



All that jazz

By Natalie Shooter



Beirut's jazz pioneer Arthur Satyan gets his music fix

Lebanon's jazz history might not be long established, but hear Arthur Satyan play and you'd imagine otherwise.

Born in Armenia at a time when jazz was forbidden, the arranger, composer and master on the keys has always gone against the grain. It all started when Satyan performed at Casino du Liban in '96 with his band Three Wheel Drive, alongside Steve Phillips on drums and Jack Gregg on contrabass. Though there was an established scene of jazz-fusion at the time, there were no bands doing what Satyan calls "traditional, authentic-sounding" jazz music.

"There were mostly fusion bands with

an oriental harmonic and improvisation approach. Guys like Walid Tawil, Joelle Khoury and Ziad Rahbani made a huge contribution to the local music scene. There are no words for how many generations of musicians they influenced with their styles," Satyan says, "but we started the jazz vein of it. All the guys who play jazz nowadays were watching us and learning." Satyan later founded the jazz department at the Lebanese National Conservatory of Music, which opened up the scene to a younger generation. "Most of the cats playing good jazz now came out of my class," he says.

Besides playing alongside almost every jazz giant who comes to town – Charles Davis,



Opposite page Le Duc des Lombards in Paris (top) and Beirut's Metro al Madina (bottom)

This page Satyan's favorite New York clubs, Smalls and Village Vanguard

Ed Cherry, Ray Vega and Larry Coryell, to name just a few – Satyan masterfully juggles musical projects. The most prominent is the Arthur Satyan Organ Quartet, featuring Tom Hornig on saxophone, Raffi Mandalian on guitar and Fouad Afra on drums – all longtime friends and collaborators. Satyan is also part of a quartet with Lebanese jazz singer Rima Bou Aoun, a duet with Mandalian and an acoustic ensemble. He has recording projects in the works with each, which shakes things up on a regular basis. “They’re all different,” he says. “Every band has it’s own color, repertoire, sound and vision.”

Just last year Satyan released “ARTology,” an album that crosses musical periods, with some songs first conceived in the ‘80s. The album’s influences are diverse, and it’s his track “Chrome” that he believes to be the perfect soundtrack to the city. “It’s Beirut where you meet all kinds of people, religions, mentality, colors, architecture, seasons and all that jazz,” he says.

Since there are no strictly jazz music clubs in Beirut, Satyan has numerous favorites around the world, including Le Duc des Lombards and New Morning in Paris, and Village Vanguard and Smalls in New York. Though he believes the hunger for jazz in Lebanon could be stronger, he has a soft spot for Razz’zz and Nova Club. “Razz’zz Music Club is the only club with an acoustic piano. Nova Club helps keep jazz music alive – the owners are jazz listeners and appreciate good music. I really want to thank them for that.”

Satyan is encouraged that an interest in jazz is growing with its integration into other areas of the local music scene. “Radio Beirut and Metro al Madina are having jazz shows and it’s very positive,” he says. “Everything is ahead. I’m looking forward to more great moments of my musical life journey.”

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