

Make Music

By J.R. Patterson

MUSIC CAN BE a refuge, but in Marrakesh, it comes in many forms. Already at dawn, I could hear the snake charmers in the Jemaa el-Fna square. At that early hour, the thick, rising heat begins, carrying the sound across the skyline of flat roofs and minarets—a cacophony of frantic drums and whining horns with all the subtlety of a Scottish pipe band falling down a flight of stairs. But the music and the snakes are a gimmick. The fat cobras lying coiled on the pavement are quickly covered with baskets when one shows no interest in joining the teasing or posing for a photograph.

Morocco sometimes felt the way the French painter and writer Eugène Fromentin had depicted it a century and a half before: men in djellabas milling around stone gates ornamented like fossilized shells, the market stalls of the casbah just beyond. Against the dun-colored walls and the dust, the souk is like an artist's palette daubed with color: mountains of dried fruits and nuts, tables heaped with silver bangles, bags of sandalwood bark, mounds of spices, apothecary jars of herbs. Entire walls hung with orange and yellow leather pouches like the scaly hide of a dragon. It is impressive, but a closer look reveals a repetitive surrealism: The stores are identical, repeating themselves ad infinitum like recycled cartoon backgrounds. To enter the bazaar is to enter a music hall of competing ballads, each vendor chanting you into their *herboristerie*, their performance sung to your sympathy but aimed at your wallet. Five hundred feet into the bazaar, I knew the salesmen's songs by heart, could tell cumin from coriander at 20 paces, and had drunk more menthol-tinged mint tea than a recovering addict.

Seeking reprieve from the haranguing calls for money and attention, I ducked into a music store near the Secret Garden. I was the only patron, and the vendor sat quietly as I perused the *nai* flutes, *mizwid* pipes, and ouds. There was no expectation I'd purchase an Arabic violin or a 5-string banjo; these items were for locals, not visitors.

I struck up a conversation with the vendor, Mohammed. We discussed various regional genres: the desert blues of Ali Farka Touré, the flamenco of Andalusia. As we talked, I mentioned my own music background—years of

playing the violin, piano, and other instruments. Mohammed then spent a few hours showing me tricks on the lute-like *sintir*; by the time we were done, I had wrecked my fingers on its three-strings. When I left, rejuvenated, my new friend told me to return to Jemaa el-Fna after dark.

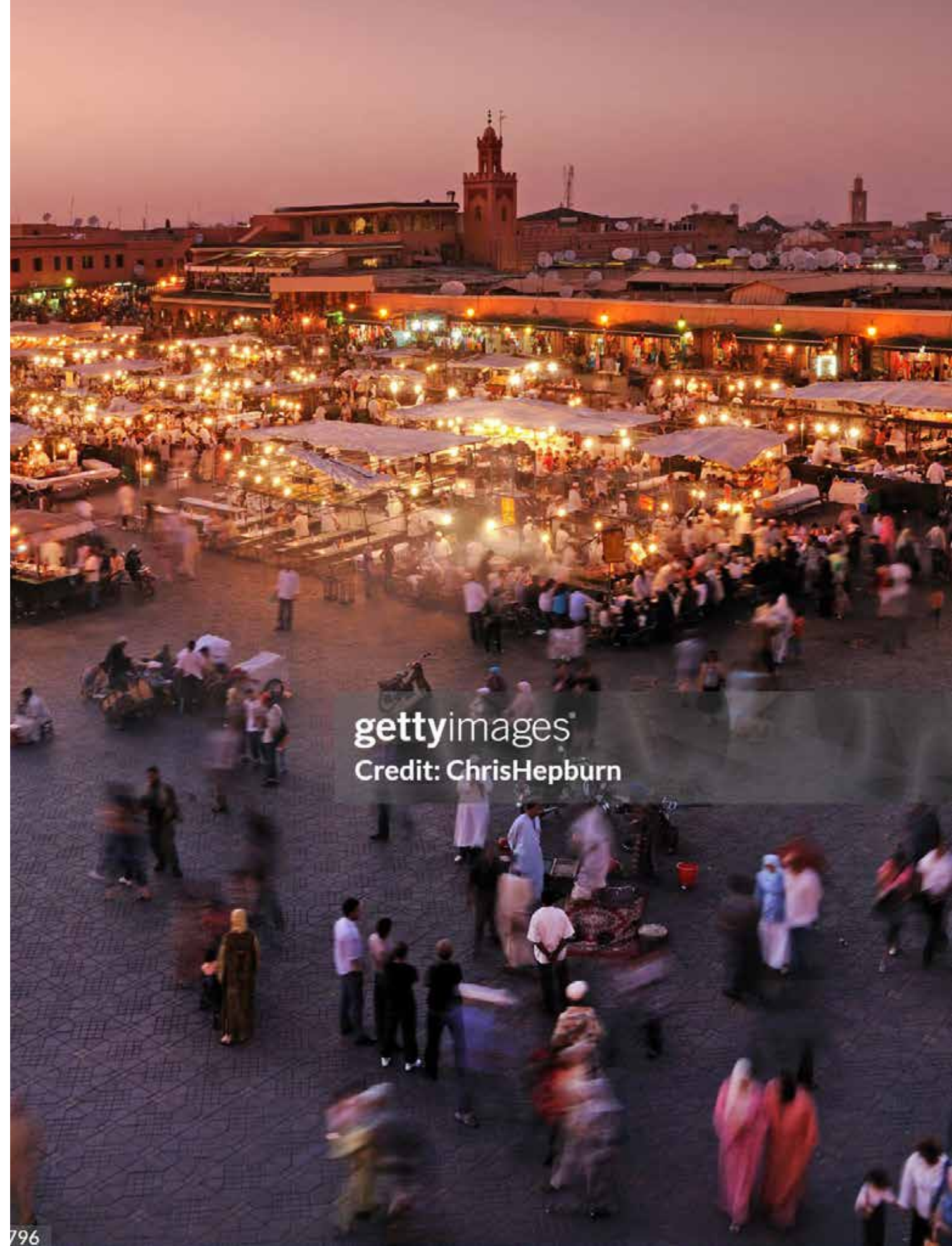
Music offers so much of what we seek in travel: It's communal and provides a view into the unique tastes of the people we meet. Perhaps best of all, because it transcends language, it gives somewhere for the traveler to be themselves.

The overlap between music and travel has always been natural for me. During an extended stay in Australia, I filled a chair in the Darwin Symphony Orchestra. Motorcycling across South America, I kept a charango strapped to my gear to provide solace through lonely nights on the altiplano. I've toured the bars of Nova Scotia as part of an acoustic duo, and I've played blues music in Kazakhstan to honor *konakkade*, the tradition that allows hosts to request a song from their guests. Wherever I go, I pack sheet music so that, should I find a piano, I'll have the opportunity to practice Beethoven sonatas. Now here, in Marrakesh, my visit was saved once again by music.

That night, when I arrived at the square, cats' eyes reflected the light of lanterns. The snake charmers were gone, replaced by clusters of musicians. I met Mohammed, and he drew me into a circle of his friends. It was *dakka marrakchia*, he said, music of the desert, of the Berber. There were tambourines, and metal castanets called *qarkabeb*, and drums. One man had a banjo plugged into a cheap amplifier and was thumping a distorted, hacksawed drone. Someone handed me a drum. We were brothers in music, Mohammed said. Brothers in arms, I said, and he asked me if I knew that song, the Dire Straits one. I did, but started tapping out the melody to "Water of Love" instead. The others joined in, adding their drums and metallic clanks, making the song something new, something different, something ours. The banjo man plucked a raw note, beginning a melody-less call-and-response. Mohammed leaned over to translate:

*Life is going
I don't have anything
Just my music
But that is enough.*

Right: Marrakesh's Jemaa el-Fna marketplace at night



Chris Hepburn/Er/Getty Images