

REGINE BASHA

## Life of the Party

### Music by Iraqi Jewish Angelenos

The only reason I know the Iraqi folk song “Fog il Nachal,” which means, literally, “I am as happy as the highest date palm tree,” is because it played continuously against the backdrop of my youth in Los Angeles of 1978–1988, mingled in with The Police, Blondie, Siouxsie and The Banshees, and Bananarama. Though at the time I hated the Arabic music my father and his friends played at home and at their parties, it was always “Fog il Nachal” that stuck in my mind throughout those years. Although I could sing it perfectly and whistle the tune, I had no idea what the lyrics were, nor did my parents bother to tell me. Arabic was spoken between them and their Iraqi friends—on the phone, at parties, at the synagogue on Wilshire Boulevard; Hebrew was spoken to my older brothers, who both grew up in Israel, and English was spoken to me. In fact, from around the ages of eight to ten, I believed that Arabic was a language that only belonged to adults. I was completely floored when I first heard a child speak Arabic—ironically, this happened when we visited Israel and I saw Palestinian children for the first time. Somehow Arabic got absorbed, as languages and music do, in that department of “forbidden sounds” in my brain.

“Fog il Nachal” was particularly loved by the community because it was, as my mother called it, “a happy tune” not a “sad, wailing” tune in Arabic. At all night house parties, the men seemed to love the sad, wailing tunes. They sat around on the floor waving their hands and wagging their fingers at the musicians (my dad sometimes playing the oud), while the women gossiped in the other room and only emerged for the more upbeat tunes. I often slept over in guest bedrooms amid the coats and handbags, lulled to sleep by the twang of the khanoun, the drumbeat of the darbukka, and the deep-belly tones of the oud. Songs that seemed to go on forever by Egyptian greats Uum Khalthoum and Abdul Wahab, and Lebanese songstress Fairouz, repeated abstractly in my head the next day as I attended dance class at Beverly Hills High. Layered over the remnants of the Arabic music was a daytime soundtrack of another kind of wailing from Siouxsie Sioux or David Sylvian, or experimental music with oriental sounds coming from Brian Ferry or Peter Gabriel. All my friends at the time were immigrant kids—Mexican or Phillipino or Armenian—and we were united in our love of the same music. My best friend at the

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*Boom: The Journal of California*, Vol. 1, Number 3, pps 67–71. ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2011 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: boom.2011.1.3.67.



time, a Latina musician, played her own new-wavey version of Latin-Arabic sounds that predated so much of what would explode in pop music a decade later. It was as if this music led to our self-understanding as people with different cultures at home. It was not harmony but disharmony that felt real and more complicated. Strangely, it only occurred to me sometime after college that this kind of happy/sad sound—shared by new wave and oriental music—was united in dissonance. It was all about that singular quarter tone that makes music sound slightly off-key or out of tune (especially to Western ears).

The history of atonal music is bound up with the history of modernism—related to industry, depersonalization, ideas of progress and social utopia. But was the dissonant quarter tone used in alternative music of the 1980s an expression of difference? Or resistance? It certainly seemed to represent longing, but longing for what? I and my immigrant friends might have heard it subliminally, might have interpreted it as a validation of our otherness, of our melancholy at being misunderstood both at home and in Californian culture. In a sense, those of us who fall between cultures—the never-

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really-modern, never-really-traditional cultures—inhabit this space created by the dissonant tone—the tone that resonates as deceptively off-key or unfinished, and that allows us to choose a constant state of tuning.

I knew early on that there must have been a really good reason my parents did not speak their native Judeo-Arabic dialect outside our home and deftly avoided references in public places to countries of birth. These were secrets I did not enjoy; they made our otherness more pronounced and mysterious. Looking back, what I did enjoy, despite my teenage grumblings about ethnic parents and their habits, was their flagrant party culture. When there weren't enough families to host those all-night house parties (more Iraqi Jews live in London, Montreal, or New York than Los Angeles), we'd go to nightclubs like the Lebanese club, Byblos, on Westwood Boulevard, or Pips on Doheny Drive. (Pips wasn't an Arabic club, but the Iraqis liked its plush carpeting, mirrored walls, low-lighting, and disco.) At Byblos, at least two or three belly dancers would perform throughout the night, and on their breaks, the dance floor would open up for us to dance to Western music. The belly dancers, to my great surprise, were more often American women who had learned to dance in LA, rather than Middle Eastern women. I always wondered how my parents and their friends tolerated this “inauthenticity.”

I later learned that belly dancers in Middle Eastern cultures are practically regarded as prostitutes. In the 1940s, in Iraq at least, a woman singer or entertainer was considered loose and compromised. Traditionally, women living in Muslim countries were not supposed to attend musical gatherings in public, let alone sing in public. Although there was nothing of the fanatical fundamentalism we are seeing today, those cultures are still conservative when it comes to women appearing in public spaces. Jewish women living in those societies followed suit, which is not a stretch,



as women in Judaism traditionally sat separately from men in the synagogues. Thankfully, the divisions today are less severe.

Once in California, such restrictive social mores were more or less left behind. Perhaps, too, the Californian Iraqi Jews had something to prove to the Iranian Jews, who arrived in Los Angeles through the 1980s: we were more “modern,” more assimilated than they.

So much seemed to be revealed at those house parties and through the music. Every so often I’d see a woman who so loved Arabic music that she couldn’t help singing alongside the men. One such family friend—I’ll call her “Laura,” which is the name she chose when she came to the States—sings a mean “Fog Il Nachal” herself, when begged to do so. Her family had migrated to California earlier than my parents, in the 1950s, barely getting safely through Israel, so the evidence of assimilation was much deeper. Their accents were less pronounced, their children were more removed from Iraqi culture, their morals seemed looser, and they had a dog (Arabic culture, by and large, frowns upon dogs as pets).

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Laura was the quintessential hostess for Iraqi parties. She made everyone from every class within the community feel at home. She also arranged for all the music, sometimes bringing in Palestinian or Syrian musicians who could play the tunes loved by the Iraqi Jews. No one ever spoke openly of this interreligious musical arrangement, though.

Loads of live recordings of these house parties on cassette and VHS tapes fill my parents’ bathroom cabinets. My own meager teenage cassette collection from this time has nothing on theirs. It wasn’t only about capturing the music but just as much the heckling, teasing, and jokes from the live audience, typical Middle Eastern behavior that you’d never encounter outside that intimate setting. The cassettes are traded and presented as gifts to friends and family abroad in a network that, ultimately, contains the social code holding people together. It may not be nostalgia, but it is reenactment, a kind that feels more like a form of resistance than active nostalgia does. It was as if our secret musical citizenship superceded time and place. Repeated again and again in different homes—the same songs, the same food, the same guests—this was the ever-present internal life of the party, where the music of 1940s and 1950s Iraq played on in pockets of Beverly Hills, Encino, and even San Diego. I had always wondered if Iraqis back in Iraq were still listening to this repertoire. Or was it just within the diasporic community?

As my curiosity about our identification with this music grew over time, I decided to research the history of “Chagli” (the Arabic word used for Jewish musical house parties) in Baghdad. In 1932, a Jewish band called Chagli, a folk ensemble with *nye*, *dumbek*, violin, and oud, was invited



to represent Iraq at the Cairo International Music Convention, the first music industry event of its kind in the Middle East. At that time, Jews and their music were not separated from Iraqi culture; the Chagli was never considered “Jewish music.” But for reasons that had to do with social mores in that era, Iraqi Jews tended to be the musicians of Iraq—so much so that music ceased on the radio and in the streets on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, the Iraqi National Radio station was a productive place for new compositions and collaborations, headed by the Jewish brothers Salah and Daoud Al-Kuwaiti. Though the Iraqi Maqam (a kind of musical scale) was often sung by a Muslim singer, Jews always provided the musical accompaniment. This led to the writing of new modern compositions modeled after the popular Egyptian compositions at the time—which led the way for Modern Arabic music throughout the whole Middle East. The eventual displacement of this culture (a force majeure after Israel was established) affected the music scene of Iraq for decades, as most of the music teachers were also Jews.

**I**n my latest research on the Iraqi Jewish musicians of this generation who are still alive and playing, no one

stands out more than the octogenarian Abraham Salman. A virtuosic khanoun player, blind since birth, he now lives modestly in an Iraqi Jewish suburb of Tel Aviv, performing only for the friends who come over and egg him on. Salman was a beloved child prodigy in Iraq and continued to perform shortly after arriving in Israel in the early 1950s as part of the program “Kol Israel” (a televised “Oriental” orchestral broadcast à la Lawrence Welk). In his living room over cookies and tea, his wife told me of his continued following in the Middle East—especially in Saudi Arabia, where efforts to bring him for a concert have proved futile. Earnestly, I asked Salman if he could talk about the Maqam to me, and explain it in layman terms perhaps. He reluctantly responded in Arabic by asking where I lived. When I stated, “New York,” he simply said, “Oh . . . that’s too far.”

I don’t know whether or not Abraham Salman’s music is still known to or appreciated by Iraqis back in the homeland.

**Jews and their music  
were not separated  
from Iraqi culture.**



Images from the VHS recordings copied and shared among the Iraqi Jews of Los Angeles. The author explores these parties in her project "Tuning Baghdad" at [www.tuningbaghdad.net](http://www.tuningbaghdad.net)

I have heard of a younger generation of Iraqi musicians who are seeking out this modern chapter in history, as apparently, Saddam Hussein actively erased it from the history books and radio waves. How ironic it is that in the hills of Encino or the suburbs of Tel Aviv, we are likely to hear the sounds of one of the last bastions of cosmopolitanism in Iraq.

If there could be a sound for that condition, it would definitely ring atonally.

## Glossary

**Chagli:** a four-piece ensemble that performs the Maqam. A term also used to refer to the party at which this ensemble would play. Related to the Byzantine Caglia that also spread to the Balkans and other reaches of the Ottoman Empire.

**Darbukka or Dumbek:** a clay or ceramic drum with a natural membrane for the skin.

**Khanoun:** A Middle Eastern instrument, like the zither that is plucked. Features prominently in most Arabic music orchestras.

**Maqam:** a system of melodic modes in Arabic music that can be played in an improvisational way.

**Nye:** an ancient flute. **B**