Man of Many Talents: Mazen Kerbaj's art conquers east and west

Mazen is a man of many talents. The past seven years have seen him express himself in various art forms, from painting, music and comics to writing. His burgeoning career is certainly one to keep an eye out for.

How would you define art?
I barely succeed in trying to define what art is with my own drawings and music! I am actually not sure whether I understand what art is.

You have many talents. Where do you see yourself the most?
I wouldn't say I have many talents, rather many ways of expression. I think that the "talent" is more what you have to say and how to say it, and the medium you use is the technique. In this sense, any technique can be mastered if needed by the artist.

Do you regard your music more closely than your artwork?
I came to music much later than illustration and one would suppose that my first medium is drawing. But rather than a sort of hierarchy between the two media, I see in them two complementary languages, at least in my world. What I cannot express in one, I express in the other.

What do you express through your unique artwork?
The "uniqueness" of my art is paradoxically the only common denominator to all artists. Each artist is a unique human being and as such he or she can only express their totally unique and subjective view of the world.

Tell me about your particular type of music; how did it developed?
I work in the field of free improvised music. The musicians play together without any prior discussion and try to dialogue "live" with their instruments on the stage, or even in the studio. The music focuses more on sounds as raw material for making music and the three sacred criteria that define music in our world: rhythm, melody and harmony.

What is the composition of your band like?
I have a lot of regular groups that I play with, but in this form of music you do not necessarily deal with the logic of a "band". I collaborate with all kinds of different musicians, both from Lebanon and from all over the world.

Where have you been performing?
In Beirut, Europe and the USA, in cities like Paris, London, New York and Boston.

What are your future plans?
I have some gigs in Europe and the USA coming up. I'm also looking forward to the Lebanese festival IRTIJAL that will take place for the 8th time in Beirut in April 2008, in which I participate as a member of the MILL association that curates it (for more info visit www.irtijal.org).