



Tuesday, February 22, 2011

A.J. Racy brings musical ecstasy to New York City

When Afropop Worldwide set about planning four Hip Deep radio programs to be researched in Egypt later this year, one of the first people we turned to was virtuoso musician, composer, author, scholar, and UCLA Ethnomusicology professor A.J. Racy. Professor Racy was the principle voice on Hip Deep's flagship edition, a program about "tarab" the art of ecstasy in Arabic music. He also contributed to Hip Deep's programs on improvisation, and Umm Kulthum, and has been an adviser to the series throughout its seven-year history. Racy is a rare guy, not only an authority on Arabic and Near Eastern music, but a brilliant practitioner, and an open and generous human being.



A.J. Racy and buzuq at Alwan for the Arts in NYC

This past Saturday, Racy made a rare visit to New York City for a sublime, mostly solo performance at [Alwan for the Arts](#), a cultural organization for the city's Arab community. Racy traveled with duffel bags of instruments, including two long-necked *buzuqs*, and a variety of end-blown reed flutes, from the classic *nay* to the deep-toned Egyptian *kawala* to the *mijwiz* double-pipe that produces a hypnotic, almost eerie, droning sustained using a challenging circular breathing technique.



mijwiz

It is nothing short of astounding how casually accomplished Racy is on his instruments. I say casually, because he maintains an air of peaceful ease even while executing extremely difficult and nuanced performances. This concert was titled "The Soul Remembers," and for all the virtuosity and versatility on display, Racy kept the focus on the spiritual and cultural origins of the music--the poetry of Rumi, the mystic quality of the nay's breathy, almost human voice, the joy of a village dance. He improvised mesmerizingly, as on "Journey of the Soul" a lulling, expansive exploration of the larger buzuq, with its loose strings and deep, almost buzzing, tonalities. Near the end of his second set, Racy was joined by trumpeter Amir ElSaffar and percussionist Zafer Tawil. (A second percussionist joined them for the encore.)



Amir ElSaffar and A.J. Racy

On an old Lebanese love song, "Ya Loro Hubbuki," ElSaffar doubled Racy on the melody using a muted trumpet, perfectly calibrated to match the understated tone of the buzuq, and in perfect rhythmic synchrony. The three players all took highly expressive solos, with the other two players largely holding back. This was Near Eastern salon music at its best, uplifting and intimate and buoyed by flawless musicianship and palpable mutual respect.



A.J. Racy with kawala

After the music, there was some talk about Afropop's Egypt plans, with many commenting that we have chanced upon a most "interesting" time to visit this hub of Arabic and African music. Watch this blog for more on that project. And check out [Alwan's website](#) for more splendid concerts in New York City.

Banning Eyre





