

# Tour Middle East December 2001

Tony Overwater



## Sunday 9th of December 2001

It's freezing in Holland, winter really started now. It's Sunday, 7 in the morning, I am waiting for the train, freezing, slightly underdressed. I didn't want to bring my wintercoat since I am leaving for Damascus in a few hours. This will be our second tour to the middle east. Since our last one, 3 years ago a lot has changed. This will be our first tour with an extended group, The Yuri Honing trio plus 3 musicians from the Middle East. Rima Khcheich, a young Lebanese singer we met on our first tour, Bassem Havar, a Djose player from Iraq, and Latif al Obeidy, a very young (20) percussion and oud player also from Iraq, are our guests in this project we call the Orient Express.

We have been following the news closely the last few days. since the famous 11th of September the situation has become a little threatening. Especially the mess with Israel and Palestine worries me a great deal. Our first rehearsal with the Orient express, for our concerts in Holland, were on the eleventh of September. We don't want to mix politics and music but still it made us think quite a bit. Our main interest is music though and in this case Arabic music. Any relevance to actual events or persons is coincidental.



the tour starts out quite dramatically. The tight financial budget does not allow great problems. We leave from Amsterdam with Yuri, Joost and Bassem Havar, we will meet the others in Syria. The flight to Paris, our first stop, is delayed. When we arrive we only have 20 minutes to catch our flight to Damascus. We just arrive in time at the gate and luckily they allow us in. Once we are in the plane we have another delay because the plane is full and now is too heavy to take off. Solution, they unload 1000 litres of petrol. Hopefully leaving still enough to reach Syria. We arrive at Damascus late and of course we have some custom delays. We thought that we would still be in time for the concert as it would start, according to our information, at 11 PM. When we finally get through and meet Neil, the Dutch guy that helped organise the tour, he gets a phone call that the concert is cancelled because we are too late. We were supposed to play at 9 and it's 9 now. We still have a 40 minute drive. Foolish planning. To build in a margin of 1 hour on such a long flight is absolutely irresponsible. Like this we already start with a 1000 dollar loss right at the start.

We drive to the concertplace anyway and meet our other 2 musicians Rima and Latif. We are so happy to see each other again that we decide to go to a nice restaurant, drink wine and smoke waterpipes and just enjoy each others company forget about this incident. Luckily friendship is stronger than financial setbacks. Wine and good food do the rest.

## Monday 10th of December



It's great to be back in Damascus! I love this town. It feels like meeting an old friend again. We have only been here once but it feels very familiar. We visit the souk with the whole group. It's beautiful to see this place again with its covered streets, smell the smells again and hear the noises.

concert, we played quite well and the sound was good. The only surprise was the elaborate light show and smoke machines.

Our first concert in Damascus is in a new theatre, so new that they didn't even have time to make the heating work. I know what you are thinking, the Middle east must be warm enough, but believe me, at night in the winter it gets really cold. It made me think of our concert in Georgia where the audience was also fully dressed, coats, scarfs and hats. We had a nice

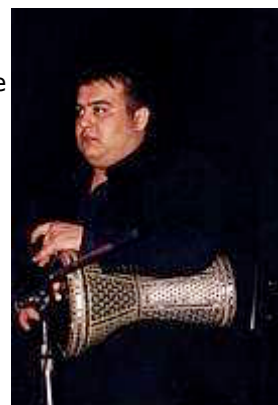


Our whole tour finds place during ramadan, a slight mistake of timing, Muslims are not supposed to eat drink during the day and alcohol is forbidden. Not the best time for concerts. There are only very few restaurants open during the day. At night we go to the Christian part of town to find a restaurant that serves wine. We need it. We're cold and the financial problems only get bigger. I never ever smoked but this is the second day in a row that I order a waterpipe. I start to like it more and more.

Latif al Obeidy.

Latif could easily be mistaken for a Japanese sumo wrestler. His youth and enormous size give him a strange mixture of vitality and peacefulness. When he plays his instruments, riq, darabouka and Oud, you only see his fingers move. He sits there like a Buddha, every emotion and expression goes exclusively through his fingers. He is an absolute master on these instruments. I don't know any percussion player who knows the lyrics and every detail of the melody so well as he does. He would even correct a singer if necessary.

But Latif is also enormously funny. After and before the concerts he loves to crack jokes. When I do some Tai Chi exercises before the concert with Joost and Bassem he joins us very seriously trying to stand with his legs wide apart, stretching his arms to left and right, in the mean time keeping his cigarette in his mouth. he is, of course, also a excellent connaisseur of Arab food and he always orders for us.



## Wednesday 12th of December

It's 2 AM, outside my hotelroom I can hear the beating of drums. A man walks around with a drum to wake people up to eat because it is Ramadan. People don't eat during the day so they have to eat a few times at night. like our driver who drove us today from Damascus to Beirut. he drove all day without eating. If you have ever been to the middle east you understand that that is quite an achievement. No pen, nor keyboard, can describe what you see there in traffic. Especially in Syria. your faith in the creator, whether it is Allah or God must be great. First of all most cars over there wouldn't even be considered as official vehicles in Europe. Most of them date back t the 40's and the 50's and the newer ones look so beat up that an average European junkyard would look like a parkingplace in Syria. I doubt if they know when the car was last checked. And than about the driving. Since there are no lines on the street everybody drive as they please, left or right it doesn't matter, where ever you need to go. traffic lights seem to have a solely decorative purpose and so do signs like 'one way street' and 'no turning allowed'. There are no priority rules it seems, it's more or less 'I dare you'. The first one to makes eye contact loses automatically. Honking in generally means 'hello I am here' or 'please move over' without any anger. With all the accidents and near accidents I am surprised to see the peaceful expressions on the drivers faces. It's business as usual and no hard feelings even if you smashed my car. Mahal salam (may be peace be with you).



Of course Neil, theDutch organiser that helped us set up the concerts, promised us it was only a two hour drive to Beirut. Well, the van they arranged for us didn't look like it could drive much more than that. We were squeezed in the bus like sardines in a can leaving no space for anything extra let stand for the 'where are we going to put the bitches' rule as described in the rider from Randy Brecker. A very humorous text that talks about everything you have to know when you do business with this famous trumpet player, the brother of the even more famous saxophone player. We usually take this as a comic guideline to valuate our

tours. Anyway, he writes about this experience where an organiser gives the 7 piece band a 7 person bus and one of the bandmembers adequately replies 'but where are we going to put the bitches if we find some'. our band doesn't have those but a six person bus for 8 persons and luggage including a huge bass flightcase could also use a little more room. Imagine yourself sitting backwards in a bus like that with the kind of traffic I described before. The "2 hours , I promise" turn out to be six hours. The border between Lebanon and Syria has, as to be expected with two Iraquee refugees in the band, some delays. The usual dealing and bribing takes about 3 hours. The members of the band don't seem to care less. It is not our first time here. We just hang about in the no man's land zone between the 2 countries.



### Beirut, Lebanon



The home town of Rima, our singer. Rima is the best. She is an absolute wonder and I am happy we met her. She has become a dear friend, as did Latif and Bassem. As proven this day in Beirut, Rima is not only a fabulous singer and a beautiful person, warm and generous, but also a good organiser and PR manager. The concerts in Beirut in the Medina theatre are badly organised, The theatre doesn't pay us, telling us how poor they are and they trust that the Dutch government will pay us. And as it goes with organisers that don't pay well, all the rest is organised badly as well. Rima had to do all the publicity, a friend of her made the poster, she organised a radio advertisement, and arranged for the Lebanese TV to do an interview and record the concert. When we arrived in the theatre yesterday and she found out that they hadn't arranged a drumset she nearly exploded got on the phone and organised this too. I could go on for quite a while like this but it would become a little boring to read and I prefer to talk about her musical qualities for now.

That night the theatre was full with people, an enthusiastic crowd. Rima sang like a nightingale. Besides the classical Arabic pieces we also do some arrangements of our trio repertoire. Rima wrote lyrics to Yasutani, a composition by Yuri and she wrote completely new lyrics to Björk's' Isobel. These numbers really show the new direction this group is going.

### 14th of December



The 3 concerts we did last 3 days in the Medina theatre went by quickly. They were great every night the theatre was getting fuller and fuller. We had some great reviews and one really bad one, which is also a good sign. People were quite surprised. This is a total new sound, something they haven't heard before.

The last concert in the Medina was without Latif. We had a substitute percussion player who really did his best but it's not that easy to substitute somebody in this group. It showed how equally important all six musicians are. The first set was not great. Joost and I tried to depend on

the new percussion player but he wasn't so sure himself. During the second set I remembered that we were actually part of a trio and I guess Joost and Yuri did the same. We put on the trio turboboost and blasted our way through it. Yuri forced himself physically and hurt his back. Luckily we have a day off tomorrow, travelling to Jordan, so hopefully he will be better the day after.

Nidal, the owner of the theatre didn't show up at the concerts nor did she leave a message or anything. You would expect a theatre would be thankful or at least happy to have great group for 3 days for free that also does it's own publicity and brings so much audience. They made thousands of dollars on us. I would prefer not to play here anymore. It just doesn't feel right.

We solved Bassem's visa problems and arranged a van to drive us to Jordan, we didn't realise that we had to travel through Syria again. So again we are facing long waiting times and hassle to get through the borders.

The trip from by Beirut to Amman in Jordan went by the book. The Arabic book of travel that is. We left in the morning in a brand new van that would bring us straight to Jordan. The van was OK, a little to small to fit all our instruments in and us but we managed. At the first border, the Lebanese-Syrian one, we had an exceptable waiting time. 2 hours to go through about 6 checkpoints is not bad. (1. registration of the vehicle and contents, often checking the luggage, 2. checking out of the visa of the country of departure, 3. pass control, 4. buying visa at the next country, 5. vehicle and luggage control, 6. passport control and you are ready, Each of us has than filled in about 4 forms and paid money for visa and some bribe money to make things go a little faster.)



Five minutes after we left the border the driver told us he could not drive us to Amman because he did not have the right papers. He would bring us to Damascus where he would put us in two separate smaller taxis to go to Jordan. We tried to convince him that we paid for a big van and not two smaller taxis which would have been cheaper already. Of course we had been asked to pay already more than half of the money before we left. Finally he promised us a stationcar and a normal taxi. When we arrived in Damascus we drove to a taxi company in one of the suburbs. They had two very old beat up American Chevrolets ready for us. They tried to convince us to tie the bass on top of the roof. I refused. Then they wanted to put the bass in the back trunk so the neck of the bass would stick out one meter or more. I refused again. Then Rima and Bassem started shouting and yelling for about an hour and even Neil threw in his Arabic swearing, about sons of dogs and stuff like that. Then we got another van, smaller of course than the last one. We literally squeezed everything in, 2 persons plus the driver had to sit in front and four of us squeezed into the backseat where the neck of the basscase made the space even smaller. Still two more hours of driving on very bumpy highways. The crossing of the border from Syria to Jordan went quite smooth though. One and a half hour maximum. The friendly Iraqi driver told us that the other driver didn't need a license at all but just didn't want to drive all the way to Jordan. He and his boss had planned this from the start. But our new driver also had a little surprise, he could drive us to Aman but not into Aman since that was not allowed for foreign taxis. We were left at a taxi stand outside of the city where we called the organiser who then later picked us up. It was nine o'clock in the evening and we finally arrived.

### Aman

Our final 3 concerts were in Aman, 2 of them in the Nai, a nice place but extremely noisy, people just wouldn't stop talking. And one concert in a nice club called the Blue Fig where both the audience and the circumstances were much better for our music. Rima had never performed for an audience that is not completely silent and she had a hard time with it. This group only works in real concert places. There are too many details that get lost in a noisy place.

Bassem our djose player had a special reason to look forward to Aman. His brother lives there and he hadn't seen him in years. It was nice seeing Bassem and his brother, both skinny as a rake with piercing dark eyes. Bassem is one of the friendliest guys I ever met. He is a real virtuoso on the djose, a violin like instrument made out of a coconut, a stick and a fishskin, and a very open minded musician. One of the few Arab musicians that will work in many different settings and styles. He is, just like Latif a very generous man, always giving presents to people and if necessary he would give you his last shirt if you needed it. We may have quite a negative image of Iraq in the west but all the Iraqis I met so far are very, I mean very friendly and heartily people.



### Dead Sea



On our only day off in the tour we planned a trip to the Dead Sea, an hour's drive away from Aman. It's Neil's birthday and we rent a minivan together. On the way down to the Dead Sea we visit an archeological site where the remains are of a Byzantine church that marks the place where Jesus was supposed to be baptised. It's a beautiful oasis in the middle of the desert. We walk around the site and deeper into the oases until we are stopped by guards who warn us for possible mine fields. A small reminder that we are in an explosive part of the world, Israel and Palestine just a few miles away.

The Dead Sea experience is amazing. Just by looking at the sea you can see that this water is different. The Dead Sea is the deepest point on Earth 500 meters below sea level. The little water that gets into this valley can't go anywhere and the heat evaporates the most water leaving the salt. The result is a sea that feels like oily, like petrol for example, and of course the main attraction it makes you float. When we get in the water all we can do is laugh. It's one of the strangest things I experienced. If you try to stand up straight the water just tilts you over in a horizontal position, either on your back or on your stomach. Swimming is out of the question. If you try to make a breast stroke your feet and knees come above the water and make your attempt to swim look really silly. We have a great time, the most hilarious moment is



when we decide to get a mudbath. A man took us to a little cabin and puts mud all over our body, I mean all over. He carefully puts the pitch black mud on all your body parts including those underneath our shorts. When we walk outside in the sun to dry the mud, we look at each other and laugh.



The 3 days in Jordan were quite enjoyable. Although they weren't the best musicwise they were a nice continuation of a friendship for our band. I never had a band larger than 3 persons that had such a great atmosphere. I like all of them equally and this feeling seems to be mutual. We spent a lot of time together even if we didn't have to. I am happy that most of us live in the Netherlands or at least close by. I will miss Rima the most since she lives in Beirut. But we will do our best to get this band together as much as possible. I feel like we struck a goldmine with this group. Maybe not financially but at least musically and socially. We will have much to explore and even a message to spread.

The only way we will be able to live together in this world is by showing interest in eachothers background and culture and meet on a personal level. To realize that every group is built out of individuals is important. Any media, west or east, left or right will tend to write about groups in stereotypes and if we don't have the opportunity or take the initiative to meet others we will start believing these stereotypes and live in fear where there is absolutely no reason to fear other human beings.