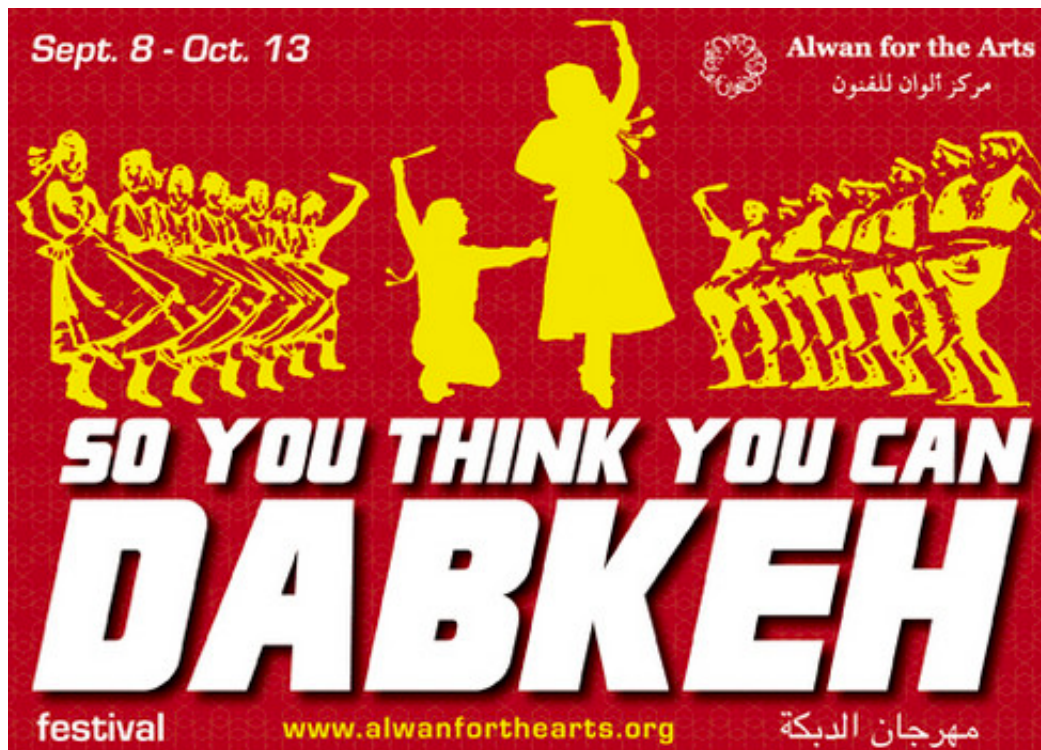


So You Think You Can Dabkeh Tour of Bay Ridge

DANCE FESTIVAL | SEPTEMBER 27, 2012 | BY: NICOLE CASAMENTO |



So You Think You Can Dabkeh Festival Flyer

Credits: Nicole Macotsis

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in New York City is currently running its first ever So You Think You Can Dabkeh Festival and a [Dabkeh Tour of Bay Ridge](#)

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on October 6th will be included among the other festivities and learning opportunities.

Dabkeh is a traditional Levantine line dance seen at social gatherings, troupe rehearsals and even political protests. Nicole Mactosis, curator of dance at Alwan, conceived of the festival to highlight an Arab dance tradition in New York City and to reach out to Arab-Americans in the metropolitan area who may be interested in Alwan's general mission to showcase Middle Eastern cultural events and art forms.

In Brooklyn, on October 6th, you can join the *Dabkeh Tour of Bay Ridge* hosted by Nicole Mactosis. You will learn about and participate in some of the traditions associated with dabkeh at local establishments.

The evening will begin at the [Arab American Association of New York](http://www.arabamericanny.org/) (<http://www.arabamericanny.org/>)

where an all-women dabkeh troupe, Nejmat Falasteen, will demonstrate and teach their steps. Participants will have the opportunity to have their decorate hands decorated in various Henna styles, a tradition associated with dabkeh and celebratory social events such as weddings. There will also be traditional henna-party dresses on view.



Location: Alwan for the Arts

Following this, Nicole will lead the group to a local Arab music store where you can purchase dabkeh CDs after being introduced to the shop owner Ayman, who manages a young boys' dabkeh troupe. You will also learn about Ayman's dabkeh music selection. Afterwards, you'll be led to [Cedar's pastry shop on 5th Avenue \(http://www.yelp.com/biz/cedars-pastry-brooklyn\)](http://www.yelp.com/biz/cedars-pastry-brooklyn) owned by Sikna Koubbat who will talk to the group about the various sweets eaten at traditional Levantine celebrations, some of which participants will be able to sample in the store. Sikna will also share her personal dabken stories from Aquoun and Fort Hamilton High School, where she was the dabkeh team leader. The event will culminate with mezze, dinner, shisha, and live music by Basil Touma and his band that you can dabkeh along to at [Le Sajj](http://www.lesajj.com/)

[restaurant. \(http://www.lesajj.com/\)](http://www.lesajj.com/)

Tickets are \$25 dollars and [can be purchased online only \(http://alwanforthearts.org/event/887\)](http://alwanforthearts.org/event/887). The price includes dinner at La Sajj and pastries from Cedar's.

The Bay Ridge tour is only one event, of many, at the festival.

If you want to practice your steps before the tour, each Saturday in September, [a dabkeh workshop has been held at Alwan \(http://www.alwanforthearts.org/class/66\)](http://www.alwanforthearts.org/class/66), taught by master dancer, percussionist and choreographer Ramzi Edlibi. There is one session left this Saturday, but there will be another on October 13th before a dabkeh dance-off. You can drop in at Alwan at 3 p.m. to participate. Find more information on the [Facebook page \(http://www.alwanforthearts.org/event/894\)](http://www.alwanforthearts.org/event/894) and below.

The workshop participants will be given the opportunity to perform in the Dabkeh competition on October 13th at 7p.m., along with both other student and professional dabkeh troupes. The dance competition will be preceded by another short dabkeh dance class 3:30 p.m., focusing on the various forms of dabkeh in villages abroad and its recent manifestation mixed with urban culture here in New York City. In between the lesson and the Dabkeh-Off, scholars, Shayna Silverstein and Christopher Stone will discuss the different cultural and political contexts of dabkeh in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

Nicole Mactosis answered some more questions about dabkeh, the festival and its mission for us:

What was your reason for creating the Dabkeh Festival?

I wanted to highlight an Arab folk dance that is passed on intergenerationally within the community and is shared by different groups of people across the Levant and beyond. Although dabkeh remains a vibrant tradition, many aspects of its practice are fading. For example, dabkeh would traditionally be danced to a wind instrument such as shababah or mijwiz (or zameer in Syrian Arabic). However, keyboard or org

dominate performances in the tri-state area now and groups almost always perform to recorded music.

There is a dearth of Arab acoustic folk music in an area with the largest concentrated number of Arab Americans in the United States. Arab American youth who would normally learn to play these instruments at regular social gatherings don't even have the chance to hear it live anymore. I hope to create more intergenerational opportunities in New York City through which participants may hear and learn more about these disappearing practices.

Finally i've chosen dabkeh because its dancers have impressed me with their creativity and technical skill. I've heard dabkeh dismissed as a "common, simple folk dance". I want to draw attention to its aesthetic, social and cultural value.

Why do you think it's a good idea to have an entire festival dedicated to dabkeh in New York? What do you hope participants and/or viewers will take from it?

I hope that the general public has opportunities to engage with Arab Americans through dabkeh - a vital part of Arab American cultural and community life. Unlike learning bellydance - where students often learn technique taught by non-Arabs, So You Think You Can Dabkeh tries to link the dance with its greater cultural context.

I also hope that Arab-American audiences and participants engage with each other to sustain their cultural heritage and to meet others Arab-Americans nearby beyond their ethnic, national, religious or local neighborhood boundaries.

How important is having a dance background to learning dabkeh? What advice would you give someone who does not generally dance much or know this dance specifically but was still interested in learning it?

The earthy feeling and a sense of rhythm is the most important in the social style of dabkeh. Workshop teacher Ramzi Edlibi gave us some great exercises such as pushing off of a partner's hands and leaning on a partner, to feel the weight of our bodies and feet on the floor. All you have to do is be in tune with a good dancer who will be the "ras", or head, leading the line. As it's primarily a social dance, you learn by doing and following the leader. For the professional staged styles, which require more traveling and jumping, being in shape helps!

Can you tell us more about how dabkeh's link to protests in Palestine?

I know that here in New York, groups that are protesting actions of the Israeli occupation in Palestine sometimes perform dabkeh and dabkeh is an integral part of Palestinian identity in general. In Palestinian stage performances, dabkeh movements often narrate or symbolize the struggles of living in occupation as well as the attempts to fight against it.

It is danced in lines and circles, with all members holding hands, sometimes leaning on each other's shoulders and always moving in unison with the exception of a few dancers in the front of the line. As a result, the form of the dabkeh line provides opportunities for self expression supported by a united group framework.

Can you recommend a few dabkeh singers for people who may not be able to attend the festival but want to know more and hear the music?

[Wadih El Safi \(http://www.last.fm/music/Wadih+El+Safi\)](http://www.last.fm/music/Wadih+El+Safi) is my favorite. He is an older lebanese singer and has many styles beyond dabkeh. A popular current singer is [Milhem Zein \(http://melhemzein.net/\)](http://melhemzein.net/). I love [Najwa Karam \(http://www.najwakaram.com/\)](http://www.najwakaram.com/) also; she is a popular woman singer with a strong voice. [Tony Hanna \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csl6Ck6tOk4\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csl6Ck6tOk4) is an old-school lebanese singer who performed many well known dabkeh tunes. And [Omar Souleyman \(http://www.myspace.com/omarsouleyman\)](http://www.myspace.com/omarsouleyman), a Syrian dabkeh singer, who has crossed over to the world music scene and is even popular with electronic music fans.

In New York, people should check out [Anas Tabash \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1UQT9yUdOo\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1UQT9yUdOo), known for his village-style sung poetry or “mawwal”; [Fahim Dandan \(http://www.myspace.com/dabka90\)](http://www.myspace.com/dabka90), is probably one of the most popular singer and known for the quality of his voice and wide repertoire of songs; [Rana Beyrouti \(http://kamillebanesecuisine.com/\)](http://kamillebanesecuisine.com/) is probably the best local female singer whose style is inspired by Najwa Karam. All of these singers can be heard at local venues in the tri-state area and Anas Tabash will be singing at Alwan on October 13th at the Dabkeh-Off.



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Nicole Casamento edits www.culturegrinder.com. Culture Grinder is an online publication dedicated to exploring, interpreting and shaping contemporary culture. Through essays, interviews and online exhibitions, we hope to engage our audience in dialogue regarding the modern world and to promote...