

## Dhafer Youssef

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Late junction (BBC) presenter Fiona Talkington explains how an exceptional young Tunisian musician found his creative home in Europe.

{tab=Biography}

A small seaside town in Tunisia in the 1970s. A boy walks along a deserted shoreline picking up the odds and ends he finds lying around: A broken fishing net; a few discarded sardine cans; spokes from an old bicycle. His heart and mind are full of music and he wants to play. It's as much as his father can do to put food on the table for Dhafer and his seven brothers and sisters. There certainly isn't spare money for music lessons, let alone for an instrument. So Dhafer makes his own oud, the traditional middle-Eastern lute, using whatever he can find.

You've only got to listen to the achingly beautiful first minute or so of Dhafer Youssef's last album Digital Prophecy to hear how the passion for music, born in that small Tunisian town, still lives on.

The young Dhafer did what was expected of him and sang, having learnt at the traditional Koran school, but at the same time, he was hearing music on the radio - the only source of entertainment in this small town. "It was just music. That's all I knew" says Dhafer "I didn't know what was classical what was jazz and so on. Just music..." And so, on his homemade oud, Dhafer taught himself to play by ear.

One day a friend came back from his travels with an electric guitar and a small toy one for his young nephew. Dhafer borrowed the toy for a week, at the same time secretly yearning to get his hands on the proper instrument. Eventually his friend began to lend it to him for a few days at a time: "days when I didn't sleep, the time was too precious. I just played."

As he began to earn money by singing at weddings, he saved enough to buy his first 'real' oud for the equivalent of 100 Euros. This was frowned on by friends and family. "God's given you a voice, you've got to sing."

But Dhafer had fallen in love with the sound of the instrument. It was the sound of his roots, the country where he was born. "If I'd been born in Africa I'd have been a drummer. In New York- a sax player. But I was born in Tunisia -I play the oud. If I'd been brought up near a piano maybe I'd have played that, but actually I didn't even see my first piano until I went to Vienna when I was 19."

Vienna lured him with the promise of the opportunity to study music. "I did anything I could to earn money. I washed dishes, cleaned

windows, worked as an Italian waiter even though I wasn't Italian. I did anything I could just to keep the music going. But I still couldn't read music. I went to listen to lots of music: jazz, classical, anything. And I met a viola player Tony Burger who patiently helped me to write my music down, and we would just play together for hours. Then I met the tabla player Jatinder Thakur who really got me into Indian music. This was a BIG discovery. I fell in love with the sound. It seemed so near to my soul, and I played with him every day. He was at the heart of the first quartet I played with."

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"In Vienna, I was still working to survive. But, I have to say, it was the most beautiful time of my life. It was a dream coming true: I was doing my own music, bringing alive the colours in my soul, playing a lot of theater music with people like accordionist Otto Lechner."

"Then along came an amazing opportunity. The Jazz club Porgy and Bess in Vienna would give a musician carte blanche to do what they liked, one night a month for the next twelve months. A new project every month. I could invite anyone I wanted to play with me so I just thought: 'why not?' and asked so many people I admired from all over the world: Iva Bittova, Peter Herbert, Renaud Garcia Fons and Christian Muthspiel for example."

"It was a huge success and I got to do in nine months what might have taken ten years. I was doing something completely different each month and at every gig, people would come up and ask about the music. Sometimes, things went so well with the musicians that one night at the Porgy and Bess wasn't enough and we'd go into the studio to record. That's how my first album, Malak came about."

"Well, after that, I thought I would go back to Africa in search of my roots, but after a while, I felt that Europe was where my home was. My creativity is in Europe and wherever that is, there is my home. Enja wanted another recording from me and I went to New York for a while and recorded Electric Sufi with a group which included Dieter Ilg, Markus Stockhausen and Doug Wimbish."

The world was beginning to take notice of Dhafer's captivating high vocals and intensity of playing and he considered settling in New York.

"But then came September 11th and I just thought in this troubled world I should return to Paris."

"I began to have more and more contact with Norway and Nils Petter

Molvaer invited me to play with him and the singer Anneli Drecker." This lead eventually to his third album, Digital Prophecy. Here, Dhafer's profoundly spiritual singing and playing become embedded in the Scandinavian, existentialist world of Norwegian music, embodied in the playing of Eivind Aarset on guitar, drummer Rune Arnesen, Bugge Wesseltoft on keyboards and Dieter Ilg on bass, along with the sampling of Jan Bang. "I just love playing with musicians from the North. They are more African than some Africans and they are an inspiration to me."

Dhafer's band consists of the cream of Norway's electronic nu-jazz scene. Eivind Aarset, one of the finest guitarists in the world today, is renowned for the ambient washes and eastern flavoured drones that have featured on the work of Nils Petter Molvaer, Kjetil Bjornstad and for his own band, Electronique Noire. Drummer Rune Arnesen's urgent beats also feature in Molvaer's work and add a distinctive, contemporary drum 'n' bass sensibility ably teamed with the highly in-demand depth charges of bassist Audun Erlie. The line-up is completed by trumpeter Arve Henriksen recipient of one of Norway's Jazz launch Europe awards whose unique style of trumpet playing and vocals is confounding audiences and fellow musicians alike.

"I am the only one who doesn't speak Norwegian!" says Dhafer, "but our gigs together are not about what happens for an hour on stage. These are simply great human beings, and how we are as musicians comes as much from the time we spend hanging around: waiting at airports, traveling together, being on the road, in a bus, sharing good food."

Fiona Talkington - Journalist, DJ and Presenter, Late Junction, BBC Radio 3

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