

## **Mohammed Ben Sala**

Mohammed Ben Sala was a French artist, musician, activist and essayist born in 1953 and died in 2008, from Saint-Étienne.

### *Childhood and adolescence*

Mohammed Ben Sala was born in Saint-Étienne in 1953 to Tunisian parents. The eldest of two brothers (including Rachid Ben Sala, who went on to become a singer) and a sister, he spent a relatively happy, if somewhat marginal, childhood, his parents abandoning him and his brothers in the streets of Saint-Étienne; his adolescence was marked by belonging to gangs of young delinquents sharing the urban territory (he claimed to have been part of a gang that had fought against the one to which the young Bernard Lavilliers belonged). At the age of 15 he was part of a short-lived rock band called Les Clamsés, which toured actively in the squats around the city and in the disused cabaret occupied by the avant-garde electronic artist Jesus "Clochard" Calderon. The end of his adolescence was marked by an unexpected move to Portland (Oregon) in the United States, with his father, a researcher who had been posted for five years.

### *Beginnings in music*

He emigrated permanently to the USA in 1975, after studying sociology (although he never practised in this field). Ben Sala's musical beginnings in America were in classic rock bands, but he then became known mainly in the so-called "industrial" milieu of Portland and Augusta (Maine), where he settled in 1983 with his wife Elisabeth. He presents a series of concerts/performances, generally taking place in squats and artist lofts. He plays alone, with a keyboard and effects pedals, and sings. Sometimes he also reads texts from the Beat Generation, or from authors such as Jean Baudrillard, Italo Calvino, Michel Foucault. Many of these concerts are recorded on cassette and broadcast in the local industrial environment, but they are also sometimes sent to newspapers, administrations, private individuals (chosen at random from the phone book) or left in public places for anyone who wants to take them, as Ben Sala considers that his music and the speeches he puts into sound should be addressed to the whole of society and not just to a small circle of amateurs.

### *The evolution towards cultural terrorism*

Apart from these cassettes, Mohammed Ben Sala refuses to compose and market full-fledged albums; stage performance seems to him to be the only real way of getting across what industrial music should sound like. However, the major bands of this milieu, such as Whitehouse, seem to him to be fundamentally false and overrated (he described this band as "jokers" in an interview, which triggered a small controversy, the first but not the last of his existence), exploiting a caricatured and ineffective violence, since paradoxically it is expected and desired by the public. He therefore worked to develop a form of stage violence that could not become an aesthetic or attract the slightest support. These attempts culminated and ended with the happening *Snipers*, in November 1984, when with friends he took a concert hall in New York by surprise in the middle of a performance, arriving on stage hooded with loaded machine guns, shooting into the audience – the panic, which was more powerful than expected, left two people seriously injured and Ben Sala spent two weeks in prison, narrowly escaping deportation from the United States thanks to the mobilisation of the East Coast artistic community – the artist having created a network of contacts in industrial and punk circles, but also and above all thanks to his weekly readings of poetry and contemporary authors, among gallery owners and programmers of artistic events, including one of the sons of the mayor of Augusta at the time. A full account of the affair appeared in the fanzine *The Tower* that same year and fifteen years later Mohammed Ben Sala agreed to revisit the events in

an interview with *Industrial Nation*. People like John Zewitt and Jim Goad also intervened to acknowledge the seminal nature of this performance.

This event marked a decisive stage in Mohammed Ben Sala's relationship to the artistic act; deciding to abandon music, the art world and public performances in favour of pure concepts and new ways of confronting the public – such as the one that earned him a stay behind bars – he went through a long period of silence, about which little is known. In 1983 he moved to Maine with a former New York gallery owner who had exhibited with him, and who later became his wife, and ceased all contact with his former collaborators and contacts. He was thinking about a book and documentary film project on the contemporary counterculture, which was supposed to be shown at MOMA, but the interviews he conducted within the scene he frequented left him extremely dissatisfied. He ended up writing diatribes in several fanzines, taking up his old arguments against the industrial scene, which, according to him, was guilty of having cut itself off from society, of living in a vacuum and of being profoundly hypocritical, claiming to be provocative and avant-garde when, according to him, it was retreating into an audience of amateurs who were looking for provocations that were no longer provocative. Some of his audience would boycott him, but Ben Sala would find "unexpected and even hoped-for" support, in his own words, and this would encourage him to look for new ways to approach "cultural terrorism".

### *The Nihil Pop Organization*

In the months that followed, Ben Sala travelled enormously to meet, in city after city (New York, Minneapolis, Boston, L.A. and Dallas), the main 'leaders' and activists of the underground, as well as political activists, from the left and the right, or religious or even sectarian. Ben Sala was once suspected of being a member of the Church of Scientology, and it is a fact that he has always refused to clarify his opinion on this sect, just as he has never hidden the fact that he wrote and published a poem with David Miscavige in 1985. Nor his fascination with the ability of this sect to mobilise large and fanatical followings, and to constitute itself as a parallel society, a state within states. Nevertheless, his explorations of the American underground led him to the quasi-fascist militias of Montana, where he confessed to spending several weeks with a group of *power electronics* activists (who later inspired the "militarised" sections of the Nihil Pop Organization, and even more so the Nihil Pop Family), as well as to the anarchist and straight-edge circles of New York, or to the members of Born Again Christian. His signature can be found in a certain number of magazines from 1983 to 1985 and it seems that each time Ben Sala adapted his discourse to that of the magazines that welcomed him, while maintaining a certain freedom of tone and opinion, as well as an increasingly obvious desire to federate movements that were separated by everything. Around 1986, he began to claim to be a member of a certain "Nihilist Society" that he had discovered in New York, which over the months came back more and more frequently under the name "Nihil Pop Society" and then "Nihil Pop Organization". It is undeniable that Mohammed Ben Sala was in contact with a certain number of American and European organisations from which he would have poached members or at least obtained their sympathy and logistical, human and sometimes financial support. And that he began to return to the limelight by claiming to be a member of the Nihil Pop Organization – whether he created or helped to create it himself, or simply joined it on the basis of a shared view, has never been resolved. It is not even impossible that the NPO was strictly imaginary at the time, and that the circulation of Ben Sala's statements and theoretical texts attracted enough potential members to give the organisation a real existence.

The NPO became known to the general public mainly as a label and publishing house, releasing some albums (mostly on tape) of American industrial groups. But the underground, esoteric activity of the NPO was of another order. In a manifesto circulating at the time in the form of a double-sided A5 flyer, Mohammed Ben Sala, along with other signatures, declared that he wanted to "explore the manifestations of nihilism in contemporary culture, its paradoxical enhancement and recuperation

as a strategy of control and a market strategy, in order to elaborate techniques of counter-recuperation". The Nihil Pop, despite this programme, will often be content with easy provocations – in the same register as, for example, the group of artists Unpop Art close to Boyd Rice – of diversions of symbols and discourses typical of the industrial and post-situationist milieu. Ben Sala always regretted this state of affairs, more or less publicly, to the point of distancing himself from the first members of the Organisation and becoming involved in other structures such as the Cacophony Society or the Church of Satan.

Ben Sala had been making a living for some time as a film critic for various small American magazines – mainly focusing on fantasy and horror films. He took advantage of this job to make as many contacts as possible in the film and media world, for utilitarian purposes, although he was always a genuine horror film fan. He also participated unofficially in the writing of several film scripts, both professional and amateur; the biggest feature film in which he participated being *Society* by Brian Yuzna, whom he met in 1987 and whose character David Blanchard is very much inspired by the young son David of a friend of Ben Sala's from Saint-Etienne, with whom he used to do the punch in his youth. In gratitude and sympathy, Yuzna slips a nod to the Nihil Pop Organization into his film; indeed, towards the end of the film, when the young hero is in hospital, there is a very short still shot, lasting a few seconds, which shows labels, one of them bearing the words NPO (nil per os, nothing by mouth).

From 1991 onwards he withdrew from almost all the circles to which he belonged. He will continue to explore contemporary culture, writing tirelessly about film and novel reviews, in which he believes he sees a conscious or unconscious nihilism at work, and to comment, in the wake of American cultural studies, on the mechanisms of current subcultures. His main theory is that the contemporary political-ideological system is maintained not by means of an integrative, seductive or authoritarian, or reactionary discourse, but by allowing people, especially teenagers, to express their nihilistic impulses through the entertainment industry – and that the various forms of nihilism have themselves become objects of consumption, identities that a teenager can buy for himself and change as he pleases (for example, he can claim to be a Satanist, a fascist, a deep ecologist, a libertarian, etc., as he discovers music). Thus, perfectly integrated adults can adhere to the nihilistic – and perfectly hypocritical – messages of films like *Fight Club*. Ben Sala sees in this both the victory of what he calls "the anti-nihilist forces, the forces of Order, of Everything, the totalitarian forces", and a hope, considering this power tactic as double-edged: according to him, it would only take sufficiently conscious cultural agitators, skilled in manipulation, to convert playful nihilism into real and operative revolt.

### *The Party of Conscious Nihilism*

It is in this spirit that he founded in 1999 the very short-lived Party of Conscious Nihilism, which, in addition to similar activities in the line of the NPO and its cultural studies of the 1990s, proposes to make all the enemies of the system (notably the extreme right, the extreme left, the Islamists and the radical ecologists) aware of their tendencies and deep desires, and that, above all, of the material, concrete destruction of current civilisation, in a drive to destroy the world. The PNC refuses to see any more than this, but it is convinced that it is the only way to achieve this goal is by means of a more or less conscious death drive and suicide. The PNC refuses to see further than the killing of contemporary society, be it through terrorism, wars or revolutions. This party will constitute the only real militant act of Ben Sala, who will thus leave the ironic distancing that characterised him until now, to present himself as an ally of all extremisms. A drift that he himself would soon regret.

But faced with the incomprehension, once again, that his approach aroused (the PNC recorded only thirty memberships in the first year and a half of its existence), Ben Sala withdrew for good and

returned to his first love: music. He toured the county where he had settled, with a classic rock band, and led a quiet life. He participated in the KKK vs. Martians project with members of the French electronic band Mondo Bizarro Anal, and produced albums by several of his friends, including Bob & Bill Play Drones, Cabane (a French band whose frontman Mike Hate is the French leader of the Rhône-Alpes-based Nihil Pop Family) and Pierre Wittmann.

#### *A controversial death*

According to his family, Mohammed Ben Sala died in a hunting accident in Wisconsin in May 2002. At the request of his family, his body was repatriated to Saint-Etienne. However, no one has ever been able to locate his exact grave or to confirm in person that Ben Sala is dead. Some rumours claim that he was arrested following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and taken prisoner at Guantanamo Camp. In fact, his name can be found in lists of prisoners:

<http://www.cageprisoners.com/prisoners.php?id=397>

<http://forumislam.com/forum/showthread.php?p=74286>

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/guantanamo\\_nationalities.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/guantanamo_nationalities.html)