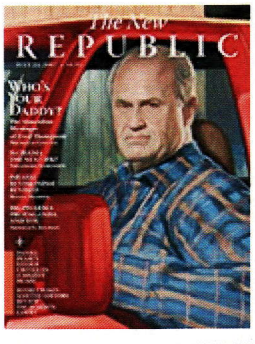
The New REPUBLIC



LOST & FOUND

Playing From Memory

by Joseph Braude

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[What is Lost & Found?]

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Israeli-born composer and performer Yair Dalal has never been to Baghdad, home to his parents until they fled in the early 1950s together with 125,000 other Jews. But it's that city's musical heritage, as it sounded when his family departed half a century ago, that comes alive in Dalal's technique and improvisational style today. His music is the sound of a culture flash-frozen in time and thawed a generation later.

Learning the music of your parents' generation doesn't seem unusual but, as far as the Iraqi Jewish diaspora is concerned, the icy excesses of nationalism in the Middle East have created cultural barriers that make Dalal's achievement, sadly, unique. Among the many who were forced to flee Baghdad, tarred as Zionist traitors, were some great musicians--including more than half the players in the legendary Iraqi National Orchestra. Their weekly radio concert in Baghdad had aired live across the region for years. They formed a new ensemble in Israel, struggling to reach the same Arab listeners via short wave, but it's hard to connect with an audience you can no longer actually meet. And it proved too difficult to build up a critical mass of fans inside the Jewish state; Arabic music was taboo among Israelis during the early decades of conflict. So by the time Dalal went out looking for an Iraqi music teacher in the late '70s, he found some of the all-time

greats selling parsley and scallions in a Tel Aviv market. They probably thought he'd be better off working for a credit-card company, but they taught him their licks anyway.

A classically trained violinist, Dalal learned to play the oud--a 13-stringed precursor to the European lute. Shaped like a giant pear sliced down the middle, you tune it much like a violin but strum it, mandolin-style, with a feather pick. Its deep, hollow body resonates with every nuance of finger pressure on the neck or friction between pick and string--an audio readout of the performer's temperament and skill almost as visceral as the sound of his own voice. The range of melody, moreover, is vast--meaning not the distance from lower to upper registers but the wide open space in between each note. Intervals are negotiable because the oud, unlike a mandolin or guitar, has no frets. Melodies do cartwheels around the rigid semitones of modern Western music; they stretch back in time to medieval and ancient scales that mixed quarter- and three-quarter-tone intervals among the wholes and halves. These are the sounds that some historians of Western music used to claim had been lost for all time, after the Roman church clamped down on ancient Greek chants. In fact, the ancient scales lived on in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and the eastern Mediterranean coastline and were codified by musical philosophers in ninth-century Baghdad. (Click here to listen to a few of these scales, known in Arabic as *maqamat*, played on the oud in streaming audio.) Chains of teachers and students passed them on for generations in Iraq and bequeathed them to players in the twentieth century--in spite of efforts, ancient and modern, to suppress them.

Plato's *Republic* had outlawed a few scales, arguing that certain musical intervals were dangerous because they incited violent acts or aroused sexual urges. Khomeini, during his years as a Muslim jurist in southern Iraq, issued a similar edict; his ban holds among some religious Muslims even now. But it's not easy to eradicate intervals as tiny as the space between two fingers. Only the prevalence of the electronic synthesizer, in bands across the Middle East today, threatens at last to snuff them out. The irony of Yair Dalal's musical journey backward on the oud to the sound of his Iraqi roots is that trends in Arab, Israeli, Turkish, and Greek dance music have meanwhile converged. Up-tempo and harmonically streamlined, they all sound equally distant from his retro playing style.

Listening to one of Dalal's first albums, *Al Ol* (Najema, 1995), you can hear the past meet Dalal's other influences to tell a modern story. The first track, "Solo Arak," opens with the breathy sound of the Nay, an Arab shepherd's flute, riffing on a couple of old-time scales. The initial flute phrase is modest--a slow flirtation with three or four notes of the melancholy *Nahawand* scale--pausing and starting, pausing again then starting up more deliberately. Then, a tiny

transformation: The same narrow melodic space is reexplored through the more angular and suspenseful *Hijaz* scale. The riff uneasily resolves on a low note, which is held at length before an extra gust of breath effects a sudden octave-high jump. From this peak the notes climb down again, returning to *Nahawand*, and at last greet the strumming sound of Dalal's oud. The two instruments state the theme in unison, which is then sung--surprise--not in Arabic but in modern Hebrew, and in the somber guttural accent of an Iraqi immigrant. Heavy traditional Iraqi percussion drives the tune forward. The words are by Iraqi-Israeli poet Ronny Someck:

> Black ants crawl over nicotine-stained fingertips
> dipping a mint leaf into the glass.
> The alcohol dismantles Abd al Wahhab's "Cleopatra."
> Now all is clear
> solo violin
> solo flute
> solo oud
> we're solo arak

These words evoke an image that the children of Jewish immigrants from Iraq (myself included) know well: An old-timer from Baghdad, living below the poverty line in Israel among ants, listens to a broadcast of the beloved Egyptian composer Muhammad Abd al Wahhab on the radio. He nurses a glass of arak--clear hard liquor made from anise, which turns cloudy with a cube of ice and which Iraqis like to drink with fresh mint. The song manages to fuse a timeless Mesopotamian sound with the very modern nostalgia that's felt today in the Iraqi diaspora for a not-so-distant past.

Other tracks on the album combine the same modern reality and ancient memory in more subtle ways. Dalal's most traditional performances are his unaccompanied Oud improvisations, known in Arabic as *taqsim*, which build in intensity and usually end in an old Baghdadi Jewish folk song--like "Taqsim Eliyahu," the second track. Arabic music fans who listen can tell that Dalal's solos are a marked departure from the flashy style of Egyptian virtuoso Farid al Atrash, whose famous oud riffs from the '50s and '60s are imitated all over the Arab world today. Dalal's *taqsim* is more brooding--almost meditative in its rhythmless contemplation of the scales--perhaps evoking a time in the Middle East when the pace of life was slower.

The album's title track, "Al Ol," is an ensemble work that explores the borders of modern Israel--literally. "Ol" is the word that Bedouin in the Jordan Valley use for a swirling desert wind, common in Israel's eastern and southern fringes, that emits a wailing sound. Sometimes an Ol can actually be seen, because it whips thousands of specks of sand, in mid-air, into the vague shape of a cone. There's a legend that each Ol is the ghost of someone who has earned God's wrath (the word is also the origin of the English word, "ghoul"). An insistent three-beat rhythm played on the daf--a hand-held frame-drum--captures the swirling pattern in sound, while Dalal's oud, the voice of

a singer, and a clarinet embody the Ol's tormented soul. It's hard not to hear a hint of klezmer music--eastern European Jewish soul--in the angst-filled blasts of the clarinet. But the ambience is much darker here than in a klezmer ensemble. In its fusion of musical styles, metaphors, and even disparate ethnic motifs, "Al Ol" is at once Iraqi, Ashkenazi, and quintessentially Israeli.

I meet Yair Dalal for coffee whenever I visit Tel Aviv and he's in town. We both travel a lot, but Dalal--like his elder Iraqi music teachers--is prevented by his Israeli citizenship from visiting the places his heart craves most to see. Baghdad has always topped the list, but there are other dream destinations. "I want to go to Saudi Arabia," he once told me in Hebrew.

"Saudi?" I asked. "Mega-malls, gaudy houses, chandeliers in every room, crystal dolphins on the coffee table?"

"Desert," he replied. "Friendships for life. Wide open spaces."

He has formed memories, through his music, of places he has never seen. These memories are all beautiful and loving.

JOSEPH BRAUDE is the author of *The New Iraq: Rebuilding the Country for Its People, the Middle East, and the World*.

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