



ON THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS

THE HIDDEN STORY OF IRAQI MUSIC

Produced and Directed
by Marsha Emerman

Featuring Majid Shokor



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ON THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS



Yair Dalal and Majid Shokor

REVIEWS

A much-needed film that crosses cultural boundaries, uncovers a hidden story, and brings home universal truths – Arnold Zable, author, *Violin Lessons*, *The Fig Tree*, and *Jewels and Ashes*

Riveting, moving, joyful and sad. Everything rang so deeply true – Anna Epstein, curator and publications editor

This re-examination of Iraqi-Jewish heritage unearths vital history – Deana Nassar, Artistic Director, Arab Film Festival

A beautiful film, full of wonderful characters and music – Andrew Pike, Director. Ronin Films

Reflecting on the rich history of Iraqi music, the film movingly celebrates the shared cultural expressions of Iraqi Muslims and Jews – Ella Shohat, author of *Taboo Memories*, *Diasporic Voices*, Professor of Cultural Studies, New York University

A nuanced and sympathetic view of the deep, intertwined roots of Muslim and Jewish people in Iraq – Kelly DeVine, Artistic Director, Global Peace Film Festival

Excellent! A fabulous story of cultural resilience and identity – Robyn Sloggett, Director, Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation; Professor, Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne

ON THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS

SYNOPSES

One Line

A musical odyssey that uncovers the hidden – and almost erased – story of Iraqi music.

One Paragraph

When Majid Shokor escaped from Iraq he discovered that the songs he loved as a child in Baghdad have a hidden history. Saddam's regime purged Iraqi music of its origins, but Majid learns the truth as he travels the world to meet exiled Iraqi musicians – Jewish, Muslim and Christian - who still sing and play these songs. They are reunited in a joyful concert at London's Barbican Centre, where music and culture are bridges that transcend religion and politics.

One page

"On the Banks of the Tigris" follows Majid Shokor's journey to uncover the hidden story of Iraqi music.

As a young boy, Majid loved singing and listening to music in the cafes and markets of Baghdad. Music and acting were his passions, but Saddam's brutal regime shattered his dreams and forced him to flee.

Australia is a safe haven, but the music of childhood lingers in Majid's mind. He begins to search and makes a startling discovery – that many of the best-known Iraqi songs were written by Iraqi Jews.

What happened to these Iraqi Jewish musicians? How was this history so well hidden?

Majid embarks on a bold journey to find out more. His quest takes him from Australia to Israel, Europe and Iraq to meet great Iraqi musicians and hear their stories. Young and old, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, they all play the same songs and share a sense of loss and longing for their homeland.

A music critic and composer living in exile, whose defiance of censorship nearly cost him his life, helps to unravel the hidden history. Majid's dream of a unifying concert bears fruit when Iraqi musicians of all faiths perform together in a joyful celebration at London's Barbican Centre.

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KEY PARTICIPANTS

Majid Shokor is the key character – an Iraqi-Australian born in Baghdad, with a keen intellect and the courage to take risks. Majid loved Iraqi music from his earliest childhood – singing with his family and hearing music in the markets and streets along the Tigris River that runs through Baghdad. He also loved acting but his youthful dreams of a professional acting career were squashed by serving 10 years in the Iran-Iraq war.

In 1995, Majid escaped from Iraq and Saddam's regime. With his wife and two young daughters, he came to Australia as a refugee. Here he began to discover the hidden history of the music he has always loved. Passionate about art, music and the truth, he took the journey that is told in this film.

Ahmed Mukhtar is a master *oud* player, composer, teacher and recording artist. Born in 1967 in Baghdad, he enrolled at the Baghdad Institute of Music at age 14. When the call to military service came, he fled Iraq and gained political asylum in the UK. He now directs the Taqasim Music School, and teaches *oud* and Arabic music theory at the University of London – SOAS. In 2009 he was granted the Alhambra Award for Excellence under the auspices of the Queen of Britain. Ahmed believes that music can help create peace and reconciliation: "We are heirs to one of the world's first civilizations where Arab, Kurd, Turk and Jews lived together in harmony. Music can bring all Iraqis together at one table to share in the same cultural feast."

Yair Dalal is an acclaimed composer, violinist, *oud* player, and singer. Born in Israel to Iraqi-Jewish parents, Yair performs traditional Iraqi music as well as his own compositions, interweaving Iraqi music with diverse influences. Yair has recorded 11 albums, and been nominated for Grammy and BBC World Music Awards. He performs and collaborates with renowned musicians and orchestras from all corners of the globe, and devotes much energy to breaking down barriers between people through music: "It doesn't matter if we are Jews, or Christians, or Muslim, or Sunni, Shi'a, Shi-u-ie. The music is the connection."

Farida Mohammad Ali is considered the greatest living interpreter of Iraqi *maqam* singing. Farida studied with the renowned Munir Bashir, who encouraged her to perform classical Iraqi *maqam*, despite traditional barriers to women. She graduated from the Baghdad Institute of Music and was its first woman teacher. Farida lives in the Netherlands and performs worldwide with the Iraqi Maqam Ensemble. "The most beautiful thing we have in Iraq is diversity. Through our musical heritage, I try to bring all Iraqis together."

Kawkab Hamza is a first-hand witness to the Ba'ath regime's censorship of Iraqi music. A famous songwriter in Iraq in the 1960s, he was 'invited' to join a committee, established by then Vice-President Saddam Hussein in 1973, to 'review Iraqi musical heritage'. He soon discovered the committee's real agenda was to erase the names of Jewish composers and anyone unsympathetic to the regime. Hamza refused to serve on the committee and fled the country into exile. Iraqi agents then hunted him and murdered some of his family. He now lives in Denmark.

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HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

ONCE UPON A TIME...peoples of diverse religions and ethnicities lived together peacefully in Iraq. For many centuries Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived side by side in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

These peoples shared a common culture. Iraqi music and art, food, architecture, Arabic language and literature were sources of pleasure and pride. This shared culture flourished, especially in the melting pot of Baghdad from the 1920s to the 1950s. Music was heard everywhere - in coffeehouses, theatres, homes, and on the radio.

Jewish musicians and composers were highly esteemed and wrote many songs cherished by all Iraqis and popular throughout the Arab world. They recorded traditional music and original ballads, made up the majority of the first Iraqi Radio Ensemble, and performed widely. Among the most famous were composers Saleh and Daoud Al-Kuwaity and singer Salima Pasha Murad.

Iraqi Jews were in all walks of life – the arts, business, commerce and politics – so had little desire to leave their country. But events in the 1940s began to undermine the Jewish presence in Iraq.

A climate of fear and persecution arose with Nazism, Britain's re-colonisation of Iraq after World War II, and the creation of Israel as a state. The reasons for increased community tensions, with some bombings and violence, are contested. Some say it was anti-semitism in Iraq, while others blame the vigorous Zionist recruitment of Jews for migration to Israel.

From 1950 to 1952, 105,000 Iraqi Jews migrated *en masse* to Israel. They were required to renounce their Iraqi citizenship and leave behind most possessions. Some remained, but by the 1960s most of Iraq's Jewish community, the largest in the Middle East, had left for Israel or other countries. (See Abbas Shibliak's 2005 book, *Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus*, Saqi Press, London, for details).

Iraqis and other Jews from Middle Eastern countries did not receive a warm welcome in Israel. They lived in makeshift camps and took whatever jobs they could find. The Ashkenazi majority did not appreciate "Arab" music, so musicians who were revered in Iraq could only play amongst themselves, for their own community.

From the start of the Baathist regime in the 1960s until its demise with the US invasion in 2003, many Iraqi Muslims and Christians, including artists and dissidents, also had to leave Iraq. All art was turned into propaganda for the regime. Knowledge of the past, including the Jewish contribution to Iraqi culture, was suppressed.

Renowned non-Jewish musical exiles include Ahmed Mukhktar in the United Kingdom, Farida Mohammad Ali in the Netherlands and Kaukab Hamza in Denmark. For all kinds of artists, practicing their art in foreign lands was hard.

Actor and writer Majid Shokor was among those who had to flee his country. His family was granted refugee status by the UNHCR and migrated to Melbourne, Australia. With access to the Internet, other news sources, and the chance to travel, Majid began to seek the source of the music that had echoed round the markets and teahouses of his

childhood. He found that these lyrics of love and melancholy, set to traditional rhythms and haunting melodies, had a hidden history. They were not just “folk songs,” but original compositions by songwriters whose love for art had played a role in their exile.

This music is still prized and played in ensembles that include the *oud*, a traditional lute-type instrument, and the ancient Persian flute, the *ney*. The tradition continues to evolve, with the interest and support of younger people of all faiths living in the Iraqi diaspora.

At a book launch in Melbourne, Majid met Marsha Emerman, a documentary filmmaker who shared his love for music and his vision of making a film about what he had found. “On the Banks of the Tigris” was conceived and this history is part of the story it tells.

ON THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I met Majid Shokor at a book launch in Melbourne in 2004, we clicked straight away. Our backgrounds were very different but our passion for music, film, the arts, and social justice was much the same.

Majid told me that, growing up in a Muslim family in the 1960s and 70s in Baghdad, he knew nothing about Jewish people or their history in Iraq. The Ba'ath regime said Jews were the enemy. Once outside Iraq, he started to research the music of his childhood. He discovered that Iraqi Jewish musicians played a pivotal role in the music and songs he had always loved. Not only that, Jews had lived in Iraq for over 2,000 years and, in the 1930s, they comprised a third of Baghdad's population and were among its greatest musicians. Majid felt it was important for this history to be more widely told.

His story intrigued me. Although my background is Jewish, I knew little about Jews from the Middle East, least of all those from Iraq.

While the story was new to me, the role of music in cultural connection has long been a theme in my life and work. In 1991, in response to the first Gulf War in Iraq, I organised "Shalom-Salaam," a multi-cultural and multi-faith concert of music, dance and poetry for peace. "Children of the Crocodile," my film about East Timor's independence struggle, highlights cultural identity as the key to survival for Timorese-Australians who were forced to flee their homeland. In the short film "Intersections," migrant women from many countries connect through music, art and cultural exchange.

In March 2005, we met to discuss how Majid's story might be told as a film. It was the start of a long and fruitful collaboration. I produced and directed, while Majid was the co-writer, researcher, translator and creative collaborator. Neither one of us would have guessed that our journey to complete the film would take the next 10 years.

The making of "On the Banks of the Tigris"

For its tiny budget, our film was ambitious. We filmed in Australia, Israel, Iraq, the UK and the Netherlands.

Our first filming trip was in 2006, to Israel and Amsterdam. For Majid, going to Israel was a big decision that meant taking some personal risks. I was inspired by his courage and creativity, springing out of the losses and tragedies of his past. While Majid's wonderful wife and daughters are only briefly in our film, their continued support for the project was also a great encouragement.

Throughout filming, conflict and violence continued to dominate media coverage of Iraq and the Middle East. This took a toll on Majid and his family, but also strengthened our resolve to tell this story about Iraqi Muslims, Christians and Jews – how much these communities have in common and how deeply their roots are intertwined.

As producer and director, I faced other challenges. Making a documentary over a long period of time requires resources, a suite of skills, and stubborn faith that is constantly being tested. You need to stay focused as life moves on, stories evolve and filmmaking technology changes.

Despite the passing of years, some stylistic decisions about the film remained unchanged. I wanted the participants to tell their own stories, so no “outside” narrator was used. Majid is the central character, so his voice and point of view provide the narrative thread.

The hidden story of Iraqi music is embedded in a broader history that is complex and contested. In particular, various accounts of why the Jews had to leave Iraq differ. My decision was to stick with first-person stories told by film participants themselves, focused on music and their own experiences.

The film, as it finally came together has many layers and themes: Majid’s personal story; the history of Iraqi music and culture; the search for the hidden side of this history; and the diaspora experience shared by Muslims and Jews alike. When we “pitched” the film as a TV documentary, we were often asked, “Is this music, history or a personal journey?” The answer is that it is all of these.

A journey toward peace

Films are a sensory experience, a personal encounter. They can provoke strong reactions, or influence people in subtle ways.

I wanted this film to impart some information, but more so to touch people through its music and stories. If seeing the film is a catalyst for people to read, research and learn more, that will be a bonus.

Our film is an artistic response to conflict, and a way to challenge the false dichotomy of Jews vs. Arabs, a notion that denies the importance of shared history and cultural identity.

Majid told me, at the start of our journey that there will never be peace in Iraq until people are willing to face the truth of our own history. Our hope is that “On the Banks of the Tigris” opens some hearts and minds and is part of a process toward peace and reconciliation for the Middle East.

Marsha Emerman

Melbourne, 23 August 2015

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PRINCIPAL CREDITS

Producer/Director

Marsha Emerman makes documentary films on the arts, human rights and social issues for Australian and international audiences. **On the Banks of the Tigris**, her first feature documentary, reflects a continued keen interest in music, cultural identity, and telling stories that challenge misconceptions and open dialogue.

Children of the Crocodile, her award winning film on East Timor, aired nationally in Australia on SBS TV and screened in festivals worldwide. **Lihok Pilipina**, on women in the Philippines, and **Intersections**, on new migrants to Australia, are among films she has made for aid and human rights groups.

Marsha has an MA in Cinema from San Francisco State University and worked on such classic films as **Dark Circle**, **The Day After Trinity** and **The Fall of the I-Hotel**. In 1989 she migrated to Australia, where she teaches documentary at the VCA School of Film and TV. She writes, produces and directs projects through her company Fruitful Films.

Co-writer and Translator

Majid Shokor is a writer, theatre director and actor. Born and raised in Baghdad, Iraq, Majid arrived in Australia in 2001 where he has appeared in many plays, TV series, shorts, and feature films such as **Lucky Miles**. His performances are critically acclaimed and he has twice been nominated for Green Room Awards as Best Actor. He also received a Phoenix Award for his contribution to Iraqi culture from abroad.

Majid has an MA in Community Cultural Development from the University of Melbourne and is a Community Cultural Ambassador for Multicultural Arts Victoria.

Editor

Lucy Paplinska was born in Warsaw, Poland and has permanently settled in Melbourne. After completing a post-graduate diploma of Film and TV at the Victorian College of the Arts in 2002, Lucy commenced a career in the Australian film industry as an editor and documentary director. She directed and edited **The Company You Keep**, the story of a family struggling with mental illness and **Alone in a Crowded Room**, on the lives of four adults with autism, both broadcast on ABC TV.

Lucy has worked as editor and assistant editor on many documentary and drama productions. She is a member of the Australian Screen Editors Guild (ASE) and a consultant editor for the VCA School of Film and TV. **On the Banks of the Tigris** is Lucy's most recent film as editor. **Sperm Donors Anonymous**, which she wrote and directed for ABC TV, was recently broadcast.

Cinematographers

Sander Snoep (Europe) is a member of the Netherlands Society of Cinematography. A DOP since 1989, he is highly regarded internationally for his work on award winning documentaries and fiction features.

Sander's documentary credits include: **First Kill** (2001, director Coco Schrijber, winner Dutch Film Critics Awards and Best Film, Netherlands Film Festival, screened worldwide including Cinema du Reel, IDFA, Leipzig, Sheffield, Rotterdam, One World Human Rights); **Ramses Later** (2002, director Pieter Fleury, winner Golden Calf Best Documentary, Netherlands Film Festival); **Mali Blues** (2002, director Paul Hegman); **North Korea: A Day in the Life** (2004, director Pieter Fleury, Amnesty International Award for Best Film); **Dutch Touch** (2006, director Ulrike Helmer); **Dealing & Wheeling** (2007, director Sander Frencken); **Prisoners of the Ground** (2009, director Stella Van Voorst van Beest); **Curacao** (2010, director Sarah Vos); **The Rescuers** (2011, director Michael King); and **The New Rijksmuseum** (2014, director Oeke Hoogendijk)

His fiction feature credits include: **Scratches in the Table** (2000, 35mm, director Ineke Houtman, the official Dutch entry for the 2000 Academy Awards, Best Feature at Berlin International Film Festival); **Polleke** (2003, 35mm, director Ineke Houtman, Best Film, Vancouver, Montevideo and Carrousel International Film Festivals, Golden Film Antwerp); and **The Dinner** (2013, director Menno Meyjes, nominated for 8 Dutch film awards)

Peter Zakharov (Australia) is one of Australia's most prolific and well-respected cinematographers. In a career that spans nearly three decades, 'Zak' has shot many independent feature and television documentaries and natural history, science, travel, and lifestyle series for Australian and international TV channels. A sample of his documentary credits includes: **After Mabo** (1998, director John Hughes); **Hybrid Life** (2001 TV series); **Children of the Crocodile** (2001, director Marsha Emerman); **Welcome to My Deaf World** (2005, director Helen Gaynor); **2 Mums and a Dad** (2007, director Miranda Wills); **Hope** (2008, director Steve Thomas); **Lonely Planet: Roads Less Travelled** (2009, TV series); **The Trial** (2009, director Joan Robinson); **Immigration Nation** (2011, TV series); **Dr. Sarmast's Music School** (2012, director Polly Watkins, AFI nomination for Best Cinematography); and **Acid Ocean** (2014, director Sally Ingleton).

Philippe Bellaiche (Israel) is a French cinematographer educated at the École Nationale Supérieure Louis Lumière. His credits include fiction and documentary films made by many well known directors and screened by the BBC, Arte, PBS, Israel Channel 2 and Israel Channel 8, including the Academy Award winner **One day in September** (1999, director Kevin MacDonald), **Orange** (1998, director Amos Gitai), **Forget Baghdad** (2002, director Samir), **Route 181** (2004, directors Eyal Sivan and Michel Khleifi), **Raging Dove** (2005, director Duki Dror), **Avenge But One of My Two Eyes** (2005, director Avi Mograbi), **Hot House** (2006, director Shimon Dotan, winner of Special Jury Prize, Sundance Film Festival), **Between the Folds** (2008, director Vanessa Gould), **Gypsy Davy** (2011, Rachel Jones), and **The Flat** (2011, director Arnon Goldfinger, winner 7 awards including Best Documentary, Israeli Film Academy and Bavarian Film Awards and Best Editing in a Documentary Feature, Tribeca). He also teaches film at Tel Aviv University, Camera Obscura, and Sam Spiegel.

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FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

Festivals

Montreal World Film Festival, Canada – World Premiere

Global Peace Film Festival, Florida, USA

Baghdad International Film Festival, Iraq

Arab Film Festival, San Francisco, USA

Jewish International Film Festival Australia

Boston Jewish Film Festival, USA

Washington Jewish Film Festival, USA

Ahbab Festival, Cambridge, UK

New York Sephardic Film Festival, USA

Krakow Festival of Jewish Culture, Poland

Awards

Best Documentary, Baghdad International Film Festival

Audience Choice Award, Arab Film Festival, San Francisco

Finalist, Best Documentary – Social & Political Issues, ATOM Awards, Australia



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