



## Simon talks to Coline Houssais

Simon: So. Coline, welcome. So why don't you start by telling us a little bit about your background and then get on to what your current sort of field is.

Coline: Well, hello and thank you very much for having me. I studied political science with a focus on the er, on the Middle East and North Africa, but I've always been ... I grew up in a family of musicians and music and musical guests so for me, music has always been a way to connect with people, to connect with different cultures. And also to connect with my own culture, because, so I'm from Brittany and from the Gallo country, but I grew up up the road, I mean outside of Brittany, in the mainly Paris and then the Lyon and then the south east of France and music was the way for me to connect with my, with my culture. So I would go to Mediatech and to public libraries. We have an amazing system of public libraries in France with a lot of CDs and music, and so for me, listening to Breton music, and also Irish and Celtic music in general was a way to connect with that part of my identity that I live on a day-to-day basis in this part of France.

Simon: So, what are you doing at the moment? What's your thing?

Coline: So, I am based between France, in Brittany and the U.K.

Simon: Right.

Coline: So I go back and forth and um, and so I work as a journalist.

Simon: As a?

Coline: A journalist.

Simon: A journalist, right.

Coline: So, I write articles, mainly articles about music and culture, mainly about our own music and culture but also increasingly about Celtic culture, Celtic music and particularly the links and the potential musical dialogues that exist between Celtic culture, or Celtic cultures from the Arab world. They have a lot in common in many ways. I'm not trained ... I mean first of all because we are all humans so there is a degree of universality, universality in a way and also there are common features, sometimes they just cannot be explained the reason why this is similar. But, for instance the sounds, the bagpipes, the double-reed instruments is a great example that we're working on.

Simon: Yeah.



Coline: The traditional costumes as well.

Simon: Yeah.

Coline: You would find lots of very similar patterns and knots or even just colours, and I think again it's not because there is a common origin to the Celtic and the Arab culture, but it's just because clearly in a way, particularly in the past two centuries, Europe and what lies at the south and the east of the Mediterranean have been intensely, like intensively in touch in connection and so sometimes you would find bits, you know from one part of the Mediterranean to the other and even beyond. So, I write articles, I teach also at Sciences Po University in France um and I create shows as well. So I would call them enhanced readings maybe so ...

Simon: Enhanced readings?

Coline: Yes.

Simon: Okay, of what? I mean, so you say a show.

Coline: Yes.

Simon: So, in a theatre?

Coline: Yes, in a theatre.

Simon: And an enhanced reading of ...

Coline: Of, so I would write my own texts and I would put them in an image and sounds.

Simon: Okay.

Coline: In a sense that I would read and then I would have either a live musician accompanying me or I would have recorded music.

Simon: Right.

Coline: I've worked lots with archives.

Simon: Okay.

Coline: Um, and the same goes for images and videos so I would usually use archives. I've also worked with a live artist who drew.

Simon: Right.



Coline: As I spoke, and usually the themes my shows are about um, are, they would entail questions of ... I mean it's always about culture and it's always about the links between culture and politics. So far I've worked mainly on the art world. My first show was about the golden age of Iraqi music so Baghdad from the 1920s to the 1960s and the idea with the words and music and the videos and all the archives was to convey to the public who was not really familiar with Iraq to convey a very small idea about how Baghdad looked like at that time because, for instance, particularly in France, um when we think about Iraq we think about the war, we think about recent history but we don't have all that information. Um, and it was also a way for me to talk about the Jewish communities in the art world, how instrumental they were to the development of urban music. And how they were expelled from Iraq because they were Jews and when they arrived in Israel, they were also marginalised because they were Arabs.

Simon: Yeah, yeah.

Coline: So for me, just like dual identities, it is a very interesting topic to work on. So that's an example.

Simon: Okay. So it's really interesting when you say about the influences or the similarities between say Breton music and Arab music. And for me, as a musician I think one of the interesting and one of the most appealing parts of Breton music and Arabic music, or Arabic music by origin, Arab origin, is the non-western tonality. Cos you talked about the links, and where do those links come from and you, I think you said they were, you said something about sort of non-cultural but human, humanistic ...

Coline: Hmm.

Simon: Can you get into that a bit more?

Coline: Basically, a lot of traditional music and melodies in the world including in Europe traditionally were micro-tonal and why it was put into writing, and when you know classical music developed particularly after Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach, um we had this idea that music had to be in either a major or a minor note. But, particularly in regions where culture was transmitted orally as well and it was not put into writing, I guess it was much more space in a way to interpret the songs and the melodies as you wanted it to. Um, so it had everything to do with the ear, basically how you heard it and how you sang it, or how you played it. Um, there were no, there were no frets on the instruments that were used, for instance, and which is something that also



existed in the arab world. But there is, and I mean as everybody knows, but everybody knows in Central Brittany there is the Kreiz Breizh Akademi. His very existence is about, among other things but about bringing together all this microtonal traditions from different regions of the world, so obviously Breton music but also Turkish music, Persian, Arabic.

Simon: Eastern European Balkan music.

Coline: Absolutely.

Simon: Yeah. So when is your next show?

Coline: I don't know. I have just finished writing a book so I am also writing books. Er.

Simon: On?

Coline: That book was about um Paris as the capital of Arab literature and thoughts.

Simon: Which was when?

Coline: Um.

Simon: Or, as of now, or as of ....

Coline: Well, it was, so the book covers a very wide period in time from the antiquity, um, until today but the main focus, like is on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Basically, it's after the revolution until let's say, the 1970s and 1980s.

Simon: Right.

Coline: And the idea, or the thesis was that Paris emerged as the ex city capitol of Arab culture as the same time as it emerged as a cultural centre, like as a global cultural centre. So it's as much a history of Arab cultural presence in Paris and the west as it is a history, a social history of Paris.

Simon: Okay.

Coline: The coming of age of Paris, in a way, the emergence of Paris as a global power. Um, in a way it's a love letter also to the cultural relations between France and the Arab world but I have to say that this relationship is a very toxic one, or has been a very toxic one. Er, this could have been the title of the book actually.

Simon: And the title is?

Coline: We haven't decided upon a definitive title yet with my publisher but if I were given free reins I'd day, I'd name it 'A Very Toxic Relationship. 'But also, as a



Breton person I, it's not that I don't identify it but for me what was interesting about all this story between Paris and the Arab world, was that it was a story also of the dynamics between the centre and the peripheries. So, this is about Arab culture but sometimes a similar, yeah a similar thought or a similar path of a way of thinking could have been applied also to this relationship between the peripheries within mainland France and Paris.

Simon: And certainly Brittany.

Coline: Absolutely.

Simon: Yeah.

Coline: Um, so that was the second book and I'm not sure yet whether or not I want to start writing another one soon. But it might be more personal or might have to do more about Brittany and Bach.

Simon: That's fascinating, Coline. A really interesting conversation and I will stop there because I think we could probably go on for about a month. Ah, but that's great. Thank you very much for coming and talking to us.

Coline: Thank you.