

[Lucid Culture](#)

GREAT MUSIC THAT'S NOT TRENDY

Maqamfest – 2012's Best Concert So Far

The first weekend after New Year's in New York is the booking agents' convention a.k.a. APAP, and most of the shows put on for conventiongoers are also open to the public. Because the artists performing are all auditioning for at least theoretically lucrative gigs, they're usually at the top of their game. As a result, some of the year's most extraordinary bills, and extraordinary performances, happen here, and this past weekend was no exception. While Winter Jazzfest on Saturday night and then Globalfest on Sunday – both part of the convention – had their moments, the best show of the weekend was the first annual Maqamfest at [Alwan for the Arts](#).

The maqam trail, with its otherworldly microtones and eerie chromatics, stretches from northern Africa to central Asia, and across the Mediterranean to the Balkans. In a spectacularly successful attempt to cover as much ground as possible, the organizers assembled a diverse program including music from but not limited to Egypt, Greece, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and many points in between. Organizer Sami Abu Shumays – virtuoso violinist and leader of the first act on the bill, Zikrayat – took care to point out that while each group drew on centuries, maybe millennia of tradition, each added their own individual vision to the music. Middle Eastern cultures don't typically differentiate between classical, and folk, and pop music as westerners do: over there, music is music, pure and simple.

In introducing the program, what Shumays omitted, maybe out of modesty, is that the players on the bill were not only some of the most important and creative Middle Eastern musicians outside the Middle East: they're some of the most important and creative Middle Eastern musicians anywhere in the world. They make their home at Alwan for the Arts downtown, where a vital, cutting-edge scene has evolved. What the Paris salons of a hundred years ago were for classical, the 52nd Street clubs were for jazz in the forties and fifties and what CBGB was for punk rock in the 70s, Alwan for the Arts is for music from the Middle East now. Unsurprisingly, the acts on the bill each brought classical purism, jazzlike improvisation and some punk rock fearlessness too.

The most traditionally-oriented group was [Safaafir](#). A trio led by Alwan music honcho Amir ElSaffar and his sister Dena (virtuoso of the jowza fiddle and leader of the considerably different but equally exciting [Salaam](#)), Safaafir play hypnotically rhythmic, centuries-old Iraqi court music and folk songs. The band name means “coppersmiths” in Persian, which is fitting because that's what the ElSaffars' grandparents, and their parents before them, did in the Baghdad marketplace. For all the stateliness and split-second precision of the music, Safaafir gave it a jolt of energy, sometimes with a bounce, sometimes with an insistent attack courtesy of percussionist Tim Moore, locked in with the graceful arcs of the fiddle and Amir ElSaffar's precise lines on santoor dulcimer (and also occasional, unaffectedly exuberant trumpet). Some of the songs had a trancelike, Indian tinge while others allusively referenced modes from the other side of the Euphrates.

The most western-sounding performance was by [Gaida](#) and her band. Many of the musicians on the program made multiple appearances, Amir ElSaffar playing torchy muted trumpet in this group along with the night's most popular musician, buzuq player Tareq Abboushi, with [George Dulin](#) on piano, [Jennifer Vincent](#) on bass, [Zafer Tawil](#) on oud and [Hector Morales](#) on percussion. The Syrian-born chanteuse has a minutely nuanced, warmly breathy delivery that looks back to iconic singers like Fairouz and Warda; like many of the instrumentalists over the course of the evening, she began a couple of songs with quietly spectacular, microtonally melismatic improvisations. Behind her, the band shifted effortlessly from bossa nova, to urbane saloon jazz, to vintage habibi singalongs and the most dramatic, impactful number in her all-too-brief set, a darkly apprehensive piano-driven ballad that evoked the more ambitious cross-pollinations of legendary Lebanese songwriters the Rahbani Brothers forty years ago.

The set that was the most cinematic (which happens to be the title of the band's latest album) was delivered by [Zikrayat](#) (Arabic for "memories"). Their speciality is classic Egyptian film music from the 50s and 60s, along with originals that update this lush, slinky genre. This particular incarnation of the band featured Shumays accompanied by Abboushi, ney flute player [Bridget Robbins](#), bassist [Apostolis Sideris](#) and percussionists [Johnny Farraj](#) and [Faisal Zedan](#). Meanwhile, a trio of bellydancers twirled and dipped in front of them, managing to pull off a neatly choreographed balancing act without anyone in the tightly packed, sold-out crowd getting bumped. Through a trickily shapeshifting Mohammed Abdel Wahab mini-epic, a fetching Umm Kulthumm ballad delivered masterfully by guest singer [Salma Habib](#), and another soulful number featuring young crooner [Salah Rajab](#), the instruments blended voices and wove a magical tapestry of melody over beats that were as slinky as they were hypnotic. At the end of the, they abruptly switched from plaintive elegance to a stomping, ecstatically rustic, jajouka-ish folk tune that managed to be both ancient yet absolutely modern as it pulsed along with the percussion going full steam.

[Maeandros](#), unlike what their name might imply, don't meander: their oud-based Greek music is straightforward, soulful and frequently dark. Their connection to the rest of the acts on the bill is that they favor bracing Arabic maqams via music from the underground resistance movement in the 1930s as well as originals with the same kind of edgy intensity. Frontman Mavrothi Kontanis is a world-class oudist and a strong singer who conveys drama and longing without going over the top, but he's a generous bandleader, leaving the spotlight mostly to violinist [Megan Gould](#) – whose point, precise, microtonal inflections wowed the crowd – along with clarinetist [Lefteris Bournias](#). Bournias may not be a household name in the United States, but he's one of the most sought-after reedmen in the world, especially in his native Greece, a truly Coltrane/Papasov-class soloist. Predictably, it was his rapidfire, flurrying, judiciously incisive soloing that stole the show, supersonic speed matched to an intuitive feel for where to employ it. The band's set built an undulating, cosmopolitanally nocturnal ambience much as Zikrayat had done, Kontanis opening one number with a long, aching crescendoing improvisation and ending the set with a brief, upbeat song featuring some blistering tremolo-picking.

With its funky rock rhythm section and electric bass, Abboushi's genre-smashing band [Shusmo](#) – with Abboushi, Morales, [Dave Phillips](#) on bass and [Zafer Tawil](#) on percussion – rocked the hardest, covering a vast expanse of sonic terrain, from an understatedly scorching, intense take on an apprehensive Turkish folk melody, to a brief detour into stately western baroque, to hints of jazz, all with a purist, levantine undercurrent. With Bournias' clarinet salvos bursting out alongside the clank of the buzuk and the hypnotic rhythmic pulse, they evoked another great New York group from ten years earlier, the [Dimestore Dance Band](#), except with Arabic tonalities. Bournias used a long one-chord vamp to cut loose with his most feral, wailing solo of the night, Abboushi also wailing a lot harder than he had as a sideman earlier, particularly through a long, very welcome taqsim where like Bournias, he expertly spun furious clusters of chromatics spaciouly and suspensefully, choosing his spots. As the clattering, rumbling grooves shifted unpredictably from funk, to rock, to less predictable tempos and then back again, the intensity was relentless.

The evening ended with the [Alwan Music Ensemble](#): Shumays, Abboushi, Farraj, Tawil (now on eerily reverberating qanun), Amir ElSaffar on both trumpet and santoor, [George Ziadeh](#) on oud and Cairo Opera star [Ahmed Gamal](#) on vocals, making his U.S. debut. It seems that Gamal had other things in mind than the set list Abboushi had come up with: with a little humming and a few cues beforehand, it was amazing to watch the band create a lush arrangement on the spot behind Gamal's smooth but powerful baritone crooning and breathtaking microtonal inflections (where European opera is all about bombast, Arabic opera is built on subtleties). Gamal sang to the women in the crowd and then got everyone singing and clapping along with a joyous mix of swaying, popular Egyptian standards. Even after more than five hours of music, the crowd was ready for more: as ElSaffar had predicted before the show began, it was impossible to feel tired at this point.

And the evening didn't end there. Up at Rockwood Music Hall, Israeli-American rockers [On](#) took the stage about a quarter after one in the morning. Drummer Adam Halfi played slowly swinging, artfully spacious rhythm with his right hand while supplying string synthesizer orchestration, washes of organ and nimble basslines with his left; guitarist Naraan Barzilay swayed uneasily to and fro as he fired off jagged, allusively Middle Eastern chords and chordlets, using only enough natural distortion to raise the menace

<http://lucidculture.wordpress.com/2012/01/10/maqamfest/>

factor a couple of notches. It's amazing how ornate a sound the two musicians manage to create, through a mix of slowly crescendoing, 6/8 ballads, jagged indie rock and much in between, part goth, part chamber-rock and all of it interesting. When they called it a night a little before two in the morning, it made a perfect conclusion to a genuinely transcendent night: Israel, after all, is on the maqam trail.

Share this:

- [Twitter](#)

[January 10, 2012](#) - Posted by [delarue](#) | [concert](#), [Live Events](#), [middle eastern music](#), [Music](#), [music](#), [concert](#), [New York City](#), [review](#), [Reviews](#), [world music](#) | [adam halfi](#), [ahmed gamal](#), [ahmed gamal singer](#), [Amir ElSaffar](#), [apostolis sideris](#), [bridget robbins](#), [concert](#), [concert review](#), [dave phillips bass](#), [Dena ElSaffar](#), [dimestore dance band](#), [egyptian music](#), [faisal zedan](#), [Gaida singer](#), [gaida singer review](#), [george dulin](#), [george ziadeh](#), [hector morales percussion](#), [jennifer vincent](#), [johnny farraj](#), [lefteris bournias](#), [levantine music](#), [maeandros band](#), [maqamfest](#), [maqamfest 2012](#), [maqamfest 2012 review](#), [maqamfest review](#), [Mavrothi Kontanis](#), [megan gould violin](#), [middle eastern music](#), [middle eastern rock](#), [Mohammed Abdel Wahab](#), [Music](#), [music review](#), [naraan barzilay](#), [on band](#), [palestinian music](#), [rahbani brothers](#), [safaafir](#), [safaafir band](#), [safaafir review](#), [Salaam band](#), [salah rajab](#), [salma habib](#), [sami shumays](#), [shusmo band](#), [syrian music](#), [tareq abboushi](#), [tim moore percussion](#), [umm kulthumm](#), [world music](#), [zafer tawil](#), [zikrayat band](#), [zikrayat band review](#)