

The Majazz Project and the Palestinian Sound Archive



By Mo'min Swaitat

Until then, living in London for the past few years, I'd collected vinyl in an ad hoc way. I would stumble across Arabic stuff every now and then, but it was pretty hard to come by, and Arabic cassettes were nonexistent. I picked up vinyl at second-hand shops whenever I was back in the West Bank, but they tended to be heavily scratched and in poor condition. The Arabic music I'd found was often new releases by Arab bands and reissues by foreign collectors.

Tariq took me to his archive and began talking me through his collection that was covered by a thick layer of dust. He had mainly Arabic pop, funk, jazz, and soul from Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, as well as Yemeni-Jewish and Iraqi-Jewish tapes. Walking through the genres with me, he gave me some background and helped me put them into context. I was overawed by what I'd stumbled across. The

In 2020, during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic in Palestine, London-based artist Mo'min Swaitat discovered a large collection of cassette tapes and records from his youth in Jenin. Amongst them was Riad Awwad's *Intifada*, the first album released in the first *Intifada*, containing revolutionary songs. It had been lost for years after the Israeli army confiscated all the copies they could find – 3,000 in all – and arrested Awwad. Inspired, Swaitat founded the Majazz Project, a record label that focuses on sampling, remixing, and reissuing vintage Palestinian and other Arabic cassettes.

Being a Palestinian Bedouin, with many prominent wedding singers and musicians in my family, I have grown up around music and have always been interested in it. As I was raised during the chaos and upheaval of the second Intifada, music has always grounded me – in both good times and in bad. While my background is in theater

(I trained at Jenin's Freedom Theatre under Juliano Mer Khamis until his assassination in 2011, and then studied in London and Berlin), I gravitate towards music when I feel lost and uncertain.

During the first COVID lockdown, I found myself stuck in Palestine for about eight months, unable to return to my wife and daughter in the UK. Since 2012, I had not spent that much time in my family home in Jenin in the northern West Bank. The experience was hard, bittersweet, healing, and nostalgic. Wandering around flea markets and familiar old shops, I rediscovered Tariq Cassettes, a little music shop that was popular when I was growing up. It was right next to my school, so after the bell rang, we used to wait in line to spend our pocket money and buy new tapes for five shekels. The man who ran it was my grandmother's neighbor, so I knew his face well. I saw that the shop was shuttered, so I knocked on the owner's door and asked whether he still had any tapes for sale.



Landscape picture of part of the Majazz Project Collection that comprises more than 12,000 cassettes, including studio-recorded and home-recorded albums as well as recordings of radio broadcasts, interviews, and festival and field recordings, all of which are from or about Palestine.



Singer and composer Riad Awwad sampling drum sounds in his family home in Jerusalem for the 1987 *Intifada* album that was re-issued by the Majazz Project in 2022. Majazz Project Collection.

tapes felt like such a vital part of Palestinian and broader Arab cultural history and heritage, now unloved and nearly forgotten. I bought several hundred cassettes on the spot, a big haul, looking out for particular artists, even cassette covers, that I connected with and was pleased to find tape after tape of Bedouin field recordings that have inspired so much of the Palestinian wedding music genre. These tend to be made up of psychedelic riffs on the *arghul*, an instrument that sounds a bit like a bagpipe, and on the *mijwiz*, a bamboo pipe which produces very hypnotic, quite mournful sounds. There's a lot of improvised spoken word put to electronic music which makes not only great dance tracks (for the traditional *dabke* dancing popular at weddings among youth and some of the elderly alike) but is also a really important part of our history and culture as a marginalized community. The other tapes I bought in bulk were anything Palestinian

that was produced during the first and second Intifadas. Given that I was born during the first Intifada, and having come of age during the second, these were the soundtracks of my youth.

I thought I knew roughly what I could expect, but the collection turned out to be full of surprises. There was a yellow cassette without a case with the word "Intifada" handwritten on a sticker but no other information. As soon as I put it on, I knew it was special. Many tracks were really infectious, with beautiful and stirring lyrics about identity, belonging, the Palestinian relationship to land, and revolution. At one point on the album, singer Riad Awwad introduced himself and his sisters and mentioned Hanan Awwad and Mahmoud Darwish, one of the best-known Palestinian poets, as co-authors of one of the tracks. But still, I had little to go on. There was a hiss on the album, which I later found out

was the result of the album being recorded in the living room of the Awwad family.

Digging deeper, I got in contact with Riad's sister Hanan, who features on and co-wrote songs for the album. She told me the story of her brother, Riad, a musician from Jerusalem who had studied engineering: The week after the first Intifada began, he gathered his sisters, and they began to record tracks he had written for them. There was an urgency to the whole process. Riad made 3,000 copies of the cassettes and began to distribute them around the Old City of Jerusalem. Some found their way to the West Bank. Hanan said that as you walked through the Old City, you could hear the cassette playing in shops, homes, and cafés. It became a kind of first soundtrack of the Intifada. Once the Israeli army got wind of this, they immediately confiscated all the copies they could find, arresting and detaining Riad, who was tortured and held without trial for several months. Not even Hanan had been able to listen to the cassette since then, as she couldn't find a copy anywhere. So she was overjoyed when she discovered that I had a cassette that had survived.

After Riad was released from jail, he began teaching kids across Palestine about music, using equipment he was able to make because he had a background in engineering. Riad also formed a new band called Palestinian Union. But tragically, he was killed in a car crash in 2005.

During the rest of the lockdown, I visited shops and collectors and was able to accumulate a collection of several thousand cassettes and records that I took back to London with me (it was certainly an "interesting" experience having to explain this at the Israeli-Jordanian

Riad Awwad did not live to see how popular his music would become with people around the world. But his music lives on in defiance of censorship, and young Palestinians in Palestine and in the diaspora as well as listeners in all corners of the globe can now connect with the fascinating music, history, and politics of Palestine and the region.



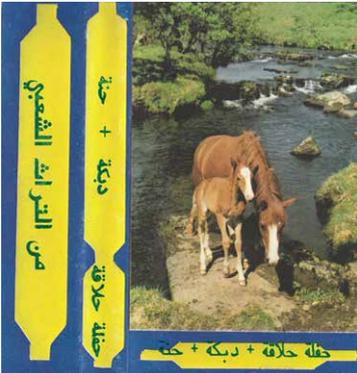
The cassette cover of Ziad Rahbani's album *Houdu Nisbi*. Majazz Project Collection. This album has just been reissued on vinyl for the first time in April 2022 by the sound label We Want Sound, London.



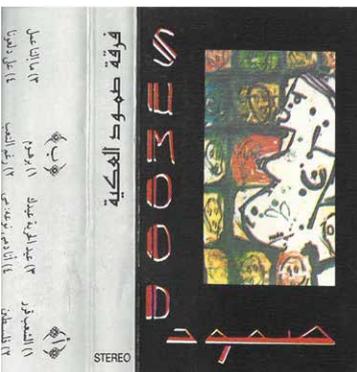
The cover of Marcel Khalife's album *Ya Mahla Nourha*. Majazz Project Collection.



The cover of an album by the Iraqi band The Road. This album was released in the 1980s as part of Iraq's support of the Palestinians. Majazz Project Collection.



The cover of an album of Palestinian Bedouin music field-recorded by Atif Swaitat and Qasim Swaitat at a wedding in northern central Palestine in the 1970s. Majazz Project Collection.



The cover of an album home-recorded in 1988 by Sumood, a Palestinian jazz/funk band from Akka. Majazz Project Collection.

border). I was lucky enough to be awarded a £20,000 fund from Jerwood Arts during the pandemic and thus was able to buy mixing and sound equipment, open a pop-up record store, and found a record label that in 2021 became the Majazz Project, a collaboration between Arab and non-Arab DJs, producers, and artists interested in shedding new light on the richness and diversity of Arabic – and particularly Palestinian – musical heritage. Majazz will keep putting out releases and do everything possible to safeguard the archive and bring new life to it through remixes, samples, and collaborations with contemporary DJs, producers, and musicians.

Majazz now has a show on London's NTS Radio, called the Palestinian Sound Archive, where you can get a flavor of what we do. We hope to become stronger as the label grows and evolves. In April 2022, we put out an album with remixed interviews with my mentor Juliano Mer Khamis (1958–2011). The label is about so much more than just releasing songs as dance or background music. We aim to revive a sense of joy and celebration, much needed after so much Palestinian suffering, sure. But more than that, we aim to preserve the work and memory of the many artists who have formed the backbone of our cultural identity. Palestinian archives have been looted, dismantled, censored, and destroyed since the *Nakba*. There is true power in reclaiming these sounds and stories and in platforming the incredible range of artists who were making music during such fascinating and turbulent periods of Palestinian history. The label is as much about sharing their stories as it is about

the albums themselves. And it feels particularly powerful that the label is Palestinian-run. There are a few international labels that are putting out some amazing Arab tracks – and there's a whole other discussion to be had around that – but I feel an immense sense of pride in knowing that these albums are available to listeners around the world yet ultimately remain in our hands. Moreover, the reissues are borne out of a very close collaboration and discussion with the artists and their families.

We are going to reissue as much as we can and, in the long term, work on making everything accessible online as well as in a physical venue in Palestine. The plan has always been to build an audio-visual immersive digital platform, where people can discover more about the history behind each song/genre, building on my love of both theater and cinema. Upcoming releases are going to be reissues of recordings by Al Fajr, a Palestinian-German revolutionary band, and by Zeinab Shaath who sang the amazing folk

song “The Urgent Call of Palestine” (a collaboration with the American label Discostan). We're also researching and reissuing the work of George Cormoz, a Palestinian singer-songwriter and early ethnographer who made albums with villagers across the West Bank and whose album *From Ansar to Askalan* we released for a short run during this year's Palestinian Prisoners' Day and broadcast to prisoners across the West Bank.

Mo'min Swaitat is a London-based actor, writer, director, and founder of the Majazz Project, a record label and research platform borne out of the Palestinian Sound Archive radio program. You can listen to the Majazz Project on soundcloud (<https://soundcloud.com/user585637463>).



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Atif and Qasim Swaitat playing a live gig at a Palestinian wedding in northern Palestine in the 1980s. Majazz Project Collection.