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Jamming with the Tunisia man

By Cecil J. Chen

The Alliance Francaise de Karachi played host to a live performance titled 'Jazz Guitar and World Music' by French Jazz guitarist Mamdouh Bahri and his band Tuesday night. The music, a compelling fusion of the oriental and the occidental, appealed to the large crowd that filled Le Patio on the occasion.



This concert was Bahri's first ever in Pakistan and will be followed by a performance at the World Performing Arts Festival 2006 in Lahore on November 16.

The concert started late, pending, as usual, the arrival of guests and a few speeches by the hosts. Bahri, while standing behind this reporter, said, "This is taking too long." Maybe it was providence or pure coincidence, but soon after his words, he was called to stage and the performance began.

With Bahri on the electric guitar, Francis Balzamo on bass guitar and Jacques DaCosta on drums, the trio kicked off the concert with the title song of his latest album, Tabarka. Tabarka is a city in north-western Tunisia, which is from where Bahri hails.

The track teemed with blends of Funk and Jazz laced with the undertones of ethnic music. With traditional jazzy beats and rhythm provided by DaCosta and Balzamo, Bahri interwove, with the extra manipulation of his fingers on the guitar, licks of the traditional music he grew up with in Tunisia. The nearly six-minute instrumental also featured a drum solo, riffs accompanied by Balzamo's smooth bass lines and towards the end of the number, a wonderful transitional scale change. All in all, the song started the concert off on the right note with the audience which exploded into applause at the end of the number.

The trio played a total of eight tracks during the one-hour performance which was constantly met by a round of applause from the audience after each chorus, riff, bridge and solo. Much of the music showed the influences and musical aspects of legendary artists such as Hendrix, Santana, Clapton, B. B. King, Coltrane, Martino, Miles Davis and Montgomery - a little of each.

The songs combine Afro-Mediterranean music with a tradition well represented by jazz standards and reminiscent of the sensation that accompanies a jam session.

In a few of the pieces, the trio portrayed a variety of moods, especially in their third track, in which the music had a constant feel of spontaneity. One feels as though there is a certain familiarity in the progression of notes but then it changes, unexpectedly, sometimes subtly, and other

times prominently.

Very few tracks were not memorable. The audience especially appreciated a subsequent number which was immersed in Hispanic notes, littered with guitar licks that were reminiscent of Santana with lapses of Hendrix and Montgomery, capturing a Samba-like quality and yet staying true to jazz. The number, Bahri explained earlier, was originally conceived and composed about four months ago in during a trip to Chile.

Bahri was born in Sfax, Tunisia, and, at the age of 25, moved to Montpellier, in the south of France. He grew up listening to the traditional music of Tunisia, where he absorbed the Eastern strains into his music and started playing Derbouka (hand drum percussion).

As a teenager, he listened to Hendrix, Santana, and other popular artists of the seventies. When he got his first guitar at eighteen, he started emulating their music and performing with local bands, adding his own personal flair to the popular songs of the seventies.

His interest in jazz was influenced by George Benson's "Weekend in L.A." and much of his music is influenced by John Leslie 'Wes' Montgomery, Joe Pass, and Pat Martino, sparking a lifelong love of jazz.

The trio concluded the performance with a piece in which Bahri invited a local tabla player by the name of Arif to the stage. Infused with a more local sound, the last track drew much appreciation from the audience that was treated to prominent - without being loud - funky beats from the tablas and drums with rhythms accompanied by the lead and bass guitars.

The audience, revelling in the harmonious production of the quartet, demanded an encore which, of course, was granted, despite an announcement that dinner would be served. Many listeners stayed glued to their seats as the trio, now joined by Arif the tabla player, indulged the audience with a final pieces that culminated in an instrumental crescendo and a standing ovation.

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