

# Free to Fly

The Tunisian *oud* player Dhafer Youssef talks to **Jane Cornwell** about his latest Syria-inspired release

**D**hafer Youssef flies when he plays. In his mind, inside the music, he sees – becomes – a bird with spreading wings, soaring over countries and boundaries, coasting through air, space and time. “Right from the first record I made, I’ve been seeing pictures,” says the Tunisian, 48, sitting in the West London offices of his record company, wearing leather jeans, a black pork pie hat and designer stubble, looking more like a rock star than the acclaimed *oud* virtuoso, vocalist and composer he is. “As with paintings and movies, they were pictures that told stories. But the flying thing was always there,” he continues in his accented English. “It is usually a bird’s eye view, I think between dusk and dawn, accompanied by this feeling of going up.” A feeling, he agrees, akin to the heightened emotional state known in flamenco circles as *duende*: “It’s as if you become the instrument, and the music is flowing through you.” A smile. “There’s always a moment in the concert hall where everyone onstage is high without drugs. I think maybe even the audience too.”

Youssef’s eighth solo album, *Diwan of Beauty and Odd*, continues the theme of artist as conduit while also featuring complex time signatures, tracks dedicated to ancient Syria, a multicultural band of crack musicians and a focus on bass and drums. As with his back catalogue – which ranges from his groundbreaking 1999 debut *Malak* and 2001’s intense, meditative *Electric Sufi* to 2013’s mighty four-movement *Birds Requiem* suite – it’s a work of genre-blurring experimentation, as ambitious as it is accessible, as adventurous as it is melodic.

“In Islamic literature a *diwan* is a collection of short poems written by a single author, to be sung or composed,” says Youssef. “I am using prose written by Al-Akhtal, a Sufi who lived in Syria during the Umayyad epoch [the first Islamic dynasty, 661-750]. I spent some time in Damascus, and the Syrians are some of my favourite, and most inspiring, people on earth. “So I am seeing the city through his eyes” – in three tracks titled ‘Al-Akhtal Rhapsody’ – “and dedicating this work



to [Syrians]. He speaks about the hypocrisy of people who pray to god only because they are afraid of punishment, of hell.”

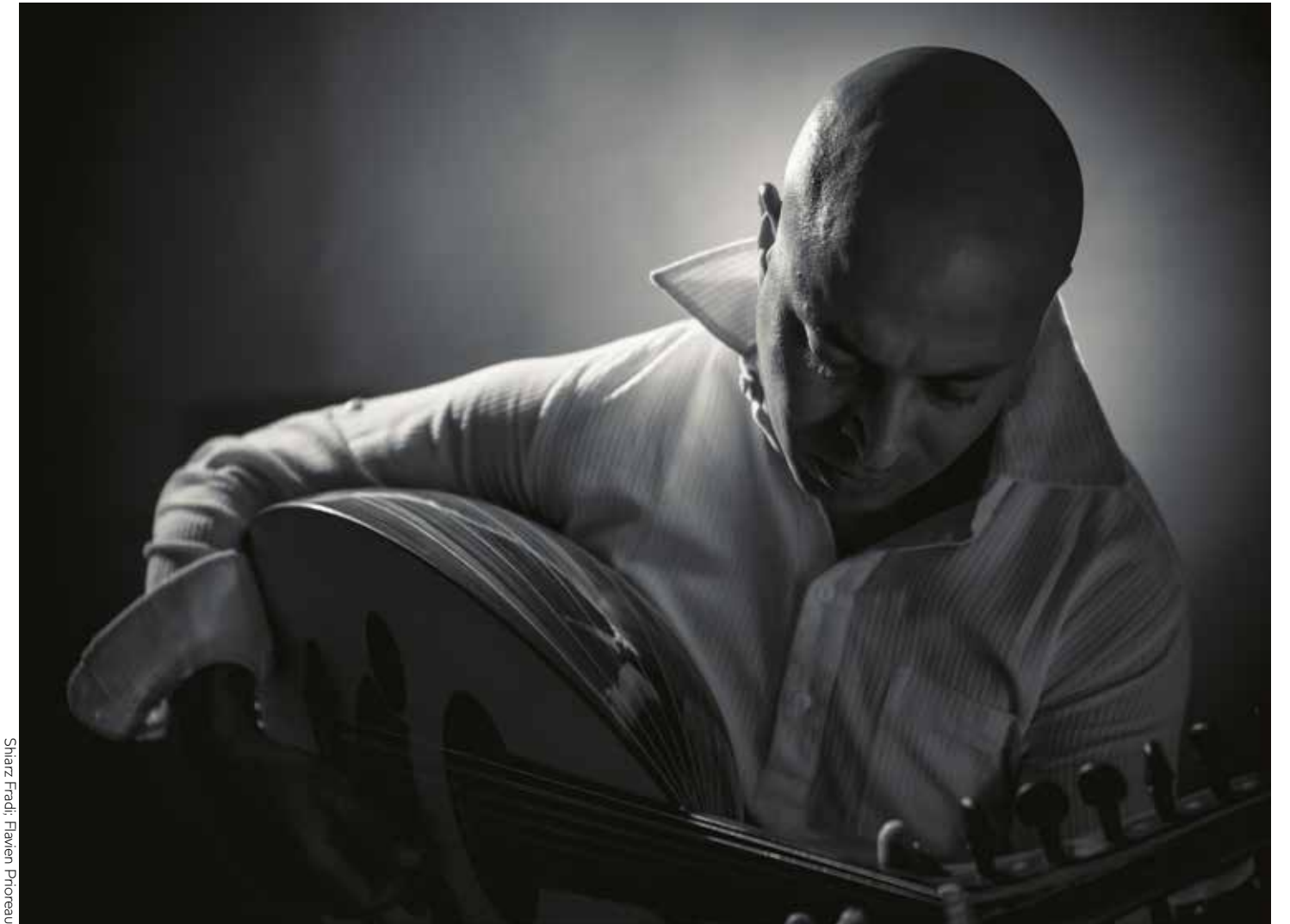
The ‘odd’ of the title refers to the use of unusual metres. “I am composing melodies, harmonies and atmospheres on weird time signatures to build something beautiful. Just as there is no light without dark, no good without bad,” he says, “we are taking strange rhythmical tunes and flying with them.”

A New York-based band comprising the esteemed likes of trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, pianist Aaron Parks, bassist Ben Williams and drummer Mark Guiliana kick off the album with the spacious ‘Fly Shadow Fly’, grooving with deceptive simplicity through tracks pre-composed and collectively developed. A starting point was the music of India; influenced by *tabla* player Jatinder Thakur early in his career (“we were living in Vienna; he was always explaining things and I fell in love with these odd metres”), Youssef kick-started *Diwan of Beauty and Odd* by recording three tracks with *tabla* wizard Zakir Hussain.

Often designated as a jazz artist, Youssef has long been interested in music from elsewhere; his goal, he’s often said, is to transcend genres, for music to be classified as music. “My hero is Miles Davis,” he says, “but I also love artists such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Oumou Sangaré and [Azerbaijani *mugham* singer] Alim Qasimov. But my greatest guru is [Egyptian] Quranic reciter [Sheikh] Muhammed Omran [1944-1994], whose voice always gives me goosebumps.”

Youssef’s voice is also such an instrument. Powerful and resonant, imbued with a stunning high tone, it recalls both a hard-rock wail and the cry of the *muezzins*, the callers to prayer, of his youth. Which isn’t surprising; born to a modest family in Tébourba, a fishing village in eastern Tunisia, Youssef’s heritage includes generations of Quranic singers. He is not, for the record, a Sufi: “But the most important thing for me is the mystical part. I have always a wish of ecstasy.”

As a child Youssef honed his vocal performances in the acoustically enhanced foyer of the local *hammam*. He even called to prayer from the mosque with a toy microphone.



Shiraz Fradi/Flaxen Phoreau

“A plastic microphone from the *souk*.” He flashes me another grin. “It was very loud; I loved it.”

He taught himself to play a toy guitar (“I was thirsty to make a noise!”) before graduating to the oud – the pear-shaped fretless string instrument central to the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean – and the electric bass. After studying at the conservatory in Tunis, he moved to Vienna and formed his first band with an Austrian percussionist. He soaked up jazz structures and idioms – both Scandinavian and Mediterranean – as he moved around Europe, playing residencies and recording with everyone from the aforementioned Thakur to Norwegian trumpeter Nils Petter Molvaer and Armenian pianist Tigran Hamasyan.

His trademark, perhaps, is respecting the oud’s ancient traditions while taking its robust yet delicate tones into the future. “I’m trying to tell stories by putting the oud in places other people are afraid to go because it’s a matter of experience and good taste. When you hear the oud with a piano, big band or classical ensemble, it must have its own place.”

“I always begin each composition with the oud, the main thing in my work,” says Youssef, a former BBC World Music Awards nominee, who recently took his ten ouds (including an electric one) and moved back to Tunis to be with his Tunisian partner and closer to his ageing parents. “I am lucky to have learned from encounters with great musicians and also from

my constant wish to develop myself. You cannot stay in one room and share your story with the world. It is important to read books, see art and theatre and travel and be open. Each new person you meet could be like a treasure for you.”

Youssef is currently reading a book by Turkish writer and poet Elif Şafak; a record by the great *bansuri* player Hariprasad Chaurasia is on heavy rotation on his iPhone. He just watched Don Cheadle’s Miles Davis biopic and loved it: “I’m interested in how other people see artists and especially Miles, because he was an enigma. I’ve met musicians like Herbie Hancock and Dave Holland who played with him and they speak of him as if he was a prophet.”

He’s looking forward, he says, to his forthcoming European tour (“especially the London date because it’s also my birthday”), just as he’s already thinking about his next album – a work for oud, *tabla* and clarinet – which he’ll start recording with Zakir Hussain in Mumbai in January. For all his sonic adventuring, Youssef insists he would be nothing without his musical roots. “The traditions I learned as a child are my basement. They let me go here and everywhere.”

He pauses, smiles. “They let me fly.” ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Diwan of Beauty and Odd* is reviewed on p63

+ **DATE** Dhafer Youssef will perform at London’s Barbican on November 19 as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival