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on the **banks** **of the** tigris

the hidden story of Iraqi music



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A STUDY GUIDE BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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Majid Shokor with Elias Shasha

On the Banks of the Tigris

The hidden story of Iraqi music

*I remember beautiful days, beautiful hours,
very beautiful places. The Tigris, the boats,
the fish. I can't forget that I was born in
Baghdad and I am an Iraqi*
– Elias Shasha

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OVERVIEW

When Majid Shokor escaped from Iraq he discovered that the songs he loved as a child in Baghdad have a hidden history. Saddam Hussein'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.

The documentary runs for 80 minutes. Its title comes from a much loved and popular Iraqi song composed by Saleh Al-Kuwaiti – *On the Banks of the Tigris*.

You can watch a 2-minute preview of the documentary on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ok7Aodd33c>

SYNOPSIS

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 his country of birth.

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. The internet is a fruitful source of information and contacts.

As he journeys from Australia to Israel, Europe and Iraq, Majid discovers what happened to Iraqi musicians of all faiths. He meets many great musicians who fled Iraq to escape war and persecution and hears their stories and music. Young and old, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, they all play the same songs and share a sense of loss and longing for their homeland.

Kawkab Hamza, a musician and composer living in exile, witnessed Saddam's Ba'ath regime's censorship of music. Along with many other musicians, Hamza helps to unravel why and how the history of Iraqi music was hidden. Majid's dream of a unifying concert bears fruit when Iraqi musicians of all faiths perform together in a joyful celebration in London.

THEMES

On the Banks of the Tigris addresses the very contemporary issue of what happens to a nation's culture and identity when war and conflict fracture a society, sending many of its people into exile. What happens to art and music, to artists and performers?

While truth is said to be the first casualty of war, culture is often another important casualty. How can you sing, make music, write poetry and stories when your very existence is under threat? The current turmoil in Syria shows the many ways in which ordinary life is destroyed. It is not just the civilian deaths, damage to buildings and unliveable cities, but also the terror, loss of normal life and uncertainties of exile.

Some of the themes addressed in this film include:

- Refugees
- Exile
- Cultural Identity
- Inter-faith peace and reconciliation
- Music and cultural heritage
- Reclaiming, preserving and celebrating culture



CURRICULUM LINKS

This documentary is an excellent film text for middle, senior secondary and tertiary students studying:

- History of the Middle East
- Conflict and Globalisation
- Migration Studies
- SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment)
- Geography and Politics.

It can also be used by English Language and Literature teachers investigating concepts of identity and belonging.

For students studying Music, the film provides a rich exploration of a country's music and its importance to national identity, how it can be disrupted through war and tyranny, and how it can be kept alive by those committed to retaining cultural history and musical traditions.

A key capability in the National Curriculum is intercultural understanding.

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. Intercultural understanding involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.

To fully enter into this film's world, students could be encouraged to reflect on the importance of music in their own lives. How would music's value as a means of personal expression, joy and shared experience be impacted by a ban on playing and listening to many types of music, and by silencing the music makers?

MAPS

The map of this region of the Middle East shows the different countries surrounding Iraq to which Iraqis have fled. What leads people to flee their homeland and where do they go?

The map of Iraq on page 6 shows the major cities, including the capital Baghdad and the northern city of Mosul.



<http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/me.htm>

BACKGROUND HISTORY

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF A RICH AND ANCIENT CULTURE

The region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, historically known as Mesopotamia (now Iraq, Kuwait, and parts of Syria and Turkey), is often referred to as the cradle of civilisation. It was here, that humankind first began to read, write, create laws, and live in cities under an organised government—notably Uruk, from which the name “Iraq” is derived.

Mesopotamia was home to successive civilisations in the period 6500 to 3800 BCE including the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires. The Sumerians were the first to harness the wheel and create city-states, and their writings record the first evidence of mathematics, astronomy, written law, medicine and organised religion.

After the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Mesopotamia fell under Persian and then Greek rule. By the 3rd century, Arabs increasingly displaced the earlier populations, and the Arabic name al-*Irāq* began to be used.

Baghdad became a centre of science, culture, philosophy and invention during the ‘Islamic Golden Age’. This period of cultural fruition ended in 1258 when the Mongols invaded and much of the city was destroyed.

In the 16th century, most of the territory of present-day Iraq came under the control of the Ottoman Empire. It remained under Ottoman control until after the First World War.

http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/time/explore/main_mes.html#1900B.C.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesopotamia>

THE MODERN STATE OF IRAQ

For nearly 400 years prior to World War I, the territory of Iraq was comprised of three distinct provinces ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Despite Ottoman efforts to create division, many different religious and ethnic groups co-existed in these provinces including Muslims, Christians, Kurds, Armenians and Jews.

In 1915, Great Britain forged an alliance with Emir Hussein bin Ali of Arabia (now Saudi Arabia) to create an Arab revolt against the Ottomans, who had joined Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I. Since the Emir was a prominent Islamic religious leader, the alliance shielded the British from accusations of coming into the Middle East as Christian Crusaders. In return, Britain promised Hussein independence for virtually the entire Arab world.

What Emir Hussein didn’t know was that oil had been discovered in the region and Britain had no intention of keeping its promise. Just months after this accord, Britain secretly made a separate pact with their chief ally in World War I, France. Under this agreement, all the most politically and commercially valuable portions of the Arab world would be carved up by the British and French.

At post-war conferences in 1919 and 1920, this was solidified. France was given much of greater Syria and Lebanon while the British took possession of a vast expanse stretching from Palestine to Iraq. The British Empire would now administer a new, artificially created nation under the name Mandatory Iraq.

Nationalist and anti-colonial revolts against British rule followed, which were put down by a “surge” of British troops and severe military reprisals. The British government then decided to step back from direct administration. In 1921 they created a monarchy to head Iraq and installed Faisal, one of Emir Hussein’s sons, as king.

The kingdom of Iraq was granted “full” independence in 1932.

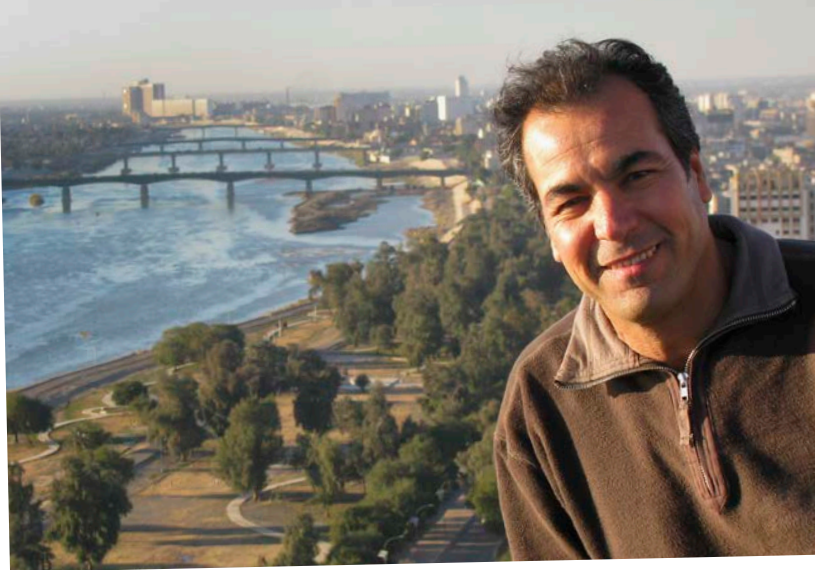
However, the British continued to exert great influence on Iraq's internal and external political affairs. Iraq remained a kingdom until 1958, when a military coup led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim removed the monarchy and established a republic. Qasim was a social reformer who implemented land reform, promoted women's rights, expanded education, and nationalised Iraq's oil. In 1963 he was assassinated and after a few years of political unrest, the pan-Arab Ba'ath Party seized power in 1968.

Saddam Hussein was a secularist who rose to power through the Ba'ath political party. He was the country's dictatorial president from 1979 to 2003. As well as repression of Iraq's citizens, his rule featured several wars including the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) which claimed over 1 million lives, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (August 1990), and two US invasions.

The "First Gulf War" (August 1990 – February 1991) was a response to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, when the USA, under George Bush Senior, intervened to maintain US access to oil fields. Angered by years of repression, the Iraqi people rose up against the dictatorship in March and April 1991. Although Bush encouraged the Iraqis to "take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein to step aside", no help from the USA was forthcoming. The Iraqi National Uprising was brutally crushed, leaving thousands dead or wounded and many more internally displaced.

The "Second Gulf War" (March 2003 – May 2003) was fought on the false pretext of avenging Al Qaeda's airplane attacks on US targets on September 11, 2001. Al Qaeda never operated from Iraq but this time US President George W. Bush's administration wanted regime change there.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faisal_I_of_Iraq
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_uprisings_in_Iraq



<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/disintegration-iraqi-state-has-its-roots-world-war-i-180951793/>

IRAQ TODAY

Saddam Hussein was deposed and executed following the 2003 US-led invasion of the country and the coalition's occupation continued until the end of 2011 when elections were held.

Neither the fall of Saddam nor the American occupation of Iraq brought peace or stability. On the contrary, the US invasion and pursuit of its own objectives increased civil and military conflict, gave rise to unstable government, and opened the door to groups such as Islamic State that had never existed before inside Iraq.

Dominating today's news on Iraq are reports of car bombings, suicide bombings and ongoing struggles for power. Many Iraqis continue to flee and make perilous journeys to neighbouring countries, or far distant ones like Australia, where they may be detained as "illegal" arrivals (under international law seeking asylum is not illegal).

What we don't hear in news reports about Iraq is that most people are trying to lead ordinary lives, with support from their family, friends and communities. We don't hear of people's resilience, their ability to survive and carry on in stressful circumstances. They are supported by shared language, traditions and culture, including music, art and leisure activities that help to overcome the impacts of the terrible conflict.

Iraq is still an important centre of Arab civilisation and culture but many of its precious artefact collections were destroyed or looted when U.S. forces failed to protect the National Museum when they occupied Baghdad, after the second US invasion.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Museum_of_Iraq

IRAQI JEWS

Iraqi Jews are one of the world's oldest and most historically significant Jewish communities. So how is it that by 2014 there were 227,900 Jews of Iraqi descent living in Israel, with many thousands more living in other countries around the globe?

Iraq's Jewish history dates from about 4,000 BCE to the birth of the biblical patriarch Abraham in Ur, where there is a shrine and archaeological digs. Long after Abraham left for what was then called Canaan, generations of Jews were sent into exile in Babylon, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now Iraq.

An Ottoman census in 1917 counted 80,000 Jews in Baghdad out of 202,000 residents. Ali Adeeb, who worked for The New York Times in Baghdad and now teaches at New York University, said that in the first half of the 20th century, Jews were not only major forces in Iraq's financial institutions, but also produced some of the nation's most renowned historians, famous singers and influential composers.

Iraqi Jews had largely lived in harmony with their Arab neighbours. But danger increased with the rise of Nazi influence in the 1930s as well as unhappiness around the Arab world with Zionism's push for a Jewish state, which included underground recruitment of Jews from Arab lands. A pogrom in June 1941, the Farhud, killed nearly 200 Jews in Baghdad.

'This is the point where they realized there is no future in Iraq', said Lily Shor, a guide at the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre in Or Yehuda, outside Tel Aviv.

In 1950, the Iraqi government passed a law allowing Jews to emigrate to Israel on condition they forfeit their Iraqi citizenship. Still, there was disagreement among Jews on whether to take the airlift to Israel in 1951; thousands remained behind. For those who left, a new challenge awaited, said Dina Zvi Riklis, 66, a Tel Aviv filmmaker: starting over with nothing as a Mizrahi — the Israeli term for Jews from the Middle East and North Africa — in a young country dominated by Ashkenazis from Eastern Europe.



'I told my mother not to speak to me in Arabic', Ms. Riklis said. 'I denied that I came from Iraq'. She recalls her father being ridiculed by Israelis who called his traditional Arabic dishdashi, a full-length garment, 'pyjamas'.

Many more Jews, including Ms. Shor, 59, slipped out of Iraq by the 1970s. In 2008, it was reported that fewer than 10 Jews remained in Baghdad. Emad Levy, 51, who came to Israel in 2010, said he knew of just five Jews in the city. 'They are well', he said, protected by Muslim friends but dealing with endless violence and an absence of any civic activity.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/world/middleeast/in-israel-iraqi-jews-reflect-onbaghdad-heritage.html>



<http://www.mapsofworld.com/iraqi/>

IRAQIS IN AUSTRALIA

The total population of Iraqis in Australia is estimated to be as high as 80,000. Australia's Iraqi-born population includes Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Mandeans, Turkmen and Jews.

Wars and persecution have led to many more Iraqis seeking sanctuary in other countries. Like Majid Shokor in this film, many have moved as far as Australia or Canada to construct a new life.

MAJID SHOKOR

Majid Shokor is the central figure in this film, which follows his journey to uncover the hidden story of Iraqi music. Majid works as an actor in Australia, and in this film as interviewer and translator for several of the musicians. He is an Iraqi Australian born in Baghdad, the capital city of Iraq on the Tigris River. In 1995 he fled Saddam Hussein's brutal and repressive regime, waited in Beirut for a refugee visa, and finally settled in Australia in 2001. As you watch the film, look and listen for clues as to why Majid is so committed to helping reclaim Iraq's musical heritage that is at risk of becoming silent and lost.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

THE JOURNEY TAKEN BY MAJID SHOKOR

1. REFLECTIONS ON HIS CHILDHOOD

I grew up in a neighbourhood where wherever you go you would hear the music or the songs coming from the coffee houses, the shops, in the market around you - Majid

When we first meet Majid at his home in Melbourne, he recalls the importance of music in his life while growing up in Baghdad during the 1960s.

- In what ways do Majid's recollections of his family singing traditional songs keep his past alive and make him nostalgic for a way of life that he remembers in the markets and streets of Baghdad?
- What experiences do people today have of music in public places, including live performances?
- Do you or any family members participate in making music – playing instruments, singing in groups or choirs, or performing solo?
- How have technologies such as computers and iPhones made it easier to have your chosen music as a constant background to your daily activities? Do these technologies encourage many people to be passive listeners rather than active participants in making their own music?
- How has the internet, particularly YouTube, given us the opportunity to research and connect with people, places and cultural traditions that might otherwise have disappeared or that we may never have known about?



2. SADDAM HUSSEIN IN POWER

Saddam Hussein became Iraqi president in 1979 and In 1980 Iraq invaded Iran. The war continued until 1988. You can read about this war at <http://www.history.com/topics/iran-iraq-war>.

The protracted war between these neighbouring Middle Eastern countries resulted in at least half a million casualties and several billion dollars' worth of damages, but no real gains were made by either side. Started by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in September 1980, the war was marked by indiscriminate ballistic-missile attacks, extensive use of chemical weapons against troops and civilians and attacks on third-country oil tankers in the Persian Gulf.

Although Iran was forced on the strategic defensive, Iraq was unable to reconstitute effective armoured formations for its air force and could not penetrate Iran's borders deeply enough to achieve decisive results. The war ended in July 1988 with the acceptance of UN Resolution 598, ordering Iran and Iraq to cease hostilities.

A direct consequence of the war was the conscription of young Iraqis, like Majid. Many were required to serve in the army for the whole duration of the war.

- What were some of the worst personal consequences for Majid as a result of his extended military service?
- What does it mean when people say that 'a whole generation was lost through war'?
- Apart from the many lives of soldiers and civilians, what else is lost in wars? What are some of the physical, social, emotional and psychological impacts of war?
- What ongoing effects do wars have on the arts and culture?

Instruments played by Iraqi musicians

While some instruments that musicians play in this film may be familiar to you, such as the violin, there are some instruments that may not be so well known to a Western audience.

The traditional Arabic ensemble or takht (literally 'bed' in Arabic) consists of 4 main melodic instruments: **oud**, **nay**, **qanun** and **violin**, and one main percussion instrument (riq). Sometimes the **riq** is supplemented/substituted with the tabla or daff (frame drum).

Using an online search engine, find images and descriptions of these instruments. You could start with https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_musical_instruments. The Oud is a stringed instrument and the Nay (or ney), looks a little like a bamboo flute or recorder.

In Australia, Joseph Tawadros (who is Egyptian), a virtuoso oud player, often plays with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, and also in jazz and world music groups. He has won several ARIA awards and popularised this musical instrument for many people in the West.



3. FOLLOWING THE CLUES

I read an article in an Arabic newspaper and I discovered a lot of the songs I grew up with were written by Iraqi Jewish musicians. I thought that story should be told. – Majid

Majid embarks on a journey to track down, meet and interview the musicians still performing traditional Iraqi music.

- What do you think are the driving forces behind Majid's desire to know more about the people who composed the songs he remembers from his childhood?
- How would you go about conducting a search for family members long dead or finding out the truth of rumours about your great-grandfather's colourful life story?
- How does the internet both shrink the world and at the same time become a source of sometimes inaccurate or outdated information?
- Why is it important for Majid to speak face-to-face with people who were in Iraq at the time when traditional music was a bigger part of Iraqi life?
- Which of the following materials are important for Majid Shokor in his quest to create an accurate history of Iraqi music:
 - Letters
 - Photos
 - Surviving recordings
 - The written and spoken memories of older people and their children
 - Majid's own memories
 - On-line information posted by people still practising Iraqi music

- Majid said he knew nothing about Jews in Iraq due to the "tough censorship." What do you understand by the word 'censorship'? How can being unable to speak about something become a form of censorship?
- Is there censorship in Australian media or society? Can you think of examples where freedom of artistic or cultural expression was restricted?

4. THE IRAQI/ ISRAELI/ AUSTRALIAN CONNECTION

I lost my life. This {violin} is part of my life and I lost it. We lost our identity – Naji Cohen

- In which decades did many Jewish people settle in Australia?
- What threats were many of them fleeing from in European and Middle Eastern countries?
- When Majid finds Naji Cohen, an Iraqi Jew now living in Australia, what makes their meeting such an emotional experience for both men?
- What feelings does Naji Cohen's violin evoke when he plays it?
- Why does Majid decide to go to Israel? Why is he a little reluctant to make this journey? Who might object to his going to Israel and why?

5. IN ISRAEL

Whoever drinks from the Tigris will never forget – Iraqi Jewish musician at the group gathering in Tel Aviv

- Why would the Tel Aviv taxi driver ask Majid where he is from?
- Does Australia have diplomatic relations with the state of Israel?
- Outline some of the continuing conflicts in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank between Israelis and their Palestinian neighbours.

The term 'diaspora' refers to a scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographic locale. Diaspora can also refer to the movement of the population from its original homeland to other places

What does it mean to identify with a particular ethnic group?

The Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (ASCCEG) is the Australian statistical standard for classifying ancestry data within the Australian population. ASCCEG is based on the geographic area in which a group originated, developed or settled, noting similarity of groups in terms of social and cultural characteristics. ASCCEG is intended for use in the collection, aggregation and dissemination of data relating to the cultural diversity of the Australian population

For the purposes of ASCCEG 'ethnicity' refers to the shared identity or similarity of a group of people on the basis of one or more characteristics, which were enunciated by the 1986 Population Census Ethnicity Committee.

The Committee drew on a definition of ethnic groups contained in a United Kingdom Law Lords statement. The Law Lords noted that the key factor is that the group regards itself and is regarded by others, as a distinct community by virtue of **certain characteristics, not all of which have to be present in the case of each ethnic group.**

Among the distinguishing characteristics that may be involved were:

- » a long shared history, the memory of which is kept alive
- » a cultural tradition, including family and social customs, sometimes religiously based
- » a common geographic origin
- » a common language (but not necessarily limited to that group)
- » a common literature (written or oral)
- » a common religion
- » being a minority (often with a sense of being oppressed)
- » being racially conspicuous.
- » Self-perceived group identification, e.g. 'I identify as Iraqi or Aboriginal or Jewish'.

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/1249.0main+features22011>

- As you watch this film, think about how displacement from your birthplace, often under forced conditions, can impact on how people live their lives in a new land.
- How might the preservation of cultural traditions assume great importance to identity, both as an individual and as part of a group? For example, what tensions might arise between migrant parents and their children who are born in a new country?

Australia is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. In addition to Australia's First Peoples who speak many languages and have diverse cultures, we come from over 200 nations, speak over 200 different languages and are from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious backgrounds.

- How much do most people in Australia know and/or care about the religious background, beliefs and practices of their friends, workmates, schoolmates and neighbours?
- How interested are many young people in the ethnic origins of their classmates and friends? Is ethnic origin, cultural identity or religious background a reason for making or not making friends with classmates?
- Does a multicultural society, with 28.2% of Australians born in another country, always show greater acceptance and protection to more recent immigrant groups?

IRAQI JEWS IN ISRAEL

In 1950, the Iraqi government passed a law allowing Jews to emigrate to Israel on condition they forfeit their Iraqi citizenship.

By 1952 120,000 Iraqi Jews had left for Israel.

By the late 1960s nearly all Jews had left Iraq.

- What does Majid discover in Israel through his conversations with 88-year-old oud player Elias Shasha, ney player Alber Elias, and Shlomo Elkivity about the contribution of Jewish musicians to Iraqi traditions?
- What does Alber Elias' story about the policeman throwing his neyes into the river in Baghdad in 1948 suggest about the reasons why Jews began to leave Iraq?
- How were Jews from Arab and African countries initially treated in Israel?
- After so many years of exile from their birthplace in Iraq, how do these Iraqi Jews still feel about their country, about Baghdad, the Tigris River and their previous life as musicians?

- Apart from shared love of their musical heritage, what other aspects of Iraqi identity does this community still want to express and celebrate in their daily lives?
- Give some examples of cultural traditions practiced in Australia by different immigrant groups.
- Is your family background Lebanese, Vietnamese, German, Indian, English, or another of the many groups, which have made their home here? Describe some of the ways that the food your family cooks, the music you listen to, and the cultural practices you celebrate reflect your cultural heritage.



6. KEEPING THE MUSIC ALIVE

My parents are from Baghdad. When I was a kid and my mother and father took me to a Chalgi Baghdad (private concert) I was in the tent with the other children and I heard all this music. And when I grew up I just was an embarrassed outsider and I was a bit ashamed of this music...but after many years I thought it's about time to go back to this music because I was born with this music – a pupil of Yair Dalal, an Iraqi Jew born in Israel.

- Why do you think children sometimes feel embarrassed by their family's culture being seen or heard in a society where they are recent arrivals or a minority?
- Have you ever felt you did not want to acknowledge your family's cultural traditions?
- Does your school and community provide opportunities for you and your classmates to express, appreciate and share your cultural heritage?
- Yair Dalal was born in Haifa in Israel and he now teaches Iraqi music to young Israelis. Why is his work and passion for the music of his family's homeland so important to sustaining and enriching these traditions and skills?
- Maqam is a traditional Iraqi musical style that uses classical Arabic poetry. In Amsterdam Majid meets Farida Mohammed Ali, a woman with a powerful voice who sings in this traditional style. How did Farida overcome taboos and restrictions on women in her society to become an accomplished maqam singer?

7. GOING HOME

I want to find out if Iraqis still remember the old songs and know who wrote them. But I can't talk openly about Iraqi Jewish musicians. I can't be sure how people will react
- Majid

Before leaving to travel, Majid remembers the painful experience of fleeing Iraq, in search of a safe place to bring his family

- Why did Majid flee Iraq "on false papers"? Why was he prepared to take such risks?
- How is his experience similar to that of other refugees and asylum seekers who come to Australia in search of protection?
- Why does Majid feel he must be careful about raising the subject of Iraqi Jewish musicians in Iraq?
- What other anxieties does Majid have about returning to his hometown in Iraq after 14 years?
- How does he know many things have changed in Baghdad and what does he hope has not changed?
- What do we see in Baghdad when Majid visits some of his old haunts that we rarely see on news reports from Iraq?
- How can a war-torn homeland evoke powerful memories in someone who had to leave for his own and his family's safety?

8. CENSORSHIP

In my long career as a music critic, I couldn't write about certain names. I wasn't allowed to write about Kawkab Hamza and Saleh Al-Kuwaiti because they were expelled from Iraq and to write about them was forbidden – Adil Al-Hashimi, music critic in Iraq

- What was Kawkab Hamza expected to do in his role on the Committee to Examine Iraqi Musical Heritage? What was the cost to him of refusing to do what he was told?
- Why did Saddam Hussein want to create a completely nationalistic record of Iraqi music which deleted all mention of Iraqi Jews and others opposed to the regime?
- How have other totalitarian regimes attempted to air-brush people and events from official history which do not fit their national ideal? Give some examples from 20th and 21st century history.
- Why are musicians, artists and writers frequently targeted by political regimes? What dangers might their work be thought to pose to the regime and society?
- For example, the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot destroyed Cambodian culture and artistic expression for many years, and musicians, writers, dancers and painters were killed in large numbers. Those who survived only did so by serving the purposes of the rulers as propagandists for the regime.

The Tenth Dancer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_CAqlpaCk

What did the all-girl group Pussy Riot do that led to their imprisonment under Putin's regime in Russia?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2att1HJqH2o>

What are some other subtler ways of censoring artists and their work in different societies?

Why is exile preferable to being silenced in your own country?

9. THE CONCERT – THE ART OF ALL IRAQIS

I was so happy when Yair Dalal came with this idea for a concert...the highlighting of the Jewish contribution is very important because this history has been suppressed for such a long time - Majid

Majid's experience meeting Iraqi musicians around the world has made him determined to bring these Iraqis from diverse faiths together in a concert for peace and to honour the long tradition of Iraqi music. But where can such a concert take place and how can people from many countries come together to perform?

I'm very happy to take part in this concert. Our aim is to preserve Iraqi heritage, to show the rich mosaic of Iraqi society. We are presenting Iraqi art, not the art of this religion or that religion – Farida Mohammad Ali



- How does the concert turn out?
- Describe the atmosphere at the venue.
- What are some of the moments of emotional and musical engagement between the performers and the audience?
- Who benefits from such an occasion – the performers, the audience, the organisers, Iraqi musical traditions and cultural identity? How do they each benefit?
- Is it possible to describe and value the sheer joy that is apparent among the musicians and the audience during the concert?

10. CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

If you finish the movie, I don't want this journey to end. So maybe you don't have to finish the movie. So the journey will go on and on – Yair Dalal

- How can Majid's journey continue now that the film has been completed?
- Could students also join the journey to discover more about their own identities?
- The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Life is a Journey, Not a Destination." How might this apply to your own lives, goals, dreams and plans for the future?

THE MUSICIANS

Saleh and Daoud Al-Kuwaiti were amongst the most acclaimed Iraqi singers and composers who played in the Baghdad Radio Orchestra in the 1930s and 1940s. At the height of their success, they wrote music for King Faisal's 1936 coronation ceremony, headed the Iraqi radio orchestra, and composed a song for the Egyptian musical giant, Umm Kulthum. The song *On the Banks of the Tigris* was composed by the brothers. After the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, the brothers emigrated there in the early 1950s, along with thousands of other Iraqi Jews who were forced to leave their country. The brothers died in Israel in 1976 and 1986 without ever returning home.

After Saddam Hussein came to power he established a committee in the broadcasting authority. One of its orders was to erase the names of the Al-Kuwaiti brothers from every official publication and from the curricula in the academy of music. However, recordings exist of their music and their songs are still kept alive by Iraqi music lovers.

Yair Dalal, an Israeli born child of Iraqi Jews, is a celebrated musician. He plays the oud and the violin and teaches traditional Iraqi music to a new, younger generation of Israelis. He was one of the instigators of the idea for a concert of reconciliation to bring together Jewish, Christian and Muslim musicians in a celebration of Iraqi music.

Ahmed Mukhtar, a master oud player now living in London, performs some of the Al-Kuwaiti brother's music and agrees to take part in the London concert.

Farida Mohammad Ali, an Amsterdam resident, is a maqam singer venerated for her abilities in a traditionally male discipline. She has a powerful and expressive voice and it is her band that provides the ensemble for the *On the Banks of the Tigris* concert in London.

THEMATIC QUESTIONS

Earlier in this guide, some of the themes that the film embodies were mentioned. They included:

- Refugees
- Exile
- Cultural Identity
- Inter-faith peace and reconciliation
- Music and cultural heritage
- Reclaiming, preserving and celebrating culture

- How well do you think the film addresses and illustrates these themes? Which themes do you think are most important? Are there other themes you would add to this list?
- In what ways does the film present an alternative view of the peoples of Iraq that is different to the images and stories we see on television about life there?
- How can societies like Iraq be rebuilt to enable citizens to live together in peace? What needs to happen for normal and stable life to be possible again?



What does Multiculturalism mean in practice?

Multiculturalism in today's Australia is reflected in the diverse composition of its people, a prohibition on discrimination, equality before the law of all persons, and various cultural policies that promote diversity, such as the existence of the Special Broadcasting Service.

- What do we need to do in Australia to ensure that all cultures and ethnicities are able to celebrate and practice their cultures?
- What are some of the global political and ideological influences that are most likely to threaten social harmony in democratic societies? What can we do within our democratic institutions to minimise those threats?
- How does a film such as *On the Banks of the Tigris* suggest that people can live in harmony while valuing those things that unite rather than divide us?

THE FAMILIAR AND THE NEW

Few people in Australia would know anything about Iraqi music. We may not have known the instruments, rhythms or melodies of the songs in the film unless we have a Middle Eastern background, friends from that region, or a special interest in different kinds of world music

- How can we learn to appreciate Iraqi, Middle Eastern, African or any other music from around the world unless we open ourselves up to new experiences?
- Can we empathise more with different cultures and extend our own view of the world if we make the effort to watch films with subtitles where the characters are not English-speaking? Do you find films in other languages difficult or easy to watch, whatever their subject matter? Why do you think this is the case?
- How does entering into other people's worlds, through art, music, religious beliefs or by trying the food of another culture, enrich our own lives by offering us alternative ways to live?
- In your class group or groups, discuss the difficulties many migrant families have when they move to a new country. They may include: learning a new language, finding employment, unrecognised professional qualifications, confusing local customs and behaviours, unfamiliar food, no supportive local community, etc.

THE FILMMAKERS

On the Banks of The Tigris is a Fruitful Films production

Key Crew

Director/Producer	Marsha Emerman
Co-writer and Translator	Majid Shokor
Editor	Lucy Paplinska
Cinematographers	Sander Snoep (Europe), Peter Zakharov (Australia), Philippe Bellaiche (Israel), Hayder Daffar (Iraq)

Documentary film-making is a team effort. There are many skilled roles to fill and some luck, passion, and generous supporters are needed to finish the project.

- What do the numerous credits show about the complexities of making this film?
- Why might people contribute cash, skills and time to making a documentary film?
- What are some of the challenges for independent film-making that rely on community support?
- How does this documentary offer an alternative perspective to films and articles that we mostly see about Iraq and its people?
- In what ways might films like this one promote the director's hopes for peace and reconciliation in the regions where the stories are set?

AWARDS

This film has been shown in many countries including Canada, USA, United Kingdom, Sweden, Poland, Russia, Nepal, Iraq and Australia. It has been nominated for, and won several awards.

Best Documentary - Baghdad International Film Festival

Best Director (Documentary) - Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival

Audience Choice - Arab Film Festival, San Francisco

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

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Read the Director Marsha Emerman's statement about the making of *On the Banks of the Tigris* with Majid Shokor which outlines some of the challenges and rewards experienced by the filmmakers during the filmmaking process.

THE MAKING OF "ON THE BANKS OF THE TIGRIS"

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.

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 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, and translator. Neither one of us would have guessed that our journey to complete the film would take the next 10 years.

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 personal risks. I was inspired by his courage and creativity, springing out of the losses and tragedies of his past.

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 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.

A JOURNEY TOWARD PEACE

I wanted this film to impart 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.



REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

The film production company's website
<http://www.fruitfulfilms.com.au/films/tigris#top>

An account of Iraqi musical history and its stylistic characteristics
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Iraq#Maqam

Iraqis in Victoria
<https://museumvictoria.com.au/origins/history.aspx?pid=29>

The legacy of the Al-Kuwaiti brothers
<http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/850/features/the-brothers-al-kuwaiti/>

IMMIGRATION MUSEUMS

Most Australian states have Immigration Museums or Centres where the diverse backgrounds and journeys of people who have come to live in Australia are documented, explored and celebrated. Investigate your state Immigration Museum through an online search.

In Victoria, this museum is in Flinders Street, Melbourne and includes Immigrant Stories and Timelines.
<https://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/>

There is also a Migration Museum in Adelaide.
<http://migration.history.sa.gov.au/>

IRAQ MAPS AND TIMELINES

Time maps from antiquity to the present
<http://www.timemaps.com/history/middle-east-1960ad>

Maps of Middle East Empires and colonisation from antiquity to the present
<http://www.mapsofwar.com/ind/imperial-history.html>

IRAQI MUSIC WEBSITES

Tuning Baghdad, an archive of rare video footage, audio clips and historical information on Iraqi Jewish musicians <http://www.tuningbaghdad.net/>

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REVIEWS AND ARTICLES ABOUT THE FILM

Brian Yatman, *Songs of Sadness, Songs of Love, Marsha Emerman's On the Banks of the Tigris*, Metro Magazine, 188, Summer 2016. – an extended article about the film

<http://theconversation.com/on-the-banks-of-the-tigris-a-documentary-that-traces-the-forgotten-history-of-iraqi-music-47260> - good discussion of cultural identity

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/the-story-of-jewish-songwriters-in-iraq-shows-the-power-of-music-to-unite-20151027-gkjcyz.html>

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20151031-the-hidden-story-of-iraqi-music/>

OTHER FILMS

Forget Baghdad (Switzerland, 2004, 112 min, Dir: Samir Samir, a Muslim Iraqi exile, interviews four elderly Jewish Iraqis, all ex-Communists, who were forced to emigrate to Israel in 1951.

Between Two Notes (France, 2006, 52/84 min, Dir: Florence Strauss) A Jewish-Egyptian director travels from Paris across the Middle East in search of the roots of classical Arab music.

Knowledge is the Beginning (2005, 115 min, Dir: Paul Smaczny) The story of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by Palestinian writer Edward Said and Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim, in which young people from Israel and Arab countries perform side by side.

BOOKS

Violin Lessons (Zable, Arnold, Text Publishing, Melbourne 2011) The title story in this collection by Australian author Arnold Zable is about Naji Cohen, one of the Iraqi-Jewish musicians featured in *On the Banks of the Tigris*.

Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus (Abbak Shiblak, Saqi Press, London, 2005). A well documented and balanced account of the exodus of the Iraqi Jews.

The Maqam Music Tradition of Iraq (Yeheskel Kojaman, UK, 2001). A scholarly account of Iraqi musical tradition written by an Iraqi Jewish émigré who now lives in London.

Sweet Dates in Basra (Jessica Jiji, USA, Harper Collins, 2010). This novel, set in 1940s Basra, tells of love and friendship between Iraqi Jews and their Muslim neighbours.



PURCHASE OF DVDS:
RONIN FILMS
P.O. Box 680
Mitchell, ACT 2911
AUSTRALIA

PH: 02 6248 0851
FAX: 02 6249 1640
WEB: <http://www.roninfilms.com.au>
EMAIL: orders@roninfilms.com.au

This DVD can also be purchased at The Education Shop: <http://theeducationshop.com.au/dvds-and-other-media/dvds-and-blu-rays/on-the-banks-of-the-tigris-the-hidden-story-of-iraqi-music/>



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