Baladi Blues

EXPOSING THE TRUTHS AND DISPELLING THE MYTHS...

BY GUY SCHALOM

Part 1

Percussionist, dancer and record producer Guy Schalom uncovers the truth about Baladi, as seen through the eyes of one of its most famous figures – Sheik Taha.

Baladi is Egyptian dance music at its most dynamic. Soulful accordion, saxophone and trumpet solos energised by powerful Egyptian rhythms give Baladi its distinctive sound. The music reflects the fast-paced, urban lifestyle of Cairo and Alexandria in the 1940s and 1950s yet has its roots in the countryside.

Baladi is veiled in mystery however. In the first of the series, Guy Schalom reveals the rise to fame of Egypt’s greatest Baladi musicians, as remembered by one of its foremost accordion players...

Sheik Taha is a gifted musician and a master of Baladi improvisation, but is also a renowned composer and arranger. His compositions such as “Raqs El Hewanem” are legendary in Egyptian folklore. Taha has lived in the UK since 1967 and we have been performing and recording together since 2004. In late December 2010, Taha and I were stranded in Berlin. We had spent 10 days in Germany recording my new album, featuring The Baladi Blues Ensemble, of which Taha is an integral part. We were on our way home, but a heavy snow fell led to the cancellation of our flight. So as we sat drinking tea in the departure lounge, we talked about “the old days”.

Born in Dakhalia, Egypt, Sheik Taha has played Arabic music for over sixty years. At the age of 12 he was playing at the court of Prince Abbas Halim (heir to the throne of King Farouk of Egypt). Taha is from a unique era. He was young enough when he began playing music to remember the earlier musicians who influenced the sound we now associate with Baladi.

Taha’s real name is Mahmoud. He got his nickname from Sheik Taha El Fashny who used to sing religious songs on Egyptian radio. When Mahmoud performed at weddings, his accordion playing was so spiritual it was said to bring the listener closer to God – just like the songs of Sheik Taha El Fashny.

To Taha, “Baladi” means “of our country”, that is “the music of Egypt”. But it also means “the best that can be”. For example “ward el baladi” is the most beautiful flower you can imagine. As Taha explains, it is also the style of music that he plays.

During the two World Wars Cairo, as Egypt’s capital, and Alexandria as its main port were hosts to many British and Irish soldiers and sailors. These visitors brought with them European instruments such as accordion, saxophone and trumpet. Local Egyptian musicians acquired these instruments and used them to play the folk music of their own country. Baladi is therefore a hybrid genre which adapts Western musical instruments to Egyptian folk melodies and rhythms.

In World War II, a military musician named Hasab Allah started a brass band. The Hasab Allah Brass Band consisted of Western instruments such as trumpets, horns, clarinets and marching drums (bass drum, cymbals and snare drum). The band members congregated in Cairo’s music district, near Mohammed Ali Street, hoping to pick up work but also travelled around the city, playing for tips. Nowadays, the Hasab Allah Brass Band is a revival band. They can be heard on the recordings of modern artists including Mahmoud Fadl, now living in Berlin, and New York’s Frank London.
Brass and woodwind instruments add a bright and powerful dimension to Baladi music, but the most versatile Baladi instrument is the accordion. It is the quintessential Baladi instrument and many believe that no Baladi improvisation is complete without a soulful accordion solo.

Indeed in 1952, Qor Qor lent Taha his own instrument, which Taha used to make the first Egyptian recordings to feature quarter-tone accordion. These included “Han Il Wett” by Mohammed Abdel Wahab and “Ya Dana Ya Ghali” by Shadia.

During the 1950s, the accordion signified a Westernisation of Egyptian culture. Artists who used accordion in their recordings were considered forward-thinking and cosmopolitan. The accordion became so important to Egyptians that King Farouk sponsored the training of a military musician named Said Mokhtar. His playing can be heard on the accordion solo on Abdel Halim Hafez’s epic song “Zay El Hawa”.

Taha recalls a group of boys playing football in the streets of Cairo in the early 1950s with a ball made of rolled up socks. One of them was the son of a famous oboe player. This boy’s name was Hassan Abdel Seoud. Twenty years later, Hassan was to become a renowned accordionist and composer in his own right, his most famous composition being “Shik Shak Shok”.

Before that however, in the early 1960s, a young boy named Farouk Salama, began to learn the accordion. He hired an instrument from Qor Qor and took it to play at weddings, parties and ma’alema (boss woman) parties. Under the expert tuition of his father, who was a classically trained musician, he became one of Egypt’s most famous and accomplished accordion players. Farouk Salama went on to write and record a song named for his girlfriend “Nawal” whom he later married.
Nawal became the most famous instrumental Baladi piece of its day with its distinctive introductory waltz-like motif. It also introduced the world to saxophone player Samir Sorour. Samir Sorour was taught by master saxophonist Sa’ad Mahrous. One night, on the way to a performance, Mahrous was accidentally hit by bus and his hand was permanently injured. This twist of fate paved the way for Samir Sorour to become Egypt’s leading saxophonist.

Sorour’s unique saxophone sound was in high demand and was used by Egypt’s greatest classical singers such as Abdel Halim Hafez and Oum Kalsoum. The most famous saxophone solos he recorded are on Hafez’s “Gana El Hawa” and “Zay El Hawa”.

Undoubtedly, the biggest break for these Baladi musicians was when they began working with singer Adaweya. Adaweya started out as a duff (frame drum) and ney (flute) player but was also a gifted Sha’abi singer. Sha’abi was the pop music of Egypt during the 1970s.

Adaweya released two songs written and arranged by Sheik Taha. The most famous of these was “Sah El Dah Embu” – a song about a lady who desires a man only so she can bear his child. The obvious sexual connotations in the song’s lyrics shocked Egyptian society. The government subsequently banned Sah El Dah Embu from the radio and Adaweya himself from the broadcasting station. This created such hype that the record sold over a million copies in the month following its release.

The success of this song was also down to its unique arrangement which begins with duff. Due to the hierarchy amongst Egyptian drummers, the tabla is the solo instrument and the duff player generally accompanies. Ahmed Hamouda was booked to play tabla on the recording. However, he refused to suffer the humiliation of following the duff in the introduction so walked out of the recording session. A teenage boy was brought in at the last minute to play the tabla solo. His name was Khamis Henkish. Henkish is now one of Egypt’s greatest tabla players.

The most distinctive part of the introduction however was the trumpet solo played by Samy El Bably. Samy El Bably was the most accomplished trumpet player in the Arabic world from the 1970s until his recent death. Bably mastered the performance of Arabic scales on a Western instrument. He can be heard on recent recordings by Mahmoud Fadl and Hossam Ramzy.

Another huge hit for Adaweya featuring the trumpet was the anti-government song “Salama Mu Hassan”. “Umu Hassan” literally means “Hassan’s mother”, but in Egyptian slang means “backside”. The music for this song was written by the talented accordionist Farouk Salama who was by this time very good friends with Sheik Taha. By the mid-1970s Hassan Abdel Seoud replaced Farouk Salama on accordion and stayed in Adaweya’s band for the next 10 years.

The significance of Adaweya is that his backing band consisted of the best Baladi musicians of the day. The arrangements reflect this in their use of typical Baladi structures and motifs. For instance, one can clearly hear much interplay between the musicians. Other unmistakeable Baladi characteristics such as call and response and the use of interchanging folk rhythms are also evident. These elements will be explored in greater detail in part 2 of this series of articles.

The legacy of these Baladi masters lives on to this day. Baladi saxophonist Ahmed El Saidi now plays Samir Sorour’s saxophones and along with Taha, Ahmed El Saidi is a pivotal member of The Baladi Blues Ensemble. Sheik Taha is still busy performing and recording his Baladi songs and improvisations. New York klezmer trumpet player Frank London has recorded with the Hasab Allah Brass Band and plays the quarter-tone trumpet in the style of Samy El Bably. Other outstanding UK musicians such as Bashir Abdel Aal (nay) and Ibrahim El Minyawi (tabla) are still very active. London’s greatest saxophone player Mustafa Sax is sadly no longer with us, but his recording of “Afran Baladi” remains a classic.

In part 2, Guy Schalom unravels the mystery behind the Baladi improvisation known as “Ashra Baladi”.

Percussionist and band leader Guy Schalom has appeared with major Arabic artists as diverse as Natacha Atlas, Mahmoud Fadl, Hijazy Metkaf and The Musicians of the Nile, as well as dancer Suraya Hilal. He also leads his own group The Baladi Blues Ensemble focussing on improvised urban Egyptian music.

A key element of Guy’s work is to explore the connection between music and dance. He works regularly with Arabic, Jewish and Flamenco dancers to convey this connection - combining choreographies and on-the-spot improvisations.

Guy tours worldwide, performing and presenting at concerts, festivals and workshops.

All the songs mentioned in this article are available for download on iTunes and many appear on Guy Schalom’s first album “Baladi Blues” or on his new CD. Entitled “Baladi Blues 2: A Tribute to the Masters”, the album will be released in March 2011. Please visit www.guyschalom.com for details.