

Making music for freedom in the Saharawi refugee camps

I write this as a relative newcomer to the world of the Saharawi people of Western Sahara. It was only one year ago that I first set foot in the Saharawi refugee camps near Tindouf. Before then I had heard about the Saharawi situation but had no idea of the scale of the camps, with an estimated 200,000 refugees displaced into the harsh desert of SW Algeria, since 1976, spread out in five large camps.

I was initially invited to the camps to teach sound recording for the Studio-Live project, an initiative being led by UK charity Sandblast. The broad mandate of the project is to equip the Saharawi living in exile with the skills and material resources to build their own music industry in the camps. I discovered early on, that music has played an important role in expressing the long self-determination cause of the Saharawi people. So far very little of their music manages to reach international audiences and Studio-Live hopes to help change that.

Since my first visit back in Dec 2012, I have had the privilege of going back to the camps three times to contribute towards building sound recording skills in the community through short training workshops. During these action-packed visits I have forged friendships, developed a strong rapport with my students and met many wonderful and talented musicians.

The Studio-Live project has evolved out of the charity director's long-standing relationship with the refugee community and the work Sandblast has done to promote Saharawi music and its musicians since its creation in 2005. There are several strands to the Studio-Live project, of which the sound recording training that I am involved with, is but one.

The project kicked off in 2010 with a series of fundraising and awareness raising activities in the UK. Discussions with the Ministry of Culture in the camps determined that the first step should be the provision of live sound training and a decent concert PA. To this end, Sandblast forged a link with another UK charity, Fairtones, to deliver the training and help source appropriate sound equipment. In early 2011 a comprehensive PA was delivered in a donated van and three live sound courses have been given to roughly 15 students since 2012. It was decided that, once the live sound training was established, work would begin on the studio training.

On my first trip I was accompanied by a group from Sandblast and BBC journalist Robin Deneslow, who was going out to produce the BBC radio 4 programme "Studio in the Sand." During my stay I had the chance to assess the level of studio training required and meet potential students and musicians. It became immediately apparent to me that the Saharawi were crying out for a means to record and document their music. There is a pervasive fear that a lot of their music knowledge and history is being lost as leading artists die out without being recorded. I also found there was a large body of people keen to gain skills in sound recording.

One of the main concerns we faced was how to deliver the training in a manner that would ensure a high enough level of expertise was developed for the Saharawi to be self-sufficient. Both sound recording and live sound are areas that require a certain depth of knowledge. In addition, as practical subjects, they can only be thoroughly learnt through continued hands-on practice. It was decided that, for the studio training, I would initially teach a core group of students who could eventually go on to train others.

These days, with the constant technological advancements, there are numerous options for a basic recording set up. The equipment that I was given to teach on was a computer-based system based around a 13" Mac book with a minimal amount of equipment and a limited range of microphones, which thanks to fundraising and donations is slowly expanding.

The first training course took place over the course of two weeks in April 2013. As the project had no premises we situated ourselves in the newly established music school in the smallest

camp of Boujdour (previously known as February 27). It had the bare shells of two rooms that had been designated for a recording studio. Working there was a mixed blessing. Being on the outskirts of the camp the electricity supply was extremely poor with constant power cuts. It was also quite a trek for the students to get to class and, yet more trying, stagger home under the midday sun.

The rooms we were working in were bare, square rooms with tiled floors, full of hard reflective surfaces – probably just about the worst environment for recording. However, the music school was an excellent place to get started, as there was a constant stream of musicians rehearsing there, providing an introduction for myself and a good source of willing artists for recording practice. By the end of the two weeks I had a core group of six students who had gained the basic skills and were committed to the project.

The second two-week course took place in September 2013, this time we were in the youth centre in central Boujdour. This was an excellent location and we found ourselves with no shortage of musicians willing to record and a constant buzz around the project. The abundant recording practice supported by intensive theory and practical classes enabled the students to progress rapidly on this course.

A significant development, just as I left the camp, was the acquisition of premises in central Boujdour to pilot the Studio-Live project. Under the guidance of Sandblast's director Danielle Smith, the premises were adapted and the Studio-Live trainee team organized into a collective to run the centre as a rehearsal and recording space.

Over the course of the last few months the core students have been establishing themselves as a part of the local community and have apparently been very busy. On my next visit, in January 2014, I will have the opportunity to review the work done and take the training a step further towards a professional standard.

Whilst much of the world takes access to music and music production for granted, the Saharawi camps have until now remained for the most part isolated, with limited access to technology, intermittent mobile phone connections and, if available at all, an unreliable, unstable electricity supply. This makes the Studio-Live project even more relevant, whilst presenting many challenges on physical, technological and social levels.

On the physical level there will be the need to improve the acoustic properties of the Studio-Live centre if it is going to be a successful recording environment. This is harder than it sounds due to the limited resources available locally. With the vast range of recording equipment on the market today there will be the constant balance between buying what the project can afford and building up a professional standard facility. Currently the studio is running with minimal equipment, but as the project gains momentum it is hoped that money will be raised to invest in more studio equipment.

The main challenge is building up a studio robust enough to withstand the punishing physical conditions. Sand, heat and unstable power supply conspire together to sabotage carefully laid plans. Short of investing in military grade equipment, too costly to be a viable solution, the project is testing equipment 'in the field'. Equipment manufacturers won't guarantee operating in temperatures above 35 °C, we have found that some equipment soldiers on, some just 'faints' in the heat, only to come back to life once reaching the UK. Trial and error will hopefully lead to a reliable studio set-up. There is no getting away from the problem of sand, and the degree to which we resort to sheets of plastic and gaffer tape will have to be judged. Having a permanent physical space will be a great improvement in keeping the equipment clean. Again, time and experimentation will tell. Some equipment will fare better than others.

There are also many social factors that are emerging as the project takes root and develops. The Studio Live Trainee Team has, quite by accident, turned out to be a team of three men

and three women. Whilst Saharawi women are visible and extremely active in camp life and society, it is unusual globally in the male dominated world of the sound studio, to have a team comprising 50% women. In addition there are black members of the team, we find ourselves in a position where the Studio- Live team is confronting issues of racism and sexism in society. This is forcing the project to address these challenges and engage local sources in educational activism to find effective solutions.

Another important dimension in the sound recording training process involves educating the musicians as much as the sound engineers. Recording is a skill that even the most experienced musician needs to develop. The project has been endeavouring to work with a wide range of the Saharawi musicians not only to develop the skills of the engineering team but also to increase the experience of the musicians in the recording environment.

It has been encouraging so far to see the interest in the project and willingness to participate on the part of the musicians. However, they still look to myself and other visiting engineers as the 'experts'. A combination of the young age of the engineering team and their lack of experience means that they will need to prove themselves by producing some quality recordings to gain the respect of the musicians.

To add to our challenges we also need to tackle overcoming the suspicion amongst some musicians that we are there to 'steal' their music for our own gain. This is a fear that is not unique to the Saharawi; I have encountered this problem in many countries of the world. I imagine that it grows out of the many historical examples of musicians being exploited. However, Sandblast plan to incorporate education on the global music industry, artists rights and promotion as part of the Studio Live project, to enable the Saharawi artists to take control of their own music marketing and promotion.

Currently, the recording quality of music in the camps is simply too poor to gain international recognition. But as musicians and trainee engineers have access to higher quality recordings they will recognise the value of paying attention to quality sound recording, and as the engineers improve their skills higher quality recordings will be produced. The goal is for the Studio Live Team to have the skills to be self-sufficient, but be able to count on maintained links with outside expertise for support and exchange of ideas.

Recently the Saharawi asked for help to set up international recognized certification for music and sound engineering training in the camps. To this end Sandblast has started to build a link with the London College of Music, where I teach and have managed to build up enthusiasm to support Studio-Live. Initially, it is planned to send volunteer music teachers to the camps and for students to study a range of instruments working towards the certificated LCM grades. There are also plans for an exchange of skills with students from the London College of Music, who can provide videos and online support in recording skills.

The Studio Live project has so far succeeded in attracting support from several organizations and individuals but is still in need of more high profile involvement and funding to have the impact it seeks. One recent positive develop has been the interest of the British Library to build an archive of Saharawi music for its collection. A member of the Sandblast team, Violeta Ruano, who is doing PhD research into Saharawi music at the School of Oriental and African Studies, is busy doing field recordings as I write.

As the project grows it will be important to regularly re-evaluated and managed through constant dialogue to ensure that the project stays focused and is in tune with the needs of the Saharawi community.

I have tried to give you an idea of the Studio Live project so far from my perspective. Whilst the project currently appears to be making a positive contribution to Saharawi camp life, and is being well received, I cannot predict the future. However, it is clear that Studio Live

participants both engineers and musicians are developing skills which cannot fail to impact on the way that Saharawi music is documented and distributed both within the camps and beyond.