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# Let Palestine Sing: Interview with Basel Zayed

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**Basel Zayed, Palestinian singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalis.**  
(Photo: Supplied)



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## Interviewed by Louis Brehony

Basel Zayed is a Palestinian singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist living in occupied Jerusalem. An accomplished virtuoso oud player and vocalist skilled in highly developed Arab musical traditions, Basel is also a trained pianist with a unique outlook on musical arrangement. Since 2004 he has led the band Turab and has more recently focused on developing a style based on Palestinian music 'with a jazz flavour.' He has also collaborated with Palestinian music researchers at NAWA (the Palestinian Association for Cultural Development) to recreate the compositions of 'lost' composers from pre-1948 times, based on music records painstakingly found in dusty archives in Jordan and Syria. Israel controls locked up records of this music and other items of Palestinian culture, stolen from history.

Basel Zayed is outspoken about what he sees as the political manipulation of the Palestinian cause by figures in the 'official' leadership. At the 2012 New Year Art Festival in Ramallah – organised by Palestinian youth in response to the decision by some to invite Israeli singers to celebrate New Year in Ramallah – Basel and his band performed the song Doleh (Statehood), with satirical lyrics about the kind of state promised to the Palestinian people by the Palestinian Authority's bid for UN recognition. PA police responded to the song by calling a halt to the concert.

Basel was interviewed in Ramallah by Louis Brehony as part of the *Let Palestine Sing* project. A longer version of this interview can be found at [www.letpalestinesing.jux.com](http://www.letpalestinesing.jux.com)

**Louis Brehony: Could you give us some background into your upbringing and how you got into music?**

**Basel Zayed:** It was a relatively late start actually and at the time I got interested in music there were no music schools in Palestine. There was a limited number of teachers if you wanted to go and learn piano, oud or voice, which were my main interests. I started when I was 14 to actually have proper piano lessons. Before that I was singing at social events like family weddings, activities. If we had guests they'd ask me to sing and, you know, that's where it started. But, I didn't start to learn music until I was 14.



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I grew up in Ramallah – partially in Ramallah and partially in Jerusalem because my father is from Ramallah and mother is from Jerusalem. Many cities are connected to it due to its religious flavour. Ramallah is more of a town. So in Ramallah I was exposed more to folk, more to the actual peasant kind of life. In Jerusalem it was more civilised if I'm allowed to say this! So I was exposed to different kinds of music, as well as to the heritage that humanity has, like classical music, Arabic classical music, vocal and instrumental, Oriental and Western, and different combinations.

**LB: Were you exposed to traditional folkloric songs in particular?**

**BZ:** Yes, this was part of my upbringing. Actually for most musicians who were raised in Palestine, even in the diaspora, in the camps in Lebanon, Syria and everywhere, you are exposed to the music and the culture because of what our heritage is about – our sayings, stories from the heritage, songs, dance and customs, food... its a rich experience and it does inform your musical identity in the future, especially in the oriental field of music in general, because its very much connected to these roots. Later on when you develop your skills and you develop your identity as a musician, you discover the reason why you play this kind of music now, and why what you're doing actually comes from your folk and ethnic heritage.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4VxKVR\\_0P8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4VxKVR_0P8)

Recently I've been working on a project, oriental jazz music. However there is not much freedom to actually go out of the folk style and produce a jazz band that can perform at jazz festivals. I think that the way I think about it is different, because it comes from my roots, to tell the story musically to people that don't come from the same culture and share the same cultural heritage. It is very personal and very collective for people who live in this area. It might apply to people in the Arab world to hear this kind of music that they can understand – and Palestine as well – put in a new spirit or flavour. We played in Italy to a mostly Palestinian audience. We didn't get much feedback from the Italians who were there. But it would be interesting to hear the opinions of Italian musicians, or British or European or American musicians. Folk is a main element.

[But] the fact that we're not a state is a big risk for a producer or even a band manager to work with a Palestinian artist rather than an Israeli artist – because they have laws, they have copyright, they have all the means of a well developed artistic area. In addition to many other concerns, our Ministry of Culture has, over the years, been very

weak and unproductive, and has not provided any containment for the artists, speaking of musicians and other forms of art. I could talk about this for an infinity, we have so many concerns about the limitations of artists.

**LB: The PA has become increasingly reliant on funding from the US and EU but it seems their goals are centered around 'security'. Obviously the PA is limited as a non-state actor but they seem to be maintaining their own position above all else.**

**BZ:** I very much agree to this. Unfortunately, we're wasting this time talking about our limitations rather than about creativity or art. This is exactly what I'm describing. Most of the time we're thinking musically, "how will people understand this statement in this song?" Rather than being free, having freedom, which is a prerequisite for creativity. If you're not free, if you want to be more creative... I'm always trying to free my mind from politics and from the occupation, to be able to focus on the here and now and my pure musical identity, which came from the folk, before the occupation and before the PA and Fatah and Hamas, before all of these complications, to have a clear mind, free for creativity. Yes we have limitations, but these are man made limitations and they are recent in comparison to the folk and our cultural heritage.

I think the same thing that is happening politically is happening culturally. There are some organisations for teaching music, and that's one element of culture. There are some organisations that work a whole year to organise one festival. Unfortunately there has been a lot of conflict and a lot of waste in terms of these festivals. For example, we have four schools for teaching music in Ramallah and the number is increasing, and I don't see the need. There is only one conservatory in Amman that I know of so far, where there is a bigger need because they are more open to other countries – up until two years ago when they closed the border with Syria. Because in theory, people who want to come and study in Jordan can come from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq... In Ramallah I don't see the need for a massive building with a massive number of rooms for teaching, there aren't that many music students, and that's just one branch. Another is in Bethlehem, another in Jerusalem, which is a much smaller community – zero access to Palestinians [from elsewhere] to Jerusalem. Particularly for education and specifically for musical education, what's it for? It's just a place wasting money, paying bills with no economic basis.

Back in Ramallah is al Kimanjati and other social organisations, expanding horizontally, opening branches everywhere. Its a complete waste because we don't have staff, we don't have much to cover the needs they claim. The Baremboim conservatory is another organisation in Ramallah that I can think of. Each additional school could've supported central projects and supported students in Palestine who want to learn music rather than opening a competitor. The conservatory has been working in Palestine for 20 years, they say its working successfully. The orchestra is still struggling to continue because there are not enough musicians. What have they been doing all these years?

This is a major concern, and going back to the organisations that run festivals, there is also a lot of political influence there. Mainly its the NGOs who run them and they get money from the same sources. Last year there were 17 different festivals in the months of June and July. What for? Is there such a thing in New York? Perhaps! 50% of Palestinian families living under the poverty line. Its a lot of money, we could have just done one central festival. But of course the donors give you the money and you have to use it for culture and for a specific purpose. Its one of our big issues.

– Read more about the Let Palestine Sing project at [www.igg.me/at/letpalestinesing](http://www.igg.me/at/letpalestinesing)



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