



✚ Palestinian trio gives oud a youthful, bluesy spirit

[By Mike Zwerin](#) Bloomberg News

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PARIS When Samir Joubran's daughter was three years old, he brought her to Paris from their home on the West Bank, and she heard her first concert. Her father and his two brothers play the oud, an Arabic lute.

After the Parisian audience stood up, applauded and cheered, Samir's daughter, who is now 5, began to cry. Samir, who doesn't generally speak on stage and doesn't smile easily, carried her up to explain. "She is crying because in her experience," he announced, "a crowd of people making noise means violence. She did not know that people clap their hands out of happiness."

"Randana," the first album by Le Trio Joubran, will be released on their record label, also called Randana (a combination of two Arabic words meaning resonance and humming), on April 28 in France. The CD will be distributed in Western Europe and the United States over the rest of the year, and the trio is scheduled to tour in the spring and summer. They go to the United States for the first time in September.

Samir has found that it can be more complicated to get from Ramallah to Tel Aviv than from Tel Aviv to Montreal, where the trio performed at the "Strictly Mondial" festival in February.

"We are not just normal musicians trying to build a career," Samir says. "Everybody knows we are Palestinians when they come to hear us. We cannot not be Palestinians on stage."

Samir, 32, and Adnan, 19, were being interviewed in a café on Place de la Bastille in Paris. The third brother, Wissam, 21, was in Italy studying to be a luthier at the Antonio Stradivarius Institute in Cremona. He is to graduate next month.

Wissam, who built the instruments they play, learned the trade at a young age in Nazareth from their father Hatem, who was a master luthier and the son of a master luthier. The two older brothers began to tour as far away as Brazil as a duo in 2002. Adnan joined them early in 2005.

The irony is that the three of them were born in Nazareth, they travel on Israeli passports, and so, except for Egypt and Jordan, which have peace treaties with Israel, they cannot travel to Arab countries. "They invite me to play in Israel," Samir says. "But I do not think it is the right time."

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The idea for the trio came when Samir heard the all-star guitar trio of Al Di Meola, Paco de Lucia and John McLaughlin combining jazz, rock, and Flamenco music. He asked himself: "Why can't the oud be shiny like that?"

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In the Arab world, the oud, the ancestor of the guitar, is viewed as an instrument for old people; it has become something of a museum piece. Samir wanted to renew it, to connect the instrument to other traditions. (The Tunisian Anouar Brahem has been doing something similar.)

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"The oud may be a 4,000-year-old instrument," says Samir, who graduated from Muhammad Abdul Wahab Conservatory in Cairo, "but it can still be played with youthful spirit. Some people call our music classical, some call it popular, some say it is world music; I don't know exactly what to call the music we play. Being young, we are open to Western popular music, Indian music, Flamenco, and so on. We play jazz festivals; we are improvising 70 percent of the time."

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"If you did not know who we were," Samir says, "you would not be able to guess we were Palestinian." Their music is, however, obviously Middle Eastern. The brothers write their own songs, which are linear. There are few chords. The unamplified ouds are articulated percussively. Their songs are spotted with blue notes, many in the form of quarter tones. You could almost call their style bluesy. At the same time, it is strict, weighted with history.

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According to Samir, what they are doing "did not exist in Arabic music before. In the past, the dialogue has been slow - I play for 10 minutes, you play for 10 minutes. Now we are doing one sentence and one sentence. There are 42 different Arabic scales, and we travel from scale to scale when we improvise. We have become more and more instinctive about it."

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He pointed to Adnan, sitting respectfully beside him in the café, "When I want to move to another scale, he should be ready for that. We are three brothers with three brother-made instruments, so there are actually six brothers on stage."

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Mike Zwerin is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.
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