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LIFE

When Arabic Met Pop

By Don Duncan

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Yasmine Hamdan, 33-year-old front singer for the electropop duo Y.A.S., says vocalizing in Arabic is like working with "a precious metal, a raw metal." "You can really experiment with it," she says. With their debut album "Arabology," in which Ms. Hamdan sings in five different Arabic dialects, the duo hopes to strike gold.

A refugee of the civil war in Lebanon, Ms. Hamdan spent most of her upbringing moving around the Middle East. In Paris, where she lives now, she met Mirwais Ahmadzaï, a music producer who had worked with Madonna on three albums. The two set out to make a credible electropop album in Arabic that would stand up in Western markets outside the peripheral categories of "World Music" and "Fusion."

It took the pair more than three years to craft "Arabology," with songs that wrap around and sometimes inflect the dominant Western pop register. The video for "Get It Right," their first single, has the familiar nocturnal urban landscape of a Western pop video, full of club-hopping scenesters chattering on cellphones and throbbing on dark dance floors. But there are differences—young girls in hijab, towering mosques and the vibrant streets of Cairo.



Mirwais Ahmadzaï and Yasmine Hamdan of Y.A.S. JEAN-BAPTISTE MONDINO

Late last month, Ms. Hamdan had a homecoming, playing Lebanon's biggest music night of the summer at the Byblos International Festival, north of Beirut. The crowd knew her from her days on the Beirut music scene in the early '90s, when she fronted a trip-hop

band called Soapkills, one of the first indie bands to move away from English and French to Arabic. Today, many Lebanese indie bands don't even ask themselves the question; almost all of them sing in Arabic.

In France and Belgium, two Western markets where the album has been launched so far, "Arabology" has met with critical acclaim. Y.A.S. says the language issue makes it crucial to find the right launch strategy for the U.S. and the U.K. Getting featured on tracks with an established rap artist may be the best way to whet the American appetite, Mr. Ahmadzaï says. In the meantime, American listeners can find imports of the album on Amazon.com and sample songs on YouTube or www.myspace.com/yaspopmusic.

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