

ARTIST
OF THE MONTH

Amer Zahr



When Amer Zahr first got into comedy, there were just a few Palestinian comedians. Now, there is a whole crop. But Amer is not merely a comedian who happens to be a Palestinian. He is a comedian, an activist, an academic, and a Palestinian. All at once. All the time. He graduated from law school, and even though his mother tells everyone he is a lawyer, he doesn't practice the profession.

Amer was born in Jordan and raised in the United States, returning to Palestine whenever he can to perform, conduct workshops, or just be. His parents are Palestinian refugees from Nazareth and Akka. His mother, a Muslim, and his father, a Christian, met as young activists in California in the 1970s. Like every Palestinian, Amer was raised with Palestine ever residing on the tip of his tongue. Activism has always been at the core of his life. As he says on stage, "When Santa asked me what I wanted for Christmas, I replied, 'Enforcement of UN Resolutions 194 and 242.'"

After coming up through the ranks and making some marks in the comedy world, Amer is now one of the most in-demand Arab American comedians out there. He is currently producing a show titled *Being Palestinian Makes Me Smile*, which features him and three other Palestinian comedians, Said Durrah, Mona Aburmishan, and Mike Easmeil. The show has been featured at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, and New York City's world-famous Carnegie

Hall. He is the only Arab American comedian ever to headline a show at both venues, two of the world's most prestigious stages.

Amer currently resides in Dearborn, Michigan, the unofficial capital of Arab America. He has produced a comedy festival there each year since 2013, and the fourth installment will occur on November 18 and 19, 2016. He also founded the "1001 Laughs Ramallah Comedy Festival," which will feature its second installment this summer, from August 22–26, 2016, with shows in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. He is also an adjunct law professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, where he teaches on Arab Americans and their history in the American legal system.

Palestinians always have stories to tell. And Amer is no exception. As he says in one of his most famous jokes, Palestinian can't ever talk to anyone without first saying, "In 1948..." Comedy is one of the vehicles of the greater Palestinian narrative. It can be humanizing, both for ourselves and for others. It can create some comfort in the face of a life riddled with abnormalities, anomalies, and aberrations. Usually, a comedian's job is to point out the absurdities in culture, politics, and society. For a Palestinian, this job is quite easy. Palestinian life is characterized by the daily experience of living in some sort of alternate universe where the usual norms of law, justice, and basic rights are themselves alien. The comedian's job, however, is not only to observe these things, but also to effectively convey them, through humor, to all audiences. Amer has made a bet that comedy and Palestine can coexist and thrive. So far, it seems, he's right.