



Marco Borggreve/ECM Records

# Anouar Brahem

The Tunisian *oud* player has forged his own path in a career spanning 30 years. **Bill Badley** reports

There's a widely-held belief that Arab music and Western jazz make comfortable bed fellows. On paper it should work, as both share a tradition of improvisation based on a well-known melody or worked around a mode. Inconveniently, there are also a number of often-overlooked differences between the two that make collaboration less simple than might initially appear. The first – and most obvious – is the

importance of harmony in jazz, while Middle Eastern music is essentially monophonic. It can also be easy to ignore the gap in understanding that divides two distinct cultural contexts: the Arab musical tradition is surprisingly hierarchical, while jazz thrives in a socially freer environment. Nevertheless, there are an awful lot of Oriental jazz CDs clogging the racks and, to be honest, not many of them are very good.

And then there's Anouar Brahem. The Tunisian master of the *oud* who has travelled his own path for over 30 years, bringing together the sounds and flavours of Eastern and Western music in a style that might be called Arab jazz but, essentially, disregards genre.

Brahem came to the oud early, enrolling at the Conservatoire National de Musique in Tunis when he was only ten years old. His teacher was Ali Sriti, a charismatic figure in Tunisian musical life, well-connected with the Egyptian and Syrian musicians who were leading the post-colonial Arab musical renaissance; his breadth of musical experience opened the young Brahem's ears to these new sounds. Within the huge orchestras that accompanied superstars like Oum Kalthoum, the oud played a modest, accompanying role and it was not until the Iraqi virtuoso Munir

Bashir placed the instrument centre-stage that modern players began to understand its solo potential. Yet, while this was enlightening for Brahem, his long-term ambitions lay elsewhere. "I actually really wanted to be a composer: Arab music is big on tradition but little on composition," he once said.

Despite having established himself as the *wunderkind* of Tunisian music, Brahem moved to Paris for four years in the early 80s to broaden his musical horizons and deepen his understanding of jazz. While there he collaborated with the avant-garde choreographer Maurice Béjart and began writing music for Tunisian films; one of the first times Brahem's music was widely heard outside the Arab world was his soundtrack for the widely-acclaimed *The Silences of the Palace*. Throughout his career, Brahem has frequently composed for picture – even directing his own documentary, *Mots d'Après la Guerre* about the Lebanese conflict – and one word often used to describe his music is 'cinematic.' There is certainly a contemplative quality to his work; an impressionistic sense

of space that allows listeners to summon up their own images.

Upon his return to Tunisia, Brahem was appointed as the director of the prestigious Ensemble Musical de la Ville de Tunis and, characteristically, one of his first initiatives was to change this from being a large-scale, Egyptian style orchestra into a smaller, flexible *takht* or chamber group of soloists. He also branched out into his first cross-cultural production, *Liqua 85*, bringing together Tunisian, Turkish and French jazz musicians, an initiative that would set the course of his future career.

Anouar Brahem would probably shudder at terms like 'fusion' or 'crossover,' in the revealing sleeve notes of his latest release, *Blue Maqams*, he is dismissive of "opportunist" musicians who do this as a mere fashion statement. Nevertheless, his choice of collaborators has been significant in shaping the varied sounds of his recordings over the last 30 years. These decisions have been anything but haphazard and are arrived at after painstaking consideration; however, he says that, "it is the project that inspires the choice... sometimes I write with specific musicians in mind and sometimes the music I am writing guides my choice." It certainly helps that Brahem is held in unimpeachably high regard by fellow musicians: certainly, successful oud players slightly bow their heads in respect when his

name is mentioned. Similarly, the jazz musicians he has worked with are among the world's finest; while it may be the stellar names – like Jan Garbarek – that first catch your eye, there's also a very select list of other magnificent players he has called upon.

A constant guiding star in his career has been his relationship with ECM Records and the production skills of its founder Manfred Eicher, who has allowed him the freedom and space to develop his ideas. One of the most striking things when listening to the Brahem discography is the variety of texture and instrumental colours. For each recording, he brings together a small group of two or three musicians and develops an intimate sound-world unique to that project. He picks players from both Eastern and Western backgrounds and it seems that the different systems of scales present less of a problem than might be imagined. "When composing, I try to be free of the restrictions of musical grammar – I just don't think about modes or scales. The most important thing is that it must be natural for

**"I try to be free of the restrictions of musical grammar"**

the player – whatever they play must be part of their vocabulary." The performers also rehearse and spend a lot of time with each other, developing their own musical language.

Brahem's original instrumental combinations sidestep obvious convention, to the extent that the dazzling but relatively conformist jazz line-up of British musicians Dave Holland (bass) and Django Bates (piano) with drummer Jack DeJohnette on *Blue Maqams* almost comes as a shock to those who have known his work over the years. Similarly, the poised sonority of bass clarinet, six-string electric bass and *darbuka* (goblet drum) on the 2009 album *The Astounding Eyes of Rita* is in marked contrast to the more overt jazz explorations of sax and *tabla* that can be heard on *Madar* 15 years previously. However, the mercurial blend of these very different timbres with the sinewy sound of his oud playing is always immediately recognisable.

Describing Brahem's work can be elusive; any statement seems to need qualification. Yes, it's Arab – in a cosmopolitan way. It is jazz – and yet there are shades of minimalism in his work. It sounds both improvised and very precise. It's probably best not to even try: "defies categorisation" is an overused phrase; however, it admirably sums up Anouar Brahem's very personal musical landscape. ♦

+ ALBUM *Blue Maqams* is reviewed on p62

## BEST ALBUMS



**Barzakh**  
(ECM, 1991)  
Brahem's first release for ECM, featuring fellow Tunisians Lassad Hosni

(percussion) and Béchir Selmi (violin). It is his most obviously Oriental sounding recording and one on which his dazzling *oud* playing is well to the fore. Note to keen audiophiles – it has just been released on 180g vinyl.



**The Silences of the Palace**  
(Caroline Records, 1995)

If you can track down a copy of this soundtrack, it has some beautifully elegiac solo pieces by Brahem, as well as delightful performances of traditional and classic songs.



**Madar**  
(ECM, 1992)

This collaboration with sax-god Jan Garbarek and *tabla* player Shaukat Hussain divided listeners when it came out in 1992. It was about as left-field as the *oud* had gone at the time and is not Brahem's most cohesive work. Nonetheless, this album was a milestone and is adored by some.



**Le Pas du Chat Noir**  
(ECM, 2001)

If this album is playing when visitors come to our house, I can guarantee that someone will comment on its beauty and ask what it is. The languorous texture of accordion, piano and *oud* casts mesmerising shadows: this is melancholy to be savoured. A Top of the World in #14.



**The Astounding Eyes of Rita**  
(ECM, 2009)

Brahem's epitaph for the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: the sparse, low sounds of bass clarinet and bass guitar perfectly support some extremely tasteful *oud* playing. A Top of the World in #65.

## IF YOU LIKE ANOUAR BRAHEM, THEN TRY...

### Dhafer Youssef



**Birds Requiem**  
(Okeh, 2013)

Fellow Tunisian Dhafer Youssef is more obviously experimental than Brahem and makes for an interesting contrast. The combination of his *oud* playing, electronic effects and *muezzin*-influenced singing is intriguing and arresting. Reviewed in #98.