

Translated from Shimmy 01.05.2013 by Sari Virta

Interview: Guy Schalom

Musician, band leader, producer, dancer...

Guy Schalom - Messenger of Baladi

Guy Schalom is a professional musician and dancer. His main instrument is percussion, more precisely tabla drum, i.e. darbouka. Guy also produces records, the most known of which are surely his *Baladi Blues* series. Guy is the founder of the famous Baladi Blues Ensemble and the band leader. The band plays mainly Egyptian baladi music.

In addition to Egyptian music Guy also works in the fields of Klezmer music and dance. He plays e.g. in the big band composition "*Other Europeans*" led by *Alan Bern*. Guy leads several *Klemer Keilidhs* dance evenings around Europe.

Guy was born in Israel to a multicultural family. His father is an Egyptian Jew and mother an English Jew. Music was always present in the family. Guy remembers to have performed as a little boy to his parents using a baseball bat as a guitar. Guy was seven years old when the family moved to Manchester, England.

Music became a career

Guy was very young when he realized that he enjoys music and playing more than anything else. A dream of becoming a combat pilot changed into a musical career when he was around 17 years old. However, Guy does not describe himself as natural talent, but tells about a difficult start. One can only become a good musician through practice and it takes time.

Creating a career in music is uncertain, and Guy doubted. The family always strongly supported him -- Guy's father bought him a drum set and gave a permission to rehearse at home. His parents also tirelessly drove him to gigs (and sighed of relief when Guy got a driver's licence).

Guy started to study music at the university, where a wide variety of musical styles from around the world were available: from pop to jazz, ethnic styles, Brazilian and Cuban... All of these were useful later when Guy travelled to Egypt aiming at researching the local music.

In the beginning of his career Guy played a lot of Jewish Klezmer music, but inspired by the family's Egyptian roots he also wanted to learn more in detail about the Middle Eastern music. Tabla got chosen as his main instrument in a moment when Guy was

practising at a friend's place and that family's daughter started to dance to the music. It was magical and hooking to see one's own playing in another person's body.

The Egyptian culture has always been present in Guy's life from his father's side of the family, and Guy says that he feels himself more Egyptian than Israeli. He has spent a lot of time in Egypt and with Egyptian people. After he had moved to London, Guy took private lessons from Egyptian drummers to further develop his skills. Now, as most of his fellow musicians are Egyptian, the culture and way of life has had a strong influence in him.

London offered work and contacts

Currently Guy lives in London where there is plenty of work and contacts. When Guy moved to London in 2004 he was already very enthusiastic about baladi music. This got even stronger after he, by accident, met the legendary musician *Sheik Taha*. This famous musician made a livelihood from music in Egypt already as a young boy. He is one of the rare male musicians who has had access (due to his young age) to play in women's parties, and Taha witnessed by his own eyes, how women dance and interpret music. The meeting of the two musicians led to a tight cooperation, which still continues.

Guy says that he originally founded Baladi Blues band only to record Taha's and his own music. Somehow, however, things proceeded and the band started to tour. Alongside Guy and Sheik Taha, the band consists of *Ahmed el Saidi*, *Aly el Minyawawi* and *Adam Warne*. The band has a lot of hafla gigs in London, and sometimes also in weddings. They enjoy playing to dancing audiences, but prefer concerts because they offer the audience a possibility to concentrate on the music and to hear the fine nuances in detail.

Baladi Blues Ensemble has played together already for seven years. Their manager lives in France and has arranged performances e.g. in Germany. Due to his high age, Sheik Taha does not want to do extensive tours any more. However, Guy thinks that they have already achieved one of their most important aims - baladi music is finally gaining wide respect and acceptance. Recently, the BBC asked Guy to make a big documentary series about the subject. "*Bellydancing and the blues*" has reached a large audience, and is still available for listening on the internet.

Baladi comes from the heart

Guy thinks that baladi is the soul of Egyptian music, something that all is based on. It is native music of Egypt, which is at the core of all other styles. Egypt and baladi can not be separated. Also, Guy feels that baladi combines his own personality and history to

one artistic entirety. He loves this music, and it drives him forward every day. He wants to make this art more widely known and recognized, according to its value, also internationally.

Mental well-being is important

Alongside his busy work, Guy takes good care of his mental and physical well-being. When one's way of life is hectic and there is a lot of work, it is important to take care of healthy ways of living. In recent years, Guy has made his hobbies as an important part of his life. These include scuba diving, jive and salsa, Reiki treatments and hiking. Nature is an inspiring element for Guy. Last spring he climbed the Mount Sinai with his girlfriend, which was a very inspiring experience.

Guy states that an artist cannot hide himself on stage. If your heart sings, it shows, want it or not. Our feelings exist, they are important and they have to come out in a way or another. When we sing, dance, play, we present our feelings. Guy thinks he is lucky being part of a band where people have special skills to communicate, sense and understand each other. By observing and sensing your fellow performers, you can guess how the music proceeds and also be in strong contact with your own emotions.

To dancers, Guy wants to say that all the technique in the world does not save them on stage, if there is no understanding where the dance is heading to. Look at and listen to the musicians, the interaction between instruments, the communication. There is always a limit for what our bodies can technically do. However, our capacity to understand music and show that with our bodies is limitless. We need technique to show our experience and what is happening internally, but if we are only technique, what are we then?

More: www.guyschalom.com