

# I N T E R V I E W

## UNDER THE OLIVE TREE: SACRED MUSIC OF THE MIDDLE EAST

By FAUN FINLEY

*Yuval Ron is a composer, record producer, teacher and professional musician. In the context of traditional music, he has worked with myriad master musicians, including Omar Faruk Tekbilek and Yair Dalal. His most recent CD is Under the Olive Tree: Sacred Music of the Middle East, with the Yuval Ron Ensemble. The Ensemble is "dedicated to fostering an understanding of Middle Eastern cultures and religion."*

I met with Yuval at his home studio where, with a genuine politeness, he offered me newly brewed mint tea. He poured the chartreuse liquid from a golden yellow pot, reminding me of the magical elixirs I had read about in Jack Vance science fantasy novels. Sweet-smelling incense billowed like misty breath against white walls, and a sacred calm resonated as purely and deeply as sympathetic strings.

My first encounter with Yuval Ron was a serendipitous one. I had just begun a new position as Activities Director for a retirement community whose residents were hungry for culture, and seriously stir crazy. As soon as I walked in the door, they wanted to know when they were getting out the door. They hadn't been offsite in months, which formed my mission: deliver them somewhere spectacular - the sooner the better.

As if divinity had graced my email box, there was a message about a concert designed to cultivate understanding of Middle Eastern cultures as a path to peace. It was March, a time when war with Iraq was still a question being contemplated by the people, rather than a decision made by the government. The program, "Mystical Music of the Middle East," featured traditional instruments such as oud, saz, and zurna. Dancers were also an important ingredient of the show. Joy rose in my heart; I knew this was it - this was "somewhere spectacular."

Yuval, of course, had no idea that my reputation was on his shoulders, yet he and his profoundly talented Ensemble delivered. The residents sat quietly captivated for more than straight two hours, and burst into enthusiastic and unbridled compliments at its conclusion, which did not abate for the entire week. The show transported my spirit as well. Into a place of melodic abundance and beat-filled bliss, I went, far from the world of worry, striving, and perfecting. In the throes of eternal delight, I was both graciously grounded and ecstatically set free.

There would be more intersections with Yuval. The *Mystical Music of the Middle East* concert went beyond music into ethnomusicology. Yuval's introductions of each piece dove into its origins, some known, some theorized, as well as the connections, both culturally and spiritually, among Jewish, Sufi and Christian Armenian traditions. I felt this concert could unite souls beyond any political proclivity. I promised to tell every single person I came into contact with about the music and the message, and I invited him to my retirement community to speak. Now I extend that promise to the folk community at large, and acquaint you with this angel of music behind the oud.

*FF: I know you were born in Israel, but I'm curious as to where you grew up, and in what ways your environment played an influence on you becoming musical.*

**YR: I grew up in New Tel Aviv, a suburb of Tel Aviv. Israel is an intersection of the West and the East. It's always been like that. Growing up**

**there, I could turn on the radio and listen to classical music on one station, and then turn the dial and hear Jimmy Hendrix, and hear jazz, and then hear really good Arabic music, either from Israel or from Lebanon or from Jordan or from Egypt.**

**If I were to go to Jerusalem to visit, just walking in the streets of the old city, you have a church on the one corner and then right next to it there is a mosque, and right next to that there is a synagogue....You hear the sounds of the language, different languages, which, for me, is like music when I listen to language. You hear the prayers echoing from church and the mosque, and the synagogues. I had that exposure since I was really young, and growing up as a teenager. I think really affected my direction without me really knowing and being aware of it at all.**

*FF: How long have you been in the United States? What brought you here?*

**YR: I've been here for 19 years. I came in '85 to Boston to study jazz and film music. When I was a teenager I had a jazz band and I studied jazz...I knew that I'd be going to Berklee College of Music because it was the best well-known jazz school in the world. My teacher at the time studied in Berklee. I wanted to follow his path, and he was the best jazz musician around in Israel.**

*FF: You were a jazz musician! What was your instrument?*

**YR: Guitar - I was a guitarist since I was twelve.**

*FF: So, it is actually a departure for you to do traditional music?*

**YR: It is a departure...though I arrange it in an untraditional way in the sense that I mixed different traditions - the Jewish tradition, the Arabic tradition, or the Christian Armenian tradition, and I do a medley that the traditional people would never do. They will never put one next to another in the same song. But everything else is in its traditional form.**

*FF: When you first embarked on your journey into jazz, did you see yourself as more of a composer or a performer?*

**YR: My first interest in music was in performing. I was not aware of composition and that possibility....Then when I was 19, I started writing for theater just by mistake, just by bumping into theater people and befriending them. They got me into all this adventure and working on Samuel Beckett, Yates, and Shakespeare, and original plays. I started writing music for those plays and playing. I felt this power that there is in music when I write music, when I compose original music. When I came to Boston to study in the jazz school, I changed my direction from being a jazz musician to study composition and film scoring.**

*FF: How did you start with the oud?*

**YR: I've been traveling to the desert again over the last 20 years....In the summers, I would go to the Sinai Desert and I would take my classi-**



**cal guitar with me. I always traveled with my classical guitar, and I would sit around the fires with the Bedouins and play along with them and learn from them. They would play an oud. I always thought that it's kind of clever what I'm doing on the guitar. I'm imitating the oud on the guitar and maybe I'm creating a new sound for the guitar by tuning it lower like the oud. I was really into that, creating technique on the guitar that is not a guitarist's technique. I thought that would bring a new color to the guitar world.**

*FF: ...by shaving off all the frets?*

**YV: Yeah, I was thinking about taking all the frets and to play fretless classical guitar, which few people do, but I played with the Bedouin with a [fretted] classical guitar. Then I got my first oud in the desert. I bought it from a Bedouin. It was unusually hard to get them and finally I found one. I started playing the oud maybe once a year, maybe twice a year, like in a party or when somebody wanted to see some novelty, something different. I would pick up the oud and just play it; I really didn't practice it. Then I thought maybe I'll concentrate on the oud...and I started playing the oud everyday.**

*FF: How long did it take to get good enough for Omar Faruk Tekbilek to invite you to play with him?*

**YR: It took me a couple of years. But, you know, it's really different than starting from scratch.**

*FF: Right, because of the guitar.*

**YR: Yeah. And I have a lot of guitar to thank; I used to be pretty good jazz player back when I was in Berklee. A lot of the left hand fingerings and hammering really helped me on the oud. I have students for the oud, a few that played guitar before, and a few students that never played an instrument before. It's years of difference between the two.**

*FF: When did you first start working with Omar Faruk Tekbilek?*

**YR: I've worked with him as a composer and a producer since 1998. I hired him to play film music that I composed. That's how I met him. He came to the studio to play my music. And then we did two films that I composed and he played. And then he asked me to produce his record *One Truth*.**

**YUVAL RON** *continued from page 3*

That's, by the way, that's how all my learning about Sufism and Sufi music was all these five years since 1998, working with Faruk, and all these projects and spending time with him....It's all coming into my work with my Ensemble....I started feeling that I miss the playing of the music...I realize I'm just envisioning the music and then other people are playing it. I thought if I could just play...it's going to add a lot of happiness to my life. It would just add something that I don't, that I can't get in any other way. The first thought was maybe I'll form like an amateur blues band.

*FF: Blues? I wasn't expecting that one!*

**YR:** It was like the first thought. Maybe we will have like a garage band...just play blues and rock and roll for one afternoon on the weekend, and that would be the release and the fun and the pleasure of playing I'm looking for.

*FF: I know the manager of a great blues bar, maybe I can get you in!*

**YR:** Yeah. See, if I met you back then, maybe that's what I would end up doing.

*FF: No one would ever forgive me! But I can see what you mean, composing is more of an abstraction, something you can't quite experience in your body the same way as playing.*

**YR:** Right, right. Playing is really sensual. It's really in your fingers. It's more expressive. It's immediate expression. Composing is expression, too, but it's a strange expression. It's an idea. It takes a long time until you hear it.

*FF: Did you have any notion that the oud would later become your primary performance instrument?*

**YR:** It was not really to perform. I thought it

was just for me to have this half an hour a day where I *make* music. It was about music making, you know, for myself. I'm really grateful to Ruth Goodman, and I'll never forget about it, because she heard me play in a couple of private parties.... It was just informal, where we just sit and have fun, not a professional situation. Ruth was really insistent. She said to me, "You have to do something with this." I thought in the beginning that it seemed to be really crazy and really risky, because I had my name established in film and TV business....I felt that it didn't make sense to launch another career in another arena. Once you start performing professionally, you have to live it professionally. You have to prepare. You really have to be committed to that. I was not, I didn't feel that that's what I wanted to do.

*FF: Are you committed now?*

**YR:** Yeah. Definitely.

*FF: Ruth was also instrumental in catalyzing the Mystical Music of the Middle East concert, asking you to organize a concert as a public prayer in response to the second Intifada that began on the West Bank in May of 2001. It seems like a lot of research had to be done because the concert is more than musical, it also identifies cultural and spiritual intersections. Had you already been involved in that research before Ruth approached you?*

**YR:** Yeah, it's a good question, because, you know, people are not aware of what you're pointing out. I couldn't have done it just suddenly in three months. I actually did it for 20 years just for myself and for my compositional work....In almost every dance piece I did research about ancient forms of music. I studied the music that they wrote for dance a hundred years ago and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was

interested in that. Then I went further back and I researched music of the middle ages, church music from Europe and from central Asia. Then I researched very early Jewish prayers and Arabic prayers. All this research was part of my compositional work.

*FF: Dance is also an integral part of the program. What inspired that decision?*

**YR:** I have a connection to dance from the days that I started working as a composer for choreographers...but like a lot of people, I didn't know that belly dancing is an art. What I knew about belly dancing, like what people usually know, is that they dance in restaurants...and men put dollars in the bra. Suddenly, in concerts of middle eastern musicians, I see they *didn't* have money pushed into their clothing. They *didn't* go down to sit on somebody's lap. It was a whole different way of looking at it. It was more like a folkloric dance, part of the culture....I wanted to include that in our presentation. The goal here really is to make people understand and feel the beauty in the culture of the middle east.

*FF: Do you have a different experience when you play sacred versus secular music.*

**YR:** I think that every music making is sacred....When I play sacred music...like the things that are traditionally considered sacred, meaning prayers of a specific religion, I observe that that we really have to tune ourselves to a voice that is greater than us....We don't just take the instrument and we start playing the song and do it technically, meaning the fingers just go to the places, but rather, you take a breath...it's like a meditation. You clear your mind from all what happened to you before, all the interruptions and all the sound and voices; try to go into a blank space like a vacant place in your mind and your heart. Then you try to feel something inside of you that is going to express itself, and then you start playing that prayer. You connect to something greater than yourself. And then, if you're a great musician, you do the same thing when you play anything.

*FF: Is there a personal value or a particular motivation that underlies all the work that you do, a thread that connects its diversity?*

**YR:** I think that what I try to do is to have intensity, to have drama. I'm not attracted to things that are not captivating, that are just sitting there and they don't call you, they don't engage you. Whatever the style that I do, I try to make it engaging. My way of creating is not by making it necessarily light and funny and easy, but the other way. Engaging us in a way that it's intense and dramatic and deep. I think that you can hear this thread in any of my music that you may listen to, that there's that element.

*The Yuval Ron Ensemble will be performing their Mystical Music of the Middle East program at the Folk Music Center in Claremont on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 7:30pm. This is a very intimate setting, and the last opportunity to experience this amazing concert before it goes to Europe. Tickets go on sale October 26<sup>th</sup>. For more information and reservations, please call the Folk Music center at 909-624-2928. On Wednesday, November 12, 8:00pm (doors at 7:30pm). Yuval Ron will present a free lecture on Understanding the Mystical Music of the Middle East. Reservations are required. Call 909-624-2928. To listen to Yuval Ron's music and learn more about his work, please visit [www.yuvalronmusic.com](http://www.yuvalronmusic.com).*

*Faun Finley creates cultural, spiritual, physical and social programming for residents of a local retirement community. She also teaches and performs ethnic-folkloric dance traditions, including belly dance and English Country dance. She has a B.A. in Anthropology of Expressive Culture from Mills College, and is currently studying for yoga and expressive arts teaching certifications.*

## PHOTO COLLAGE: YEAR IN REVIEW



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### By Judy Nahman-Stouffer, Folk Photography

A longtime singer, dancer and player, Judy is now dedicated to "Capturing the Spirit" of the underground and aboveground events of the Los Angeles folk community. She is available for all people-based events and also sells photos, graphic arts and screen savers.

Official photographer to:

FolkWorks Newspaper

Summer Solstice Folk Music Dance and Storytelling Festival

Dreamshaper's World Storytelling Festival

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Top row left to right:

Zhena folk chorus at Statewide Folkdance festival - Santoor master Pandit Ulhas Bapat at the Getty Museum - Harp student at the Summer Solstice Music Festival - Les Yeux Noirs at the Skirball Museum summer concert series

Middle row left to right:

Old Time workshop leader John Herrmann at the Summer Solstice Music Festival - Singer Eva Ayllón with the Afro-Latin band Los Hijos del Sol at the Getty Museum - Contra dancers at the Summer Solstice Music Festival - International student dance troupe at Statewide Folkdance festival

Bottom row left to right

Shape note singer at Angel's Gate Regional Shapenote Sing-Storyteller Megumi at the First Annual World Storytelling Festival - Raynald Ouellet performing at the Summer Solstice Music Festival - Drummer Mitch Hyare who played with the DJ, Cheb i Sabbah, at the Getty Museum