

The history of jazz music in Damascus and Aleppo told by a musicologist, a drummer and a cultural operator Damascene memories: the beginnings (Samim Al Sharif, musicologist)

Damascus discovered tango, rumba and samba music in the 30s of the 20th century. Syrian musicians started right away to copy these melodies and to make their own arrangements of western contemporary music (“Ya Jarati” by Muhamad Abdel Karim in 1938 and “Ma Akdarsh Akhabi” by Serri Tamburji” in 1943, both inspired by Tango melodies).

In 1943, jazz music made its way into the music scene with the creation of the first Syrian jazz band by Hisham Al Shamaa, Hassan Derkzenly, and Shukri Shawki who is considered to be the most talented jazz players of this area (clarinet). In 1947, the trio split and Hisham Al Shamaa created his own group “The band for contemporary music”, but he soon left to Egypt to study in the Music Academy of Fouad the 1st, while Hassan Derkzenly founded the first real Syrian jazz band that kept performing in public places and on the radio and television until 1968.

Jazz music almost disappeared from Damascus for a while until Vahe Temrejjan formed the jazz band “Tigers”. The success of the “Tigers” encouraged the creation of several jazz bands especially that Syrian guitar and keyboard players became better musicians in the last two decades on the 20th century. The final push came with the creation of the National Conservatoire and the academic learning of brass instruments which are the main instruments in jazz music. In the 90s, jazz music got its official recognition with the creation of a brass quintet by late musician and founder of the National Conservatoire, Sulhi Al Wadi, and with the supervision of professional trainers from the Conservatoire.

Aleppo tunes: the Golden Age (Tarek Fahham, drummer)

Tarek Fahham, one of the most important drums players in the region, has witnessed the Golden Age of jazz music in the city of Aleppo, for a long time considered to be the capital of jazz music in Syria.

In the beginning of the 70s, Tarek Fahham started to study drums with Vatche Aramian, one of the most influential personality in the history of contemporary music practices in Syria. Nouri Eskandar, Hratch Kassis and Salem Bali are counted among his students. At that time Dureid Lahham was the president of the Syndicate of the Artists, and since Aleppo was a center of activity for jazz music practice, he requested from Vatche' Aramian to found the first Syrian Big Band (jazz orchestra) in 1978. Another main personality in the history of jazz music in Aleppo was Nadim Darwish, the son of reputed musician Ali Darwish who is famous for reviving the traditions of oriental music.

In the 70s, nightclubs and ballrooms in Aleppo were frequented by families and by the well-educated middleclass. It was the place to perform in for the best musicians in town, the thing that helped to bring jazz music closer to the audience in their daily life. Later on, these same musicians started to tour all around Syria (Tartous, Lattakia, Al Raqqa, Qamishli, Hasakeh) taking jazz music to new audiences. Some of well-established Aleppo jazz musicians had the opportunity to study music abroad, such as famous Hratch Kassis who studied jazz music in Berkley University in the USA, then came back to Aleppo and founded a jazz band alongside with other great jazz musicians and started playing in Aleppo Cultural Center every two weeks. The band members used to make their living from working in nightclubs while they performed for free in the Cultural Center only to keep the bond between jazz music and the large audience.

Music shops played also a vital role in the history of jazz music in Aleppo, such as "Solina" music shop run by the guitarist Radwan Zein Eddin, "Shadows", and many other music shops in Bab El Faraj neighborhood that are turned today into restaurants and stores. It is worth mentioning that the Armenian community had an important role in spreading jazz music in Aleppo, especially with the opening of Dar

Al Tarbieh Theatre with a capacity of 800, and which was mainly dedicated to concerts performed by top-notch Aleppan and Armenian musicians.

Unfortunately, in the late 80s live music in Aleppo started to fade out and the elite jazz clubs lost their audience and came to play more popular music genres.

In 1992, Tarek Fahham met Garo Salakian and Asem Buni, two professional well-known jazz musicians.

Together they started to play jazz again in places like the Goethe Institute and the French Cultural Center in Damascus. They tried to bring back the enthusiasm of the Golden Age, but these random concerts didn't last for more than a year.

The caravan has arrived: almost back on track (Bassel Kaghado, cultural operator)

Bassel Kaghado, former Information Officer in the European Delegation to Syria, established the first jazz festival to take place in Damascus and Aleppo.

In September 1994, the first edition of the «Euro-Arab jazz Festival - Jazz Caravan» was launched with the support of the European Commission in Damascus, Aleppo and Deir Ezzor, in addition to Amman and Beirut. This major pioneer cultural event introduced for the first time the concept of corporate sponsorship to a cultural activity in Syria. The festival was supported by a group of private sponsors without who this dream would not have been possible.

Two factors helped increasing the allocated budget to the festival throughout its editions: the Barcelona Declaration in 1994 that gave a major consideration to southern Mediterranean countries, the thing that had to be reflected in the European cultural agenda. As well as the visibility generated to the European Commission through this regional project and that encouraged it to increase its involvement in the festival.

“Euro-Arab jazz Festival - Jazz Caravan” had three main dimensions. First of all, it included regional musicians, it was also an important moment during the year for

workshops and jam session, and all these elements made it a real partnership between the local and the international participants. The number of participating bands increased from 6 jazz groups in 1994 to 14 in 1997, the year it was reported in the Jazz Magazine as a well-established world jazz festival. “Euro-Arab Jazz Festival – Jazz Caravan” had achieved its goal to become a peak moment for cultural interactivity with concerts, workshops, photographic and design competitions bringing together international and Syrian musicians, jazz and music fans, artists and the large audience. The festival extended for six years, however in the last two years its title changed to become the «European Jazz Festival» taking place only in Damascus and Aleppo with the participation of European jazz artists alone without any Syrian participant. This change in the essence of the festival as an interactive musical meeting was shortly followed by the end of the first Syrian jazz festival. Regardless of the fact that the first Syrian jazz festival had a short period of time, it has surely established in Syria for the first time the know-how of cultural management on an international level, as well as it raised the interest of Syrian audience and musicians in contemporary music practices.

Jazz Lives in Syria Festival came to carry on and continue what was started by the first Syrian retro jazz lovers, Aleppan jazz musicians and samyaa’ (listeners to great music), and to take the “caravan” to other undiscovered music territories.