

INTERCULTURAL JOURNEYS



So Farah, why don't we start with your background. As they say, 'what's your story?'

Well, I grew up in Jordan. In Amman, the capital. When I was three years old I took my first music lesson. That was also the first time I ever stepped on stage. Since then, it's been impossible to get me off stage! In Jordan you can hear a lot of different music, Western, Middle Eastern, even flamenco! Jordan in itself is a melting pot culturally and that really enriched me in many ways. I went on to study in England, at Trinity College of Music. I studied music composition and then I decided I wanted to major in Film Scoring and Music Business and Management, and so I moved to Boston to attend Berklee College of Music. Growing up in Jordan, I had the Middle Eastern music in my ear and was influenced by that, then moving to the West and studying in the U.S., I learned more about jazz, Latin music, and world music. After Berklee I moved back to Spain (my family had moved there when I was 18). In Spain, I studied the art of flamenco, and that allowed me to come full circle and established who I am.

So now you've been in Philadelphia for five years, right?

Yes. Philadelphia, New York, Madrid, and Amman are my bases and I flow between all four, when I am not in other countries. But really, I feel like I live where the music takes me. I'm never in one place long enough to feel settled. Actually, if I do feel settled, that makes me nervous. I have Bedouin roots, nomadic roots, and I feel very strongly that those roots pull me. One of my

albums is called *Nomad*, and it describes that feeling very well. My approach is to live, as much as I can, like everywhere is my home, as opposed to feeling like I am always 'away' from some place.

You had your first music lesson at age 3. Is that because of one of your parents?

It was my mother and grandmother, actually. My mom really loved music as well. She noticed that, as a kid, I was very intrigued by music and instruments and would always try to sing what I heard. So she signed me up for music lessons to see if I had any musical talent. She had no idea that I would become a professional musician. When you teach a kid music, you are also teaching them culture, discipline, sensitivity, and to speak and learn in another language. I learned to read and write music before I learned to read and write English or Arabic, any "official" language. I don't come from a musical family, but I do come from a family that appreciates music and the arts. My mom definitely encouraged me- she always loved to sing, and that was her way of having music in her life.

How important is music in Jordan?

Music in general is part of the culture- you hear it everywhere. Anywhere you go there's music, whether it's a café, a restaurant, a store, etc. What's different about Jordan is that there are so many different kinds of music available. People listen to classical Arabic music alongside Western classical music, pop and even hip-hop. Jordan is a small country, so the music industry is always growing. When I was growing up, there wasn't much of a music scene. For someone who studied music, the only real path they had was to become a teacher. Being a female musician, this expectation was particularly strong. The concept of being a performer was not hugely popular. Now the music industry is exploding and there are many performers, including many female performers. I also take my role as a musician seriously because I am a female, Arab musician and bandleader. It sends a message of empowerment and shows that Arab women are strong and independent, we have our own dreams and ambitions.

Absolutely. Is that message something that you have always been aware of?

I don't think I was aware of it when I was growing up, but after my schooling, I definitely became aware of it. Music is very much dominated by men, not only in the Arab world, but also in the Western world. 95% of the musicians I've played with are male, either in the West or the Middle East. I think I became more interested in sending this message of empowerment to female musicians because I found that I needed to empower myself and feel that there is a place for me. Luckily, my band supports me

100%, and I've never felt any inequality, but I have been in situations where male musicians had a hard time following a woman's lead. It's especially important to me as an Arab woman to send a message that Arab women are powerful, because it makes people think twice about stereotyping Arab women when they see me leading a band. I'm not oppressed and I'm not submissive! I always surround myself with open-minded musicians and find that's a very healthy environment to work in.

So, you mentioned your band. How did you form the band and meet all the members?

The Farah Siraj band has four members. On guitar there's Andreas Arnold, he's a flamenco jazz guitarist and can play just about anything. On electric bass, we have the Andres Romistrovsky, and on percussion we have Marcelo Woloski. I met both Andres and Marcelo at Berklee College of Music. Many years later, we formed this band. It's definitely an intercultural band and we are a representation of the mission of IJ because we are from different cultures, backgrounds, and religions. We are a representation of a peaceful gathering of people from all walks of life. They are my musical family. We've performed all over the world together: the Middle East, India, Europe, South America, the United States, and many other places. When you travel with people it brings you closer to them.

How long have you been playing together?

We've been playing together for years now. The good thing about working with these incredible musicians is that they are always bringing in fresh ideas. Everybody brings something to the table. I feel like I am in really good company. Each one has positive vibes and we really believe in that. There's a good karma that comes from the band and I believe the audience feels it.

Your performance also features a special guest artist, spiritchild, with whom you've performed before.

We actually haven't performed together live. I invited him to perform on one of the songs on my last album and we did this song that was an anthem for peace. He is very much an advocate for peace and human rights, so that was a perfect fit. It will be great to have him there. This is our first live performance together, which is very exciting!

I'm interested in hearing a bit more about your personal mission as a musician and your work in general. I've listened to the songs on your site and it seems like there's always been a humanitarian aspect to each one. Was this always something that spoke to you?

I think from a very young age, I was very sensitive to other people's reality. Though I myself did not face any hardship growing up, for example, I wasn't subject to war; I was still very aware that war, poverty and violence exist. That's always stayed with me. My music is for the people and to help people. That's the biggest purpose I can have -- to help and heal other people. Whether it is to make people aware of action that needs to be taken, like standing up against genocide or helping impoverished people, or make them aware of another issue. We forget about these things because of our daily lives and the luxuries we have. For us it's reality, but for someone else it's so far away from reality. The purpose of my music is to uplift the human spirit and to influence people to help others. I get inspired to write songs by putting myself in the situation of someone who needs their voice to be heard. When you meet an artist who the primary purpose of their work is humanitarian, I would say it comes with some de-commercialization. I'm not a pop artist, but my music has a strong message. In all my performances I talk about the importance of peace and being kind to ourselves and others. I like to remind people how lucky we are, and I think that only emphasizes our responsibility to be aware of other people who are not so lucky.

So you represent Jordan annually on United Nations' World Peace Day and are indeed, the "Musical Ambassador." What does that entail?

It's a privilege to represent my country. I'm very proud to be Jordanian and to represent a country that stands for a lot of good things. It's a peaceful country. It's also very appropriate that I am the musical Ambassador because I am always abroad and traveling! In fact, this year we are doing a music video for Peace Day, with Peace Day Philly and working with other organizations and groups that stand for peace.

I read an article recently that said we need to stop talking about peace, and start talking about collaboration. What role do you think the arts can play as a tool for helping to build bridges between conflicting communities?

I agree that the word peace has been over-used. Yes, you have to have peace within yourself, not just as a community, country, and world, but there needs to be more strategic talks about how to get to peace, instead of just using the word as a poster child for what should happen. Peace is something that needs to be worked on, it cannot just be preached. Speaking of an artist's role, artists are speaking up more and more for what they believe in and that's important. People listen to artists, and indeed artists have shaped public opinion and moved people to take action. The arts go deeper into a person and can make them feel something that they might not have felt with just words. When I was living in Boston, Berklee College of Music made me the "poster child" for the campaign against the genocide in Darfur. I was there at every rally and every talk. I noticed that the speakers would talk about the situation and people would sit and listen. You could feel they understood. Then I would come on and play my music and you could feel it go to a deeper place, where their realization of what was happening touched them on an

emotional level. Some people would cry. I feel a personal need to speak up, especially for injustice. I see that as my responsibility. Whether I will get criticized for that, or even misunderstood, that's fine, but I have to stand up for what I believe in. Artists need to stand up for people whose voice is not being heard.

That's really beautiful, and you're right artists, especially Western artists, are often in a position to speak up.

Right, absolutely. Artists can be admired and if you have someone you admire voicing something that's important to them, you're more likely to listen. I firmly believe that is part of our role. It's a responsibility that comes with the job. We're not just here to entertain. Our talent is a gift, and it's to be shared, to uplift the human spirit, and also to help and provide a voice to people who need to be heard.

I think sometimes when we talk about international conflicts, people often feel like "what can one person do?" What would you say to that?

I would say that by being tolerant, you are serving your purpose. I believe most conflict in the world likely comes from seeing yourself as separate from the 'other.' Once you see yourself as separate, you can justify demonizing the 'other,' and that's the big problem. Instead of focusing on what divides us, I think people should remember that in many ways, they are the 'other' person. Be aware that you can't solve violence with violence, war with war. Throughout history, people have claimed to be 'right' so the other side is 'wrong.' This fixation on being 'right' has destroyed civilizations. We need to be more open and listen to other opinions. We should challenge ourselves to be kind to others no matter who they are or where they come from. I am looking at the region I grew up in and it's being burnt to ashes and I think to myself 'How did we get here?' The most important thing is to go through life without causing harm and to just 'do good.' I say that to myself every day: 'just do good.'

That's very empowering.

Yes, I feel like that's how we all grow. I know that's how I grow! I don't want the same all the time, I want the 'other.' We all can learn from different cultures. One of the most surprising things in my life was when I toured India last year. I felt so at home. I had never been there, didn't speak the language, and I felt absolutely at home.

Why is that?

Well, it's because the people are very open and accepting and there's a lot of peace there. Yes, it's a poor country, but they're free of judgments, free of materialistic desires. They may even see us as the poor ones. If I were to look at India as the 'other' I never would have gone, but I went and fell in love with it as if it were my own country!

At Intercultural Journeys we really feel that education is a key component to building bridges between cultures and that the arts help us provide a way of doing that.

Yes, the arts can aid in teaching tolerance, among other things. You may be playing with people who are from different backgrounds, it could even be that your countries are at war, but the music you make is beautiful. You may not talk to each other after, but you can sit down together and make music. That is the first step.

Have you ever witnessed a moment or event where music served as a connector?

Well, yes, in each of my concerts, so you could say there are too many to count! I have the opportunity to play with people all around the world, and each person brings new things. Each artist brings their own energy and culture and I feel like every concert serves as a connector in some way.

You are the first concert in our season, *Songs for Peace*, in our new home at International House Philadelphia, which has a mission similar to our own. What does that mean to you as a musician to be a part of this season?

It's a big honor. My songs are for peace, and I stand for peace. So to open a music series with this theme is an honor.

Aside from our concert in October, where else can people see you?

My album *Dunya*, which means 'world' in many languages, just came out. We'll be performing works from *Dunya* and will have copies available for sale. September 10, 2014, we'll be performing at the Kennedy Center for the TEDMED conference, they are naming me a Global Humanitarian Musician. While we're in Washington, D.C. we'll also be performing at the Library of Congress. September 21, 2014 the music video for Peace Day will come out. We'll also be in the Austin World Music Festival, WOBEON.

See Farah Siraj, her band, and spiritchild perform at International House Philadelphia, October 10 at 7:30pm. Tickets can be purchased by calling the International House box office at 215.387.5125 or by going online to: <http://ihousephilly.org/calendar/farah-siraj-and-the-arabian-jazz-project-with-special-guest-spiritchild>