



Topic: An exclusive interview with the Jazz guitarist Mr. Michel Sajrawy

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Omar Faqir

Mr. Michel Sajrawy, a musician and a composer, who was able to create a solid step in the world of Jazz in the Middle East. Passionate, sensitive, and creative – those qualities are perfectly reflected on his music. His attachment to his Oriental character and his follow up on music in the world gave his music originality and charisma...the following is the interview with Michel

1- Would you tell us how you were introduced to Jazz and the guitar?

In 1995 when I moved to London – England, to study at the Musicians Institute, I was introduced for the first time to Jazz. It interested and still interests me. Regarding the guitar in general, I was introduced to it from an early age; when I was a kid, I went to a private Catholic school in Nazareth, The Terra Santa School, where students used to set up a stage and play music. They played western instruments like the guitar, bass, keyboards and drums during our lunch breaks, almost every day during springtime. The guitar attracted me the most. At the age of nine, my parents encouraged me and bought me an acoustic guitar, and I started taking up guitar lessons immediately at the local music institute in Nazareth.

2- Who were your main influence/s and how did they influence you?

The following are my main influences: Arab-Turkish music, Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Yngwie J Malmsteen, Steve Vai, Iron Maiden, Dream Theatre, Bela Bartok, Arnold Schoenberg, John Zorn, Pat Martino, Pat Metheny, Mike Stern, John Scofield, Munir Bashir and Lebanese pop. All these different people and genres influenced my music in different ways, rhythmically, melodically, emotionally and spiritually.

3- Can you tell us in brief about the role of the guitar instrument in Jazz music?

In Jazz, the guitar is used for comping chord changes and soloing.

4- How would you describe Jazz musicians' contribution to Jazz scene in the Middle East?

I don't think that there is yet a Jazz scene in the Middle East, perhaps there are some places here and there where live Jazz events take place, a few Jazz musicians, but you wouldn't call it a Jazz scene. It will take time to establish such a thing in the Middle East. It entails a great deal of investment in social education, arts and humanity in order to create a Jazz scene here. This process is political in nature insofar that the American culture needs to be established in this part of the world too. This will be part of the so-called "New Middle East".

5- What are the hardships you are facing as a Jazz musician from the Middle East?

The hardship mainly that geographically I'm outside the scene, there is a strong market for jazz in Europe but it costs a lot for the ordinary club to fly you with your band, unless you go for a festival with that kind of budget.. covering travel expenses.

6- Do you think that the Middle Eastern Jazz musicians can create a new genre for Jazz?

I'm sure they can, jazz is a form of art, and art is human. It is to a great extent related to the geographical area from which the artist comes. We have a strong, deep and very rich Arabic – Islamic culture in the Middle East, which jazz musicians should be rooted to in order to create a new sound for Jazz.

7- Would you tell us about your "Sajrawy – Afif" Jazz project and its importance?

The Sajrawy–Afif Project has made it possible for Rony Afif, Elie Afif and I to meet and work together despite the political boundaries in the Middle East. It is a political statement.. When you combine a Palestinian guitarist with two Lebanese musicians.. At first I met Rony on Myspace, where Rony suggested that his brother Elie Afif be the bassist in this project, and so it was. After a while, I wrote new compositions for this trio taking into account the common geographical area we live in and the cultural background that the three of us share.

The Jordan Festival as of 2009 was the first opportunity for us to meet and try out the "new tunes" of Rony and me. Communication, listening and mutual respect arose right from the first rehearsal. The third rehearsal took place in a

studio in Amman, Haytham Kawar Studio, where we managed to record our first demos. The festival gig was a success on the following day, with an attendance of a vibrant and warm audience. You can visit our page at:
www.myspace.com/sajrawyafiftrio

8- Do you think that Middle Eastern Jazz musicians are being put in the dark? Why?

I don't think that Middle Eastern Jazz musicians are being put in the dark. In my last visit to Amman I was amazed at how good the young Jazz musicians were. When you have the resources on the internet how could you be put in the dark unless you choose to? However, from a political point of view, I think that there is a kind of darkness placed upon our fabulous culture, as an attempt to report only the bad news about us to the West.

9- What would you ask professional Jazz musicians from all around the world?

I would like to collaborate and work with different musicians from all over the world. I would say: "let's meet, play together and find what is common between us."

10- What is your advice/s for young Jazz guitarists?

There are a lot of entries to Jazz and different ways for self-expression. You don't have to start from Charlie Christian if you feel you don't like his music. Perhaps, at first, you will be attracted to contemporary guitarists, then you will go back in history and discover the beauty of Charlie Christian. I would say, follow your passion, don't just listen to jazz.. play things that you love to play, practice every day, research, learn Jazz lines from the great Jazz guitarists, get a chords dictionary, work on your vocabulary every day and learn it very well, remember that the more you know the freer you are; and one last thing to say is stick with the right people.

For more information about Mr. Sajrawy and The "Sajrawy-Afif" project please visit:

www.michelsajrawy.com

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