

Tour Middle East September 1998

Tony Overwater



Thursday 17th of September 1998

the first thing that strikes me when you arrive in a country and people start telling about the local situation is that it is not at all what we thought it would be like. We are indoctrinated by the western media; radio, tv newspapers etcetera of a certain image of a country with it's good guys and bad guys, its enemies and its friends. This image is always colored by the western media and dogma's. Things aren't that simple usually, every behavior has a reason that is embedded in a culture that we cannot grasp and should not easily judge about. Western media and governments make us believe what is best for them just like the so called dictators and communists do in their countries. And above all we like to intrude in problems that are not originally ours but might only concern our financial well being.

Enough of that, let me not start of too moralistic. Beirut, Lebanon that's where Turkish Airlines brought us yesterday. A tour through the middle east with the Yuri Honing Trio.

After a thorough check at the customs we meet Neil van der Linden our guide and organizer of the tour. A man with a vast knowledge of the Arabic world and culture and a keen eye for details. It's going to be a sweaty, hot tour not just because of the high temperatures (between 30 and 40 C) and humidity but also because of the beautiful female population here.

Friday 18th of September 1998

Yesterday we played our first concert in the Medina Theater in Beirut. The audience was nice. Many young Lebanese who were sincerely interested in our music. we played one big set mixing some older repertoire with new material. After the concert we were invited to a concert of a local hero who played in bar on the other side of town. We were excited to go, expecting some traditional Lebanese music. Unfortunately the repertoire was a mixture of French chansons and stuff like La bamba and One Note Samba. Three keyboards, seven horns drum, bass, percussion and only one Oud (traditional Lebanese instrument) waiting patiently for a feature in the introduction of La Bamba. For some reason every tour like this seems to have one night where we are invited to something that is so shameful for the country. I feel ashamed that I come from a part of the world where the urge to preach is still in our DNA and where we love impose our culture on other countries who have a beautiful culture of their own. Before we know it we will not need to travel anymore because every city in the world will be the same; Mcdonald's, Benneton, Sony, CNN and the mother of all explorers Coca Cola.

Saturday 19th of September 1998



As we are leaving the city of Beirut with the minibus provided by the Dutch Embassy of Damascus, we drive through the suburbs where many buildings still show in silent protest the marks of the war. Some buildings look like sieves with thousands of bullet holes from automatic guns, some buildings look like a stack of pancakes, through heavy bombings the walls have disappeared and the floors are stacked on one another.

This is the first time we experience something of the 16 year on going war that only ended in 1991. People don't talk much of the war here. The only reference we had was by the owner of the Blue Note jazz club which we visited last night. He said that he hadn't had so few people since the war.

It was a memorable day yesterday. We invited a young Lebanese singer called Rima Ksheish to meet us before the concert and have a little session to see if it was possible to play an Arabic song with her during the concert. Two worlds of difference met. We were very excited with our first meeting with this beautiful music. Just that morning we met the Dutch ambassador who told us that the local people weren't yet very educated in music, after half an

evening of western music they would always end up playing 'that music with that Arabic scale again'.....

'I'm sorry mister Ambassador which of the eighty different Arabic scales do you mean?', should have been our reply but we didn't want to disturb our noble sponsor in his colonialistic world of thoughts...

After the concert where we did play a tune with Rima we went to meet a famous oud player and his girlfriend who is a singer. We had Heineken and Tuc and discussed the Arabic music. Finally he took out his Oud and played us some different scales and moods (in Arabic scale and mood are one word; maqam). We were speechless and intrigued, somebody just opened a door in the world of music which we were completely unaware of.

Monday 21st of September 1998

A poolside concert at the Sheraton was next on the schedule. I imagined us wearing bermuda's and Hawaii shirts for this concert but it turned out to be a real concert in an amphitheater like shaped part of the hotel facing the pool and 300 chairs which were unfortunately only partly filled with people. The annual jazz festival had just finished a week ago leaving the people in Damascus saturated with jazz. We arrived only 30 minutes before the concert being held up at the border where we passed about six gateways and then were asked for a thousand dollars as a deposit for the instruments which we would get back once we left Syria. A letter from our embassy didn't make any impression. When we asked the guy if we could make a phonecall he let us cross the border probably afraid that his personal tax system would become known to other authorities.



The concert was nice, a bit shaky at the end since we hadn't eaten since breakfast. The people from the Dutch embassy in Syria invited us for a dinner after the concert. What a difference! These people were really interested in what we did, including the ambassador. The next day we were guided through the old town of Damascus by two women from the Dutch embassy. They showed us the Souq (old Arabic shopping area) and a beautiful mosque. Especially the Mosque impressed me. Compared with Christian churches which seem to be build to impress people and make them feel humble, this was more like a social gathering of people sharing the same religion. It

seemed like a place where I wouldn't mind hanging around every once in a while. Just to arrange your thoughts and to solidify your spiritual connection.

We spend the evening eating at a big Syrian restaurant with live music eating Arabic food and smoking a waterpipe. Slowly a sense for this culture sips through and enters our veins. Next stop Aleppo.

Wednesday 23rd of September

it's after ten in the morning. We're waiting for our bus that would pick us up at eight. Usually the driver is very punctual so we are worried a bit. I realize how dependent we have become on cellular phones. They don't work here and straight away we feel lost. It's a 10 hour drive to Aman, Jordan our last stop on this tour.

Monday night we had a concert in Aleppo. in the courtyard of a former monestry we played for about six hundred people. I wondered how many people knew the songs we played and if this music sounded as alien to them as the arabic music sounded to us at first. Anyway they were interested and responded to the music.

The next day we did a workshop in the music school from Aleppo. The season hadn't started yet so there were only a few teachers, one bass student (one of the four double bass players in Syria) and a saxophone player from Beirut who drove 600 km to come to the workshop.

We played outside at the balcony since the largest room of the school wasn't big enough to hold the 10 people that were present. I jammed with two oud players who taught me an Arabic scale and a simple song based on that scale. I decided to buy an oud myself. It seemed an instrument that I could relate to since it is more or less tuned as a bass and has no frets.



friday 25th of september 1998 2:30 in the morning

Aman Airport. Our flight to Amsterdam leaves at 5. we are early because sleeping didn't make any sense. This was probably the most exciting tour yet. Never have we ever felt closer to a country and it's people as this tour. We met so many musicians, heard so many stories filled with politics, music, war, hope and despair. We've been introduced to the arabic music culture by many different people with as many different views.



Today we met Saad an Iraqis refugee who lived in Jordan. His story, without doubt one out of many, touched our hearts. He wanted to be an artist, composer, philosopher. He left his country to escape the army. He wanted to go to a place where he could meet he people that would relate to his way of thinking and where he could develop his musical skills. Neil, we, like the arabs, call him Mister Neil now, is for these people a possible ticket to Europe. Someone who

could help there art become more recognized. Neil thus has many friends. I wouldn't like to be Mister Neil. I would give every person I met over there a ticket and invitation to a festival or gallery. Every artist creates his own uniqueness and therefore reason to be supported. Saad brother missed one foot, lost in the war. Saad told us that every family has either lost sons in the war or badly hurt them. When I was practicing in the beautiful gardens from the roman villa we stayed and played at and glanced at the ground shattered with leaves and little branches I saw something that looked like a nut. When I took closer look it turned out to be a bullet from a machine gun. Never had I felt the war so close.

We played in Aman in a gallery that was part of a big culture foundation that was situated in this beautiful roman villa over looking the city built on seven hills. It was also our first concert that was broadcasted live on the internet. I don't think the sound quality was any good judging by the equipment used and the fact that they didn't hook up the bass amp correctly so that you only heard me through the snare mic for the drums. But there has to be a first time for everything.

The middle east. I'll have to go back home and let it rest for a while. My head is full of images, smells and sounds. I think this trip has more consequences then we can over see now.

friday at noon

We are almost home. this morning it looked like we couldn't get home today because our tickets for the trip from Istanbul to Amsterdam had the wrong date. tomorrow to be precise. Yuri has his first concert today with Misha Mengelberg in the Bim huis, presenting their CD 'Playing'. Joost has his birthday today and wants to go home to his girlfriend. I am getting a little home sick and was really looking forward to see Kaili, my son, and Marieke (my girlfriend).

The man at Turkish Airways said that it was impossible to change the flight because today's flight was fully booked and leaving in ten minutes. Our experience with the arabic negotiating technics came at hand now. We screamed, we begged, we cried, we jumped and finally what seemed to be a definite no changed into a yes, first class with 500\$ per person extra fee and later second class smoking with 30\$ per person extra. One of our major lessons from arabia. No is never really no but just the start of the negotiations.

