

Positive signs

One of Jordan's most prominent figures in contemporary music, Yacoub Abu Ghosh continues to innovate with his latest band, Sign Of Thyme

Interview by Eddie Taylor

Grouped in a rough semi-circle on an otherwise undecorated stage, all seated except the slender bass guitarist nearest the edge, who leans into the microphone to announce the next piece with a laconic, unhurried delivery, Sign Of Thyme's live performances occasionally feel more like a stupendously accomplished rehearsal. The five musicians aren't so much putting on a show as allowing a privileged handful of guests to witness their unique talents fuse in a 90-minute showcase of Arabic, Spanish, rock and jazz music. It's easy to leave with the conclusion that Yacoub Abu Ghosh, Sign Of Thyme's chief architect and songwriter, wouldn't actually care whether anyone else were in the auditorium or not.

This group is his latest musical incarnation. The self-taught bassist experimented with various rock covers bands in his early twenties before joining the prodigiously successful Rum, leaving in 2003 to pursue a variety of film and TV soundtrack work. Two years ago, he met a young oud player named Ahmad Barakat, and the instant rapport resulted in a band that played an eclectic mix of Arabic music interlaced with fragments from all corners of the world. In December 2005, they released their debut album, *Like All People*, which showcased their diverse influences, and after a string of highly acclaimed live shows, they are set to export their singularly Ammani sound to the rest of the Arab World. And, as Yacoub hopes, well beyond.

The genesis of the band came with your meeting with Ahmad Barakat. Did you realise instantly that there was a musical affinity?

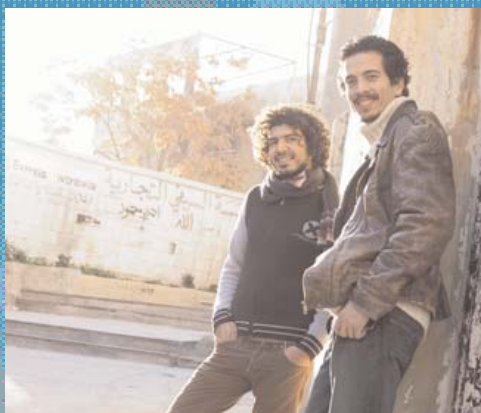
I had been working on developing something of my own for a long time, but I needed someone I could work with who understood both Eastern and Western forms of music. I met Ahmad, we got together to jam, and realised that something could happen here. I wrote some music, we locked ourselves away in a small room, added a drummer and a guitarist and played a gig. That was it, really.

Was it always the fusion style we hear now, or was that something you had to refine over time?

It was definitely more discovery than evolution. I felt an incredible freedom that I could write music that didn't need to sound like anything else. I felt I could just sit down, play anything that would come into my mind, and if I liked it, work it into a piece of music that made sense. Living here, you are influenced by everything, every form of music, and in a way I think I have come up with something that sounds like here. I don't think I could have written this music if I lived anywhere else but Amman.

So, what is it, jazz music with Arabic flavours or the other way around?

Honestly, I flinch when I hear us described as a jazz band – but I suppose categorisation will always be a problem until we become our own category! But I think it is very much Arabic music, but with strong jazz or jazz-like arrangements; it is all written with Arabic scales, and one of the most important differentiators of Arabic music is its almost complete use of melody over harmony.



You have a reputation here for being involved in interesting projects. What's been the reaction to Sign Of Thyme?

Very good. But Amman is a strange place, divided in two between East and West. In the West, which is about three percent of the population, I do have a name – thankfully, it's a very important three per cent! But I am a mixture of extreme pessimism and a little too much self-confidence, if that makes sense. I wasn't expecting anyone not to like us, if you see what I mean, and I couldn't wait to put our music out there. So the realistic part of me is very satisfied, while the dreamy, head-in-the-clouds part is frustrated because I'm not the biggest thing in Middle Eastern music!

What are the plans to help make that happen? Where are you targeting next?

The next step, logically, is Beirut, and we already have an agreement in place that we're going to market the album there, plus Damascus and Egypt. I hope our music will appeal everywhere; it's a product of being an Ammani, but there's nothing in the songs you could really call Jordanian – you'll find more Turkish, Egyptian and Persian influences, alongside the Western themes.

When's the new album out?

I have a few new songs that are nearly ready. There's one that the band is avoiding because it's too hard, and to be honest I've not even worked out how to play it yet! But we are now working with singers like Sawsan Habib, who has one of the best voices in Jordan. We want to use vocals as another instrument. We are taking our time with the next step; we're in no rush.

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Do you find it is difficult to make your presence felt, being a band from Jordan, which hasn't the same musical heritage as some of your neighbours?

Actually, I think it might be easier; if you're the only one on the scene, it's more likely you're going to get noticed. In Arabic we're called Zaman Az-Zatar, which is literally 'Time Of Thyme', and the idea was that this area – famous in the region for thyme – needs to start making its presence felt culturally. This is our time now. We have a lot going for us, so we need to take advantage of that. ■