

# NAFOURA

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*Guy Schalom*

DISCUSSES  
THE NEW ALBUM  
BALADI BLUES 2!

FEATURES

FASHION  
REVIEWS  
PHOTOS  
AND MORE

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# Guy Schalom

## Nafoura Interview – Summer 2011

### **1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your band?**

First and foremost I'm a drummer. I've been playing for 20 years and I play all types of percussion and many styles of music. I live in London and am probably best known for my work in world music – mainly Arabic, Klezmer, Balkan and Mediterranean music. I also dance and I own an independent record label producing world music CDs. One of my favourite styles is Egyptian music and I express that interest with my band, the Baladi Blues Ensemble.

The Baladi Blues Ensemble plays urban Egyptian dance music called Baladi. The band is made up of some of the world's best musicians in this style. The usual line up is accordion, saxophone and Arabic percussion. I play darabuka and am the band leader, which means I choose and shape the material and I lead the flow of the improvisations when we perform live.



### **2. What / who inspired you to get involved in Middle Eastern Music and Dance?**

I come from a Middle Eastern family - my father's side was Egyptian and I was born in Israel. My family had lived in various parts of the Mediterranean so there were many different languages and cultures in the mix during my childhood. Naturally, I listened to music from all these cultures. I think the sounds and experiences that surround you in your childhood affect and inspire you for the rest of your life. It was natural that my interest would gravitate towards Egyptian music and especially Baladi music, because Baladi is a hybrid genre with a mix of influences.

The turning point for me was around 15 years ago; I had been playing darabuka and was learning all the technical aspects of the drumming. I was visiting a friend, and started playing my drum. Her daughter immediately entered the room and began belly dancing. I was blown away. I could see my music in her hips. From this point I was hooked on Egyptian dance and music because I understood that dance and music are two parts of the same story.

I now work with dancers as often as possible. When I am mentoring musicians in Egyptian music I make sure they perform with dancers as soon as possible. The whole thing makes much more sense to them once they have seen how their music 'looks'.

**3. Can you share with us the details about your education and training? Do you have any favourite / special teachers?**

I was self taught for the first five years. I had a very basic introduction at school for a few terms, but I essentially taught myself how to read music, to play with others and how to improvise. I got my cassette player, put the headphones on, and played along to my favourite music for hours every day. I highly recommend this way of learning.

I took any and every opportunity to play music. I played brass band music, rock, jazz, swing, big band music. That was also really useful, because whatever music I am playing at a given moment, I can bring my experience from other styles to the table. This makes me a more flexible artist and means I can adapt quickly to new situations.



After five years of self-study, I began drum kit lessons with one of the UK's best teachers, Dave Hassell. He took my playing to a whole new level. He opened up my ears and exposed me to new styles of music and a whole new approach. I use many of his methods in my teaching today, such as learning by voice and movement. His motto was "if you can't sing it, then you can't play it". How true.

I then completed my degree in Popular Music and Recording at Salford University and around that time, Dave introduced me to Egyptian percussion. After a few lessons in London and playing duff at many four-hour-long Egyptian weddings, I decided to go to Egypt to learn properly. I took lessons from Egypt's best darbuka players such as Said El Artist, Negm Nabil and Nabil Airashi.

In fact it was the famous dancer Yasmina of Cairo that put me in touch with those guys. She performed with the Baladi Blues Ensemble in July.

Negm was a tough teacher. He made me conduct while singing the rhythm and once I could do that, I had to count out loud in Arabic while I played the rhythms. That was a great way to learn and I feel very lucky to have had such a strong grounding in Egyptian music. Said El Artist was my favourite teacher. For many years, he was drummer for the famous dancer, Dina. He has such an open heart and is a very generous teacher. He has a great technique and runs a large percussion group in Egypt.

I also spent a lot of time in Luxor. Luxor is in Upper Egypt (the south or 'Al Said') and home to some of Egypt's best folk musicians.

I spent many weeks living with the Qenawi family in Luxor. They are descendants of Egypt's most famous and successful folk singer and musician Metqal Qenawy. I travelled with them to their performances.



I played with them, and played drum solos with the belly dancers they invited. That was a great way to learn.

This is also where I learned to dance. In Luxor and other parts of Upper Egypt, there is a strong tradition of male stick dancing. This derives from a combat dance known as 'Takhteab' which uses a quarter-staff. It is slightly macho, but is very earthy and extremely powerful. It is different from the male dance style often seen in tourist shows in Egypt. I have even seen the Takhteab done on horseback and it is always accompanied by music.

#### **4. From a musician's perspective, what advice do you have for dancers who want to explore performing to a live band and / or a drum solo?**

Go and see live Egyptian music, do this early in your dancing career and do it as often as possible. Be a part of the experience and let the sights and sounds affect you. Think about how each sound or movement makes you feel. Dance and music is art. Art is a way to communicate feelings, experiences and ideas to others in a way words alone cannot.

Also, as a performer, be flexible. Remember that musicians are human and they often play things differently from how they did it on the CD. So enjoy that fact. Keep an open mind and be comfortable with your technique so you can deal with any new sounds.

To perform Baladi, I'd say get comfortable with improvising. For me, the best Baladi dancers and musicians are great improvisers. Improvisation gives the performance an energy and freshness and keeps the art alive. It also allows the personality of the

artists to shine through, and makes for great interplay between the performers and their audiences. When we play together on stage, the energy and enthusiasm of our audience inspires us to play better and come up with new ideas.

And finally, remember that the band is there to make you look as good as possible. They are on your side and (with the right musicians) will make things easy for you and will help you communicate all the range of emotions you want to express.

**5. You have recorded several albums. Can you give me some history behind your style and inspirations for these works?**

I have produced many albums, but in terms of Arabic music, there is Baladi Blues, Tabla Tastic!! and the most recent, Baladi Blues 2: Tribute to the Masters.

The two Baladi Blues albums feature my band the Baladi Blues Ensemble. We play Baladi music, which as I mentioned, is urban Egyptian dance music.



The band features some of the best Egyptian musicians in the world. On accordion is Sheik Taha who is a legend in the world of Egyptian music. On saxophone we have the amazing Ahmed El Saiidi. I am supported on percussion by master percussionist Hassan Reeves and Adam Warne.

Baladi developed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Cairo and Alexandria. It has a very distinctive sound because musicians use Western instruments like accordion, saxophone and trumpet alongside Egyptian percussion instruments. The Egyptian

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percussion used in Baladi, allows Baladi to retain its 'danceable' quality while the Western melody instruments give Baladi a soulful yet punchy modern feel. Baladi makes great party music.

Tabla Tastic!! is a rhythm CD. It is all percussion. I cover 25 of the most common Arabic rhythms. It is a fun and accessible collection of practice material for both drummers and dancers. There are also four drum solos dedicated to my favourite percussionists.

**6. You have a new album - Baladi Blues 2. How did this project come together? What was your inspiration? Also, who did you work with?**

My original reason for setting up this band was to document the work I was doing with our accordionist Sheik Taha. The original Baladi Blues CD was our first project together as a band. Because it was so popular we began touring and playing live more often.

Since 2007, we have toured and performed together a lot so have become tighter as a band and have learned to take more risks. Taking risks is important when improvising. So, for Baladi Blues 2, I wanted to have a record of where we were at now, to document our development over the past four years.



Baladi Blues 2 is a tribute to the master Baladi musicians of the last century. Of course we have one of them in the band, Sheik Taha, so naturally we recorded one of his pieces, *Raqs el Hawanem*. We also recorded some saxophone solos as a tribute to the great Samir Serour and Mustafa Sax.

I also wanted to highlight the legacy of trumpet player Samy el Bably. I flew in my colleague from New York, Frank London, to play trumpet on the CD. Frank hadn't met the rest of the band until he arrived in Berlin to work with us.

He got off the plane and went straight to the gig to guest with us. We rehearsed the next day and the day after we were in the studio recording. I had an instinct that the sound of his trumpet would work in our line up and I was right. The trumpet adds a richness and warmth to our sound. And Frank is a great improviser too so his playing was perfect on the album. I am very pleased with the result.

**7. What are your plans to raise further awareness of the new Album?  
How has it been received so far?**

Our favourite way to let people know about what we are doing is to play live. We love the audience feedback. We have some great events coming up this year so visit my website to find out where you can see us live. I often update my website ([www.guyschalom.com](http://www.guyschalom.com)) with music articles, photographs, news and podcasts.

The feedback I've had so far has been very encouraging. Everyone who's heard Baladi Blues 2 has been impressed with our playing, the interplay and the quality of the recording. And many people have been inspired by the addition of the trumpet.

The CD is available via my website ([www.guyschalom.com](http://www.guyschalom.com)) or on Amazon or ask your local record shop. It's also available for download on iTunes etc. Check out the reviews in the World music press.

**8. What makes Baladi Blues 2 different from your previous albums?**

Baladi Blues 2 was our first recording with percussionist Hassan Reeves. He is a fantastic duff player a perfect addition to our band. And I mentioned that we have Frank London playing trumpet on this CD.

Other than that, I am really happy with the quality of the recording. We used one of the best commercial recording studios in Berlin and they had some of the best equipment I have seen and some of the best engineers I have ever worked with. You can really hear the difference.

Also the material we are now playing is very interesting. We have some standard material on there, but the way I have arranged the music gives it a fresh sound. And that is something one can also experience live at our concerts.

And musically, you can also hear how we have developed as a band over the past four years.



### **9. Can you share with us any details of your future plans / projects?**

We will be touring the UK and performing our new material all year with some exciting new collaborations (see below).

In 2012, we will start an innovative teaching project in Berlin with fantastic dancer and teacher Nabila Sabha. It's called RAKSlife and is an intensive dance course spread over five weekends. It's a total of 76 hours of training and wait for it - all with live music. That is something really special, so well worth the investment if you are serious about progressing your dancing to the next level.

I am planning to release the follow up CD, Baladi Blues 3 which will focus a little more on the classical Egyptian repertoire of Baligh Hamdi. It will feature songs by Abdel Halim Hafez and Oum Koulthoum. So watch this space.

And I am currently working on a new collaboration (my favourite thing to do) with Flamenco musicians. There are many common points between Flamenco and Arabic music and fusions have been done before, but I am doing something different with this. I am focussing on the rhythmic and percussive connections and am working with many dancers and drummers, as well as Spanish and Arabic melody instruments. It's a very powerful sound.

### **10. What are you performance dates for the future?**

All the details are on my website ([www.guyschalom.com](http://www.guyschalom.com)) and we add new dates all the time. So check back regularly and join the mailing list!