



Hannibal Saad – Syrian Music Lives

In Lebanon, Jordan, the Netherlands



Can you describe your event this year for Jazz Day?

Our event is entitled “Jazz for Syria”. We decided that this title has all of the necessary elements. Jazz is about freedom, communication and individuality.

Syria is the country we will be playing for. It goes without saying that everyone knows about the war and everyone wants peace. Anything else would have been politics.

“Jazz for Syria” is composed of three simultaneous concerts in Beirut (Lebanon), Amman (Jordan) and The Hague (The Netherlands) connected via Internet broadcast and Skype. We divided the project in order for it to be in three cities involving international people who are connected to Syria – either they were in Syria before or have a special relationship with the country – as well as Syrian musicians and jazz musicians who previously played in Syria. We created a platform for them – for us - to share their beautiful stories and music with the world in these three cities. The event is going to be interactive; we will connect three cities via Skype and also broadcast it online to reach other people who cannot attend the concerts. At the same time, on this Jazz Day, we will do the big launch of “Syrian Music Lives” Portal and Social Media Platform.

Can you briefly describe your organization/establishment/institution?

My organization ‘Music and Beyond’ created and ran two major international music festivals and conferences in Syria until the crisis began. We currently run international crossover projects between the Arab world and the rest of the world. We work on expanding the “Oriental Landscapes” and “Jazz Lives in Syria” festivals and concepts to other international cities through a series of mini-festivals featuring Syrian and international artists who participated in these festivals in Syria. We are also now working to build an interactive website for Syrian music and Middle Eastern culture, featuring audio, video on demand, written materials about Middle Eastern music and pod casting for live events and interviews. Our site is: www.oriental-landscapes.com, or www.jazzlivesinsyria.com.

What does jazz music mean to you? To your community?

For me, Jazz is a language that has no boundaries.

This is why our "Jazz Lives in Syria" festival aimed from the very beginning to pave the way towards a solid Syrian jazz music movement starting from 2004 when we established a big band to be an incubator for musicians to get more involved in Jazz. In 2010, we were proud to give space and support for ten bands. We also worked with many children in order to promote grassroots movement for Jazz. In our experience, people can accept jazz easier when they can relate it to something they are familiar with - especially when it comes from their own culture. The Syrian music scene, with its rich and diversified musical heritage, is already regionally and internationally recognized.

The Syrian jazz festival was held annually in the Damascus Citadel from 2005 to 2011 and in other Syrian cities, and became the largest musical event in Syria, generating a number of important initiatives such as music workshops for young and professional Syrian musicians through collaboration with international composers, musicians and educators who came to Syria to teach, rehearse and compose for the Big Band. The Syrian Big Band, as well as the creation of a dozen of independent small jazz bands that sprang from it provided the opportunity for a large number of Syrian instrumentalists to have their place on the musical map in Syria and the world, rearranging Syrian traditional musical lore in a jazz fashion and presenting it worldwide.

The festival also featured many great jazz artists like Wayne Krantz, David Binney, Frank Carlberg, Alain Caron, Erik Truffaz, Ensembl Denada, Eivind Arrset, Jan Akkerman, Francis Colleta, Bert Joris, Kenny Wheeler, Christoph Lauer, Time Report, and Franco Ambrosetti.

Why are you celebrating International Jazz Day? Why is it important?

For me it is a day of sharing music with the world. Of celebrating the miracle of peace through music. Since the war in Syria shattered our lives I decided not to take things for granted. Having a day like that is a miracle in itself. It is important to savor the ecstasy of life. Those few beautiful moments of our lives. Jazz is a mix of immediate expressions of feeling about the present which summarizes many immeasurable things. Sharing these moments with many people around the world is even more beautiful. We want to share with the world beautiful things about Syria.

What do you hope for in celebrating this Day?

I hope this international gathering through this great art form brings more happiness and peace to the people around the world. Group participation brings more energy for a good cause. Even though Jazz is a sophisticated art form that comes from an amalgam of cultures and human experiences, I hope people will come together for common enjoyment of simple things. The power and simplicity of enjoying life.

I had my house blown up when I was in Damascus two years ago along with the entire neighborhood. I was asleep when the explosion happened. It was a miracle that we survived. Since then, I have a new life. It is still not easy to cope with the current personal and national crises, but I am much more alive than before and want to do what I was destined to do. Help my culture the way I can and know how to help it. Jazz Day can help my project to be known so I can give some hope in our project.

What is your establishment/organization's mission and how does it relate to International Jazz Day?

We started the Jazz Festival in 2004 so that Syria could have a place in the world Jazz scene, and establish a grassroots movement and platform for people to meet and produce new jazz projects.

Since the crisis in 2011, our aim now is to keep the momentum by:

- Creating a permanent link between Syrian musicians, inside and outside Syria, to exchange experiences beyond the current geographical, political and social rift;
- Making available written and audiovisual information about the latest news, activities and creative work of Syrian musicians, including forum participations, concerts, the release of new albums, articles by and about them, interviews, etc.; and
- Informing the public at large about Syrian living music and the musical life of Syria.

What should people know about your activity for Jazz Day with the backdrop of your country/community?

We want to share with the world our rich heritage and we want to tell the world that Syrian people shouldn't be forgotten. Syria is in the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. Peace must come soon. Our simple activity adds to the awareness that gives hope for the future by stressing the importance of the present and remembering the great things we did in the past and the things we share. It is important to share all of this with my fellow countrymen in order to surpass the schism at present. I want to ask the world to give one moment of attention and send some good thoughts to Syrians so they can feel that people still care.

Can you share the challenges/difficulties you have had in preparing for the celebration of Jazz Day?

My concern from day one of the crises in Syria was to stay sane and not to be driven to any extreme. Bringing together people for a common goal in the middle of a conflict is a big challenge. Because of the conflict, we lost our two festivals, the big band, and all other projects. Musicians were scattered all over the planet. Bringing them together in one place will take a long time and will require huge efforts. This is why we thought that virtual on-line activities to bring musicians together would be the only way. We faced many difficulties in funding since most international institutions are taking sides in the conflict while the Syrian people pay the high price of the big game of nations. So it wasn't easy to find support for our peace event in the way we envisioned our project. But so much positive energy came our way from people to make our project materialize.

Interviewed by Mika Shino, Director of Program and Global Outreach, Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.