



Flavour of the year

Photos: courtesy of the British Council

Too many cooks spoil the broth?
Not when the British Council's Music Matbakh
project brings together a diverse group of UK
and Arabic musicians, as **Abi Bliss** discovers

Take 14 young people and one token 'veteran' of wildly varying backgrounds. Confine them in a small space somewhere in London and set them seemingly impossible tasks to tackle under the eye of the cameras. What will emerge at the end of the week? If you're picturing the kind of slanging matches, inane soundbites and shameless exhibitionism that comes with each



series of *Big Brother*, then be thankful that Music Matbakh operates on a completely different level.

'Today we are a group of friends and you can almost say we are a family,' says Jordanian singer-songwriter Ruba Saqr, who took part in the British Council-organised project between May and August this year. 'Even though we have different temperaments, customs, belief systems and ideas of how the world should run, we have great respect for each other's space and personal choices.'

Organised by a team including the British Council's music adviser Leah Zakss and

production agency Serious, Music Matbakh united musicians from Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the UK. Receiving help and guidance from musical director Justin Adams, the artists collaborated on material for a series of concerts, both here and in their home countries.

'Matbakh' is Arabic for 'kitchen': an appropriate term not only because the musicians worked to a schedule so pressured that even Gordon Ramsay might find his store of expletives sorely stretched, but also because the project required ingredients as varied as rap, heavy metal, jazz, classical Arabic music and electronica to be blended into a new dish that would tempt audiences' tastebuds and not send them running for the door.

The musicians were initially recruited by each country's British Council offices. Applicants had to supply demos and media clippings and answer questions about their musical and career plans. This selection stage was where Justin Adams became involved. Currently serving as guitarist for ex-Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant and with a CV that includes collaborating with bassist Jah Wobble and production for Tuareg rock group Tinariwen as well as previous British Council projects, Adams helped select the applicants.

'Although I've dabbled in Arabic sounds, rhythms and scales, I'm by no means an expert. But if I am an expert in anything, it's cross-fertilisation and unusual combinations,' he says. It was important, he explains, to reflect the true diversity of Arabic music, not just between each country, but within them: 'The generation of Arabic musicians in their 20s are an internet generation, who are completely aware of what's going on. They know Metallica, they know Hendrix, they know what's going on in rap and they know their traditional music pretty well. They don't feel any more limited by where they happen to come from than I do. Ten or 15 years ago, it wasn't like that. There were rock bands in Egypt in the 70s, but not very many.'

As well as Ruba Saqr, the final line-up of musicians comprised violinist Mohamed Medhat and guitarist Ousso from Egypt; bassist Yacoub Said Abu Ghosh, singer Hiba Mansour and rapper RGB from Lebanon; oud player Issam Rafea and ney player Moslem Rahhal from Syria; singer Hicham Bajjou and MC Taufik Hazzeb (aka Bigg) from Morocco; electronic musician Skander Besbes and percussionist Lotfi Soua from Tunisia; and

keyboard player Andrew McCormack and drummer Leo Taylor from the UK.

To help break the ice, each musician received profiles of the other participants and could listen to samples online. Although they had had a chance to ponder possible riffs, lyrics and ideas beforehand, when the group arrived in London on 5 May, that must have felt like scant preparation for a debut performance looming just seven days later.

Adams says of their first gathering, in The Premises Studios, 'there were 15 musicians who had never met each other before and the objective was that we had a week to put a show together. So I gave a little speech saying, "We know this is a completely crazy situation and that you and I will have both spent years putting together a great band and working on material. We all know it's completely artificial, but we'll probably never be able to do anything like it again, so let's have a laugh".'

To help things along, he organised the musicians into two groups: vocalists and instrumentalists. Of the two rooms, one was designated 'loud', with a drum kit and electric instruments; the other 'quiet'. 'I thought okay, I know young musicians, I know young drummers and bassists and guitarists and what they want to do is make a racket as soon as possible. So I had to allow them space for that, for a massive jam session to happen straight away. And at the same time we've got to get the quieter musicians together pretty quickly to do something there.'

Ruba Saqr is positive about this strategy: 'The fun part was that moving between the two rooms was flexible. Almost all musicians taking part played two roles: In one room they would be basic developers of a song, where in the other room they would be called upon to add their touch to an already-developed tune by other musicians.'

'From the very beginning, one thing we wanted to do was to stop it getting too compartmentalised. We tried to encourage the more traditional players to work with the rappers, to keep it interesting', Adams says.

Around 20 pieces of music were created and developed during the sessions, some based upon germs of existing lyrics or riffs but many created from scratch. Adams' job involved being both the eyes and the ears of the project.





'Justin had the hectic role of keeping us busy and that involved seeing that sometimes a few of us would feel they were out of the loop; he would put us right back in and he would also give tips on the direction of the pieces that we formed together', Saqr says.

'He had a bit more experience, so you could trust him, and any questions about a particular song, he would have the final say,' Andrew McCormack adds. 'So he was quite crucial, really.' Adams also had to arbitrate between the tensions that would inevitably arise when creative minds all pull in slightly different directions. McCormack again: 'Someone would have an idea about the way it should be and someone would have a different idea and it would become, okay, what's the best way to go. That is quite stressful, trying to be diplomatic and obviously wanting the best results at the same time.'

'From the beginning I thought, "Oh god, this is *Big Brother*, basically",' Adams says. 'Especially as we had a film crew there, so each time there was some tension there was a camera to catch it. But I tend to take that kind of role in groups anyway, so I'm used to that kind of thing. People were pretty tolerant of each other, considering.'

With 15 musicians from seven countries involved, some of the challenges to communication were of a more basic type. Saqr says, 'The first week, I couldn't understand one word the Moroccans and Tunisians were saying – since the dialects between east and west of

the Arab world are completely different, although it's the same root language. I got used to the music in the Maghreban dialect after having lived with the guys for a month during the UK residency and the Morocco experience. Proudly, I can tell you that now I can understand their jokes and instead of a confused look on my face, you get a loud giggle!'

However, one conflict that was notably absent was the political and religious problems that have marred relations between many of the musicians' home countries. 'Obviously there are a few problems in the Middle East, and even a little between the Arabic countries, say Lebanon and Syria, but that's not been an issue with this project,' McCormack says. 'It's been totally musical. Everyone's been concentrating on the details of the music and it hasn't felt political at all, really.'

By all accounts, the first concert, at the Heart of the World Festival in Cambridge, was a massive success. Adams remembers it with pride: 'From having nothing at the beginning of the week, to suddenly having two hours' worth of music, it was evident why everyone had been put up for it by their local British Council. There were no shrinking violets; everyone came over really wanting to perform.'

'The audience absolutely loved it. It was like a little mini-festival on stage, because there'd be beatboxing one minute, then the next would be Ruba doing her beautiful, Joan Baez kind of stuff, then there's this very wry rap and

funk rhythm going on. They're often my favourite gigs, the first ones, because there's the excitement that you could go desperately wrong, and there's something quite magical about when it stops being a rehearsal piece and goes out to the public and becomes a real thing.'

Subsequent concerts presented new challenges and opportunities, from one at The Sage Gateshead, where the now-bonded group had to open up to working with additional musicians, to an acoustic gig at St Barnabas Chapel in Soho, which required rearrangement of pieces for unplugged performance. 'That gig was very special to me because I have always dreamt of playing music at a chapel, a cathedral or a house of God. Being a Muslim, it is not quite an open opportunity to me to do so in my part of the world,' says Saqr.

In June the group journeyed to Casablanca, playing to around 10,000 people at Le Boulevard Festival. 'It was very much an outdoor festival, "we have to hit them one after the other" sort of thing, very different to playing a small venue in Cambridge,' notes McCormack. After a month and a half's break, the tour resumed on 20 July in Jordan. 'I think Jordan was possibly our best audience in that they were reacting to the music as it went along.'

'They didn't wait until the end to show their appreciation. We were led to believe that it's one of the more conservative Arab states and they were dancing in the aisles.'



The last Music Matbakh concert took place on 16 August in Tunisia. Although the project was filmed by media agency Yeast for a documentary which the British Council will show in the participating countries, where now for the musicians? McCormack for one has hopes that the project will continue in some form: 'I would like it to tour to some other places, other than to the Middle East, because it's more like we're taking it home to those countries. Maybe Europe or the States – it would be good for some new audiences to hear it. But maybe an album would be the quickest and easiest way to do that. I'd be up for it, anyway!'

Whatever happens, both McCormack and Saqr highly rate the lasting effect of Music Matbakh upon them as musicians, and especially how it exposed them to unfamiliar genres and traditions. 'The ney player [Moslem Rahhal], the way he improvises is very different to how I would improvise as a jazz musician,' says McCormack. 'The simplest way of putting it is that he'll have a theme, and what he improvises is completely on that theme, whereas a jazz musician would tend to improvise on the chord changes from a song. So that was really interesting and I'd not seen that before.' He hopes to collaborate with Rahhal again in the future.

'Personally, I never understood rap musically before Music Matbakh; now I relate to it and understand the feeling behind it,' says Saqr. She carried her Matbakh experiences over into her own solo work. 'When I first left to

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Music Matbakh I was in the middle of recording my first album. When I came back to my country following phase one of the project, I made substantial changes on the general feel of my album and did some arrangement changes.'

Does Music Matbakh offer a model of collaboration that could be repeated elsewhere? 'I don't see why not,' says McCormack, 'but I think the reason that this has worked so well is the musicians themselves, and their openness, their ability to adapt. As long as you can find open-minded musicians – and I'm sure there are all over the

world – then I don't see why it shouldn't work in other disciplines and backgrounds.'

Saqr says, 'I was once sitting with Justin and we were reflecting on what has been achieved, and I remember him saying that the project was a "lifetime within a lifetime". I have learnt so much about myself and my abilities as a musician and I have made personal discoveries about my potential, which was life-transforming.'

Adams himself adds a purely pragmatic final seasoning to this unique 'kitchen' session: 'The experience of working with that many musicians who you don't know against deadlines, has taught me that it's tough, you've got to work really, really hard. Another time I've learned to try to schedule a week's rest after it,' he laughs. 'It took a lot out of me. But I loved doing it.' ■



www.britishcouncil.org/musicmatbakh