



Words Victoria Macchi

**M**ohamed Chaoua didn't quite know what he was getting himself into when he moved from Tunisia to San Francisco in 2000. While most rai artists head to Paris to make a name for themselves, the 29-year-old native Tunisian headed to the US. "I had no clue about the American culture, and I thought rai music was as popular here as it was in France. So I wasn't thinking that I was taking a risk at all."

Even if the US isn't a hotbed of Rai fans, Chaoua – aka MC Rai – has been making a name for himself, including a performance in front of 200,000 spectators and taking the stage with the king of rai, Cheb Khaled (who hasn't sang along to "Aicha"?). The promising star has an edgier image than a lot of the genre's fresh faces. He currently has one album out, released last year, entitled *Raivolution*; his next album, due in late-Spring, will prove if his sound can match up with his look. Here, MC Rai breaks down for *Skin* what makes up him and his music.

## Get up Stand up **So what's Rai all about?**

*Just the guy to bring rebellious Rai to the spotlight again*

Rai in Arabic means opinion. It was started by the youth in Oran, Algeria. They took Algerian folk music and combined it with synths and drum machines. It broke all the taboos in Algerian society. It talks about subjects that you normally wouldn't talk about: daily life and struggles, drinking, love and sex, etc.

**How old were you when you decided you wanted to make a career in music?**  
I realised early on that music is my passion, but I decided that I wanted to make a career out of it when I was 17. My parents were not very happy with it, because they were worried that I wouldn't be able to make a living out of it, and they thought doing music is a hobby rather than a profession...

**Given that so many Rai artists move to Paris or Cairo to try to make a name for themselves, why did you choose the US?**  
In 2000 I decided to come to the US. Every rai artist that made it in France ultimately wants to make it in the US as well, so why not go directly there?

**What's been your best moment in US so far? Scariest? Funniest?**  
Performing at a San Francisco peace rally in front of 200,000 people, I feel like my voice as an Arab was heard. Another great moment was performing a song with Khaled during his US tour in 2003. It was such an honour, because he was the one that made me love rai music. The scariest moment was doing a show one week after September 11, in a period where there was a lot of tension and almost hate. The funniest was when my guitar player jumped from the stage in a jealous rage because he saw his ex-girlfriend with another man.

**Do you keep in touch with the musical scene in Tunisia?**  
I am trying to keep in touch with the music scene there, but America is very far. The scene there is more pop-oriented. The only underground scene is hip-hop music, and it's not allowed on the radio because of its political message.

**What are the themes you find yourself tapping into for lyrics?**  
Social politics, homesickness, poverty, human rights.

**The 411 on MC Rai**  
**Hometown** Gabés, Tunisia **Current location** Los Angeles **Huge fan of** Rachid Taha **Wishes he could perform with** Jim Morrison **Chills to** Sufi music **Gets away to** Napa Valley **Never leaves home without** his cell phone **Likes** ahweh turkee more than Nescafé **Digs** cigarettes and argileh, David Letterman, Salata m'shwiya **Gets mad** when driving **Spends weekend nights** watching movies with his girlfriend **Spends the most time at home** in his studio **Prefers** night to day, Um Kalthoum to Fairouz, cars over walking or public transportation, and dogs to cats.