THE ECSTATIC TIME OF THE GUIMBRI AND ITS HYPNOTIC ATMOSPHERES

Alberto Popolla | 22 October 2026

An ancient ancestor of the bass, the guimbri (also known as guembri, gimbri or sintir) seems to have found a place and a use even in our Western lands, employed in different contexts but always retaining its characteristic Gnawa sounds, associated with North Africa. The instrument originates from an area broadly encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mali. Roughly the size of a guitar, it has two long strings and a shorter one on a simple round neck, and a rectangular wooden resonating body covered with a camel-hide membrane. It is used by Gnawa communities in rituals and ceremonies connected with their culture. Its sound is highly percussive, while the shorter string (all the strings were originally made of goatskin) functions as a drone, accentuating the hypnotic, truly trance-like quality that makes the instrument so fascinating even at our latitudes. The playing technique closely resembles clawhammer, the earliest approach to the banjo, preceding the revolution introduced by Earl Scruggs in the 1920s, which involves three small picks worn on the thumb, index and middle fingers. Both clawhammer banjo and guimbri, by contrast, are played by plucking—or perhaps striking—the strings with the knuckle of the index finger, while the inner side of the thumb plays the drone. It is no coincidence that the clawhammer banjo technique is traced back to African origins, very probably to the guimbri itself as well as other lutes common in Africa. In recent years, the instrument has begun to be used in settings not strictly associated with Gnawa music, while unmistakably carrying with it that music’s sonorities and ecstatic dimensions.

The Experience of Bab L’ Bluz

One of the latest examples is Bab L’ Bluz, a Franco-Moroccan group formed in Marrakesh in 2018 by singer Yousra Mansour and musician Brice Bottin. Their distinctive blend of Afrobeat, blues, Gnawa music and Chaabi (Moroccan popular music) is characterized by the use of no fewer than two guimbris: the awisha, a smaller guimbri closer to a guitar, played by Mansour, and Bottin’s guimbri proper, which performs the essential role of bass and rhythmic driving force. Both are electrified. Signed to Peter Gabriel’s Real World label, Bab L’ Bluz, joined by Brahim Terkemani and Mehdi Chaib on flutes, drums and percussion, have so far released two albums: Nayda! in 2020 and Swaken in 2024. An intense live schedule, political commitment and feminist themes, together with an explosive fusion of sounds and rhythms and clear references to Gnawa trance, have made Bab L’ Bluz one of the groups most appreciated by critics and audiences alike.

How Natural Information Society Use It

Another particularly significant example is Natural Information Society, the Chicago group led by bassist Joshua Abrams. While Bab L’ Bluz remain more or less within what might be called an ethnic musical setting, Abrams’s ensemble takes us, on the one hand, into a world closer to improvisation; on the other, through particular methods related to minimalism and experimentation, it heightens precisely the trance element, taking us back to Gnawa culture. Having worked with Hamid Drake, Rob Mazurek, Jason Stein and Tomeka Reid, among others, Abrams plays the guimbri exclusively in Natural Information Society, alongside Lisa Alvarado on harmonium and electronics, Mikel Patrick Avery on drums and Jason Stein on bass clarinet, with various additional collaborators ranging from electric guitarist Emmett Kelly to drummer Frank Rosaly. Reiterated music, a marked and obsessive rhythmic drive, ambient soundscapes and

long compositions emphasize its ecstatic, in some respects psychedelic, quality. There is also a particular attention to improvisation, especially on the album Descension (Out Of Our Constrictions) with Evan Parker, or on the two works made with Bitchin Bajas, another Chicago “minimalist” group, Automaginary and Totality. Here, of course, the music leans further toward the hypnotic and ancestral, with a distinctive exploration of sound and the construction of the sonic environment.

The Italian Guimbri: Antonio Bertoni

Surprising, however, is the musical proposal coming from Piacenza, by bassist and double bassist Antonio Bertoni, a skilled experimenter across different musical fields and the creator of the fascinating Solo Guimbri, released this year by Loup Editions under the name Ongon (a carved wooden figure which, in Mongolian shamanism, serves as the dwelling place of an ancestor’s spirit or a protective spirit). In this case, Bertoni’s approach is much closer to tradition—and that is the surprise—although revisited and shaped by various influences and elements from other cultures, not just the Gnawa tradition. The album is the outcome of a long and profound investigation of the instrument, chosen for its combination of percussiveness and strings, and for its many rhythmic and dynamic nuances. The music ranges from the 7/8 of Non Opacizzarsi, inspired by tabla solos and Hindustani music, to the 11/4 of Anna, written expressly for the guimbri with a rhythmic structure that integrates two different speeds. Campane Doppie, meanwhile, draws inspiration from the rhythmic variations of pairs of double bells from Cameroon, while Takamba pays tribute to that particular music originating in Niger and Mali. It is an evocative work with a unique flavour, skilfully revealing the guimbri’s expressiveness and resources, musically constructing an alternative tradition while still starting from the powerful, ecstatic sound of this distinctive bass instrument with its long history. Within this exploration of the guimbri’s potential, Bertoni’s work stands out for its spareness and essential character, allowing us to fully appreciate the instrument’s hypnotic and ecstatic progression. An album to hear with an open mind and open ears, ready for an initiatory journey.

LISTENING

• Bab L’ Bluz, Nayda, Real World, 2020.

• Bab L’ Bluz, Swaken, Real World, 2024.

• Joshua Abrams & Natural Information Society, Simultonality, Eremite Records, 2017.

• Natural Information Society with Evan Parker, Descension (Out Of Our Constrictions), Eremite Records, 2021.

• Natural Information Society, Perseverance Flow, Eremite Records, 2025.

• Natural Information Society & Bitchin Bajas, Automaginary + Totality, Drag City, 2025.