



## The sound of the desert comes to the UK

As Iraqi musician Yair Dalal prepares for a series of events in London in September, **Danielle Goldstein** speaks to him about his life in song. Photography **Shmulik Balmas**

**T**his September, as the Jewish Music Institute's summer programme comes to a close, the organisation will be bringing a distinctively Middle Eastern influence to London and his name is Yair Dalal. Born in Haifa, Israel, 61 years ago to Iraqi Jewish parents – who emigrated from Baghdad a year before he was born – Dalal now injects much of his

heritage into his music. Utilising the oud, violin and vocals, he describes his sound as a combination of his “spirit and interests”, weaving Middle Eastern, Jewish, Arabic, Indian and Balkan music with the blues and what he calls the essence of the desert.

“I started to love music very early,” he explains. “I remember being three years old and trying to put these heavy records on my father’s old gramophone – an old Master’s Voice one, I still have it. My parents used to take me to parties of Jewish Iraqis in Ramat Gan near Tel Aviv and I fell in love with the sound of the violin. So I asked my parents to teach me and when I was six I started to play the violin.”

It wasn’t until Dalal was 22 that he decided to add the oud to his repertoire, but his approach to that was somewhat less straightforward. “I was looking for another instrument and I tried to play guitar, but I didn’t succeed. It was very hard for me. I knew the oud from before because I had seen it in the hands of the visiting musicians from Iraq, so I tried that and I liked it very much.”

Despite an early introduction to music, Dalal didn’t pursue a dedicated career as a musician until he was 40, instead spending his formative years as a ranger at Ein Gedi nature reserve in the Dead Sea region of Israel. There he worked as a tour guide, as well as tending the natural surrounds and the animals. He enthuses distractedly about his time there when we discuss it: “You know we used to have leopards in the desert? Not any more, unfortunately, but I was lucky enough to take part in research about them while I was there and it was fascinating. It is a very beautiful place.”

To say that his time at Ein Gedi inspired his music would be an understatement according to Dalal. “It has influenced me more than I know myself,” he admits. “Some of my songs I composed in the desert and some names of the tunes come from the [influence of the] desert, like ‘Nature Phenomena’.”

After Ein Gedi, Dalal’s path to professional music began. He joined kibbutz Samar in the Arava desert – which he professes is his favourite place – as a music teacher in the high school, and when he wasn’t teaching, he would muck in with village chores, including milking cows and working in the fields. “My goal is to go back to the kibbutz after many years of being outside the community,” he reveals, “and to establish a centre for music and peace. Maybe next year... We’ve started work on it already.”



Yair on violin and (left) displaying his versatility with the oud on camelback in the Israeli desert

The centre that Dalal is referring to – aptly named Music Centre for Peace – is a one-of-a-kind project that aims to connect music study with agricultural work and life in the cooperative kibbutz. Students at the centre (aged 20 and upwards) will learn both Eastern and Western music, and the theory and history behind them, as well as taking in instrument and vocal lessons.

Promoting peace has always played a huge role in Dalal’s life. In 2005 he released an album called *Inshallah Shalom* – ‘inshallah’ meaning ‘God willing’ in Arabic and ‘shalom’ of course translating to ‘peace’ in Hebrew – aiming to nurture links between Arabs and Israelis with each track. He also put on a gig in Milwaukee, Wisconsin last year called Concert for Peace, which featured him alongside one of his former students, Israeli Arab guitarist and singer Mira Awad; and he has worked with the Shani Choir, an all-female group of Jews and Arabs, aged 13 to 19, of Christian, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds.

Of his own faith Dalal explains that he did not grow up in a strict Jewish family – “we are Jews, but we are not Orthodox, we are very liberal” – yet it has always been important to him to maintain Jewish musical customs in his songs. “I come from a Mizrahi family,” he tells us, “and I realised that if I did not play the traditional music then it would get lost. Just like that! The musicians who chose to play it have passed away, but before they passed I did everything I could to learn from them. Nowadays there are a lot of people doing it, but when I started almost nobody picked up Mizrahi or Sephardi music.”

So far in his 20-year music career Dalal has made an impressive 12 albums, all of which feature Jewish themes. His 2011 record *And You Love*, for instance,

incorporates ancient rabbinical texts alongside modern poetry. Most recently, in 2014 he put out a collaborative LP, *Lullabies from Exile*, which he created with Canadian composer Lenka Lichtenberg, about the intertwining of Babylonian and Yiddish traditional music. And in 2012 he released another collaboration, *Israel in Egypt*, this time with German conductor Werner Ehrhardt and the Tölzer Boys’ Choir, which is an adaptation of Handel’s 1783 biblical oratorio about the story of the Exodus. In this particular project Ehrhardt and Dalal enfolded the original music of Handel with elements of the Passover Haggadah and the Sufi Arabic Quran.

On his trip to London in September, you can hear Dalal perform and talk about his life, work and beliefs when he drops in on the Jewish Museum (7 Sep) as part of their exhibition and event series *Sephardi Voices*. Alongside this he’ll be hosting a masterclass at SOAS (11 Sep) about Mizrahi instrumentation, contemporary concert music in Israel and his own work. “I like teaching very much. I can’t see myself playing without teaching,” he points out. “When you teach somebody, sometimes they have ideas that you never even thought about and that, in a way, is a gift.” And while he’s in the UK he will also be reuniting with Guy Schalom and the Baladi Blues Ensemble at the annual festival *Klezmer in the Park: The Big Mix* (10 Sep). Dalal first met Schalom in Israel and performed last year with *Baladi Blues* in Cambridge, where, he describes, the band shared an intense energy. “We didn’t even rehearse! It was magic.” Don’t miss the chance to get a glimpse of the magic. ■

For further info see *What’s Happening*, pp55, 59, and visit [jmi.org.uk/events](http://jmi.org.uk/events) to book tickets. To learn more about the Music Centre for Peace, head to [musiccenterforpeace.com](http://musiccenterforpeace.com).

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