



A young Hossam Ramzy pictured in the early 90s

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# HOSSAM RAMZY

One of the world's leading and most prolific percussionists was recently nominated in the *Songlines Music Awards*. Bill Badley examines his back catalogue

When did you first hear world music? If you are one of those blessed souls whose early years resembled something out of *My Childhood in Africa*, you might have fallen asleep each night with the sound of a *kora* drifting through your bedroom window. However, for most of us the story is rather more prosaic and, unless the school music teacher had an unusually interesting record collection or Uncle Albert was an ethnomusicologist, your ears probably first pricked up to different sounds and rhythms on a film soundtrack or when a rock band tired of their telecasters and drafted in some foreign talent to add exotic spice to old grooves. If this was your experience and the music was even

slightly Middle Eastern, chances are that it was Hossam Ramzy who turned you on. This Egyptian percussionist and musical polymath is, in every sense, a larger-than-life character: he has appeared on a vast array of recordings, collaborated with countless musicians and his name is well-known to fellow performers all over the world. Although he'd been based in London since the mid-70s, his first major breakthrough came in 1988 when he contributed to Peter Gabriel's soundtrack for Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ: Passion*. His playing of a variety of Oriental percussion instruments – including *tabla* (the Egyptian name for the Middle Eastern goblet drum, not the Indian instrument), *daf* (single-headed frame drum) and finger

cymbals – is one of the defining elements on tracks like 'The Feeling Begins'. He came to global prominence in 1994 when he led the Arab musicians in Page and Plant's *Unledded* project. However, Ramzy has been a hugely energetic musical force both before and since those high-profile sessions. Though he has been based in England for many years, Ramzy was born and raised in Cairo. Like many musicians in Egypt, he received his first music lessons from his family and his mother encouraged him by giving him his first drum soon after he was able to walk. His father's relocation to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia – a city not generally known for its thriving music scene – might have signalled the end of any musical aspirations as public performance

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is tightly controlled. However, it actually offered the teenage Ramzy unexpected opportunities to deepen his understanding of Oriental music as the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) brought musicians from all around the Muslim world to his doorstep. It was also the first time that he came to fully appreciate the Bedouin dance and rhythms that he learned from local tribes. It wasn't long before the young Egyptian's gifts were recognised by the local media and somewhere in the archives of Saudi national TV is footage of him playing with the National Guard Orchestra. Nevertheless, Ramzy's dreams lay beyond Arabia and in 1975 he arrived at Heathrow to make his fortune as... a jazz-rock drummer in Uxbridge. He was soon playing kit drums with such rising luminaries as Andy Sheppard, but it was a chance visit to an Arab nightclub in London during the 80s that led to his musical epiphany. Hearing the music he had grown up with being played in London inspired him to return to his roots and he laid down his sticks and took up the instruments of his childhood.

Ramzy says that the sound which drew him back was 'finger on fish skin,' which probably needs a little explanation... While modern *darbukas* are generally made of compressed aluminium with a plastic head, the instrument was originally fashioned from baked clay with fish skin dried tightly over the top to give it the distinctive ringing tone. These pot and skin drums are notoriously tricky to keep in playing condition, especially when moved to damp northern European climates, but despite having developed his own very swish Hossam Ramzy Signature Series *tabla*, he still prefers to play the traditional instrument in the controlled conditions of the recording studio. The list of artists that Ramzy has worked with is extraordinary. To visit his website discography you must first negotiate the list of seven categories ('Arranger, Producer, Musical Director, Performer' etc...) and your eyebrows raise higher as you scroll through each one: a bit of pop with Boy George, Shakira and Jay-Z, jazz with Barbara Thompson, crossover with Donal Lunny and The Gipsy Kings, lashings of

bellydance compilations and a healthy serving of major world music stars like Khaled and Rachid Taha. From the list of soundtrack credits you can safely assume that if a 90s film had a sand dune in shot, Ramzy was probably playing. When asked about this massive canon of work, Ramzy simply replies that he considers himself blessed to have had so many opportunities to work with such a variety of talent. However, this belies two significant factors that have contributed to his success. The first is his canny ability to cater to the needs of Western musicians and create immediately recognisable Arabesque rhythms that sit happily in a rock mix. There are plenty of talented percussionists around the Middle East – several of whom openly wonder why they didn't get the Led Zep call – but they don't necessarily have what Peter Gabriel describes as Ramzy's "instinctive understanding of music, regardless of its use and history." Ramzy's other great strength is that he's a legendarily tireless operator and this has served him well in recent years. The musical landscape has changed considerably over the last decade and, when once his was the only number to call for a bit of exotic groove, there is now more choice and vast sample libraries to pillage. In response to this, he has morphed into a one-man industry that encompasses everything Eastern, wiggly and rhythmic. You want belly dancers? The Ramzy Dance Company is ready for action (fully attired with his own line of dance wear). Someone to fix authentic Arab sounds for your ancient Egypt documentary? He's got the contacts. Online percussion workshops? The Drumzy School will provide. Not that Ramzy is actually playing any less these days. Last year, he brought together the stellar line-up of Billy Cobham, AR Rahman, Manu Katché and Omar Faruk Tekbilek to record *Rock the Tabla*, a celebration of music and rhythms from around the globe that won him a nomination for Best Artist in the *Songlines Music Awards*. **N**.....

**PODCAST** Hear Bill Badley's report and music from Hossam Ramzy on the podcast

**DISCOGRAPHY**

Ramzy's recordings are legion and if you look closely at the liner notes of your CD collection, you'll probably find you already have something with him playing on it. However, these ones stand out:

**BEST COLLABORATION**

 **Rock the Tabla** (ARC Records, 2011)  
 With this array of talent – Billy Cobham, AR Rahman, Manu Katché and Omar Faruk Tekbilek – it was bound to be good. While not every track is a winner, it is never less than entertaining. A track with the Japanese composer and percussionist Joji Hirota features on the *Songlines Music Awards* 2012 album.

**BEST SESSION APPEARANCE**

 **Jimmy Page & Robert Plant, No Quarter** (Atlantic, 1994)  
 If you're going to feature on a 1970s Arabesque rock anthem mash-up, you might as well do it with the really big boys.

**BEST DANCE ALBUM**

 **Bedouin Tribal Dance** (ARC Records, 2007)  
 Ramzy has released dozens of bellydance CDs and they are some of the most polished available. This bestseller, which features Bedouin musicians as well as Ramzy, takes us back to the roots of *raqs sharki*.

**BEST AVOIDED**

 **Hossam Ramzy Presents: Mohamed Naïem – Master of the Arabian Flute** (ARC Records, 2004)  
 Ramzy is a great drummer and Mohamed Naïem an excellent *nay* (Arabian flute) player but this is a frightfully misguided, hooting album.

**IF YOU LIKE HOSSAM RAMZY, THEN TRY... YOUSSEF HBEISCH**

 **Ahmad Al Khatib & Youssef Hbeisch, Sabil** (Institut du Monde Arabe, 2012)  
 Whilst Hbeisch ploughs a very different furrow to Ramzy, he is one of the most interesting Arab percussionists around. His solo on 'Li Alix' is wondrous. A Top of the World in #83.