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An Iraqi Music Delight: Saafafir With Authentic Maquam

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By Janet Ekstract
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The Maquam consists of traditional Iraqi music with influences from a variety of countries in the Middle East according to the group's lead vocalist, Amir, who also plays the santour - a rectangular, string lap instrument similar to Turkish kanun.

Saafafir is a family effort with brother and sister team - Amir and Dena, Dena's husband Tim and their close friend Zafer from Palestine. Both Amir and Dena were born to an American mother and Iraqi father while Tim is American.

Dena said that though her father is not interested in his Iraqi cultural heritage, that she and her brother fell in love with the music and cultural traditions when they made their separate trips to Baghdad.



Her instrumentals for the group are on joza (primitive mini-stringed instrument with a coconut as its base) and violin. Her husband Tim is on debek - a traditional Middle Eastern drum while their friend Zafer does percussions.

As Amir explained: "The Maquam melodies all have aspects of Iraqi culture and society. Certain melodies can be traced to specific regions, others are associated with a historic event. Others come from outside of Iraq while others are part of religious events or rituals but they all come together into a cohesive repertoire."

Maquam tradition fascinates Amir because he says many of the words in the songs explain diverse aspects of Middle Eastern history and culture.

A good example are the light-hearted songs known as 'Destaat' - Amir commented: "Like one having to do with a woman making tea for her husband and how she makes it. Another is political and expresses much of the Iraqi communists' views in the mid-20th century.

Listening to Amir sing in Arabic, it's not possible to differentiate his singing from a truly amazing Ezzan due to its authenticity and purity of pronunciation and harmony.

It is definitely clear that Amir is completely connected to his calling as he related: "I've only spent six months of my life living in Baghdad but those were the most seminal of my life and when I got my training in Iraqi Maquam music - I found myself as a human being."

He said it was a "long journey for me" from blues and rock to jazz and classical music. Amir explained that eventually, he discovered Arabic trumpet and through that, "found his way" to singing and playing santour while he was in Baghdad in 2002.

Amir also mentioned that sister Dena began playing Arabic music a lot earlier and had her epiphany with it much the same way he did. He recounted that after she visited Baghdad in 1990, she started her own ensemble called Salaam.

One thing is certain from meeting the group Saafafir - they are genuine and humble as you might expect - yet truly engaged in meeting their audience and sharing their musical joy unselfishly.

As for the future of the Iraqi Maquam musical tradition?

Amir said, "Women used to sing Maquam in just private gatherings" because it was traditionally male. The male tradition of Maquam had more to do with gender roles in society than with the actual music, he explained.

But, times are definitely changing even in Arabic music, he said: "With singers like Farida and others who are making strides in singing the Maquam, I believe that soon it will be the domain of both genders."

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