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Two glimpses into the Triangle's often overlooked musical diversity

by Sylvia Pfeifferberger

Not every music scene is recognized as such. Less driven by money and less broadcast by traditional media and industry, certain enclaves simply grow out of tight-knit yet remarkably diverse communities because those groups demand them—if only for themselves. These are the domains of passion, personal relationships and the hard-fought pursuit of a singular art form.

From informal living-room jam sessions to nomadic urban parties, the Triangle is home to such bonded cultural communities. By way of a brief sampler, two music scenes thrived under (most of) our noses in 2011—a vivid belly dance picture and accompanying Middle Eastern and Arab live music both sacred and secular, and a young, eclectic jazz scene that increasingly makes its digs in downtown Durham. Both are diffuse yet self-sustaining. They are supremely local and generally low-budget, largely depending on word-of-mouth and social media to inform. Still, they are astonishingly international, with connections to regions and reputations well beyond the Triangle.

While it's increasingly impossible to give a definitive or all-inclusive look, these case studies bring good news: Not only is the Triangle music scene wonderfully kaleidoscopic, but opportunities to reach beyond the familiar club diet are closer than they might seem.

Naji Hilal is a master musician from Lebanon, but it's hard to predict where you might find him on any given day singing and playing his oud, the pear-shaped Middle Eastern ancestor of the lute. To wit, within just a few weeks in December, he will be soothing patients in Duke Hospital, accompanying professional belly dancers at a Lebanese cultural association, opening at the rock club Casbah for the genre-bending Hindugrass and performing in a living Nativity Christmas pageant at an Oxford, N.C., church.

"They brought in a camel," he says, surprised, about that last one.

In addition to teaching the occasional student, Hilal is a member of the musical collective Arabia Band, which plays events and private gatherings for various Arab communities throughout the area. But some of the most extraordinary musical moments, Hilal says, come from playing for local belly dancers, like Hanan Sultan.

"One time recently, it was only me on oud and her dancing," he says. "It was such an interaction of motion and music; it's like she was reading my mind."

Belly dancer Mara Cohen says she knows that feeling well.

"As a performer, it's a very unique experience to be connected to a band that's playing live music," she offers. Cohen started the Triangle Belly Dance Meetup, a rich online source of event information. "You have to be completely aware of what they're playing so that your body moves to the music. You're very much living that moment."

Besides being a belly dancer, Cohen is a musician in Lost Nomads. Andrew Shakinovsky, one of Hilal's oud students, leads the band, which frequently accompanies dancers in the Triangle's multicultural belly dance community. Every two months, on the last Tuesday of the month, all converge on Fullsteam brewery for "Undulation Nouveau," a night of performances to live music that is free and open to the public. As with most of the male members in the group, Shakinovsky is married to a belly dancer. That's how the band got started. Playing music helps him understand and immerse himself in the movement, he says.

"We started out drumming because that's maybe the easiest thing you can do if you want to participate," Shakinovsky explains. "We started practicing together and picking up other ethnic instruments. We all have day jobs. It's somewhat of a hobby or a passion that has taken on a life of its own."

The Nomads adapt musically to the wide variety of belly dance styles represented in the Triangle, from American Tribal and American Cabaret to classical Egyptian, Turkish, Gypsy and Mediterranean folkloric. With an amalgamation of influences under their belt, the Nomads are writing originals as well. They've played the restaurant circuit but are happy to be moving away from that now; 2011's big gigs came with the International Festival and the Carrboro Music Festival. At Cary's Eid Festival earlier this year, an all-male Muslim choir from the Apex Mosque, known as the Nasheeds, performed a remarkable collaboration with the Cary Choir; most people in the area seem surprised to learn this stuff even exists locally. Attracting new awareness for these forms is an active goal for Shakinovsky.

"We started getting opportunities to play at other events which were not related to the belly dance scene, per se. Those are kind of the fun ones because we actually get to play for people who are not in the scene," Shakinovsky says. "It's kind of a niche and we enjoy that, although I'd really love to see more people getting involved in this kind of music."

At about 10:30 p.m. every Thursday night at the Whiskey in downtown Durham, Brian Horton takes out his saxophone and starts to play. With drummer Jasmine Best, bassist Lance Scott and pianist Ernest Turner, his quartet attracts not only an animated assortment of late-night bar types but also students and faculty from North Carolina Central's acclaimed Jazz Studies Program, where Horton teaches. Under Horton's subtle yet commanding direction, local pros and surprise guests float in and out of the jam session until closing time; Branford Marsalis has been known to show up unannounced.

"It's kind of become one of those refuges, like a home we can go to every week," says Horton. "I'm always surprised by what's going on when we play and the people that come out."

It's one of the best places to catch great live jazz in the Bull City, whose recent jazz pedigree includes Marsalis, Nnenna Freelon, John Brown, Lois Deloatch and many more. It's by no means the only: Just down Main Street, Beyu Caffè (pronounced "bee you," as in be yourself) has likewise become a haven for jazz, giving local musicians a chance to perform several nights a week. Says Betty Rhodes, a Beyu regular: "I love it. It's personal. They make you feel at home."

Not too far away, a series of old manufacturing mills named Golden Belt houses apartments, artist workspaces and the LabourLove Gallery, now home to a new after-hours concert series on Third Fridays, spearheaded by fledgling nonprofit The Art of Cool Project. The mission is to create audience awareness and new performance opportunities for musicians in Durham's burgeoning jazz scene.

"To create more exposure for the music—that's just good music in general, it's not boxed in the category of being jazz, or being smooth jazz, or folk or indie rock or anything," says co-founder and trumpeter Al Strong. "It's just what we consider to be good music."

Says Strong's Art of Cool co-founder Cicely Mitchell, the beginnings of the programming back in August were very serendipitous. Looking for a one-time concert venue, they approached gallery owners Kelly Dew and John Pelphrey.

"John was actually the one who came up with the concept of doing after-hours concerts to bring in some more foot traffic after the Third Friday," Mitchell recalls. "The [first show] was standing room only, and John and Kelly were like, 'Wow. Can you do this again?'"

Rather than form a house band, Mitchell and Strong decided to spread the wealth: book a different artist every month, keeping it fresh for musicians and audiences alike. They've featured the likes of soul singer Carlitta Durand and cellist Shana Tucker, while hip-hop button pushers The Beast and suave bop outfit Peter Lamb and The Wolves are slated for 2012.

"When you go to New Orleans, there's like one sound. One thing I like about the jazz scene here is, it's a very eclectic mix. There's really not one sound," explains Mitchell. Indeed, Bull City jazz runs the gamut from smooth jazz, bop and post-bop to jazz infused with R&B, gospel and hip-hop. Art of Cool aims to pull it all together and make it more accessible to Triangle audiences.

"The up-and-coming young lions, the new jazz artists, are paying homage to the hip-hop influence, the gospel, the soul, the R&B influence in their music," says Kim Arrington, who will perform in the space next year. Her next album will include covers of Tears for Fears, Janet Jackson and Cole Porter. "We know that some people will be like, 'This is not jazz.' And some people will be like, 'This is the kind of music I want to listen to. Who cares what it is?'"

Arrington has performed in Latin America and Europe, but she still makes Durham her home because she says it's a good place to live as a working musician. She's financing her next CD through private house concerts.

"People hire us to come into their living rooms. We don't care about a record company. We only ask for a donation. So anyone can do this," she says. "Anyone can be a patron of the arts."

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A row of social media and engagement buttons. From left to right: a 'Like' button, a 'Send' button, a text-based button that says 'Cicely Mitchell, Al Strong and 54 others like this.', a small square button with the number '1', a larger square button with the number '44', a square button with the number '0', and a square button with the number '9'.

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