



# FAWZY AL-AIEDY & HIS PARIS-BAGHDAD GROOVE

STORY: Graham Henderson

**B**ombs rain down on Fallujah and suicide bombers slaughter would-be police recruits. A radical Moslem cleric attacks the interim government and his armed militia stalks the streets. As the Iraqi bloodbath continues the world can only look on in a kind of stunned disbelief. Isn't this war supposed to be over?

Some people might think it remarkable that it takes a terrible war to put a country like Iraq on the musical map. But perhaps this is only natural. In an effort to extract something positive from all the death and destruction visited on coalition forces and on innocent Iraqis it is hardly surprising that we turn to music and culture to provide us with something more reassuring. Music can at least remind us that there is more to Iraq and its people than burning vehicles and chaos.

It was against the backdrop of continuing bloody fighting in Iraq that Fawzy Al-Aiedy, an Iraqi musician, found himself sitting behind the stage at the WOMAD festival in Reading, England, last July.

Fawzy Al-Aiedy was born in Basra in southern Iraq in the 1950s. The regime of Saddam Hussein was so fearful that, like many Iraqis, he has had no choice but to live in exile and to denounce from a distance the tyranny and abuse of human rights in his native Iraq. A modest and gently spoken man, Al-Aiedy spoke in French about his life and music, his rapid words falling over each other.

Despite living in France for 30 years Al-Aiedy is fiercely proud of being an Iraqi and passionate about Basra, the city where he was born and grew up:

"In ancient times Iraq was the cradle of civilization," he says. "Mankind's first cities were situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The land has had a rich culture for thousands of years. Basra is a beautiful city, with architecture in every style and from every period that you can imagine. As a major seaport which opens out onto the Arabian Gulf it is a city dedicated to the maritime life."

His initial musical training was not quite what you would expect for a boy from a modest family:

"I am a player of the oud, an instrument that is traditional in Iraq, an instrument which is over 3,000 years old. But, as a student at music school in Iraq, the first instrument that I learned to play was the oboe and I became a musician in the European tradition. The music of Bach, Mozart and Handel was a great revelation to me. From there I went on to study Middle Eastern music and learned to play the oud. What I am doing now is a mixture of modern and traditional music. I want my music to establish a common ground with other peoples around the world. It is most important that the music is accessible. And that it is able to communicate with many peoples."

In France, Al-Aiedy initially played for two years with a Western classical orchestra. But he did not feel that a career in classical music was for him. It did not allow him to explore the traditions of Middle Eastern music, indulge his love of Arabic poetry, or fulfill his desire to create new music. Between 1976 and 1996 he released a string of recordings combining traditional Arabic and Western sounds, includ-





ing jazz. His album entitled *Terre*, released in 1983, was a precursor of what soon became known as world music, bringing together musicians and musical styles from many different countries.

As Iraq hit the headlines in 2003 for all the wrong reasons, Al-Aiedy, one of the leading Iraqi musicians outside his country, suddenly found himself in great demand.

"The war has provoked a great interest in Iraqi music," he says. "I have played recently in Germany and Scandinavia as well as France and hope soon to go to the U.S. This is my moment and I have very much appreciated the opportunity to play in front of so many people."

From 1996, Al-Aiedy's music took a new direction, leaving behind the jazz influences and returning to a more natural fusion of traditional Iraqi and global sounds. Like much of the music intended for a global audience, Al-Aiedy's music is essentially a fusion of traditional Iraqi instruments and rhythms with high production values and a more Western musical sensibility. At WOMAD his lineup includes the *derbouka* (Arabic drum), Eastern violin, keyboard, electric bass guitar and drum. His songs are about journeys, poetry, dreams, his native town of Basra, and about living in exile.

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Feelings about the Iraq war are still running very high. When, later that evening, Al-Aiedy played to a packed tent on the Siam Stage at WOMAD, he merely had to say where he was from to get a round of applause from the festival audience, anxious to show some empathy with the suffering of Iraq. Al-Aiedy performed many of the songs from his latest album, *Paris-Baghdad Grooves*, which is a stunning fusion of Oriental and Western influences. The title has echoes of the famous Paris-Baghdad railway, completed at the start of the 20th century, which opened up the Middle East to colonization and the creation of nation states. The album perfectly reflects Al-Aiedy's personal musical and cultural journey serving up traditional Iraqi sounds but in a polished and sophisticated Parisian style.

*Paris-Baghdad Grooves* lives up to its name, comprised of a series of catchy and sensual songs that had the festival audience dancing. In songs like "Arabia" and "Dana Dina" he has created a striking fusion sound that is truly global and which communicates and appeals across political and cultural boundaries. The music is led by his very fine voice, which is Middle Eastern in style but does not neglect to provide the audience with the moments of satisfying release associated with great popular tunes. Al-Aiedy is doing for the traditional music of Iraq what Maryam Mursal does for the music of her native Somalia, creating a finely wrought international sound.

Inevitably, Al-Aiedy is asked about the invasion of Iraq and the present events in his country. "Saddam Hussein's rule was terrible," he says, "and Iraqis are glad that he is gone. While he remained in power the situation for the Iraqi people was completely blocked. The problem is that the U.S. and U.K. invaded Iraq all alone. It would have been much better to get wider international support. Democracy is very important to Iraq but the country is not yet used to it. It is necessary to help the Iraqi people to understand."

Tolerance and openness lie at the heart of Al-Aiedy's approach. This was well demonstrated on the final day of the festival when his impromptu performance with Israeli musician Yair Dalal at the gala quickly turned into an inspirational and exciting piece of spontaneous music-making, electrifying the audience and providing one of the highlights of this year's festival. Music continues to sow seeds of hope even amidst the smoke of war. 