

HEADLINE: Sympathy for the soul

SUBHEADLINE: Rachid Taha was in town to offer a shot of inspiration for the world weary

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Rachid Taha's group therapy works wonders. After a few minutes of exposure to his meticulously worked-out method, dispensed full tilt with added vitamins, the patients were feeling much better. Perked up, refreshed, regenerated, as though they could live for a hundred more years ...

From the stage in the chic and slightly stiff Thailand Cultural Centre, Rachid Taha _ grey shirt and grey combat trousers, speaking in French _ professes: ``I'm a doctor, I'll cure you!''

Continuing with a conviction that seemed only matched by the volume of his music, he stresses: ``I am a generalist and also a specialist!''

In the front part of the auditorium, the remedy seems to take effect: bodies loosen, jackets slip off, smiles replace frowns, hips undulate, temperatures rise ...

Soon the two sides of the stage turn into dense forests of dancing bodies, swept along by dynamic, electric rhythms _ close to flamenco at times, rock, techno, funk at others, or purely Algerian-made rai. Thai, French, Lebanese, Indian, German, Singaporean _ people from every age group and background mingle with abandon.

The effectiveness of the remedy stems from the fact that Taha is neither a quack nor a charlatan. The recipient of 2001's Victoire de la Musique _ the equivalent of a Grammy in France _ French- Algerian Rachid Taha, 43, has more than 20 years experience as a singer, composer and interpreter.

He has been dubbed by some in the French media as the ``Zinedine Zidane of music'' for his ability to rally France with his world beat _ similar to midfielder and hero of Les Bleus Zinedine Zidane dribbling a soccer ball.

Born in Oran (Algeria), during the era of French colonisation, Taha moved to France with his parents in the late '60s.

He would soon be exposed to racist feelings _ ``from young kids who repeat what they hear at home'' _ and would thus begin piling up grounds for complaints and protests, the very same ones which now impregnate every beat of his music: a thirst for greater justice, and anger against injustice, inequity, intolerance.

Dreaming of becoming a journalist so he could speak his mind, Rachid wound up trying his hand at various activities including poetry and trade union activism before turning to song.

His childhood in Algeria was spent watching Bollywood films with their great soundtracks. His parents listened to rai and Egyptian music. His later influences included the Beatles, punk heroes The Clash, Kraftwerk or Daf, Taha made his first mark on the French music scene in the early '80s with a band called Carte de Sejour (Green Card), which surfed on the first waves of social protest against exclusion and racist violence.

Despite voicing the concerns of a first generation of children born in France from Algerian parents, the band largely succeeded in combining contemporary rock with Algerian and Moroccan rai traditional music.

They rose to fame with an ironic, Arabic remake of France's emblematic song by Charles Trenet called Douce France. The group split up in 1989 after a concert tour in Germany, but Taha, for whom music was a way to funnel his ardour, wasn't content to leave it at that.

A born experimentalist, Taha continued to explore different styles of music in a series of solo albums (Barbes, Rachid Taha, Ole Ole, Diwan) on various continents where he temporarily based himself, including America (Los Angeles then New Orleans), North Africa, and France.

Having played around with electronic rhythms, reinterpreted Arab classics, epitomised and transcended the world music genre and charmed multi-Grammy winner Carlos Santana _ with whom he sang a duet on the star's extraordinarily successful Supernatural album _ Taha released his fifth solo album.

Made in Medina is a compelling collection of original compositions in

Arabic, recorded in Paris, London and New Orleans. It was produced with ever-faithful producer Steve Hillage, former guitar hero of the band Gong, with whom Taha has been working for the past 18 years.

The album includes a duet (Ala Jalkhum) with Femi Kuti, son of Nigerian sensation Fela Kuti, and is geared toward a more rock-inspired guitar sound, although electronic elements are still very much there as are his Algerian roots.

Throughout his musical career, the Franco-Algerian singer has cherished a unique approach to music and rhythm. ``I cure myself with music. And I try to help cure others. My albums are like prescriptions,'' he says with amusement.

He was in Bangkok for a concert presented by the French Embassy, as part of his 2001 world tour.

``To me, music is like history. Without history one cannot exist. It is the same for music, it is vital _ it is the basis of all. As an ethnologist I did research. I tried to go back to the roots of rock and by extension rhythm and music _ I found those roots began in Africa,'' he explains.

``Styles such as techno, rock, jazz and other popular music forms indeed have their origins in the voodoo rhythms of Africa. And in the same line, one finds shamans, marabouts and other witch doctors who use rhythm to cure people. They were the first doctors.''

Inspired by this observation and strengthened by the invariability of human behaviour _ `the human body reacts to pain and expresses happiness in the same manner, whether that person is a pygmy or Japanese'' _ Taha opted for his unclassifiable music, which he hopes will bring comfort and soothe ailments.

It might be that in these times of international distress, his unifying music has gained an even greater significance.

``One can only express a feeling of horror regarding what has just happened in America. Then questions arise, such as what, how, why? But most important

is to beware of confusion and generalisation. The first to be affected by fanatical fundamentalist movements are Muslims themselves. And besides, although I am a fervent defender of democracy, I sometimes feel that those nations which stand as democratic don't always respect this principle when they handle situations outside their national borders.'

In Bangkok for the first time ever _ although he enjoyed Phuket earlier this year in March _ the North African singer was sorry to experience yet again things that ``wear him out': generalisations, racism.

With tension running high because of the terrorist attacks in the US, a Thai national in the street heckled him, saying, ``Hey you, aren't you an Arab?''

``No, I am Italian,' ' he answered, anxious not to create an incident.

``You are an Arab _ we should kill Arabs!''

Taha says, ``I am revolted by intolerance and hatred. We are all in the same bloody mess anyway.'

Then he adds: ``There is nothing better than happiness and peace. This was a concert dedicated to peace in the world.'