

What's On



Al Amari band performing saut at Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah. (Inset): Salman Al Amari — leading exponent of saut.



Saut

ROCK & RHYTHM THAT SPEAKS THE BLUES

Voice of a poetic past

By Chaitali B. Roy
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'Make the most of your life and your grace, my beloved, make the most of them / Whilst you're still young and carefree / I fear that once you reach sixteen you'll regret your youth and forget it, together with your former loves and myself.'

These poignant words celebrating youth and love are from saut, an urban art music of the Arabian Gulf.

Not many people know that Kuwait is the birthplace of saut, the 'Blues of the Arabian Gulf', a genre of music that developed in the 19th century. According to Dr Lisa Urkevich, Professor of Musicology / Ethnomusicology and Chair of the Department of Music and Drama at the American University of Kuwait, 'Abdallah al Faraj was the father of saut, and he was Kuwaiti. He belonged to a family of rich merchants and was raised in India. He came back and developed the art form.' In his book, 'Performing the Past: Sea Music in the Arab Gulf States', Laith Ulaby notes, 'The saut is one of the most popular and widespread genre in the Gulf, both historically and today. As a genre, it offers an interesting case study of the development of a musical tradition in the cultural milieu of the Indian Ocean. Although some trace the origins of the saut to the Abbasid era or to different genres with the same name in other parts of the Arab world, the genre was probably developed by Abdallah Faraj in India. After the initial development by al Faraj, the genre took root in Kuwait and became very popular there.'

Researching the traditional music of the Arabian Gulf is not easy, but Dr Lisa Urkevich, despite being an 'outsider' has done that and more. Over the years, this scholar, author and producer of several books and CDs on the music of the Gulf, has relentlessly worked to document, preserve and showcase the traditional music and dance of the region. As founder and director of the 'Arabian Heritage Project,' (2006 to 2011), she also organized the Al Kout Festival, which inspired her students and the public at large to not only return to their roots,

but to celebrate it. At present, Dr Urkevich is working on a Hijazi art song CD/booklet and a book on the Gulf saut with Ahmad Al Salhi, singer, violinist, researcher, founder of zeryab.com, and a renowned expert in the field of saut.

Inherited

Kuwait inherited its folkloric music and dance from the Bedouins who walked the desert, the sailors and divers who endangered their lives looking for pearls and from the merchants and traders who dominated the port. In the past, folkloric music played an important role in relieving the tedium and hard slog of everyday life both at sea and in the desert. Saut, the classical art song of Kuwait, developed from a humble art initially performed by a small ensemble in an intimate setting. 'The saut is a lot like chamber music,' said Dr Urkevich in an interview to Arab Times. 'Like chamber music, saut too was per-

formed in an intimate private setting. In fact, that is how we believe it originated. It was a thinking man's music, an intellectual music that focused on the text and the melodic maqam, which was more sophisticated than the drumming and clapping in desert music. Later, after sea bands adopted it, the saut became loud and boisterous with the introduction of more percussion, paired dancing and interlocked clapping.'

The contribution of al Faraj (1836-1903) to the development of a new form of music in the Gulf is undeniable. Like his creation, al Faraj was like a breath of fresh air. He was multi-talented and well regarded as a poet and a composer. 'Al Faraj was the most educated man of his time who introduced his people to a new form of music,' observes Dr Urkevich. Undoubtedly, he was an interesting man, a maverick of sorts known for his kindness and generosity. 'It is said that he would laugh and talk at the

same time. He was a beautiful person, a dreamer,' continued Dr Urkevich with a smile. Al Faraj was completely oblivious to the material aspects of living. Having lost everything in India, he came back home to try his luck. And he found his calling.

Predominance

Poetry, especially Nabatean poetic traditions played a major role in the development of music in the Gulf. And al Faraj was one of the most noted poets of his times. Perhaps, it is this that led to poetry becoming the cornerstone of saut as an art form. Dr Urkevich agrees, 'Saut means voice signifying the predominance of lyrics in this form of music.' In his book, Laith Ulaby observes, 'An important master of the Nabatean tradition was the Kuwaiti Abdallah Al Faraj. Although he was born in Kuwait, in 1836, al Faraj grew up and attended school in Bombay, India. His family worked as traders, and while he attended Indian schools, he was educated in Arabic at home, including music and poetry. Al Faraj was considered a great poet of many poetic forms including the qasidah.' Perhaps, his initial years in India, in a multicultural environment also played an important role in impressing his creativity. This exposure to cultures is evident in saut that shows influences of Yemeni and Indian musical traditions. Laith Ulaby notes, 'Al Faraj is generally credited as being the originator of the saut genre, which contains a great deal of Indian influence. This influence is primarily in the melodies composed by al Faraj, some of which were taken directly from Indian songs... Although some scholars see his time in India as having a profound effect on the development of saut, others feel that it is still deeply rooted in the heritage of Arabic song.' When

asked if there is a Yemeni influence perceptible in saut, Dr Urkevich reflects, 'Yemenis speak beautiful Arabic, and their literature and music is lovely. There was a huge Yemeni presence in Bombay, and al Faraj was exposed to all of this. He studied with them and he learnt their vernacular. This could account for the influences in his music.'

Folkloric

Why is saut a sophisticated art form compared to the folkloric musical traditions in Kuwait? For one, traditionally, saut was an individual art which focused on a singer with his oud, an instrument not very popular in the Middle East, the mirwas, a kind of percussion instrument and the violin, another instrument unfamiliar in the Gulf. The music is strophic, which means the same rhythm is repeated, but different words are sung over it. Moreover, saut as a musical presentation follows a certain structure. 'The saut evening starts with the 'estemaa' which is a polite way of telling people to be quiet and this is followed by the saut Arabi (in 6), saut Shami (in 8), and saut Khayali (in 12).'

Saut was the music of the educated class. A typical saut performance was carried out in a specific social setting like a private salon or at weddings. Traditionally, a saut performance began with a singer accompanying himself on the oud. Later, rhythmical accompaniments were added in the form of mirwas and hand clappers called kaffafa. At present, the al Amari ensemble in Kuwait is one band that specializes in performing saut.

The saut musicians sought to be different from the run of the mill. They sang love songs in praise of the beloved or the memory of a lost love. 'Most of the saut singers were rock and roll, cool kind of guys. They were

like rebels and people treated them as such,' smiles Dr Urkevich. 'We call their music 'blues of the Gulf' because of the love and sad lyrics.'

Despite the fact that Abdallah al Faraj is acknowledged as the father of saut, there is contention in the region regarding its origins. Countries such as Bahrain, Qatar and the Al Hasa province of Saudi Arabia have traditions of saut, which they claim for their own. The leading Bahraini masters during the heyday included Mohamed Fares (1895-1947), Mohamed Zuwayid and Dahi bin Walid.

When it first appeared, saut had a considerable impact on the Kuwaiti culture as people visited music diwanis, and the royal family became great patrons of this form of music. With the saut, Abdullah Al Faraj urged his compatriots to enjoy music as an art form by dividing the structure into complicated maqams, introducing sophisticated poetry and prescribing a setting. Soon he had developed a group of loyal followers who tried to take forward the work of their master. 'His primary disciples were Ibrahim bin Yacoub and the brothers Khalid and Yusuf Al Bakr (d. 1955). Khalid and Yusuf taught a large generation of saut musicians in the late 1920s and 1930s and of these later followers five went by the last name "Al-Kuwaiti" - Saud Al Kuwaiti, Mahmoud Al Kuwaiti, Abdulatif Al Kuwaiti, Salih Al Kuwaiti (1908-1986) and his brother Daud (1910-1976). Salih and Daud were Jewish and eventually moved to Baghdad and later settled in Israel.' These saut masters worked along with Bahraini musicians to develop this genre into one of the greatest urban musical offerings in this part of the world.



Dr Lisa Urkevich a leading scholar of Gulf music.

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