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New album from Lebanon's "Dean of Jazz"

NOW talks with Arthur Satyan about Lebanese jazz and his new album, "ARTology"



Arthur Satyan, the famous Beirut-based Armenian jazz musician, has just released his new album, "ARTology." NOW talks to Lebanon's "Dean of Jazz" about his influences for the album and his hopes and fears for the future of jazz in Lebanon.

NOW: Who were your early jazz idols? Who did you really look up to?

Arthur Satyan: Definitely Oscar Peterson, Count Basie, and some blues guys. My father loved Oscar Peterson. He adored him. He said, "You gotta play like Oscar Peterson." I would study him, transcribe the whole thing, and then play along with the LP. It was really fun.

NOW: You come from a family of classical composers. Where did the jazz influence come from?

Arthur Satyan: My father. I don't know that much traditional Armenian music, but I know a lot about jazz because my father was really into it. I grew up with [Louis] Armstrong and Oscar Peterson. I have almost all the jazz LPs. Jazz was forbidden then in Armenia. It was hard to find records; it was all underground. A jazz album would cost one ruble, but during that time it was 20 rubles to buy it underground, and you'd have a salary of only 160. My father used to do it regardless.

NOW: How did your album come about?

Arthur Satyan: The ideas for the album started a long time ago, some of the songs even came from the '80s. I couldn't make the album back then because I didn't have the gear, or money to buy it. When I came to Lebanon I bought my first computer and started a home studio. The meaning of the album started from there. I started recording in 2004. The main thing was the composition; I was very stressed in composing stuff, I wanted it to be more than just a jazz jam.

NOW: Talk us through the album.

Arthur Satyan: "Voca a Poco" is a song I wrote in '99. It was just after I started playing electric music. The composition is developed from one small tiny melody at the beginning. It's one of the strongest on the album. "Chrome" is like Beirut. It's everything you have in the city: Oriental, completely modern, a conflicting mix. "Waynish" is one of my very old songs. The name comes from Wayne Shorter. He's always been one of my main influences. "You Don't, I Do..." I created when I started composing an intro for a standard tune, "You Don't know What Love Is," so I started using this as the intro to the standard, then I evolved it and changed the name to this. "Seasons," is about when the weather's changing and you feel it. This is from when I first started trying to play electric music at the Blue Note club in '98.

NOW: How has the jazz scene in Beirut evolved since you moved here?

Arthur Satyan: It is growing. I pushed it and helped start the other side of the jazz scene. There was a jazz scene before; people were playing fusion but they weren't really initiating these different styles. When I came here, along with Jack Gregg and Steve Phillips, we started teaching younger musicians. We started with fusion, taught them the difference between bebop and modern jazz. Before everyone just played and taught the standards, any jazz solo, now younger musicians have a favorite bebop standard and they know how to play and define between styles.

NOW: Before that there wasn't any kind of solid jazz music education?

Arthur Satyan: No, not at all; people were just listening and transcribing. That's what you do have to do, but you can also guide people. That's what I do, not just give them shortcuts. I started in the jazz department eight years ago and now you can see the results. Almost all the young musicians who play jazz now came to my classes.

NOW: You've played alongside many renowned jazz musicians who have visited Lebanon. Who have you had particular stage chemistry with?

Arthur Satyan: Out of the people I've played with lately, it definitely has to be Larry Coryell. I've played with Larry four or five times. Last time I was playing as organ player which was new to me; I'd been playing back then for only a year. He was sort of sarcastic about it. He told me, "You know who I play with normally?" I was like, "Who?" He said, "Joey De Francesco. God of the organ." I told him to wait to hear me play. He came to rehearsal and was just shocked. He was asking me to do a technique that De Francesco does and I was like, "Is this what you mean... brrr, brr, brr." I played very fast. I had a great time with Coryell. We just knuckled down and he was like "Man, we're going to blow them away. We can make a career of this!"

NOW: What's the future for jazz music in Lebanon?

Arthur Satyan: In Lebanon I think it's getting worse and worse. I don't want to say the scene is dying, because musicians are all getting smarter and play fantastically; it's more the people. At the George Benson concert, there were maybe 5,000 people. Then you go to the jazz club and see two people sitting. Where are these 5,000 people? It's maybe just an extremely snobbish crowd who just go to say they were at the George Benson concert. People should have a little support for the local scene, because without it, people just die after a couple of years.

It's sad. I don't know what to do. We've tried everything: no cover charge, changing the programs and doing things differently, and musicians are already not getting paid, but the people are getting less and less. They all listen to their records at home and some people fly to France to watch a French musician, but don't go a couple of meters to see someone here.

The new album "ARTology" from Arthur Satyan is available on [iTunes](#) and in local stores.