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- [Jonathan Curiel, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Of course, Paul Bowles was attracted to Fez. So was Edith Wharton. And so continue to be hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit the Moroccan city that's famous for its 1,000-year-old medina (the non-European part of a north African city).

Like Jerusalem, Fez is an ancient capital that offers a maze of unforgettable sights, both religious and secular. Bowles was mesmerized by the people of Fez, writing in 1984, "It would be difficult to find another city anywhere in which the every day vicissitudes of medieval urban life can be studied in such detail."

It would also be difficult to find anything similar to the Fes (a variant spelling) Festival of World Sacred Music, an annual event that brings together spiritual singers who are Jewish, Christian and Muslim. Not every artist who attends the festival is of these faiths, but all the singers share a view that religions and cultures can bridge common values.

The festival was started 10 years ago by Faouzi Skali, a Muslim anthropologist and Sufi scholar in Fez who was disheartened by the first Persian Gulf War. Wanting to create a program that united nationalities, Skali couldn't have imagined that a decade later, he and the Fes Festival would be honored by the United Nations (as one of seven "unsung heroes of dialogue") and that the festival would inspire an offshoot event in the United States.

The Spirit of Fes Tour comes to Davis tonight, then to Cal Performances in Berkeley on Saturday night, where the concerts will begin with both a Jewish prayer and a Muslim prayer. After that, Francoise Atlan, an Algerian- Jewish vocalist who was raised in France and now lives in Morocco, will take the stage. Also appearing are Hadra des Femmes de Taroudant, a women's ensemble that emphasizes tribal traditions from southern Morocco; the Anointed Jackson Sisters, a U.S. gospel group; Lebanese American percussionist Jamey Haddad; and Moroccan oud player Farid Foulahi. Both concerts are preceded by a free panel discussion about music, globalization and other subjects.

"This project is universal," Skali says in a phone interview from Morocco. "It's about dialogue between different civilizations, different cultures, different art, different spiritualities. The music itself is a language for communication; sacred music is more than just a dialogue between people. The thing is to link this level with thinking and reflection about globalization and other issues. Here, you create a space to respond to what's happening in the world."

Atlan has performed at the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, as have the Anointed Jackson Sisters, who have riveted Moroccan audiences with their brand of spiritual music. Some aspects of the festival will be impossible to recreate in the United States. In Fez, the Islamic architecture of the concert spaces is breathtaking. Nighttime concerts are held in the Bab Makina, an open-air, palace-like setting with curved archways and tiles drenched in color.

Spirit of Fes organizers are doing their best to give audiences more than just a glimpse of Morocco. At 7:30 p.m. Saturday, a short film made at last year's Fes Festival will be shown to

audiences who arrive at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall. Morocco can have a powerful effect on visitors. Atlan was so inspired by the Fes Festival that she moved last year to Marrakesh (another famous Moroccan city), from her home in Marseille, France. Atlan's repertoire includes Arab-Andalusian music, which stems from the period when Muslims ruled over Spain.

Though much of Morocco's Jewish community has left the country, "Fez was a city where Jews and Muslims lived together," Atlan says. "It's very natural that Jewish and Muslim people make music together; Fez is the city of Andalusian music, which is made by Jewish and Muslim people. A lot of Andalusian masters were Jewish. This festival is important for this."

Spirit of Fez: The tour stops in Davis at 8 p.m. tonight at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, and 8 p.m. Saturday at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall. Both concerts are preceded by free panel discussions. For tickets and more information, go to www.spiritofFez.com or call (530) 754-2787 (Davis) or (510) 642-9988 (Berkeley).

E-mail Jonathan Curiel at jcuriel@sfgate.com.

Page E - 3

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The Anointed Jackson Sisters perform this weekend at the Spirit of Fez festival at Zellerbach Hall. Photo by Remi Boisseau



Remi Boisseau