

Let's talk about Gaza

An Interview with the First Female Oud Player in Palestine

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When Reem Anbar was eight years old, her musical talents were discovered by chance. Since then and after endless hours of practicing and teaching herself, she became the first woman to play the Oud in Palestine. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to the 26-year-old, who also has a degree in business administration, about her musical ambitions, her aim of teaching healing through music in Gaza and her struggles as a female musician in a society where playing music is considered to be exclusively reserved for men.

You said that you are a business graduate. Tell us how you went from business to music? How did you start?

My experience of playing music started at the age of eight when I attended an art competition. They found that I am good at playing instruments, especially that I was the only student who managed to play



with both hands. It is considered a difficult skill to acquire. During sixth grade, I noticed that I had never seen a female holding the Oud. Since I can remember, I have only seen men playing the Oud. I kept this thought in mind. When I attended music concerts, I used to look at the Oud players and feel notions of fear. I used to tell myself that I would never hold it until I learn how to play it properly.

At the age of 11, I was told that there was a music center that offered Oud classes so I just went to explore. I played a piece for them and they said that I was good. When I started taking classes, I wanted to learn the names of the cords and which one produced what kind of sound so I could teach myself. This was my idea. After they taught me the names of the cords, I played my first piece. It was “Yumma mmail el hawa” (‘The wind is my melody’) which is a difficult piece to play. They heard me and were astonished. They asked whether it was my first time playing the Oud. This is how my talent was

discovered. I continued teaching myself for a month before I joined the teaching staff at the center as a music teacher. I was still at school but yet teaching people who were older than me.

At the age of 13, I was invited to participate in an art camp in Barcelona. Thirty countries participated with different arts and I was the only one with an instrument. It was their first time to see an Oud. As soon as I played, the audience went into complete silence. They were simply amazed. I made my country the most successful and remarkable. After I came back to Gaza, I went back to school and left the music centers and associations in order to focus on my studies. Also, I had been facing many social difficulties and barriers that made it hard for me to continue playing music. At this time, Edward Said School kept asking me to play in a music competition but I refused. They kept persuading my parents to make me agree. I was the only female playing the Oud in Gaza and in Palestine. I kept passing the competition stages but I was never dedicated. I was also offered a job as a music teacher at UNICEF, becoming their youngest employee. I used to travel to attend music related events, and I was lucky to attend drama classes and psychodrama classes. I worked on developing my skills and how to merge drama into music.

Later, I got a job with Ayyam El-Masrah Association (Theater Days Association). I participated in plays that aimed at exposing the suffering of women. Later, I moved to Belgium where I did presentations at schools and universities on music and drama. In Belgium, I began to learn more about how to merge music with art, and how to express music through my body. When I returned to Gaza, I worked on a project that delivered psychiatric support through drama to young women. We focused on helping them to express themselves and reveal their untold sufferings such as experiences of violence and sexual abuse through music.

What kind of problems are you facing in terms of social barriers? How do you coop with them?

At the beginning when I was still a little girl, people kept refusing and denying my practice. Apparently, I did not fit into their social concepts. As I grew older, their rejection even increased. I was told that I might not be able to get married because I play music. However, I continue to focus all my energy on developing my musical skills.

What was the most negative thing you have ever heard people say about you?

First, men harassed me a lot. I have always heard men saying bad words to me because I was playing the Oud. As I got older and men started coming to my house to ask for marriage, they ran away as soon as they saw my instruments. Nevertheless, my family supported me and encouraged me to go on. I love music. It is not just a temporary thing for me. Until now, I am planning on learning more.

Regarding psychodrama, what kind of skills did you acquire that allow you to teach?

I have to say that I did not professionally learn psychodrama. When I started, the only thing I knew was that when I start to have negative thoughts, I turn to playing music in order to comfort myself. When I play, I feel relieved. Music is a means of releasing negative energy. Accordingly, I started implementing this idea with children. While I was teaching, some children told me that music was prohibited. I wondered if they knew why it was prohibited for them. They did not have any knowledge on culture or

national heritage. Accordingly, after working with them and sparking off the love for art in them, I found that they were extremely comfortable with expressing themselves through music. I faced the same situation in Belgium. When I play music or teach drama, the students would always listen and feel positively engaged. While traveling from town to town, children would recognize me at the train station and remember that I was the one who made them like art. Teaching music goes way beyond solely transmitting skills and techniques.

When I came back to Gaza, I heard about an Indian trainer who was a psychodrama expert and a German trainer who was teaching how to use the energy of the mind, heart and body in order to express oneself through music. Only five people from Gaza were given this training, and I was lucky to be one of them. The training was very professional and helpful for working with children. Through this training, I developed skills on how to deal and connect with teenage girls especially. Accordingly, they felt safe with me and talked to me as a friend. Through these relationships, I discovered a lot of serious problems that the girls had been hiding.

What is your dream?

My dream is to continue my musical education. I am encouraged to study healing through music, I love working with music. This kind of therapy is rare but very needed in Gaza.

Why do you want to heal through music?

My people here in Gaza are ill. They need help. All people here are suffering, including me. All of the people suffer from negative energy. Even I suffer from not being able to travel in order to attend festivals and competitions outside of Gaza. I always lose my chances due to the siege. Being a Palestinian living in Gaza is a frightening nightmare for me. Because my visa applications have been denied, I could not participate in at least seven international events.

Where do you see yourself in the future? How do you see yourself?

As I told you previously, I am not looking for fame. A lot of people ask me whom I want to be like. Or whom I like to imitate, and I always answer: Nobody. I want to be Reem. I like being myself. I like doing the things I love because I love them, not because they can get me anywhere. This is why I loved the idea of healing through music. I want to help people. I noticed that a lot of people are convinced by this principle. There is a big difference between how the society was five years ago and how it is now. A lot of girls are learning music now. People are accepting the idea of females playing music. Also, children need to engage in something more inspirational like music in order to find relaxation and positive energy.

What message do you have for the girls who fear or shy away from learning music?

If you like music, just do it. Do not look back to anyone and face whoever stands in your way. If you have a dream, fight for it. At the end, you only have this one life to live.