

## Interview with Guy Schalom

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***Can you give me a bit of a brief profile on yourself?***

Well, I'm Guy Schalom, born in Israel. I'm 31, I grew up in Manchester but I'm based in London now. I started playing music at school. Originally I wanted guitar lessons, but there was no guitar teacher so, like Hossam Ramzy, I started off playing the drum set.

My family has influenced me greatly in life and particularly in music. My mother was from the North East and loved brass bands so, when I started playing brass bands, she was really encouraging. I won a few percussion prizes and was in championship bands all over the North of England. My dad loved Rock 'n' Roll, on the other hand and I loved /Elvis too and as highly in demand as an expert "Elvis" drummer. I later got into jazz very seriously and that is where I felt I truly found my voice. I loved improvisation. I studied Popular Music and Recording at Salford University and became very active on the jazz scene in Manchester. I think the improvisation is actually what appeals to me most about Egyptian ***Baladi*** music.

Because of where I was born and my family influence (my dad was an Egyptian Jew), I always took "world music" for granted. Jewish, Egyptian and Greek (my granddad's family all spoke Greek because they arrived in Alexandria from Corfu) music were all around me, but I didn't really get serious about ethnic music until a little later. I was given a tape of some ***klezmer*** (Jewish) music by a violinist friend of mine and this made me start to investigate my own roots more seriously and carve my own path.

Eventually, I headed down to London to learn the table and soon I was off to Egypt for lessons. I studied mostly with Negm Nabil and Said El Artist, but I had lessons with others and most significantly, I spent a lot of time in Luxor. This is where I learnt to do the Saiidi stick dancing (***tahtib***) and was truly immersed in the culture. You have to understand the culture on an instinctive, internal, gut level in order to work at a high level artistically.

***So tell me about the Baladi Blues - how would you describe the band, who's in it, how long have you been together, how did you all meet, who plays what, etc?***

The Baladi Blues Ensemble developed from my work with the accordionist, Sheik Taha. Sheik Taha was a pioneer of Baladi music, first in Egypt and later in the UK. He's worked not only with the greatest Egyptian musicians of all time, like Mohamed Abdel Wahab, but with also the greatest dancers, such as Fifi Abdou and Naima Akif (he was related to her, by the way). He plays a quartertone accordion which can play the Arabic scales. The band also has Ahmed El Saidi on saxophone and he used to play with all the Nubian bands like Ali Hassan Kuban and Salamat. He lives in Berlin now so we have to fly him in for

the concerts. I also have an amazing frame drummer in the band from Leeds called Adam Warne (Rhythmic Ginger to some of you).

***What's your mission as a band? Why do you play this kind of music above all other, what is it you love about it?***

The idea behind the band is recreate the philosophy of Egyptian Baladi in a modern context. Baladi came about as a result of folk musicians from the countryside moving to the cities of Cairo and Alexandria and swapping their ancient traditional instruments for Western instruments such as accordion, saxophone or trumpet. So you have these old catch Egyptian folk tunes played on familiar sounding instruments alongside Egyptian percussion - so for me it's the best of both worlds. And the real hook with Baladi, which we can call "Egyptian urban blues", is the importance of improvisation. That makes each performance unique and means that on stage we can challenge each other to play better and be more adventurous. The band really comes into its own when we work with dancers. We consider the dance a member of the band who can challenge us to play better and we can improvise as a team. It makes the whole performance much more exciting for us, the dancer and of course, the audience.

***What are the highlights of your career so far as a band? Any good stories to tell?***

Actually, one of our proudest moments was our recent theatre show in London, it was a great celebration of our music. We had guest dancers and a singer and the theatre was packed and crowd went wild" That really makes it all worthwhile. Other than that we're really proud of our CD, Baladi Blues. It's really important that we document this music for the future but you never know what the interest will be and when people come up to me after a show and say "I have your CD!" it makes us very happy indeed.

***Do you just play existing material or do you also work on your own stuff? If it's not as cut and dried as that, tell me about how you approach a track and make it your own as a band?***

Well, you're right, it isn't that cut and dried. The basic material we use all comes from Arabic sources and we use that as our starting point. We play it how we like and we play solos and create arrangements as we go along - a lot like jazz musicians.

***What's your favourite kind of gig to play at?***

Well, I do think it's important to play concerts because we need to keep in mind the fact that we have top class musicians in the band and to fully appreciate their artistry and to show respect to their experience, we need to see them perform on a stage. Having said that, you can't beat playing for dancers, be it as a soloist improvising with us on stage or a group of dancers in a party (hafla) atmosphere, so I like both.

***Is there anything on your wish list that you'd like to achieve as a band?***

For us, I think because Baladi music is a living breathing art form, we thrive off collaboration. So I'd love to work with more Baladi musicians. I have some plans for that, by the way...

***What do you think makes the Baladi Blues stand out from other Egyptian bands?***

Two things. Most importantly, we are all about the music. It's really important to us to give people a sense of what this music is about. There's culture, history, depth and dynamics in this music as well as

fun. We're not just going to show up and bang 50 pop music hits at you. The other thing is, we really consider the dancer an integral part of the band and that affects how we play. The band members all do that as individuals, for instance, in taxims or drum solos, but to do it as a band is something really special. Put two different dancers in front of us and ask us to play the same piece and you'll hear two very different pieces.

***How often do you work with dancers?***

As often as we can!

***What advice would you give to dancers wanting to perform to live music?***

I'd say, firstly. Be flexible, we are human beings and one day we might play differently from the night before. But, if the band's connected to the dancer, it should only enhance the dance. Secondly, communicate with the band both before you go on stage and while you're on stage. You'll get a far better performance if the band knows what you like and how you're feeling. And lastly, remember that good musicians want to make you look as good as possible and if they don't, then you haven't got the right musicians.

***Do you think that the dance scene in the UK is suffering from a lack of live music?***

The Egyptian scene is, definitely. A lot of the older guys are fantastic but they don't want to travel and they've been doing it a long time so tend to be bored. There is a lack of younger musicians who are really interested in acoustic Egyptian music. But there are a few around and they're really helping. We need more musicians, and we need them to start learning about Baladi and other Egyptian styles now, while the master musicians are still around to teach them. And dancers can really help the process - by getting people involved.

It's not an easy genre. There are many more scales in Arabic music than in Western music, we use quarter-note which can be difficult to play. But I'm optimistic that more people will be inspired to learn Baladi in the future.

***Are there any Egyptian bands that inspire you, in Cairo or across the world?***

I love El Tanbura, the Semsimeya band from Port Said. Well done to Michael Whitewood for documenting their music and bringing them to the UK. I also love the Hasab Allah Brass Band from Cairo - it's Egyptian Baladi music, played on brass instruments and marching drums!! They're on a couple of recordings already but I'm hoping to document some of their music in the future.

***Who else would you recommend people listen to for great Baladi music, who are your favourite bands / composers / singers?***

Old stuff people should hear is anything from sax player Samir Serour and accordionist Hassan Abdel Seoud. And my favourite singer is Ahmed Adaweya. Other than that, there's a great record label in Switzerland called Tanz Raum. They produce recordings of some top class musicians.

***What is your current favourite Egyptian track to listen to?***

Bint El Sultan by Adaweya, I love the trumpet playing from Samy El Bably on that.

***What have you released as a band and where can people get it from?***

If you like Baladi or want to get into it, then I'd recommend ***Baladi Blues*** which features the whole band. We also have ***Tablatastic!!*** which is a tabla rhythms CD covering 25+ Arabic rhythms. You can find those CDs on my website [www.guyschalom.com](http://www.guyschalom.com). And if you like downloading music, check out The Bellydance Diaries soundtrack on iTunes.

***What's the next big project?***

We're still in the production stage but.... I'm hoping to release one or maybe two live Baladi albums in the coming months, so keep an eye on the website for updates.

***Where can people see you play?***

Because we have to travel a long way to perform, we don't play as often as we'd like but please visit my website for updates of our live schedule. You can also find details of my workshops and other projects online too at [www.guyschalom.com](http://www.guyschalom.com).