



Ruba Saqr, part of pan-Arab musical collective Music Matbakh, talks of touring, growing and learning from guitar legend Justin Adams



How was the tour of Britain? How different an experience was that to playing for audiences with knowledge of "Eastern" music?

It was a blast. We had several standing ovations – and we were told that the audience is hard to please! In some of the shows we had musicians from the UK playing with us and they said that they loved the energy. Music Matbakh marries elements from East and West, so the fusion was really unique.

You worked with 14 musicians from the Middle East, North Africa and UK.

Was it a difficult process to assimilate all the different styles?

Unbelievable. I did this piece with Moroccan rapper Bigg, and it was fantastic. That was the beauty of it, you were breaking out of your limitations and trying something new. One of the things that Justin Adams told the media in the UK was that what we had in common was our open minds and hearts and that's what made Music Matbakh a success.

What did these artists teach you? Did they influence your style?

It was a collective learning experience. I'm working on my first album, and when I came back I had so many ideas that I'm incorporating into it. It was a crash course!

How was working with former Robert Plant guitarist Justin Adams?

I was afraid that he would have a temper, but he was an angel. He once said that Music Matbakh is a miracle, because so many people from so many backgrounds are working together, and his leadership really made it work.

What are you looking forward to in the forthcoming pan-Arab tour?

We're excited. It might sound like over-confidence, but we're going to give a unique show. We're hoping to lift up underground music and give faith to all musicians. The kind of coverage we got in the UK was huge, so we can tell musicians here not to give up!

Your songs with Ramzi Rais that won the 2005 Global Battle of the Bands in Jordan tackled spiritual growth. Is message always part of your desire to perform?

I have a reservation when we say the word "message" because I believe that you are what you say. Music is an agent of healing, and this is proven scientifically. It's not only the lyrical part of music that is spiritual, the whole package of music is spiritual by default.

How does your Sufi background impact your music?

Sufism uses mantras which depend on repetitive recitation; I have elements of that in my work because when you repeat a phrase over and over, you start lifting up as a listener. That's what Sufism is about. I worked on a piece where we used verses from the Qur'an and from the prophets' prayers. It's as if when you borrow the words of a prophet, you're connecting to the Divine through someone who has connected before you.

Which artists inspire you from the East and West? What's on your iPod now?

From the East, I love Umm Kulthoum, I think that her voice is a school by itself. I also like underground music from Lebanon, especially Jaheda Wehbe. From the West, I love Bono! I don't have an iPod, I resist technology until there's no other choice and I have to get it.