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An Arab American
producer uses the
power of music
to narrow the gap
between cultures
By Joseph Braude

Photos By Shay Peretz



Dawn Elder never forgot the night her father took her to hear a Lebanese diva. She wanted to make music as pure as that.

Dawn Elder

grew up in San Francisco in the '70s on a diet of rock 'n' roll and her mother's Lebanese cooking. Her bedroom was the one with the Eagles and Beatles blaring from it. She hit clean octaves on the piano in the living room and skated neat figure eights at the local ice rink. Her exacting personality, teachers said, ensured her a promising career as a chemist.

Neither her science textbooks nor her taste in pop could explain the profound impact a strange musical experience would have the night her father, of Palestinian descent, took her to see a Lebanese diva perform in a San Francisco concert hall. Elder's lab partners in chemistry class never could have guessed that the California native was destined to fuse Middle Eastern music and American pop in recording studios all over Los Angeles.

"It was, like, a moment out of the space-time continuum," Elder says of that long-ago night in the concert hall. "This exotic woman singing these ancient sounds, and thousands of Arab Americans from all over California singing along and cheering her like she was a rock star."

The melodies Elder and most Americans grew up with have their roots in the music of the Middle East, where the early ancestors of the electric guitar and saxophone were invented. But the East-West aesthetic divide is wide, due as much to political tensions between America and the Muslim world as to a basic harmonic difference. Although songs by Bach and the Beatles use just two eight-tone scales—major and minor—there are more than a dozen in the freewheeling musical landscape spanning eastward from Morocco's Atlantic shores. The music Elder heard that night in San Francisco was sung in scales with names such as *Hijaz* and *Rast*, denoting subtly different combinations of quarter-tone intervals that can color the mood of any song. The scales, or *maqamat*, were interwoven in an elaborate modal system, which can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamia and Greece.

Today, American pop stars are embracing these foreign musical styles, due in no small part to Elder's prodding. Take the bilingual dance track "Love to the People," a duet with Carlos Santana and Algerian vocalist Cheb Khaled that Elder co-produced. The song opens with the breathy sound of the *nay*, an Arabic shepherd's flute, wailing a dark melody along the angular *Hijaz* scale—at first slow, low and tentative, then picking up speed and urgency. Just when the mind's eye begins to conjure shifting desert sands or Arab street scenes, a more familiar Latin rock groove kicks in on percussion, followed by the unmistakable sting of Santana's electric guitar and "Smooth"-style chord fills from his rhythm section. These Arabic and Latino colors blend easily, to be upstaged only by lyrics from California reggae singer Elan, in a whiskey-stained voice that echoes the breathy blasts of the nay:

*Summer sun floating on the hill
There's something magic in the sky
She flutters free on a jasmine breeze
Gentle like a butterfly*

As Elan approaches the refrain—*Calling everyone/Changing body, soul and mind*—he's joined by lead vocalist Khaled, whose Arabic- and French-language hits have stirred millions in Arab and European countries. On this track, he sings in English for the first time in his career, the conventions of Arab pop surviving the transition intact. He lingers on the long vowels as if he were crooning in his native tongue, ornamenting English words with North

African-style melodic trills wound tightly around the edges of his favorite Arabic scales. Hybrid sounds like these have long been relegated to the World Music section of a record store. But they typify a new style of American ethnic fusion that's largely emanating from California. With a mounting sense of urgency since 9/11, Elder has worked to persuade top L.A. producers and recording artists to reach out musically to the Arab world. The presence of Arab, Iranian and South Asian immigrants—who together number more than 1 million in Greater Los Angeles—has created both a talent pool of ethnic artists and a reliable audience for their hybrid music. And given the widespread disaffection with the Bush administration's foreign policy, some of L.A.'s leading entertainers have been attracted by the chance to make a political statement by teaming up with Arab and Muslim artists.

"It's about making music to help Americans humanize the Middle East," Elder explains, "and keeping American pop growing and evolving."

Even before 9/11, daring mainstream artists were demonstrating that a musical fusion of East and West could transcend the conflict and resonate deeply—and romantically—with American pop audiences. Sting's landmark hit "Desert Rose," for example, from the 1999 album "Brand New Day," has the British performer crooning about the mysteries of the Sahara, while in between verses the piercing voice of Algerian pop star Cheb Mami winds rapid trills around an old Algerian scale. The lyrics Mami sings may be incomprehensible to most American listeners, but his otherworldly vocal riffs helped "Desert Rose" sweep pop charts around the globe, including America's Top 40.

More recently, Arabic pop sounds have been migrating from the background to the foreground. When DJ Cheb i Sabbah, another Elder client and collaborator, shows up to spin discs at Temple Bar in Santa Monica, the line outside the club looks as if it could stretch to his native North Africa. Anxious speculation over the availability of tickets buzzes in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, English and Spanish. "He's this high-energy little guy who's transforming American dance music," Elder says. Pulsating trance music indoors blends the disparate sounds of Arabia, Africa and Asia—the heartlands of the Muslim world—courtesy of an Algerian Jewish DJ with a cult following that spans L.A.'s manifold ethnicities and sects.

Scenes like that are no accident.

I watch Elder shuffle into Elias Arts studios in Santa Monica one evening with an armful of CD jewel cases labeled in Arabic, Farsi and French. She greets an Egyptian percussionist in the lobby with traditional twin kisses on the cheeks and makes small talk in her American-accented Lebanese dialect. Then for producer Jonathan Elias, a leading composer of movie trailer and TV commercial soundtracks, she offers a muscular handshake.

"I brought you some show and tell," she says, tapping her world music stack. What follows, for hours into the night, feels like a cross between a Def Jam session and a United Nations Security Council debate. Dueling percussionists with a language barrier require Elder's mediation skills to settle

A.J. Racy | OUD PLAYER



Born in Lebanon, Racy earned degrees in musicology at the University of Illinois and has been at UCLA since 1978.

whether a Pakistani rhythm could be grafted over a standard rock beat. As an Arabic flute player struggles to tame the stand-up mike in a glass-enclosed soundproof chamber, Elder simultaneously keeps her eyes on him, motioning with her hands the solution to his problem, while launching into an impromptu show-and-tell lecture for Elias.

"Just to kind of give you an idea where I'm going with this," she says, "here's a sample of Umm Kulthum in the '50s." At the touch of a button, surrounding speakers pipe in Elder's CD mix of Cairo's most famous diva, dubbed "the voice of Egypt," wailing an epic poem to a live audience, backed by a string-heavy 32-piece orchestra.

"I love that," Elias says. "All the instruments seem to be playing in unison, though."

Elder nods her head slowly. "We do not have harmonies in traditional Arabic music."

Elias says he has called in Elder and her clients to "internationalize" the ensemble mix for his forthcoming trance album, "Prayer Cycle 2." He envisions exotic instruments and singers in more than a dozen languages using traditional song to ask a higher being for peace and protection from nuclear war. Over this backdrop, Sting, Robert Downey Jr. and other celebrities will read poems about the perils of the atomic age.

"I can get you an Indian Pakistani raga singer," Elder tells Elias, "because both countries have the bomb now, right?"

She explains that one of her clients, Riffat Sultana, is the scion of a singing

dynasty that dates back 500 years to India's Mughal Muslim empire. She's also the first woman in her esteemed family to be allowed to perform—a cultural breakthrough in South Asian Muslim culture for which Elder takes partial credit.

Elias says: "Make it happen, Dawn."

How Elder ended up connecting professionally with her faraway roots is a story of delayed surrender to destiny, and a fateful migration southward along the Pacific coastline. Like many Californians of Middle Eastern ancestry, Elder has wrestled with her multicultural identity amid strained relations between the United States and her parents' native lands. Harmonizing these often discordant influences can be harder in life than it is in a recording studio. She might still be avoiding her Arab American heritage today, but for an idealistic song.

In the early '80s, Elder stopped pursuing her biochemistry degree at Berkeley and eventually got a job in Santa Barbara promoting rock 'n' roll and Latino acts, fusing authentic sounds and worthy community causes, as long as they weren't her own.

"My father and I went together to an Arab wedding in Detroit around that time," she remembers, "and everything at this wedding was done up badly.

The PA system, the dancers, the singer. It got to the point where the star performer was doing this dance with a candelabra on her head. I looked at my dad and said, 'Baba, there's just no way I'm going to get involved with this kind of stuff.'"

She teamed up with Mike Love and the Beach Boys to plan fundraising concerts for a scholarship program and took on George Clinton and the Funkadelics and several other rock groups as a representative and artistic manager. When Latin rock took off as a popular strain in California music, she pioneered a Spanish dance festival and concert events to celebrate the Latino history of the Central Coast.

It was songwriter Michael Sembello, a Grammy Award-winning protégé of Stevie Wonder, who in late 1996 asked Elder to help him plan a video shoot in Long Beach based on a new song he'd written, "One Planet One People." What became known as the International Friendship Festival aspired to bring to one California venue as many ethnicities and bands as possible. "We saw it as an opportunity to build bridges," Elder recalls. "This idea that no matter what race a person may be—if you can see him, hear him, reach out and touch him, then you won't be afraid."

L.A.'s Jewish, Irish, Italian, Latino and South Asian elite lost little time in lining up dance troupes and bands to make their mark on the festival. But when it came to North African and Middle Eastern musicians, Elder was disappointed to find that the community was divided and lacking in leadership despite the large numbers of immigrants and abundance of performing acts. In a development meeting for the festival, some event planners offered to import a small herd of camels to stock a tent exhibition on the Middle East. Elder remembers fuming to herself: The part of the world that gave birth to civilization and invented melody was going to be represented by a Middle Eastern stereotype—unless she did something about it.

"It was the last straw for me, no pun intended," she says. "I remembered the world-class concert my father took me to see when I was a girl. I realized I was going to have to make this happen myself."

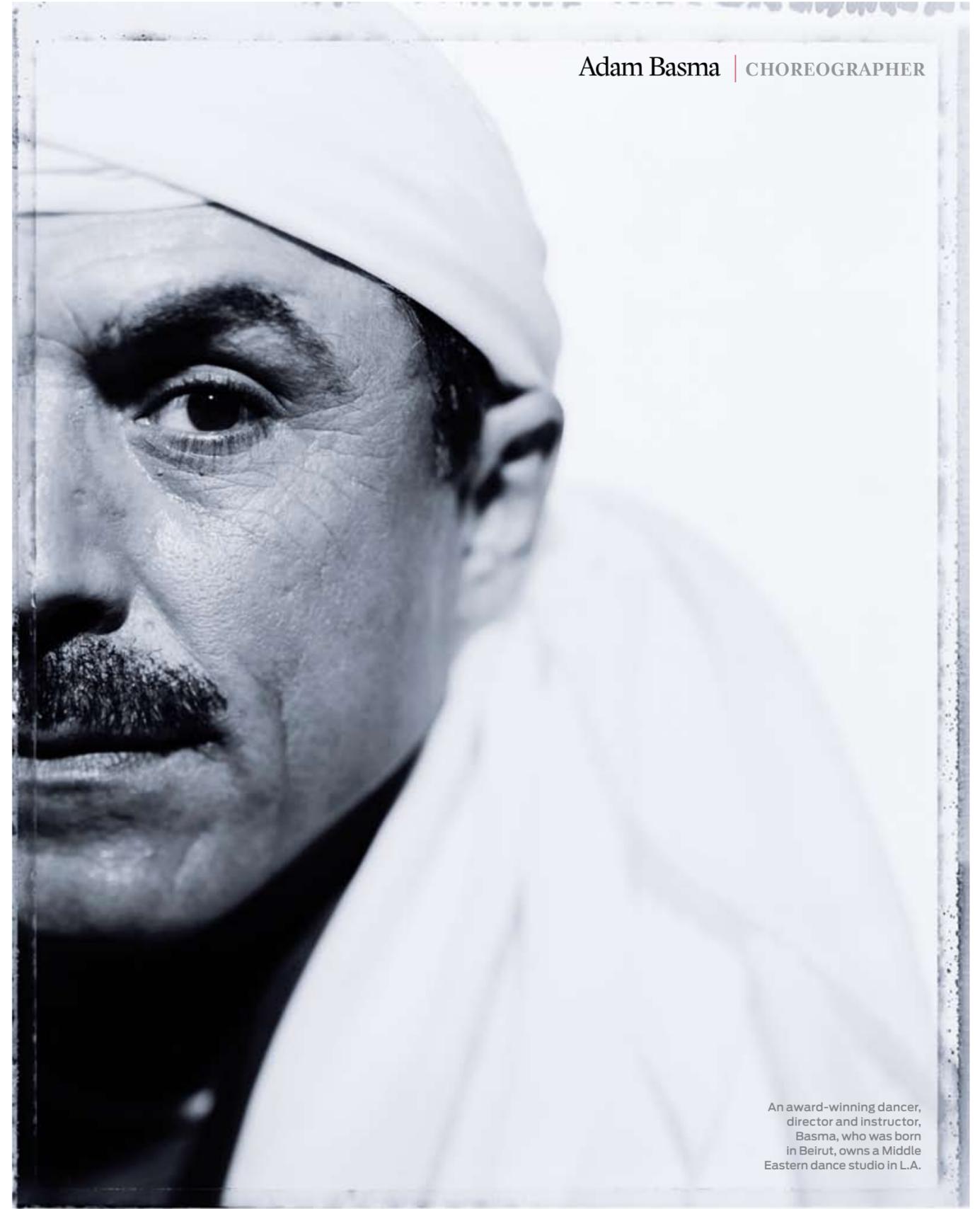
Elder steered clear of L.A.'s belly dance and cabaret scene and turned for advice to some of the city's Arab American cultural cognoscenti. She was introduced to

Salar Nader | TABLA PLAYER



An Afghani American, Nader performs all over the world, playing locally with DJ Cheb i Sabbah.

Adam Basma | CHOREOGRAPHER



An award-winning dancer, director and instructor, Basma, who was born in Beirut, owns a Middle Eastern dance studio in L.A.

The Egyptian-born Gomaa specializes in North African and Arabic percussion instruments.



Gamal Gomaa | PERCUSSION PLAYER

the Kan Zaman Community Ensemble, an all-volunteer Arabic orchestra based in Arcadia whose concerts re-create symphonic sounds that go back more than 1,000 years. Adam Basma, a Beirut-born dancer and choreographer, befriended the promoter and volunteered his Rolodex. And when Elder mentioned that her parents had named her after the famous Lebanese diva Sabah (it means early morning in Arabic), Basma let slip some community gossip:

"You know, she's here in California right now," he told her. "Her children live around San Diego, and she comes to visit every year. Let's meet her."

For Arab music lovers, meeting Sabah is a privilege akin to meeting Barbra Streisand.

"I'll never forget sitting down with that charming 73-year-old woman," Elder recalls. "Blond hair, a grand dress, a heart of gold. My parents fell in love to the sound of her voice. When I told her I was trying to introduce Arabic music to a massive L.A. audience, she didn't hesitate. She said, 'I'll do it. I'll do it for free.'"

For the festival, Sabah assembled an all-Arab American orchestra to back her up, performed to a packed Southern California crowd and added her voice, along with the Kan Zaman players, to a live rendition of Sembello's song about global oneness. The moving event was a turning point in Elder's career, and a milestone for L.A.'s Arab American community. Says Elder: "Middle Eastern and North African music is basically what I've been doing ever since."

She maintains her headquarters in Santa Barbara—a small office with a personal assistant—and commutes to L.A. most weeks. She frequently travels to Arab countries with her clients, though since the war in Lebanon and Israel in July there have been numerous tour cancellations in the region. In an e-mail I received from Elder in September, she seemed caught up in the violence engulfing her ancestral homelands. "We have a few things cooking hopefully that will bring on a positive spin to all that has been so negative lately in the world," she writes. "Music and Arts are Spiritual & Emotional healers[.] I only hope I have enough of it around to bring a few smiles to people[s] faces and a better outlook on tomorrow."

Pop music producers who find their way into Elder's creative circle are an eclectic bunch, but uniformly devoted to pushing the limits of pop. One of them is KC Porter, Santana's co-producer on "Love to the People."

"I've just felt such a responsibility to give," he explains. "The Middle Eastern world has been getting this message from America of force and aggression, and I feel like, what better response than to send back a message of love and compassion?" Hence the bilingual duet Porter co-produced after the start of the Iraq war, aptly titled "Love and Compassion," which brings together Grammy Award-winning vocalist Paula Cole with Iraq's top singing heartthrob, Kazem Al Sahir, among others.

Porter's parents, both California natives, were converts to the Bahá'í faith, a young religion whose 19th century prophet hailed from Iran. Their missionary work throughout Guatemala when Porter was a child exposed him to the sounds of South American music and language—an upbringing he put to use producing a young Ricky Martin's first album in English. "The Bahá'í view on life, and the basic principle of the Bahá'í faith, is the oneness of humankind," he says. "That's something I've really tried to focus on—how can I further that? But now, that means my interest is shifting from Latin

America to the Middle East."

While Porter reflects on his work, his assistant is shuttling in and out of the house with two cellphones and a scratch pad as they prepare for a new multicultural musical experiment. Seventy or so culturally diverse musicians and songwriters will converge on a sound stage at the Jim Henson studios in Hollywood in a few days. Each act will spend the afternoon in a soundproof room writing a song together. Elder, seated across from Porter at a picnic table in his backyard, is hellbent on stocking the talent pool with as many Middle Eastern musicians as possible.

"You really should get Gamal Gomaa for this," Elder suggests, scrolling down the little PDA screen in her hand. "He's a fabulous percussion player from Egypt. Played with all the great belly dancers. And he lives here now."

"Gamal," the assistant replies, taking notes, "We'll add him to the drum circle."

"I wish this thing weren't happening so soon," Elder says. "We've got Kazem Al Sahir coming in next month, and I would have loved to bring in Simon Shaheen on oud."

"What's an oud?"

A mainstay of Arabic, Armenian and Turkish music, it is the 11-stringed antecedent to the European lute, shaped like a giant pear sliced down the middle and traditionally strummed, mandolin-style, with a feather pick. A.J. Racy, professor of ethnomusicology at [CONTINUED ON PAGE 65]

Dawn Elder

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UCLA, says the instrument is known in the Arab world as "Amir al-Tarab, which means the prince of ecstasy, in reference to the enchanting quality of his sound." Its hollow wood body resonates with every nuance of finger pressure on the neck or friction between the pick and string.

"I could tell you stories about the oud," Elder says. "I'll never forget this guy I know at Clear Channel telling me that American radio won't accept the sound of the oud. He just couldn't see any of his DJs picking up on it."

One song featuring the oud that Clear Channel radio stations haven't aired is Lenny Kravitz's kicking anti-war track, "We Want Peace"—another Kazem Al Sahir duet. Rock the Vote, a Redondo Beach-based youth empowerment organization, released the song exclusively on its website in February 2003, more than a month before the American-led invasion of Iraq. The Palestinian American oud player Simon Shaheen starts off the track with a feverish solo run down the neck of his instrument, melding

the flash of a Spanish flamenco guitar riff with a somber Arabic scale. The trademark Kravitz R&B groove takes over, flavored with tambourine and Levantine-style percussion fills by Lebanese American drummer Jamey Haddad. Kravitz and Al Sahir take turns crooning for peace, then jointly power the chorus: "We want peace we want it yes we want peace we want it yes we want peace yeah we want it nowww!"

A version of the song with an Arabic refrain wasn't released in the U.S. Elder explains why: "It hadn't been long since Condoleezza Rice was warning the media about coded messages on satellite television broadcasts from Osama bin Laden," she says.

"After the Dixie Chicks got in trouble, we didn't want to take any chances."

It's interesting that, like Elder, the secretary of State grew up skating figure eights and practicing classical music on the piano. And that both women went on to pursue careers largely dominated by Middle East concerns.

"Don't push it," Elder says. "She does her thing, I do mine." **w**

Elder steered clear of the belly dance scene in favor of traditional groups such as the Taal Dance Company, led by Neera Chanani.



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