

## Cover story

Documentary-maker  
Marsha Emerman with  
Shi'ite actor Majid Shokor.  
Photo: Andrew Harris

# The ballads of Baghdad

A film-maker, an actor and a musician are working together to honour the Jewish contribution to Iraqi music, writes **Andrew Harris**.

**I**N the mid-1970s, Saddam Hussein set out to purge the Iraqi musical canon of undesirable contributions. He was faced with a quandary – the work of legendary Jewish brothers Saleh and Daud Al-Kuwaiti was so ingrained in Iraqi cultural identity it couldn't be removed. Instead, he officially labelled them "folk songs", and that's how two generations of Iraqi listeners came to know them.

Iraqi-Shi'ite actor Majid Shokor, now 39, escaped Iraq via Lebanon for Australia, after refusing a position at the Iraqi National Theatre. He lives in Melbourne with his wife and children. While living in Beirut, he read an article about a weekly meeting of Iraqi-Jewish musicians in a Ramat Gan community hall, soon after which he discovered many of his favourite songs were the work of Jews.

"This music was and is still part of our lives," he says. "Everyone knows these beautiful songs. They express Iraqi life: Iraqi celebrations, Iraqi sadness, Iraqi love."

Shokor met Melbourne film-maker Marsha Emerman three years ago, and they set to work on a documentary, *On the Banks of the Tigris*, that would recognise the Jewish contribution to Iraqi music. There were also plans for a live concert with Iraqi

musicians of all denominations.

In December 2006, the two found themselves in Ramat Gan, in the thick of Tel Aviv's Little Baghdad. Shokor was greeted with open arms.

"It was an amazing journey for me," he says, "and a beautiful sight really".

**T**WENTY years before Saddam's cultural purge, the Al-Kuwaiti brothers were superstars. They had composed for the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Koulthoum, performed at King Faisal's coronation ceremony and were his favoured entertainers, never once hiding their Jewishness. When they left it all behind to migrate to Israel in the 1950s, they were sprayed with DDT and shunted into tents like all the new arrivals. But despite their isolation from the Arab world, they continued to perform regularly on The Voice of Israel radio, to a huge number of listeners, the majority well beyond Israeli borders. And these days, you're as likely to hear their songs sung in Ramat Gan's Little Baghdad, as in a taxi in the Arabian Gulf.

Yair Dalal, the most prominent proponent of Iraqi-Jewish music today, took Shokor and Emerman to the weekly Ramat Gan gathering Shokor had read about in Beirut. They met

and interviewed the surviving handful of Iraqi-Jewish musicians who had played in the mostly Jewish Iraq Radio Orchestra of the 1940s: blind qanoun (Iraqi zither) player Abraham Salman, nay (bamboo flute) player Alber Elias, oud player Elias Shasha and singer Jacob El Allailly, all of whom are in their 80s.

Most people in Arab countries didn't think that a Jewish person could read Arabic and the Koran.

Majid Shokor  
Iraqi actor

"Now they are very old. This is the last moment," says Dalal, adding that all the musicians' children have not followed in their footsteps.

"This is the tragedy," he says. "They thought that music is not a respectable enough profession."

He thinks that apart from the hard work involved in pursuing a musical career, the assimilationist attitudes

thrust upon new Iraqi immigrants to Israel has filtered down to a generational split in cultural identity.

One of the Radio Iraq Orchestra musicians' contemporaries, the late Filfel Gourgy, was particularly remarkable. Growing up in Iraq, Gourgy learned Iraqi maqam (the regional musical register) from Muslim singers, and left for Israel in his 20s. Then, on Tel Aviv's Arabic radio station, he would recite koranic verses at the beginning and end of daily 12-hour broadcasts, which were transmitted through the Arab world. Outside of Israel, no-one knew he was Jewish.

"Most people in Arab countries, didn't think that a Jewish person could read Arabic and the Koran," Shokor says. "And he had such a beautiful voice."

While filming in Israel for *On the Banks of the Tigris*, Shokor came to understand the ongoing issues of Israelis identifying with Arab cultures in Arab countries.

"The culture, the music, the accent, everything was another class, not an Israeli class. That's why they didn't really have enough opportunity to express their culture, their music, their ideas."

And yet, with his faith placed firmly in one man, he's optimistic about a



shift in sociocultural opinion. "It's time to build a new generation of music," Shokor says. "Yair is working very hard."

If Gourgy represented the sort of cultural bridge-building once possible, modern-day oud virtuoso, peace-maker and Iraqi-Jewish cultural ambassador Dalal is an example of what could be possible in the future. Born in Israel in 1955 to Iraqi emigre parents, Dalal says he felt pressure to lose his Iraqi identity. Still, his parents spoke Arabic with him at home. And although he initially learned western classical violin, there was no escaping his heritage and identity. "I have Arab culture in me," he says.

Over the years, Dalal's affinity with Middle Eastern and Arabic music has led him to many fruitful cross-cultural collaborations. He has performed and recorded with the Arava's Azazme Bedouin, whose music he discovered while working as a desert guide: "It's very simple," he says, "and very beautiful".

He also fondly remembers playing with the great Nubian musician and ethnomusicologist Hamza El Din, who died in mid-2006. "We played a few concerts together," Dalal says. "He was very, very unique."

Over the years, Dalal became a star of the international world music scene, while enduring an uphill battle to gain popularity at home – though, he says, times are changing.

Across Israel, in his studio Almaya, at Tzfat's Rimmon school, and elsewhere, Dalal students are picking up where the old guard is leaving off. "It's happening already," he says of the re-engagement with the Iraqi-Jewish musical tradition. A number of students are pure Ashkenazi – today's multicultural Israel appreciates good music.

"Not my generation, the next generation, they are more open-minded," Dalal says. "They have been all over the world, so they are into it."

The influences of Arabic music and Indian music are filtering through Israeli society and have in turn brought attention to the Iraqi-Jewish music tradition, says Dalal. Still, popular acceptance is a long way off. "People don't appreciate it, the establishment doesn't appreciate it. It's Arabic music, not Israeli music."

When I ask Dalal where he would play his dream concert, his answer comes as no surprise: "In Baghdad." He says he'd like to play with Iraqi musicians, of all religious denominations. "Some of them I am in touch with," he says. Iraq is, after all, only a phonecall away from Israel.

Renowned Iraqi-Jewish sculptor Oded Halahmy is a close friend of Dalal. Since the fall of Saddam, he has made two trips back to Baghdad on his US passport. With an Israeli passport, Dalal doesn't have that same luxury. But would he go back if he could?

"I wish, I wish."

Meanwhile, between international tours, Dalal is recording with an Israeli Jazz quartet, "There will be some elements [of Iraqi-Jewish

music], because of me," he says. "It will be something called *From Baghdad to the Blues*." He's off to play in Croatia, LA and Poland a few days after we speak – and I ask why his music is so popular. "Well, I don't know," he says. "Maybe it has something unique."

Together, the film-maker, the actor and the musician are working together to honour the Jewish contribution to Iraqi music, to recognise the composers who were brutally dissociated from their work, and to send an incontrovertible message of peace through music.

"It is the real soul of the human being," Dalal says. "Music tells us a lot about the culture, and the people. And it's free. It's a universal language."

Andrew Harris is a travel writer based in Melbourne.

Marsha Emerman and Majid Shokor's documentary, *On the Banks of the Tigris*, is in urgent need of funding to complete filming and production. To make a tax-deductible donation email [marsha@fruitfulfilms.com.au](mailto:marsha@fruitfulfilms.com.au).

### Reading Jewish Baghdad

BEFORE the Jewish community's mass migration to Israel in 1950 and 1951, Baghdadi Jews, Muslims and Christians worked together in a productive intellectual environment. Two memoirs, last year published in English, conjure scenes of multi-religious gatherings of young thinkers in the coffee houses along the Tigris, discussing the merits or otherwise of Iraqi communism; families on mid-river islands enjoying Masgouf, the fish flame-grilled straight from the water; and the everyday tragedies and triumphs of a 2000-year-old community that exists only between the pages of the books.

Sasson Somekh's *Baghdad, Yesterday* (Ibis Editions, 2007), originally published in Hebrew in 2003, and Kattan's *Farewell, Babylon* (Souvenir Press, 2007), written in the original French in 1975, deal with the years leading up to the anti-Jewish Baghdad riots of June 1941, the Farhud and the restoring of Muslim-Jewish relations in the intervening years up to 1948, as well as the community's sudden dissolution a few years later.

Somekh, one of the founders of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Tel Aviv University, uses photographs throughout his unsentimental, sober narrative, which functions as a sort of wry literary documentary. The Montreal-based Kattan's writing is infused with heartfelt nostalgia and frames the time and events with a coming-of-age story.

These books are available from Sunflower Bookshop, 434 Glenhuntly Road, Elsternwick. Enquiries: (03) 9523 6405.



Photo: Marsha Emerman



Photo: Marsha Emerman



Photo: courtesy Yair Dalal

From top: oud player Elias Shasha, flautist Alber Elias and prominent Israeli musician Yair Dalal.

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