



Original compositions. Palestinian artist Nai Barghouti.

(Nini Productions)

Rising Palestinian music stars delight London audience

Karen Dabrowska

London

Rising Palestinian stars Nai Barghouti and Mohamed Najem and Friends enchanted audiences across Britain with a blend of Arabic and jazz music during a tour that took them to North London's historic Union Chapel, a live entertainment venue and charity drop-in centre for the homeless.

Using traditional Arab instruments accompanied by the piano to produce a unique musical language, the performers highlighted the Palestinians' suffering under Israeli occupation in many of the songs. Part of their fee was donated to assist UNICEF's work in Syria.

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The double bill in London's historic Union Chapel began with a performance by Najem and Friends. Formed in 2016, the quartet – Najem on clarinet and ney, Clément Prioul on piano, Thomas Julienne on bass and Baptiste Castets on drums – is popular in the Paris jazz scene and has appeared in festivals across France and in Gabon.

Najem described his first piece, "Instant Love," composed in 2011, as a reflection of his feelings towards the audience.

"From Bethlehem to Angers" and "Floor No. 4" were said to reflect Najem's personal experiences,

which had deeply moved the singer. Convinced that most people in the audience have never heard of Angers, a city in western France where he studied, Najem described its old town with timbered houses that were built in the 14th century. He said the smells of the old town reminded him of Bethlehem, his home town.

"Floor No. 4" referred to Najem's time in Ramallah, where he lived for a year. In the evening, he could see the lights of Jaffa, a city close to the village of Al-Musheer, which was destroyed in 1948. "I got permission to go [to Al-Musheer] but I did not go as I wanted to remember it as my grandfather, who died three years ago, described it," Najem said.

Barghouti thrilled the audience with a combination of her original compositions and new arrangements of some of the best-known Palestinian and Arabic songs.

Barghouti, with flowing black hair, looked stunning in a long black dress. She was forceful, proud, dignified and defiant as she introduced her songs, which included one about Palestinian refugees yearning to return home and a song dedicated to every child in the world deprived of childhood due to war.

Her song "Pulse," written a few months ago, was an experiment in using the voice as an instrument. "Stages of Love" was a tribute to her family, who accompanied her on her British tour.

Barghouti said she hoped to convey the struggle of Palestinians living under occupation and send a message that racism can never stop them from trying to reach their dreams.

"We have talent, we have beauty, we have art and we have strength," she said. "No one can take that

away from us, not even a wall of segregation. We are here today not only because our rights are being violated but also because of our music, [which is] our way of resistance."

Regarding the challenges facing musicians in the Palestinian territories, Barghouti said: "I was born and raised in Palestine but I am currently pursuing my jazz performance studies in Amsterdam. I experienced living in Palestine as a musician and living abroad as one. The struggle is real (at home!)"

"The idea of not having to worry about checkpoints and being able to move freely between cities or even countries has become a dream rather than a reality or a basic human right," she said. "When planning certain activities in Palestine such as concerts, rehearsals or any other appointments, I always needed to be ready for a sudden checkpoint that might pop up somewhere on the road or some gas bombs that might be thrown at civilians or a stubborn, racist soldier who might refuse to let me pass through."

"I have been denied entry to Jerusalem, my city of birth, but thousands of Palestinian refugees have been denied entry to Palestine as a whole, so who am I to complain?"

Barghouti performed in Britain last year with the Palestine Youth Orchestra, selling out at venues from Glasgow to London. This year she returned with an all-star band that included musicians who performed with some of the most popular young Palestinian bands, including members of the Awan Quartet, Al Raseef and the Mohamed Assaf Band, as well as her Amsterdam-based band with roots in Nigeria, South Korea and Tunisia.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

Ali Alfoneh

Iran regime using rap music as propaganda tool

China boasts of a few and so does Russia. Now, Iran has one as well: A state-sponsored rap artist to counter what the regime in Tehran perceives not only as a Western "cultural onslaught" against Iran's traditional culture and values but as a Western plot to mobilise Iran's youth against the regime.

The Islamic Republic may skilfully use rap music and Western culture to deflect attention from social problems in Iran but propaganda alone is not likely to defuse the time bomb of youth dissatisfaction against the regime in Tehran.

As Fars News Agency celebrated the anniversary of the establishment of its subsidiary Fars Plus, a certain Amir-Hossein Maghsoudloo was the news agency's guest of honour.

The marriage of convenience between rap artist Tataloo and the regime is a clever move.

Fars News is no regular news agency: For all practical purposes, it serves as the mouthpiece of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Nor is Maghsoudloo a regular guest of honour in Iran's official media circles. Better known as Tataloo, he is a rap artist covered in tattoos, served two prison terms and boasts more than 4 million followers on Instagram.

Tataloo, 33, began his career as an underground musician. Concerts and distribution of music in Iran require official permits from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance but, as with most musicians of his kind, the regime tolerated Tataloo's work.

However, as Radio Farda, the Persian-language branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Los Angeles-based Persian language media began broadcasting his music videos to Iran, the Justice Administration of Tehran charged Tataloo with "encouraging [moral] corruption" – Islamic Republic officialese for unspecified social activities disliked by the regime – and he served prison terms in 2013 and 2016.

Within that period, Tataloo and the regime found each other. Perhaps to get a licence to give

public concerts and distribute his music on the Iranian home market, Tataloo began producing music videos with nationalist and religious themes.

Famously, during Iran's nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, Tataloo produced a music video – shot aboard Jamaran, an Iranian Navy destroyer – titled: "An Armed Persian Gulf is our Inalienable Right." The video was released July 13, 2015, the day before the parties reached the nuclear deal, and the title played on the regime's mantra of "peaceful nuclear energy" being Iran's "inalienable right."

By that time, the regime – at least in public – tried to keep its distance from Tataloo. Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, the Iranian Navy chief, who had authorised filming of the music video aboard its destroyer, claimed ignorance of Tataloo's "criminal record." Tataloo for a few months avoided overt endorsement of the regime to preserve his street credibility as a rebellious rap artist who happens to be patriotic.

That approach did not work for long. Tataloo soon endorsed candidates Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf and later Ebrahim Raeisi before the presidential election last May.

However, with angry fans disillusioned with his being involved in partisan politics, on April 21 Tataloo released an audio message on his Telegram channel disclosing: "I don't have good political insights... what I say about politics is inspired by what I hear from a good friend of mine who works at the IRGC intelligence [organisation] whose political insight is beneficial to me and others." The audio message has been removed from Tataloo's account but is available on YouTube.

The marriage of convenience between Tataloo and the regime or, in less generous terms, the IRGC taking advantage of a rap artist for propaganda purposes, is a clever move by the regime. The IRGC is effectively turning rap music, which it had perceived as a threat, into a propaganda tool.

There are limits to what propaganda can do. In Iran, the real problems are youth unemployment, narcotics abuse, poverty, broken or dysfunctional families, prostitution, a corrupt political and economic culture and brain drain as talented young Iranians flee the country in pursuit of a better life.

These are the social ills for which the Islamic Republic must be held responsible and no amount of propaganda can deflect attention from it.



Concealing the face. Iranian rap artist Tataloo.

(Instagram)