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The fine art of Arthur Satyan



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Chirine Lahoud | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Armenian jazz composer and musician Arthur Satyan first came to Beirut in 1996 for the grand opening of the Casino du Liban. He has performed in many venues around the country in the last 17 years and become a stalwart member of Beirut's small but robust jazz community.

At the end of last month Satyan released his second album "ARTology" at Sin al-Fil's Nova. Satyan spoke to The Daily Star about his new album and his long career in Lebanon.

Q: When did you start playing?

A: My whole family is composers. So I had no choice. If you go to Armenia and say "Satyan family" everyone knows them. It's like the Rahbanis here but we are more into classical music. I started playing at a young age. My father used to do jazz music and my brother also. I knew lots of jazz names and music when I was 2 or 3 years old. I had no choice when I was a kid. I was surrounded by musicians.

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I know lots of instruments and how to play them. This is how I studied in Armenia. The education there was fantastic and [teachers were] coming from [the] Russian school. You had to play violin. I was also a musical member in Armenia's Chamber Theater. I was conducting the music there. I was studying saxophone, bass and drums. I was the music director for five, six years. But I'm more into composition.

Q: How was the jazz scene when you started playing in Lebanon? And how is it now?

A: The jazz scene was not super. They were more into fusion than traditional jazz. They were playing but it was not like it is now. There are some musicians who were in my class. They have an international level. They play be-bop, and different styles. So, there is a huge difference between before and now. Nowadays, it is much better. Definitely. You have drummers and guitar players ... international stars are coming and playing with them and they say "Wow!"

Now it is perfect. We have good musicians. The scene is small, you know.

Q: How many albums have you released?

A: This is my second album. I was a bit lazy with that. I was playing a lot. It's not only about playing compositions; it is a whole repertoire of music. [For example,] you have to know a whole repertoire for piano. Same with jazz, you have to know around 300 classics in order to play jazz music. You put a lot of your life [into] learning how to play jazz and I've realized that I've done it a lot so why don't I release some of my compositions? And now I think it's time to produce my music.

This is the first album comprised of my [compositions only.] [My record "Art for Art's Sake," released in 2003] had some of my tunes and some jazz standards as well, that I had it recorded in 1998. The difference between the two albums is so huge that nobody believes that this is me playing. This music is pretty old but it happened that I released it now. Plans are really to stress on my music now.

Q: What are your views on Lebanese jazz?

A: Jazz is not only music. It is the way you live. You wake up different, you live different. I can wake up in the middle of the night and compose music. My family is not surprised at all. It is very normal for them.

You don't sleep at night, you might come back home at 5 a.m.

It's way better than before. Now [jazz] has a pretty good level. We have good musicians that sound like any professional. We have few bass players, few drummers who play way better.

Q: Do you have any upcoming concerts or projects?

A: I'm planning on doing a concert of the album. I didn't do it for the launch. It will be either in AUB or Beirut Souks. I haven't decided yet. But I'm playing at Nova, a pretty rock place. Now they're doing these jazz [sessions] Monday evenings with nice people [coming.] You have Razz'zz in Clemenceau. And that's it. We have like two or three places which play jazz music.

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Q: Why did you decide to release "ARTology" at Nova. How do you draw the link between jazz music and the other arts?

A: I always [link] these two words. ART as in arts, and ART as in my name. I'm trying to play around with that. I like composing maybe more than playing.

Some compositions [on the new record] are brand new. Some of them are pretty old. I wrote some of them in Armenia but I didn't have the proper gear keyboard to record the music. Now in Lebanon I have this beautiful equipment with me and I have my own studio so I can record my music anytime I want. That's a good opportunity.

I'm finding inspiration in the music, and I have some jazz idols. We all steal. Everyone steals from each other. Some great musician like Matt Powell, Weather Report, their sounds are in your head. Some people tell me when they listen to this album that the Weather Report's spirit is flying all over the music. I have my own style in composition but there is influence of [others.] I don't deny it.

The [session] musicians are from Lebanon, Armenia and Syria.

Q: Are there any jazz musicians that you think are promising?

A: All of them! These people who came out from my class are very talented. There is Raffi Mandalian, Fadi Farah on piano. They studied with me. People from the old generation are also masters, and teaching their students. The scene is better.

"ARTology" will soon be available at select music outlets and Virgin Megastore. At present it's available at Razz'zz, Nova and at Instrument Garage.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on August 21, 2013, on page 16.

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