Amir ElSaffar and Rivers of Sound
Thursday, February 8, 2018
7:30 pm

Part of
EMBRACING COMPLEXITY

Photo: Alice Gebura, courtesy of Walker Art Center

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Amir ElSaffar
and Rivers of Sound

AMIR ELSAFFAR
SANTUR, VOCAL, TRUMPET

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DRUMS

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BUZUG

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OUD, VOCAL

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OBOE, ENGLISH HORN

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MILES OKAZAKI
ELECTRIC GUITAR

ARUÁN ORTIZ
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AMIR ELSAFFAR

Trumpeter, santur player, vocalist, and composer Amir ElSaffar has distinguished himself with a mastery of diverse musical traditions and a singular approach to combining Middle Eastern musical languages with jazz and other styles of contemporary music. A recipient of the 2013 Doris Duke Performing Artists Award, ElSaffar has been described as “uniquely poised to reconcile jazz and Arabic music without doing either harm,” (The Wire) and “one of the most promising figures in jazz today” (Chicago Tribune).

ElSaffar is an expert trumpeter with a classical background, conversant not only in the language of contemporary jazz, but who has created techniques to play microtones and ornaments idiomatic to Arabic music that are not typically heard on the trumpet. Additionally, he is a purveyor of the centuries old, now endangered, Iraqi maqam tradition, which he performs actively as a vocalist and santur player. As a composer, ElSaffar has used the microtones found in maqam music to create an innovative approach to harmony and melody. Described as “an imaginative bandleader, expanding the vocabulary of the trumpet and at the same time the modern jazz ensemble,” (All About Jazz), ElSaffar is an important voice in an age of cross-cultural music making.

Born near Chicago in 1977 to an Iraqi immigrant father and an American mother, ElSaffar was drawn to music at a young age, listening incessantly to LPs from his father’s collection, which included Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and The Blues Brothers soundtrack. His first musical training was at the age of five, singing in a Lutheran church choir at the school he attended. His mother, an avid lover of music, introduced him to the music of Bach and Haydn, and taught him to sing and play American folk songs on ukulele and guitar. ElSaffar eventually found his calling with the trumpet in his early teens.

Chicago offered many opportunities for the young trumpeter: he attended DePaul University, earning a degree in classical trumpet, and had the opportunity to study with the legendary principal trumpeter of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Bud Herseth. As a trumpeter of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, ElSaffar worked with esteemed conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Mstislav Rostropovich, and Daniel Barenboim, and recorded on the latter’s 1999 Teldec release Tribute to Ellington with members of the Chicago Symphony and Don Byron. Additionally, ElSaffar gained experience playing regularly in Chicago’s blues, jazz, and salsa clubs.

He moved to New York at the turn of the century where he performed in the ensembles of jazz legend Cecil Taylor. He also performed with Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, who were in the early stages of their careers. The three drew upon their ancestral background in an effort to forge a new sound.

ElSaffar gradually found himself drawn to the musical heritage of his father’s

Maqam: in music of the Middle East and parts of North Africa, a set of pitches and of characteristic melodic elements, or motifs, and a traditional pattern of their use. Maqam is the principal melodic concept in Middle Eastern musical thought and practice.

Source: Brittanica.com
native country: Iraq. In 2001, after winning the Carmine Caruso Jazz Trumpet Competition, he funded a trip to Baghdad to find and study with the few surviving masters of the Iraqi maqam. Some were still in Baghdad, but he discovered that most had left the country. He spent the next five years pursuing these masters across the Middle East and Europe, learning everything he could about the tradition. During this period he learned to speak Arabic, sing maqam, and play the santur. His main teacher during this period was vocalist Hamid Al-Saadi, currently the only living person who has mastered the entire Baghdad maqam tradition.

In 2006, ElSaffar founded Safaafir, the only ensemble in the US performing Iraqi maqam in its traditional format. Later the same year, ElSaffar received commissions from the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia and from the Festival of New Trumpet Music (FONT), to compose Two Rivers, a suite invoking Iraqi musical traditions framed in a modern jazz setting. ElSaffar has since received commissions from the Jazz Institute of Chicago (2008), the Jerome Foundation (2009), Chamber Music America (2009), Present Music (2010), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013), The Newport Jazz Festival (2013), Morgenland Festival (2013), and the Royaumont Foundation (2014), creating works integrating Middle Eastern tonalities and rhythms into contemporary contexts.

In addition to Rivers of Sound, he currently leads four critically-acclaimed ensembles: Two Rivers, which combines the musical languages and instrumentation of Iraqi maqam and contemporary jazz; the Amir ElSaffar Quintet, performing ElSaffar’s microtonal compositions with standard jazz instrumentation; Safaafir, the only ensemble in the US performing and preserving the Iraqi maqam in its traditional format; and The Alwan Ensemble, the resident ensemble of Alwan for the Arts, specializing in classical music from Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq. In addition to Cecil Taylor, he has worked with prominent jazz musicians such as Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway, Marc Ribot, Henry Grimes, and Oliver Lake. ElSaffar has appeared on numerous recordings, and has released six under his own name: Maqams of Baghdad (2005), Two Rivers (2007), Radif Suite (2010), Inana (2011), Alchemy (2013), and Crisis (2015).

RIVERS OF SOUND

Rivers of Sound presents 17 musicians from a broad spectrum of traditions, from Iraqi maqam to American jazz. Using resonance as its governing principle, the music incorporates elements of maqam modal music of the Middle East with jazz and other contemporary musical practices to create a unique microtonal musical environment that moves beyond the notions of style and tradition into a realm of uninhibited musical communication. As pitches and rhythms become fluid, so do cultural boundaries: elements that traditionally divide musicians and genre-specific modes are re-contextualized in a fresh transcultural soundscape.
In March of 1956, the Dizzy Gillespie Band began a concert tour of the Middle East and Southern Europe, the first in a series government-funded jazz tours during the Cold War. Through concerts in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Pakistan, Gillespie's band was to promote capitalism and American culture within the at-risk countries of the Muslim world. The success of this initial outing led to subsequent Middle Eastern tours by the Dave Brubeck Quartet in 1958 and the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1963. Dubbed the “Jazz Ambassadors” program, the project further sent jazz musicians—notably, Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman—throughout the world as a means of preventative cultural diplomacy. Though a product of the State Department’s counter-Communism policies, the tours, for the musicians themselves, were opportunities for the expansion of American jazz and transnational cultural exchange. Gillespie boldly expressed his own humanistic enthusiasm for the endeavor in a mid-tour telegraph claiming that jazz “communicates with all peoples regardless of language or social barriers.” This ideological discrepancy between the policymakers and their recruited musicians was later expressed in Dave Brubeck’s “Cultural Exchange,” a satirical song from the 1962 album The Real Ambassadors and a critique of the government’s propagandistic intentions for the tours. “No commodity is quite so strange,” wrote the song’s lyricist Lola Brubeck, “as this thing we call cultural exchange.”

More than an outcome of politically-motivated concert tours, however, the cultural influence of music from the Middle East and the larger Muslim world began to permeate sonic aesthetics of American jazz in the 1950s and ‘60s. Historian Christopher W. Chase cites the forward-moving nature of post-bop jazz and a widespread adoption of Islamic ideals by some of its African-American practitioners as catalysts in the emergence of a spiritually prophetic context for jazz. Moreover, Chase writes that, for many of these otherwise-oppressed musicians, “Islam has served to forge an audial soundscape of a global, race-neutral unity—the Islamic ummah [or community].” As such, converted musicians Art Blakey, whose famous Jazz Messengers arose from an exclusively Muslim ensemble called the Seventeen Messengers, and Yusef Lateef, a proponent of Eastern instruments, adopted modal and introspective improvisational aesthetics from eastern Islamic musics. Though a non-convert,
John Coltrane betrays this musical plurality in *A Love Supreme* (1965). A notably spiritual undertaking, the album features a printed message from Coltrane himself in which he states that “ALL PRAISE BE TO GOD TO WHOM ALL IS DUE,” and further includes allusions to both the Christian Gospel of Matthew and the Islamic Basmala (or Qur’anic blessings). In the opening movement, a repeated chant of the album’s title seemingly blurs into “Allah supreme,” a recurring mantra and musical motif that bears a striking resemblance to a recitation of the Dhikr (or Islamic devotional “remembrance”).

Much like his aforementioned predecessors in jazz, trumpeter Amir ElSaffar draws upon Middle Eastern traditions. The son of an Iraqi immigrant, ElSaffar was born in Chicago and studied classical trumpet at DePaul University. His subsequent career included a position in Chicago’s Civic Orchestra and an active presence as a jazz musician in New York City. In 2001, ElSaffar travelled to Baghdad to pursue mentorship in the Iraqi maqam (or “place”) tradition, a venture that spanned five years. Primarily a vocal practice based upon roughly one hundred distinct melodies, the maqam tradition was originally used in prayer calls and Qur’anic recitation. The melodies, often expanded seven-note sequences, are led by qari’ (or reciter), and, similar to common performance practices for jazz musicians, performers are expected to elaborate upon maqam melodies using methods of ornamentation and improvisation. This is done, however, within a rhythmically free structure and without a fixed harmonic accompaniment. With this extensive training in Iraqi music traditions, ElSaffar, also a practiced santur (or hammered dulcimer) player, leads the maqam-dedicated Safaafir ensemble and holds a directorship position for Columbia University’s Middle Eastern Music Ensemble.

ElSaffar’s Rivers of Sound Ensemble is the product of his jazz background and knowledge of maqam. Stressing a sonic unity between American jazz and Iraqi traditions, ElSaffar notes that his compositions are “about fluidity: sounds flow into one another.” Indeed, with an ensemble of seventeen musicians and an instrumentation that includes both Western (saxophone, trumpet, strings, and double-reeds) and Arabic (oud, buzuz, and santur) instruments, ElSaffar’s writing largely overlaps seemingly disparate musical features of the two traditions. The compositions, marked by structured individual and group improvisations, utilize the modal system and established melodies of the maqam. The musicians further employ the tradition’s elaborate and often microtonal ornamentations. Also backed by a jazz-based rhythmic profile, the melodies and improvisations evoke a collective, freely imagined sonic landscape, a hallmark of meditative post-bop jazz. Within this formula, the group’s notably diverse body of musicians—hailing from Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas—engage in perpetual exchanges of musical thoughts that expand upon the included musical practices. Ultimately, the interest in cultural exchange between jazz and the Middle East, a recurrent ambition among American musicians since the mid-century, continues with the Rivers of Sound Ensemble, a much-needed sentiment in times of polarizing isolationism.

C.A. Norling, University of Iowa
“Embracing Complexity” Research Fellow
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Basic information:
Matt Cannida-Shelby. Sophomore from Evanston, IL majoring in human physiology.

What is your position at Hancher?
Stagehand. I really like working the stage door and helping with load in. Doing both of those things allows me to see all the equipment and any cool performers that come by!

How long have you worked at Hancher?
I have worked here since fall semester.

What is your favorite part about Hancher?
How close we get to be to the action. The president of the University of Iowa came for a graduation and it was really cool to talk with him for a bit.

Do you have any favorite Hancher show you’ve worked or attended?
The Leslie Odom Jr. show was amazing! It was my favorite show because his voice is so beautiful and all I had to do was stand there and listen.

Do you have a favorite spot in Iowa City?
Downtown by the colorful benches.

Do you have any favorite TV shows, movies, bands, or books?
My favorite movie is The Blind Side, my favorite show is The Simpsons, and my favorite type of music is rap or country.

Do you have any favorite classes you’ve taken at the University of Iowa?
I really liked my classical mythology class because it was something I’d never seen before and I enjoyed hearing about how much media content has to do with classical myths.

What are your eventual career goals? How does working at Hancher help you achieve those goals?
[My goal is to be] an obstetrician/gynecologist. [My job at Hancher] helps me pay for stuff.
Bassem Youssef

Saturday, April 7, 7:30 pm
The Auditorium, Hadley Stage

Presented by Hancher and Mission Creek Festival

From 2011 to 2014, Bassem Youssef hosted the satirical news program Al-Bernameg (The Show) in Egypt, earning a reputation as that country’s Jon Stewart. Named one of Time magazine’s “100 Most Influential People in the World” in 2013, the physician turned comedian and critic now lives in the United States where he continues to shine a light on global issues with thoughtful, hilarious commentary.

“Youssef, a blue-eyed prankster with a fierce intellect, embodied the verve and defiance of a protest movement that arose from decades of authoritarian corruption. An impeccably tailored mercurial antagonist, Youssef, who was tear-gassed during protests in Tahrir Square, sang and danced, and tossed out one-liners at those in charge.” – Los Angeles Times

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Photo: A-Bernameg
LOOKING BAC: FERDINAND BAC, 1859-1952

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Ferdinand Bac (French, 1859–1952), What are you looking for in the sky, crazy old man?, c. 1950, ink on paper, Collection of Madame Sylviane Jullian

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Here is a look back at Hancher’s events so far this season exploring and celebrating Islamic art and Muslim artists.

Photos: Miriam Alarcón Avila

1. KJ Sanchez
   September 7, 2017
   Strauss Hall

2. Eid al-Adha Dinner
   UI Muslim Student Association
   September 9, 2017
   Stanley Café
3 Niyaz dance workshop
   September 29, 2017
   Mann Elementary School

4 Lunch with Niyaz
   Technology in Music
   September 29, 2017
   Iowa Memorial Union

5 Niyaz
   The Fourth Light Project
   September 30, 2017
   Hancher Auditorium
6. G. Willow Wilson  
Comic book signing  
October 8, 2017  
Daydreams Comics

7. G. Willow Wilson  
A Superhero for Generation Why  
October 8, 2017  
Hancher Auditorium

8. G. Willow Wilson  
Q&A at UI Teacher Leader Center  
October 8, 2017  
Hancher Auditorium
EMBRACING COMPLEXITY
Upcoming Events in Spring 2018:

THEATER | STORYTELLING

Feathers of Fire: A Persian Epic
Wednesday, April 4, 7:30 pm
The Auditorium, Hadley Stage

COMEDY

Bassem Youssef
Part of Mission Creek Festival
Saturday, April 7, 7:30 pm
The Auditorium, Hadley Stage

THEATER | STORYTELLING

Reading: Muslims in Iowa
Tuesday, April 10, 7:00 pm
Strauss Hall
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Friday, May 25, 6:30 to 9:30 pm
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