it is one of their driving forces. This year, more than **300,000 festivalgoers** filled the squares, the ramparts, the alleyways of the medina and the various Festival spaces, turning the city into a vast place of sharing where music circulates freely. Families, students, music lovers, Moroccan and international visitors once again gave the Festival its most faithful face: that of a popular, open and deeply alive gathering.

THINKING THE WORLD AS MUCH AS LISTENING TO IT

For its 13th edition, the Human Rights Forum, organised in partnership with the **Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad**, brought together researchers, public officials, artists and intellectuals around the theme "**Youth of the World: Freedom, Identity, Future**".

Opened by **Neila Tazi** and **Driss El Yazami**, the Forum immediately placed youth, freedom and dialogue at the heart of the reflection. **Neila Tazi** recalled that "*there is no freedom without youth, because it is youth that, with each generation, reinvents what it means to be free. And there is no youth without freedom, because youth without freedom is no longer truly youth: it is a state of waiting.*" **Driss El Yazami**, for his part, described it as "*the most democratic festival in Morocco*", in the sense that it brings together multiple voices in a spirit of freedom and respect, thereby recalling the singular place of this event in the national cultural landscape.

The Forum then hosted an inaugural lecture by **Souleymane Bachir Diagne**, who called on participants to "*invite the youth of our countries to join a universal struggle*", as part of a humanist reflection on the fractures of the contemporary world.

The conversation between **Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid** and **Najat Vallaud Belkacem** notably recalled the essential role of culture in building a form of citizenship open to the world. **Mohamed Mehdi Bensaid** highlighted the role of those who defend culture on a daily basis, stressing that "*it is these activists who allow culture to exist in our country*". **Najat Vallaud Belkacem**, for her part, insisted on the strength of engagement among new generations, stating: "*We need the ardour of youth.*"

The discussions around identities in motion also gave rise to several powerful reflections. **Leïla Slimani** notably recalled that "*we are always torn between the desire to defend our singularity and the need to belong*", underlining that these two aspirations are not incompatible.

Throughout the discussions, the speakers explored three major issues of our time: **creation as an affirmation of self, identities in motion, and new ways of inhabiting the world and engaging with it.**

TRANSMITTING AND PREPARING THE FUTURE

Transmission remains one of the pillars of the Festival.

For the third year running, **Berklee at Gnaoua Festival** brought together musicians from around twenty countries for a week of training, creation and exchange with international artists and professors, confirming the growing appeal of this programme.

This edition also saw the emergence of a new space for encounter, with **Jam Sessions** hosted at the **Former Danish Consulate**, offering Maâlems, guest artists and Berklee musicians a setting conducive to improvisation and exchange.

As part of the partnership with **Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P)** and its **Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS)**, the **Transitions Chair** gave rise to a dense reflection on the place of the Gnaoua in the contemporary world. The discussions recalled that Gnaoua art is not only a heritage to be preserved, but a living body of knowledge, shaped by questions of memory, diaspora, trance, ritual, healing and creation. By bringing together the perspectives of researchers, artists and thinkers, this encounter showed the extent to which the Gnaoua offer a powerful language for questioning circulations, identities and worlds in motion.

AN INCREASINGLY INTERNATIONAL REACH

The Festival welcomed more than **300 journalists and photo and video** reporters from five continents.

This coverage reflects the growing interest generated by the Festival and contributes, year after year, to carrying Essaouira's influence far beyond its borders.

THE MOMENTUM CONTINUES

Over **27 editions**, the **Gnaoua and World Music Festival** has established itself as a unique gathering on the world stage, where contemporary creation nourishes heritage as much as it draws inspiration from it. In Essaouira, concerts become encounters, traditions open themselves to other imaginaries and music creates a space for dialogue that extends far beyond the duration of the Festival.

The 27th edition comes to a close, but it continues a story that is still being written, year after year, to the rhythm of creations, transmissions and encounters.

The 28th edition of the Gnaoua and World Music Festival will take place from 24 to 26 June 2027.

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