

Snapshots of Chicago's global music scene

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Try talking "world music" to Chicago's world musicians--Nicolae Feraru, a Romanian Gypsy who plays cymballon, or the amateur bands that light up Pilsen with rock en Espanol on weekend nights--and you get a similar response.

Their eyes sort of glaze over.

Call the music what you want. They just want to talk about their music. Where it comes from. Why they play. Where the music is going from here.

Just about every immigrant community and ethnic neighborhood in Chicago has musicians who perform music in smaller venues and as part of music scenes overlooked by the rest of the city.

The Friday section is profiling just a few of them, keeping in mind that a story about world music in Chicago is going to be just as inadequate as the label. Here are the stories of three area musicians and their gigs.

Issa Boulos at University of Chicago

Braving a cold fog, concert-goers streamed into Breasted Hall on the University of Chicago campus on a recent Friday evening, and kept coming--scruffy college students, older, symphony-going types--until every one of the 250-odd seats in the auditorium in the Oriental Institute was taken.

The concert that night was a performance by the university's Middle East Music Ensemble, directed by Issa Boulos. Not a name that screams "sold-out show"--at least not to an audience unfamiliar with Middle Eastern music.

Boulos, a music lecturer at U. of C. as well as a musician and a resident of Hyde Park, is a composer of Arab classical and contemporary music and oud player (the oud is an ancient hand-held stringed instrument, the predecessor of the lute).

As much as any musician in Chicago, Boulos most comfortably inhabits the role of "world musician." Musicians from all over the world come to play with him.

Boulos was born in Jerusalem in 1968 and grew up in the West Bank. He had an early love of music, he said, and was forever making up tunes inside his head. His father was a singer and his uncle a noted violinist. He studied music at the Institute of Fine Arts in Ramallah and became the director of several groups by

his early 20s, including al-Funoun (the name translates as "the arts"), an 80-member music and dance group that put on concerts all over the world.

In the late 1980s, Boulos spent more and more time in Chicago, where he has family ties, and away from his troubled homeland. He studied music at Columbia College and became a U.S. citizen in 1995.

But he is not easy to tie down with simple descriptions. Boulos doesn't have much to do with Chicago's Arab community, or they with him. Despite his notoriety, his fellow expatriates rarely come out to see him play.

"I'm really not where they're at," he said.

The Middle East Music Ensemble concert at U. of C. consisted of two hours of music, played by a rotating cast of dozens of musicians, singers and guest soloists.

Boulos led the orchestra from the edge of stage left, half-facing the audience. He offered no introduction before launching into the first piece, a modern composition from Tunisia.

From the first note, the music presented itself as something different. Despite relying on violins and a few other familiar instruments, it bore faint resemblance to more traditional Western classical music, the music rising and falling in ever more complicated patterns until the audience was swept along in its wake.

Classical Arab music is very different from Bach and Beethoven, Boulos said. It's "monophonic," meaning that unlike the layering of harmonies by Western symphonies, every musician on stage follows at once the same melody.

And there are hundreds more notes to play. The traditional Middle Eastern music system is called "maqam," which has scales, like the West's major and minor keys, only with 300 to choose from.

Under Boulos' direction, the instruments do not overwhelm each other, but follow the path with a single, intricate sound.

His audience--to be sure--was a little on the scholarly side, the sort that might turn out to hear a campus ensemble. But there wasn't a dull, stuffy moment to be heard.

Boulos only performs a few times a year, sometimes with the ensemble, sometimes with his group al-Sharq and sometimes with the Issa Boulos Quartet, that blends Arab music with jazz. A typical Quartet concert turns the music into a series of stories, told around a campfire of candles.

"Some people out there are really seeking to experience music differently," he said, "unlike what they'd hear every day on the radio or in a nightclub."

Middle Eastern

"The Greater Mysteries: A Pastiche": 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Rockefeller Memorial Chapel at University of Chicago, 5850 S. Woodlawn Ave.: Giant puppets, music and dance enliven the ancient tale from the cosmic section of Genesis. Performers include Melissa Thodos and Dancers and their choreographer Paul Christiano; the Middle East Music Ensemble, arranged by Issa Boulos; and others.

Issa Boulos with the Chicago Immigrant Orchestra: 3:30 p.m. July 18, Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park.

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