



The Middle East in London

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THIS ISSUE: IRAQ – People and Heritage • The rise and fall of the nation • The Kurds and ISIS • The Yezidis of Sinjar • The artifice of the destruction of art in Iraq • Obliterating Iraq's Christian heritage • Nimrud reduced to rubble • Interview with Saad al-Jadir • Supporting humanities and culture for a sustainable Iraq • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



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The Middle East in London

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Saad al-Jadir in conversation with *Nadje Al-Ali* about Mosul's long history of musical influence and intellectual life

Mosul's music and rich cultural heritage



© Saad al-Jadir

Saad al-Jadir

Saad al-Jadir is an Iraqi intellectual, businessman and musician who grew up in Mosul but has been living in London since the late 1960s. He studied classical guitar for over 25 years with the concert guitarist Antonio Albanes. Al-Jadir owns one of the most comprehensive collections of old music from Iraq.

Can you tell us about the historical significance of Mosul in terms of its influence on Iraqi and Middle Eastern music?

Mosul has had a great influence, directly and indirectly on Iraqi and Middle Eastern music, even to some extent on European music. For example, in medieval times, during the caliphate of Harun Al-Rasheed, the composer, musician and musicologist Ishaac al-Mosuli was very influential. One

of his students was Zyriab (Abu l-Hasan 'Ali Ibn Nafi', 789-857), a musical genius, who is said to have improved the oud by adding a 5th string. He wound up in Al-Andalus (Spain) where he not only influenced southern Spanish music but also became a fashion icon as the chief court entertainer in Cordoba.

Much more recently, Mullah Uthman al-Mosuli (1854-1923), a very talented composer and poet famous for his *maqam al-iraqi*, had a huge influence on musicians in the region. He was particularly important to the Egyptian composer Sayed Darwish (1892-1923), the father of popular Egyptian

music, who moved away from more traditional compositions in favour of more experimental and innovative ones.

More recently, there were other singers, composers and performers – such as Sayyed Ahmed, Sayyed Ismail Al Fahham and others – who became regular performers in the modern Baghdad Radio.

What about more contemporary music? Did the influence of Mosul continue during the modern era?

Mosul enjoyed its own modern music and popularised it through the Baghdad Radio,

Baghdad Radio, which was the only Iraqi radio available at the time, acted as the medium that familiarised people in general with music from most parts of Iraq

which was the only Iraqi radio available at the time, but it acted as the medium that familiarised people in general with music from most parts of Iraq.

Some of the most famous contemporary Iraqi musicians came from Mosul and they were instrumental in producing generations of Iraqi musicians. Among them is Munir Bashir (1930-1997). He, like many other famous Iraqi musicians, was of Christian origin, a virtuoso oud player, composer and educationalist. One of his students is the currently well-known oud player Naseer Shamma, who himself has produced generations of musicians.

Jamil Bashir (1920-1974), a lesser-known brother of Munir, was also a very talented musician, not only playing the oud but also the violin. Both studied at the Baghdad Conservatory, founded by Hanna Petros in 1936, under the famous Turkish classical musician and oud player Şerif Muhiddin Targan (1892-1967).

Ghanim Haddad (1925-2010) is a virtuoso violinist and another student of Şerif Muhiddin Targan. He taught at the Baghdad Conservatory and has composed a rich heritage of classical music.

Jamil Salim (1938-1980), another musician from Mosul, composed a number of famous *muwashahat* (Andalusian love songs). Musicians who originated from Mosul made up the backbone of the Baghdad Conservatory and later School of Fine Arts. Some ended up playing in the Iraqi symphony orchestra and most were dedicated teachers.

Why do you think a disproportionately high number of accomplished musicians were of Christian background?

The Iran–Iraq war, followed by the invasion of Kuwait, followed by the sanctions; this has all destroyed the mood for creativity

Maybe because music was more of Christian tradition in terms of the chanting in church as part of worship and sermons, which made singing and music making much more acceptable to the Christians than the more conservative Muslims.

There was a substantial Christian community in Mosul, consisting of various churches such as the Orthodox, Catholics, Chaldeans, Assyrians and the Armenians. A well-integrated community that also included Kurds, Turkmens, Yezidis and even Jews. It did indeed feel like a well-integrated and harmonious community.

Musicians generally came from working classes, and only occasionally from middle classes. At the time, it was not prestigious to be a musician in Mosul. People would admire music, enjoyed listening to it, but they would not want their children to be musicians. For example, my family was not happy about my interest in music. They were dreading television coming to Mosul for fear that I might be seen on television playing the accordion.

What was the wider cultural and artistic scene of Mosul like when you grew up?

I remember in the 1950s and the 1960s our schoolteachers were very well trained and many of them were actually excellent musicians and music theorists themselves. We had lots of school concerts, performances and choirs. The choirs would sing *muwashahat*, for example. Most schools also had drama classes and would

put on theatre performances. Then there were regular art exhibitions as painting and sculpturing were very popular. There were a number of world famous painters and sculptors such as Rakan Dabdoub, Dhirar Kaddo and Najeeb Younis.

There were a number of bands in Mosul. I was playing the accordion with a couple of bands. There were lots of local singers as well. We had public concerts several times during the year.

Mosul was a very cultured city. It was normal for people to read. You would find lots of literature and poetry books in homes. Actually many of us were writing literature and poetry. We used to meet regularly in coffee shops to read and to discuss literature, art and culture more broadly.

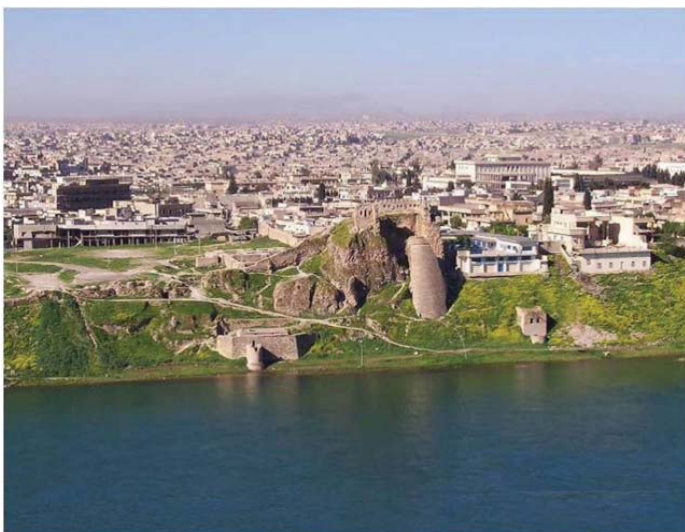
When you say ‘we’ do you mean men, or were women also going to cafés?

We were only men. Women did not join in. In fact, almost all the artists, musicians and writers of the time were men. But we were mixed in terms of social classes, ethnicity and religion. Men from all walks of life would be sitting in cafés discussing literature.

Unfortunately none of this exists in Mosul anymore. The Iran–Iraq war, followed by the invasion of Kuwait, followed by the sanctions; this has all destroyed the mood for creativity. Most artistic and creative people either fled or stopped playing music or making art.

A lot of the musical heritage in Mosul is lost or destroyed. I cannot think of any worthy documentation still existing locally. I probably have the largest collection of the music of Mosul and have some rare recordings of performances. The technology of recording at the time was not very good and people lacked the skill to record and document music. I worked on a lot of classic Mosul recordings and tried to improve them through equipment, but sadly, some historical performances went unrecorded or lost.

Nadje Al-Ali is a member of the Editorial Board and a Professor of Gender Studies at SOAS



The old zone of Mosul, the river Tigris and the remainder of an ancient wall