



The Secret of Music: The Soul's Flow

By Jamil Dababat



The sound of street vendors is not the only one you can hear in the narrow alleyways of one of the biggest cities of the West Bank, Nablus.

On the outskirts of the khan, a Farsi name given to places of rest, lies the biggest market in the city, where traders sell vegetables, cheese, and spices, and where Ali Hassanein, a 54-year-old *oud* maker works. He has been working for decades, breaking the traditional pattern of these alleyways, some of which were built during the Fatimid and Ottoman times.

Nablus is widely known for traditional industries such as candy. But Hassanein, who was born in Damascus and worked in the nursing profession in Saudi Arabia for a while, found himself making amazing *ouds* with little effort. Looking at the corner of the room where the *ouds* are hanging, Hassanein boasts, "This music is better than candy." He used to sing Islamic *nashid*.

Hassanein, who learned to play as a child in Damascus, attempted to make his first *oud* 25 years ago, when his family returned to their hometown of Nablus.

"We had an *oud* that was a little broken, and when I tried to repair it, I somehow succeeded."

In Nablus, there are makers of almost everything, from confectioneries to sabots to the *tarbush*, which is no longer worn, but the *oud* maker remains unique amongst hundreds of manufacturers.

Hassanein liked the idea of working in the musical-instrument industry, and roamed many Arab countries. "I went back to the Levant, Cairo, and Baghdad to meet the *oud* makers in those cities. Naturally, none

gave me the secret of this profession, but I gathered from every maker an idea for myself."

Northern historic Palestine is known for its *oud* industry, but when Hassanein returned from wandering in the Arab

countries, he brought a new industry to the list of industries in Nablus, in the northern West Bank.

Even though Hassanein's father, as well as his brothers, worked in carpentry, Hassanein looked into that profession with his heart, not his eyes. He looked at his wall of suspended *ouds* again and said, "The *oud* industry deals with the spirit of the tree."





He believes that the spirit of the trees remains in the timber after it's cut, and that the spirit moves from the living tree to the dry wood, and through the tunes that flow from the musical instrument.

"The soul of a tree lives in the timber, so a melody remains in its spirit."

In the city of Nablus, vendors sell their merchandise in the most musical ways.

Hassanein affirms, "In this city, everything is humming."

Hassanein's shop doesn't have signage, but he decided to name it Ziryab, according to his business cards.

Ziryab is Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Nafi, a musician and singer who lived during the Abbasid era. He had a great voice and made outstanding contributions to Arabic and Eastern music. He was nicknamed Ziryab because of the sweetness of his voice and the color of

his skin, like a black bird known as the *shaahrar*. Moreover, Ziryab is known to have increased the number of strings on the *oud* from four to five.

Hassanein prefers to play rather than make the *oud*. In 2010, he spent 90 days making the *oud* that is hung in a prominent place in the room. Every time a visitor asks him, he takes it down and plays.

"We have visitors from all over the West Bank and historic Palestine," said Hassanein, referring to his wide reputation. But over the past years, Hassanein's expertise has spread overseas, to the European music community. For years now, Western musicians have come to this alley either to repair their instruments or bring him new ideas.

Hassanein's relationship to the European market has gone beyond

the music, for he started importing timber and other supplies from abroad, especially from the Spanish market.

Like other musical-instrument makers, Hassanein wants to immortalize his name, so he carves his name and signature and the date of the *oud*'s completion inside every instrument he makes. "I learnt this from my experience, and that's how I know who made the different instruments and in which city they are made. I am doing the same thing, so that people know that I made these instruments in Nablus, and in this alley."

It is true that *oud* making is a modern industry in this city, but the musical history of Nablus goes back a long time. In a city known as a center for movements and various religious sects, music is 3,650 years old, as Samaritan literature suggests.

Abed Al Kehen, the head singer of a Samaritan band that is part of a long tradition of a cappella music, said, "We carry our instruments in our bodies," and he pointed to his throat. Moreover,

there is a Sufi Muslim band that plays copper drums to accompany religious songs. On Friday nights, you can see these musicians playing the tambourine and drums in Tkayahm, not far from Hassanein's shop.

The members of the biblical and Quranic religious singing bands feel that music is part of their faith. As for Hassanein, he sees faith in the spirit of the melody's origin, the tree. As he plays the strings, he affirms, "Music is life, and I make life again through the spirit of trees."

Jamil Dababat, a Palestinian journalist and writer, lives in Tubas in the northern West Bank, and has worked in the Palestinian News Agency (WAFA) for the past 15 years. He has covered stories in Palestine, North America, Africa, and Europe regarding Palestinian and international affairs. Dababat has won several national and international awards and is specialized in covering political, environmental, and minority and religious affairs.

Photos by Shadi Jarar'a.

Our Readers Say ...

I think it is important to discuss art from various perspectives in our community. On a personal level, art is very important to me! I believe it is an indicator of how developed a society is. It is also a medium used to express issues faced by communities.

We have to raise awareness on different topics that concern art and culture by using innovative tools. My favorite artist, Um Kulthum, is an example. She represents the golden age of Egypt and the Arab world. I feel and see passion in her voice and performance. The poetry, composition, and artists behind her songs are fantastic and truly a reflection of the culture of her time.

In terms of art appreciation, I think that our society appreciates art, but not all kinds. A cultured community is one that appreciates the arts and has the capacity to showcase them.

Culture is a means for change. Palestinian art is shown worldwide by artists who brand Palestine differently, and this is exactly what we need. Art is one language that is well understood by all without the need for a mediator!

Victoria D., Ramallah

