

## Culture

## Dervish troupe preserves Sufi tradition in Egypt

Marwa al-A'sar

Cairo

When Sufi vocalist Amer el-Tony founded the al-Mawlawiya al-Masriya in 1994, he performed at the few private theatres available. However, the Egyptian dervish group has developed into a full-fledged troupe performing in Egypt and abroad.

Al-Mawlawiya is a symbolic ritual through which dervishes target perfection. Dancers whirl counter-clockwise, deserting their egos and desires to communicate and worship God through spinning with the rotations of the planets.

"While whirling and listening to the Sufi songs I always feel as if I am flying," said an al-Mawlawiya dancer who identified himself as Mahmoud.

He said the aim of the ritual was to turn around oneself, first slowly then more rapidly "until one reaches a state of trance, one that transcends the physical body, to enter a spiritual order."

The Mawlawis are a Sufi order created in Konya in Turkey in the 13th century by the followers of the Persian poet and theologian Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi. Dancing, chanting of Sufi poems and music are used to get closer to God.

Al-Mawlawiya al-Masriya is derived from the Turkish version but substantially different in looking at the spiritual side of the ceremony and in its more modernist approach to the music, incorporating violin and guitar in addition to the traditional nay and oud.

Tony's Sufi singing about the love of the Almighty and the Prophet Mohammad is not always coupled with dancing.

"During the performances, I also chant without dancing intervals to let our audience concentrate on the poems and look into the power of the words," he said.

Tony said he does not chant Rumi's poems because they were



Egyptian Mawlawiya troupe performing in Cairo.

(Provided by Marwa al-Asar)

written in Persian and Turkish and would lose their meaning and spirituality if translated into Arabic. Instead, he chants the poems of famous Arab Sufis and writes his own music.

"We are keen not to take songs from anyone, even heritage songs. We also seek to present new tunes so the audience does not get tired," he said.

The name Mawlawiya is based on the word "Mawlana" ("our master"), the title by which Rumi was addressed. The Mawlawiya was introduced in Egypt in the 16th century after the Ottoman conquest.

"Tony has managed successfully to absorb Rumi's Mawlawiya and to modernise it without violating its principles," observed Ibrahim Haggagy, a retired university professor of Islamic history and archaeology.

The troupe's performances usu-

ally emit positive energy and Mawlawiya is state of mind rather than simply entertainment, he added.

Tony described his art as a spiritual experience more than anything else.

"Words release energy. We always attempt to spiritually connect with the audience," he said. "Sufi poetry is coded, meaning it has a lot of hidden messages but, usually, our audiences manage to decode the messages in the songs."

"It is a spiritual moment rather than a cultural event. Our state of mind takes control of us to the point that while chanting I feel that

I'm out of place and time."

A distinctive feature of al-Mawlawiya al-Masriya's performances is the improvisation, Tony said, stressing that "the real state of creativity is not achieved unless we occasionally forget the laws of music and break them."

Typically, clothing worn by Sufi dancers symbolises different elements through shape and colour. White symbolises the shroud and the black the tomb. Al-Mawlawiya dervishes, however, wear outfits representing the seven colours of the rainbow, "which are those of the universe," Tony explained.

Tony and al-Mawlawiya al-Masriya occasionally sing for the Virgin Mary and Jesus. "We have many Christian fans and viewers who identify themselves as Sufi Christians," he said.

The Sufi band is popular, with regular fans who make a point not

to miss the shows.

"I usually attend Tony's performances every month. I always leave the theatre feeling that I have been washed of all the negative energy," said Amr Ibrahim, one of the group's fans.

Tony said his plans include chanting Sufi songs accompanied by a symphony orchestra.

"We hope to present symphonic Sufi songs soon," he said. "I first write the music based on the instruments I have been using, then I add a new instrument and I change the music arrangements."

Tony is credited for protecting Egyptian Malawiya heritage, which is an integral part of Sufi tradition. His troupe has performed in festivals in India, the Netherlands, Germany, France and Spain.

Marwa al-A'sar is a Cairo-based journalist.

● **The rite of dance, chant of Sufi poems and music help the Mawlawis get closer to God.**

## Amman a potential music hub yet to receive attention

Nadine Sayegh

Amman

The Arab region is no stranger to contemporary arts and culture. From the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi to Beirut's renovated Metro al Madina theatre hosting increasingly unique young artists such as Mo Khansa, the region is home to many creative talents. However, there is one capital city that's generally left out of consideration – Amman, Jordan.

Though the city has numerous talents – from those in fine art to underground hip-hop – it is generally not included in discussions on contemporary Arab culture.

New musical talents from Amman, including Dirar Shawagfeh, drummer of popular post-rock band El Morabba3; Laith al-Huseini, better known as rap artist the Synaptik; and artist and rapper Fadi Hourani, stressed the lack of local interest in their art.

Considering there is a limited music industry in the Arab world for the kinds of sounds produced by these artists, they, like many oth-

ers in the region, use the internet as their main platform.

YouTube, SoundCloud and BandCamp are growing increasingly populated with regional talent. Some of the artists' tour in the West, as is the case of El Morabba3, scheduled to perform in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as tend to their fans in Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon, among other places. That, however, doesn't mean the Jordanian state is interested in supporting them.

But cultural constraints in Jordan have begun to ease to allow these groups to take the spotlight, Shawagfeh said.

"What made me decide to be a musician in Jordan?" Shawagfeh said, "When I was 14 or 15 years old, watching a metal concert in Jordan was an underground scene. It wasn't – let's say – legal to do such a thing because it provoked the religion and society of the country."

"Music was made interesting for our generation and for me as it became somewhat of a rebellion that got us."

Hourani said he began making music to explore a new medium. His work in other domains of culture opened the door for him. As for the Synaptik, he said: "I always wanted to make music and did what I needed to become one, despite being in the country."

The advantage Arab artists have is that a large market opens for them, so while there may only be a small number of Jordanians as fans of their work, these artists all have fan bases in other Arab countries.



New music. Members of the Jordanian post-rock band El Morabba3.

(El Morabba3)

"There is feedback from Arabs in the region – Tunisia, Egypt. It creates a type of 'oneness.' We're all Arab and we're all working on the same things. There is always space to collaborate," Hourani said.

As far as Jordan goes, "the local community in Jordan is definitely interested, in Egypt and Lebanon, too, but it's just the (Jordanian) officials who aren't interested in what we do," Huseini said.

This lack of interest from official

channels limits the reach of emerging artists when officials should be supporting a growing industry, particularly considering high youth unemployment rates and a suffering economy.

"Improved venues would lead to more opportunities in events management, sound and light engineering. Basically, more work for everybody," Shawagfeh said.

Huseini complained that cultural channels such as the Ministry of

Culture and its associated bodies "want nothing to do with us," which is not a surprise for a conservative country.

"One of the reasons Beirut and Cairo may have a better reputation is that arts and music have better support," he said. "We were just in Beirut around a month ago. There are so many more venues and spaces to perform and organise events."

Aside from an underdeveloped scene, navigating Jordanian cultural and religious dynamics is difficult in any cultural production context and the case of contemporary music, probably more so.

Hourani pointed to a lack of diversity among artists. "You know how it is for women here [difficult]. It would be good to see more female artists, it would be good for the country," he said, noting that women are culturally active across the region but in Jordan tradition leaves a large gap.

Despite the obstacles, the musicians said they were competition for their regional counterparts.

"We have to put so much more work in it; the quality of our stuff is really good," Huseini said.

"All eyes are on Jordan. We are producing new music and new genres and bands like Jadal, Autostrad and El Morabba3. We are taking over if only our country supported us like it should," Shawagfeh said.

Nadine Sayegh is a freelance journalist based in Jordan working on social, political and cultural issues within the Arab world.

● **While marginalised at home, Jordanian hip-hop and rock groups are popular in other Arab countries.**