On the Banks of the Tigris

the hidden story of Iraqi music

Majid Shokor, an Iraqi Muslim, seeks the source of the songs he loves and discovers a hidden history – the Jewish contribution to Iraqi music

Program Description

Feature & one hour documentary

DEVELOPED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF

FILM VICTORIA AUSTRALIA

and support from the Harold Mitchell Foundation, Shark Island Documentary Fund, Graham F. Smith Peace Trust, Search Foundation, Besen Foundation, Finkel Foundation and the Melbourne Community Foundation

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Synopsis

On the Banks of the Tigris explores music, history and the cultural ties that unite people across religious boundaries. It tells the story of an Iraqi Muslim who has the courage to break taboos in his quest for knowledge and truth.

When Majid Shokor, an Iraqi-Australian of Muslim background, escaped from Iraq, he discovered a hidden history - that many songs all Iraqis love to sing were written and performed by Jews. His discovery sparks an extraordinary journey through many lands. This is the story of Majid's search for the source of the songs he loves and the performers of all faiths who still sing and play these songs today.

Why this story must be told

The media has been saturated with stories of war and violence in Iraq. Our film offers a new and hopeful view. It explores Iraq's history as a harmonious society, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together for thousands of years. It shows how today displaced Iraqis of all backgrounds still share the same music, foods, and desire for peace. This project shatters stereotypes by showing an Iraqi Muslim building bridges with Iraqi Jews through music. It's an inspiring tale that will contribute to peace, reconciliation and healing in a divided world.

Style and point of view

Majid Shokor is the central character and the story is told through his point of view. We follow his travels to meet musicians, share his discovery of hidden history, and learn about his inner journey through a reflective voice over narration.

Most of the story is told with present day observational scenes, interviews, and music performances. Baghdad's history as a city where Jews, Muslims and Christians lived peacefully for over 2,000 will be visualised through archival images and contemporary footage of places in Baghdad that retain the feel of the past. Music is a key, unifying element. Joyous and sad, exuberant and quiet, it will be expertly recorded and edited to enhance the rhythm, pacing and flow of the narrative.

Setting, characters

Majid's journey takes him to Europe, North America and the Middle East. In Israel, he meets Yair Dalal, international star of world music, and his older Iraqi mentors. In Amsterdam, he meets Farida Mohhammed Ali, world acclaimed Iraqi maqam singer. In London, he visits Ahmed Mukhtar, master oud player, who fled Iraq to escape conscription into Sadam's army. Kaukab Hamza, a famous Iraqi songwriter now in Denmark, also had to flee, after refusing to serve on a music censorship committee. And in the USA, young Iraqi-Americans Amir and Dena El-Saffar are keeping "soulful music from Baghdad alive" by introducing American audiences to Iraqi music.

Themes

On the Banks of the Tigris explores many globally significant themes. These include:

- the importance of cultural heritage, especially for people living in diaspora
- the common ground between people of all religious faiths
- the need for greater knowledge and understanding of the Middle East
- the universality of people's aspirations for peace

Current status of the project

15 hours of footage has been professionally shot and recorded in Europe and Israel.

***** DONATIONS ARE NEEDED TO CONTINUE FILMING, EDITING AND COMPLETION OF THIS IMPORTANT PROJECT.*****

Story Outline

Baghdad 1930s & 40s: The Iraqi Radio Orchestra pose proudly with their instruments. Small boats drift on the Tigris. People in crowded cafes drink tea with Iraqi sweets.

Baghdad 1960s. B&W. The camera travels through narrow alleys to a two-story house. From a radio inside, a voice beckons: ***"On the banks of the Tigris oh my love come. Look, nature is so beautiful!"*** We climb up to the roof, with its view of the Tigris flowing smoothly below. A photo of Majid as a young boy with his family appears. ***VO: When I was a child, my mother and father would sit together and sing. My brothers, sisters and I would compete to secure one of their laps. It's a memory I associate with family, warmth, love, and home.***

Australia 2007: Majid, his wife and daughters listen to music in their Melbourne home. ***VO: I grew up in a Shi'a Muslim family and music was an important part of our daily life. I didn't know anything about Jews in Iraq or their role in our music. Now that I have my freedom, I want to know the true history of my country.***

Archival footage and photos show Majid's personal history and why he is so passionate about seeking the truth. Ten years of compulsory military service, being shot in the 1991 uprising against Sadam, and refusing to perform propaganda plays as an actor with the Iraqi National Theatre forced Maid and his family to flee. They gained refugee status in Australia in 2001 – just two weeks after 9/11.

Majid writes to Yair Dalal in Tel Aviv, world music star and a 2nd generation Iraqi Jew. Yair replies, urging him to come to Israel soon "to catch these marvellous Baghdadi musicians who are getting very old." Few Iraqi Muslims would dare visit Israel, but Majid wants to thank these older musicians and learn about their history. He is soon on his way.

In Ramat Gan, a Tel Aviv suburb where 80% of the residents are Iraqi Jews, Majid makes instant friends with everyone he meets – from musicians at their weekly gathering to sweet sellers in the "Little Baghdad" market. The Iraqi Jewish musicians are delighted to meet an Iraqi Muslim who loves the same music and songs. "***Dear Majid, welcome. We are honoured. We'd like to tell you, whoever drinks water from the Tigris will never forget Iraq.***"

They play music with no religious boundaries - songs by Iraqi Jewish composers and others by Muslims and Kurds. Archival images transport us to old Baghdad. Musicians of all backgrounds play together in cafes and coffeehouses. The revered Jewish singer Salima Murad and Muslim singer Nathem Al Ghazali, are married. Recordings of the Iraqi Radio Orchestra and film clips from an Iraqi version of Romeo and Juliet bring the period to life.

Elias Shasha, Abraham Salman, and Alber Elias, veteran musicians now in their 80s, welcome Majid to their homes. They play music and recall the good times in Iraq - playing in the radio orchestra and eating barbequed fish on the Tigris – before upheaval forced them to leave in the 1950s. Archival images and dark etchings by a Baghdadi artist evoke their memories.

Majid meets Yair Dalal at the jazz school where he teaches. Yair plays Iraqi tunes on his violin and the students improvise solos. East meets West, as traditional Iraqi sounds merge with European klezmer and jazz. Yair and Majid share their dream of an international concert to bring Iraqi musicians of all religions together, and inviting conductor and UN Peace Envoy Daniel Barenboim to host the event.

In search of Muslim and Christian Iraqi musicians who share their vision, Majid travels to London to meet the great oud player Ahmed Mukhtar. At London University, Ahmed tells his

students "***In the first half of the 20th century most musicians were Jews and there were a lot of Jewish composers. No one can forget Saleh Al Kuwaity. The most important songs we sing were written by him.***" He plays an Al Kuwaity tune "which is like our national anthem". "***The rhythm takes you straight to the flow of the Tigris, this great river that went through many difficult times in history."*** Images of Baghdad are cut to the rhythm of the music.

Ahmed tells how Sadam tried to rewrite music history. A committee was formed to re-label songs by Jewish composers as 'folk songs' and erase the contribution of all musicians who opposed the Ba'athist regime. Majid follows this historic trail to Denmark to meet songwriter Kaukab Hamza, a key witness to the censorship. In 1973 he was invited to join a Committee to "review Iraqi musical heritage". He bravely refused and suffered terrible repercussions. Hamza fled in 1976 and many of his family members in Iraq were murdered in retaliation.

In Amsterdam, Majid visits Farida Mohamed Ali, the greatest living interpreter of classical Iraqi maqam singing. Farida describes how she came to be a singer, despite traditional barriers to women. She speaks of the Jewish contribution to Iraqi music: " ***I perform their songs because I feel deeply about them. They express the same feeling of homesickness that I feel.***"

Farida's son Latif Al Obeidy takes Majid to an Amsterdam club where his Arab jazz-fusion group plays. Latif gets them moving to intricate rhythms on an assortment of Iraqi tabla.

In Sweden, Majid discovers Anna and Marianne, performers with Sumer, who sing Iraqi songs in perfect Arabic without even speaking the language. And in New York he meets Amir and Dena El-Saffar, two young Iraqi-Americans. Amir, an award winning jazz trumpet player, and Dena, a classical violinist, became fascinated with their Iraqi roots, studied with Iraqi masters, and set up the group Safaafir. Now they're breathing new life into traditional Iraqi music for audiences across the USA.

Despite risks and obstacles, Majid pursues his dream of a unifying concert. Some Iraqis strongly disapprove of highlighting the Jewish role in Iraqi music. Majid tries to convince them that all exiled Iraqis were victims of the same repression, and that history must be faced honestly before a country can move ahead.

A promoter and record company back the concert when world-renowned conductor Daniel Barenboim agrees to participate. Majid is ecstatic, but worries that age, health and travel permits will prevent some musicians from coming.

The concert is held in Royal Festival Hall, London to a packed house. The stellar line-up includes Yair and the older musicians from Israel, Ahmed Mukhtar, Farida, the Iraqi-American group Safaafir, Ilham Al-Madfai from Jordan and musicians from Iraq. Radio stations record and TV crews beam the show live to Iraq and Israel. A reunion between violinist Ganim Hadad from Jordan and the blind qanoon player Abraham Salman from Israel, who have not met for over fifty years, is an emotional highlight.

Back in Melbourne, Majid rides his bike on the path alongside the Yarra. He gazes across the river, and begins to hum "On the Banks of the Tigris" as the credits roll.