



# Alwan for the Arts

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Presents

## Safaafir – an Evening of Iraqi Maqam

May 29, 2010 at 9:00 p.m.



Alwan for the Arts is proud to present an evening of Iraqi Maqam featuring Safaafir, led by brother and sister **Amir** and **Dena ElSaffar**, for the first time in four years. Inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the Maqam is the classical vocal tradition of Iraq, and one of the most refined maqam traditions in the Arab and Muslim world. Safaafir is the only ensemble in the US that is performing the maqam in its traditional format, and has performed extensively around the US at Iraqi gatherings as well as for American and Arab audiences. For this performance at Alwan, Safaafir will focus on the urban maqam, as well as some of the folk and rural songs

found throughout the rest of the country.

The concert will feature **Amir ElSaffar** on santour and vocal and **Dena El Saffar** on jowza, joined by **Zafer Tawil** on qanun and tabla **and Johnny Farraj** on riqq. The performance will be held at Alwan for the Arts at 16 Beaver Street, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10004. Tickets are \$15 and are available online at [www.alwanforthearts.org](http://www.alwanforthearts.org) or at the door. Doors open at 8:30 p.m.

“Music doesn’t get much more intimate than this. The hypnotic quality of Amir’s singing draws you in. When the song moves on, the rhythm kicks like a bracing splash of cold water. The last such episode inevitably ratchets up the speed and volume just a bit, to big effect.”

~Third Coast Digest

“Safaafir first presented a traditional maqam, lengthy and mesmerizing, its vocal line a melisma-filled ramble through poetic reflection and exuberant pleading. Amir ElSaffar sang as expertly as he played. This trio is an amazing combination of musicians.”

~www.expressmilwaukee.com

## About the Musicians:

**Amir ElSaffar** is an accomplished jazz trumpeter and composer who has worked with various artists, including Cecil Taylor, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Vijay Iyer, and Daniel Barenboim. In 2002, ElSaffar put his New York career on hold to immerse himself in the music of his father's ancestral past, the Iraqi maqam. He went on a quest, traveling to Iraq, throughout the Middle East and to Europe pursuing masters who could impart to him this centuries-old oral tradition. After studying intensively with maqam masters such as Hamid Al-Saadi, Farida, Baher Al-Regeb, and Hussein Al-Aadhemy, ElSaffar became versed in maqam, learning to sing and to play the santour (Iraqi hammered dulcimer). Upon returning to the US, he founded Safaafir with his sister, Dena, and her husband, Tim Moore. The group has performed actively at Iraqi cultural gatherings, including regular performances for the Iraqi Ambassador, and was one of the groups representing Iraq in the 2009 International Mugham Festival in Azerbaijan. In 2006, ElSaffar received a commission to compose *Two Rivers*, a suite that invokes Iraqi musical traditions and frames them in a modern Jazz setting. His 2007 release, *Two Rivers* (Pi Recordings), was described by *All About Jazz* as "a stirring example of the creative possibilities of international jazz in the 21st century," and by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as "hypnotic and arresting," and appeared on several top 10 lists for jazz recordings that year. He has continued to compose works that recontextualize elements of the maqam in jazz and classical contexts, and his 2010 recording, *Radif Suite* (Pi Recordings), with Iranian-American saxophonist, Hafez Modirzadeh, has received much acclaim for moving beyond the realm of cross-cultural fusions into a musical language that encompasses cultures across geography and time into microtonal and non-metric realms. Despite his forays into the creation of new musical languages, he continues to be an active performer, researcher, and purveyor of the Iraqi maqam tradition.

Amir's sister, **Dena El Saffar**, was exposed to Arabic music in the suburbs of Chicago, where she grew up attending Iraqi gatherings with her family. She began learning the violin at the age of six. At age 17, completely engaged in classical music, she accompanied her father to Baghdad and became enchanted by the music of Iraq and the Middle East. In 1993, while obtaining a degree in classical viola from Indiana University, she founded the group *Salaam*, a Middle Eastern music ensemble which continues to perform in concerts and to lead educational workshops throughout the United States. In 2003, when Amir brought her a *Jowza* (Iraqi spiked fiddle) from Iraq, she began learning to play, and soon was performing on it. She went on to study *jowza* with Mohammed Gomar and Anwar Abudragh, maqam with Hamid Al-Saadi, and *kemanche* with Munis Sharifov. Dena's composition, "Layla," (from *Salaam's* self-titled 2009 debut CD) was featured on NPR's *Song of the Day* and she was interviewed on NPR's *All Things Considered*. In addition to leading her own projects, she has performed with the Master Musicians of *Jajouka* and *Youssou N'dour*.



## About Alwan for the Arts

Since its founding in 1998, Alwan for the Arts has been an organization dedicated to the presentation and production of the arts and cultures of the Arab world, Middle East and North Africa. Alwan organizes film festivals and screenings, book/poetry readings and signings, lectures and conferences, art exhibits, musical and theatrical performances, and language and literature classes. In 2003, Alwan established a center at 16 Beaver Street in lower Manhattan. In the second decade of its existence, Alwan remains committed to providing a space for reflection, dialogue, and growth in the arts and cultures of the peoples of the Arab world, Middle East, North Africa, and their diasporas, serving their communities and educating the broader public through programs that enrich the artistic and cross-cultural encounter.

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