



# Smithsonian Jerusalem Project: Palestinian Music

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There are many dimensions to local Palestinian music. While commercial popular music from throughout the Arab world is ubiquitous—impinging on everyday life through radio, TV, music stores, and home stereos—the old springs of popular music continue to flow, at weddings, in folk dances and songs, and among the local musical scholars and performers who help preserve these traditions. The following accounts, based on interviews conducted by the Smithsonian Jerusalem Project, introduce a few such Jerusalem-based artists who through their lifelong commitment have

helped maintain a vibrant musical life in the city.

Ahmad Abu Ghannam (Abu Farid) is a singer and an *oud* and violin player. He represents a generation of Palestinians who lived and experienced the cultural life of Palestine when it was open to the Arab world, that is, before 1948. "In the forties many Egyptians, Syrians, and Lebanese came to Palestine to perform. Had it not been for the 1948 catastrophe, the Palestinians would have been pioneers in the field of music."

When he was five years old, he made his own musical instrument from metal wires stretched on a wooden board. "When my father saw my primitive instrument, he went to Tel Aviv and bought me a mandolin." At the age of fourteen, against the wishes of his father, a well-to-do merchant, he abandoned his study of Islamic law in Cairo and pursued his passion for music.

Abu Ghannam taught music for many years. In the fifties he taught at the Jordanian Music Centre (*Muntada Huwa al-Fan*) in Jerusalem while also working as a private teacher. In the sixties he played music almost every night at the Carlton hotel. "We used to organize big festivals. The golden times of my music life were between the sixties and the eighties. We had a music band called the Jerusalem Golden Tune, which had fifteen players."



Ibrahim Abu Jum'a's father was a shepherd and used to play the *shebbabeh* in the afternoons. His eldest brother, Mousa Abu Jum'a, who is now 70 years old, plays the *rababeh* and sings. Ibrahim started

playing *shebbabeh* when he was 10 years old. They used to sit in tents at the fig groves the whole day and play the *shebbabeh*. He would play traditional folk tunes like *dal'ona*, *zareef at toul*, and *ya ghzayel*.

He started on the *ney* in 1969-70 and in the seventies took lessons with Rawhi Obeido in Jerusalem. On his own he learned to play the *mijwez* and the *yarghoul*, two traditional Palestinian instruments which, unlike the *ney*, require a certain method of moving air in the mouth so that there is no break in the tune.

For a long time, he used to play at weddings, both in the *zaffeh*, when they bring the bride to the groom's house, and in the *sahra*, the evening festivities the night before the actual wedding. In 1981 he formed a folk *debka* and singing group called *Shabab Jabal al Zayton*. In 1985 he stopped working as a warehouse keeper at a factory for music tapes. He was then approached by a folk-dancing group from Birzeit University, *Sharaf at Teeby*, and invited to play with them. He is playing with them to this day.



Hatem al-Afghani learned to play the *oud* from his father, 'Othman al-Afghani. "Like most children I imitated my father. I picked up a broom and started playing as though it were a lute." His father ran a blade sharpening shop in the Old City, a trade he learned from his own father, an immigrant to Jerusalem from Bukhara in Afghanistan.

As an early teen Hatem began performing on the lute at parties. For three years, every time his father heard about his

performing at a party, he would give him a smack. Through his persistence and talent, however, Hatem finally won his father's acceptance. At the age of nineteen he joined a band called the *Stars of the Night*, and in 1984, formed another successful group called *Reem*. Then in 1986 he began composing his own music and convinced the group to perform only at hotel parties, not in homes. In 1987, when the Intifada erupted, party halls closed down and shortly afterwards their group split up. On his own again, he chose to reflect on his personal experiences and write about them in songs. Today he sings his own music and has been on tour both in Europe and the United States.

Reflecting on the old days, Hatem recalls how respected the artists and musicians were, a hush always falling over the audience when they played. Now it is no longer common to bring groups to perform in homes; instead, parties are held in halls. Music itself, he feels, is not afforded the same esteem as it once was.

Mohammad Abdul Latif al Ashhab fell in love with the *oud* listening to his father play. In the summer time, all the family would be at the grape vines, and alone in the house, he would take up the *oud* and try to play what he had heard his father practicing the day before. One day his father came home unannounced and heard him playing. He corrected a few mistakes he made, but didn't beat or chastise him, to his surprise.

Then he heard the violin, and fell in love with it even more than with the *oud*. He bought one for five *dinars* from the Old

City and started practicing on his own.

After graduating from school, he went to Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a teacher for two years. On saving some money, he returned to go abroad and study law. His family, however, needed his savings, and so he had to give up his hopes for a university degree. He found work as a teacher at *Dar al Awad* in Jerusalem and has been there ever since.

Nevertheless, he pursued music as a second vocation. In the 60s he played regularly at weddings. Between the years 1978 and 1980 he learnt how to read music with Abu Rawhi. From 1978 to 1985 they would play in weddings or festivals. He also started teaching individuals how to play the *oud* and the violin at the Jerusalem Music Center.

At his school he introduced music classes and formed a choir. They would sing a variety of classical Arabic songs, with a particular emphasis on Sufi songs in praise of the prophet (*al Mada'eh an Nabawiyye*).

Mohammad Abu Khater went blind at age 22. At 18, the doctors had advised his parents to marry him off before he completely lost his eyesight. After he got married, he worked as a farmer until 1948, when he and his family were forced to flee to Jordan.

At school he always took part in festivals, mainly as a singer. At the age of ten they had a music teacher at *Kulliyat ar Rawda School*, Favzi an Nashashibi, who formed a choir of school children. In 1936 they began broadcasting their songs on *al Quds* radio and *Ash Sharq al Awsat* radio in Jaffa.

In 1950 he went to Cairo. In the morning he would be at the University of *al Azhar*, and in the afternoon and evening at the High Academy for Music. He returned to Jerusalem in 1956. When he auditioned for the *Awqaf*, they said his voice was good, but did not offer him a decently paying job. So he went to work for a year at the Jordanian radio, then based in Ramallah (in 1958 the station returned to Amman). In 1957 he started teaching music at *al Ala'iyeh* school for the blind, where he remained until he retired at the age of 60. He went on to teach music at *ar Rashidiyyeh* School, where he still teaches *oud*, violin, the organ, and the theory of music. He prefers hymns or *anasheed* to any other type of Arab music.



As an ensemble, *Sabreen* (which means "patience" in Arabic) was established in 1980. The idea for the band, however, emerged out the musical context of the previous decade. In the seventies there were two types of bands, westernized bands that used western instruments and played western music (several members and co-founders of *Sabreen* were working with such bands for money and playing at weddings), and Eastern bands that used eastern instruments to play eastern music and to sing eastern songs.

To bridge the gap between the two types, a vision of "mixed" music and bands emerged. Moreover, a trend of "committed music" (*multazimeh*) was gaining popularity—in Egypt with Sheikh Imam and Amad Fouad Nijim, and in Lebanon with Marcel Khalifeh and Ziad Rahbani. *Sabreen* helped introduce this kind of

"committed" music into Palestine. The band blends elements of traditional Arab and Eastern music with innovative melodies, forging a distinctive style that is easily identifiable as Eastern, yet reflects a variety of international influences, from African music to American jazz and blues.

Their uniqueness comes from the innovative way in which they play traditional instruments such as the *oud*, *buzuk* and *qanoun*. The percussion section, contrary to traditional Arab style, consists of several drums and tambourines played simultaneously by one musician.

The bands members include Odeh Turjman, who plays the *buzuk*, singer Kamilya Jubran, who also plays the *qanoun*, Said Murad, who composes the songs and plays the *oud*, Samer Musalam on bass and acoustic guitar, and Issam Murad on percussion.

The band has produced three recordings—*As-Sumud* ("Steadfast"), *Dukhan al-Barakeen* ("Smoke of the Volcanoes"), and *Mout an-Nabi* ("Death of the Prophet")—and created soundtracks for the films *Love Divided* and *Canticle of Stones*, and for various documentaries.

They have recently established the *Sabreen Music School* in East Jerusalem, offering courses in voice, Eastern and Western instruments, sound technology, and traditional instrument making. The center also has a music library with a variety of recordings.