



Bedouin Jerry Can Band: Reinventing ancient musical traditions

Tim Cumming 12 October 2007

The Bedouin Jerry Can Band, a collective of musicians, dancers and sufi singers from the oasis town of El Arish in the northern Sinai, are coming to Britain with a debut album, *Coffee Time*, and a showcase concert to close the Barbican's Ramadan Nights festival.

Getting British visas has not been easy for these semi-nomadic tribesmen. Most of them have no passport and had to have their teeth examined in Cairo to ascertain their age for British visa requirements. Alas, one of the older members, the poet Admaan, whose words and rich, sun-cracked voice opens *Coffee Time* with a traditional Bedouin greeting and closes it with an epic tale of brewing coffee in a storm, is unable to leave at all, on account of all his teeth having fallen out. The Rolling Stones never had customs problems like this.

When I went to meet the Bedouin Jerry Can Band, we set off for El Arish with a shrill 1992 home-made cassette of the band blasting from the car stereo, weaving through the chaos of Cairo's traffic. Approaching El Arish some five hours later, the first band member we meet is lead singer and simsimiyya player Goma Ghanaeim, walking back from his mosque dressed in a black jellaba and Bedouin headgear.

"We are in the middle between Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Egypt," he says, gesturing around him. "The Sinai is the crossroads of all the wars and historical activity that has happened here. A lot of different cultures have passed through, and it appears in our music and dance traditions."

It's the music of the Sinai that we've come to discover, as we arrive at Goma's brother's camp, rattling up a rocky, unlit track off the main road, as men in long, flowing jellaba emerge from a low-built, flat-roofed, breeze-block home carrying huge dishes of lamb, rice and beans as the evening prayer call erupts from a nearby mosque.

We settle in a group inside a semi-circular boundary of palm leaves where BJB members, friends and family gather to eat and to drink sweet tea flavoured with desert herbs, and afterwards to smoke Cleopatra cigarettes and tell stories.

With me is the band's manager, Zakaria Ibrahim. Over the last decade, his El Mastaba Centre for Egyptian Folk Music has played a key role in reviving, preserving and disseminating the traditional music of Egypt.

El Mastaba occupies an apartment block in central Cairo, its walls hung with a treasure trove of instruments, its shelves filled with field recordings gathered from across the country. Egypt's ancient musical traditions – steeped as they are in ceremony, magic, historical and cultural lore, mysticism, and plain, old-fashioned romance – have not only been saved from what would have been almost certain oblivion, but are thriving.

"There is the real thing and there is the copy," explains Zakaria. "And in Egypt there are thousands of copies. A group belonging to the Palace of Culture will be Bedouin one minute, fishermen the next, from Upper Egypt the next. They don't present the identity of their locale, but all of Egypt in an amalgam. And they call it folk music, which means there's no space for the real thing." He nods towards the musicians around the fire. "It has to disappear because someone else has moved in."

And it looks as if there's an eviction notice being served on the intruders. Just as Zakaria launched El Mastaba, the BJB came together to preserve the songs and stories of their own intensely lyrical tradition. By joining forces to produce *Coffee Time*, they have, says Zakaria, "developed the music more than it has been in years".

"We learnt our songs from the older generation," explains Goma. " We didn't want to see them disappear – for us it is music that keeps our culture together. It's music that gives us our feeling of identity."

For centuries it was a music carried alone by poets, accompanying stories of love, rivalry and hospitality on the one-string rababa, the melancholic nay, the ear-piercing double-reed magroona, and on the simsimiyya, a five-string lyre that sounds like an enchanted banjo. All these instruments are descended from pharaonic Egypt; hearing them together is like opening a window on to ancient history.

"Today our melodies are the same, the songs are the same, but what's changed," says Ayman Hassanne, master percussionist of the jerry cans, " was that before, each instrument was played by itself. What we have done is put all these different instruments together to make a new sound from the same traditional melodies. The old musicians played without knowing any of the scales they were using. But now we know what we're doing, we know the tonality of the music, and we work from the same tuning. Before, each player tuned their instrument according to how they felt."

The band's name comes from their percussive arsenal of Israeli jerry cans and ammo boxes, left behind from Israel's occupation of the Sinai in the Sixties and Seventies, and the long-held Bedouin practice of using whatever hard surface comes to hand when it is time to make music or dance.

As for the coffee, Ramadan means it's sweet spiced tea rather than cardamom and sugar-sweetened coffee being brewed on the desert fire. Singer Fathy Salem raises his glass to demonstrate how a guest accepts this most symbolic of Bedouin beverages.

"We make the coffee strong to clear your mind... your mind will become good on the second cup, as the poet Agmaan says." Fathy tilts the glass back and forth and sets it down on the sand. "It is old agriculture from the Yemen," he adds. Indeed, the coffee ritual of roasting, grinding and brewing is the root of Bedouin culture; both share the same origins.

"Yemen is the source of many Bedouin tribes and they brought the coffee with them. Tea is something new compared with coffee. Coffee is so very old, we treat it as part of our identity." He smiles, as Goma hums a tune, an almost familiar folkish air that could find its home anywhere between England and India. "And it is the best you can find, the coffee of the Yemen."

The Bedouin Jerry Can Band appear as part of the Barbican's Ramadan Nights (020-7638 8891) on Tuesday; 'Coffee Time' is out now on 30ips