

**Beyond Ethnic Tinge or Ethnic Fringe:  
The Emergence of New Israeli/Palestinian Musical Competences & Connections<sup>1</sup>**

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A musical scene emerged in Israel in the 1990s, around unprecedented interaction between Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze musicians in Israel and the West Bank.<sup>2</sup> Most frequently marketed at home as *musika etnit Yisraelit* (Israeli ethnic music), it involves mixing elements of various Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern musical practices.<sup>3</sup> Little of the music created in this scene is identifiable as specifically Israeli, Palestinian, Jewish, or Arab, but the confluence of people is uniquely Israeli-Palestinian, and much of the music they have produced is also unique to the particular experiences, desires, and understandings developed by these musicians in this milieu. While this scene has attained neither the stature of art music nor the market share of popular music, it has considerable significance within local and international political, social, and cultural frameworks.

By contrasting this area of musical activity with “ethnic tinge” and “ethnic fringe,” I aim to position it relative to other local practices and, in so doing, to emphasize its particular sociocultural contributions, both achieved and potential. These contributions have political implications, too, as I shall argue in the conclusion. I use “tinge” to refer to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on research that I initiated in the early 1990s, with roots in the 1980s when I directed the Workshop for Non-Western Music at the Jerusalem Music Center, and taught ethnomusicology at the Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University and first met some of the musicians who became the subjects of this study. I concluded the fieldwork in 2003, although subsequent events and contacts with musicians have continued to shape my research. The project is presented in greater detail in my book *Playing Across a Divide* (Oxford University Press, 2009). The research was supported by grants from the Committee on Research and the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. I wish to thank Joel Rubin, James Loeffler, and Marsha Dubrow for their invitations to deliver versions of this paper at the “Hearing Israel: Music, Culture and History at 60” conference at the University of Virginia and “Beyond Boundaries: Music and Israel @ 60,” sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. For their comments I would also like to thank Motti Regev, Galeet Dardashti, Edwin Seroussi, other conference participants, and the anonymous reviewers.

<sup>2</sup> Interactions across the Gaza border were less common and did not figure in the research on which this article is based.

<sup>3</sup> I take it as axiomatic that identity is situational and so are associated attitudes and behaviors. Musicians and other people use categories of citizenship, ethnicity, religion, and so on in ways that are advantageous or appropriate at a given time and place. In another situation they may categorize themselves, other people, and cultural practices quite differently.

approaches that add a bit of “ethnic” flavoring or color by incorporating a borrowed musical element — usually a melody, but possibly an instrument or something else — in a musical framework that rests on fundamentally different assumptions.<sup>4</sup> At worst, this is tokenism or dilettantism; at best, it still does not approach the kind of musical integration to be discussed here, because it requires little of the performing musicians — be they orchestral violinists or rock guitarists — in the way of conceptual adjustments or new training. Neither does it allow the “ethnic” guest artist — if there is one — to be anything but a guest. Ethnic fringe refers here to the marginality of particular music, musicians, and listeners relative to the mainstream for sociocultural reasons related to ethnicity. Arab art music and *musika mizrahit* were long located on this ethnic fringe in Israel, although their marginality has lessened in recent years, markedly so in the case of *musika mizrahit*.<sup>5</sup>

Setting aside the numerous all-Jewish bands (such as “Habreira Hativ’it,” “Sheva,” “Gaia,” and “Essev Bar”) active in the *musika etnit* scene, I focus here on the socio-cultural interactions of those collaborations that cross the boundary between Israeli Jews and Israeli or Palestinian Arabs. The Israeli/Palestinian contrast addressed in this paper’s title masks considerable complexity. Who or what is Israeli? Palestinian? Within Israel, the unmarked category of Israeli is often assumed to denote an Israeli Jew of European descent, but that identity applies to few of the musicians to be discussed here: Some are Jews of *mizrahi* or Sephardic descent, while others are Christians or Muslims who identify as Arab or Palestinian depending on context, due to the situational and instrumental nature of identity.<sup>6</sup> Adding to the complexity, some of the Palestinian Arab musicians are Israeli citizens, while others are not.

Compared to more homogenous musical ensembles, collaborations that bridge such

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<sup>4</sup> This includes the use of Yemenite melodies by Israeli art music composers, but also quotations in Israeli rock. Examples of the former include composers as different as Paul Ben Haim, Yosef Tal, and Mark Kopytman. In the latter category we might put musicians as different as Danny Sanderson, Etti Ankri (at least for her early use of Albert Elias’s *nay* on “Ga’agu’a”), or Yehuda Poliker.

<sup>5</sup> See Regev 1995. Also, folk and religious music such as that discussed by Galeet Dardashti. The program of the Israel Festival, the premier showcase for music in Israel, has usually included a few performances from Asia that are clearly scheduled as exotic events.

<sup>6</sup> Based on her own observations and a 1989 study of Palestinian university students in Israel by Nadim Rouhana, Roda Kanaaneh writes, “Palestinian Arabs in the Galilee largely refer to themselves as either Palestinians or Arabs” (2002: 11).

sociocultural divisions often require greater effort to reach mutual musical understandings due to fundamental differences in musical knowledge and values. I argue that it is precisely the deep engagement forced by such differences that can be exploited to aesthetic advantage, which may confer a heightened sense of authenticity to promoters and audiences. In some circumstances, such as the international world music festival circuit, billing as a heterogeneous Jewish-Arab or Israeli-Palestinian ensemble can also confer a marketing advantage. The message of peaceful coexistence that such bands imply — and sometimes convey explicitly — opens possibilities for sponsorship by governmental and non-governmental bodies, and is used by promoters to draw audiences seeking signs of hope for the Middle East. But such collaborations may also involve a higher degree of personal risk and raise obstacles that an all-Jewish or all-Arab band would not encounter: One of the bands I studied, for instance, could not participate in any event marking Israel's 50th year of independence due to the potentially adverse consequences for the Palestinian members of the band.

Three interrelated aspects of such collaborations are particularly significant: First, new musical juxtapositions and syntheses create the demands and the conditions for new types of musical competence. Second, these bands arise from bridging professional networks that were discrete before, or were linked only rarely and on other terms. Finally, I suggest that we give particular attention to the performativity of such collaborations, in which the musicians act out their message by creating a space of mutual respect and creative engagement that demonstrates the viability of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence.

### **Three Examples**

Three groups of musicians served well in my attempts to triangulate this field of musical activity, articulating possible approaches, positions, and trajectories. The bands “Aleï Hazayit” and “Bustan Abraham” each lasted about twelve years and brought together Jews and Arabs, but they differed in the nature of their membership as well as their musical resources, goals, and methods. Contrasting with these two bands in each of those areas is Yair Dalal, who has performed with a dizzying array of ensembles. Although he is by far the most explicit in positioning himself as a peace advocate, collaboration with

Arab musicians is just one part of that array, to be discussed in the second half of this article.<sup>7</sup>

“Aleï Hazayit” (“The Olive Branches”) consisted of a female Jewish singer and four male Palestinian instrumentalists, only one of whom was an Israeli citizen, who were sometimes joined by a Jewish bassist and a fifth Palestinian instrumentalist. They performed a repertoire of Israeli “folk songs” (*shirei erez yisrael*, Songs of the Land of Israel), Hebrew versions of Ladino songs, and Arab songs that straddle the very fuzzy boundary between light classical and popular.<sup>8</sup> The use of a typical small Arab ensemble, including the *‘ud* (plucked lute), *nay* (end-blown flute), violin, and hand drums,<sup>9</sup> to accompany the Hebrew songs was highly innovative in Israel in the early 1990s.

Typical of “Aleï Hazayit”’s arrangements is one of their first demo recordings, the classic Israeli song *Erev Shel Shoshanim*, a well-known exemplar of *shirei erez yisrael* written by Yosef Hadar and Moshe Dor. After the second verse, the violinist, Omar Keinani, began to improvise on violin, playing through an octave effect box. He receded to the sonic background as the drummer, Jamal Sa’id, began to declaim in Arabic. The singer, Shoham Einav, joined in with a wordless melodic paraphrase, while Jean Claude Jones, the bassist, and the *nay* player Jamal Qeisi wove further strands into the texture. See Figure 1 for a transcription of the vocal and violin parts of this interlude (beginning at 2:51 on audio track 1). Dominant in this excerpt is Jamal’s declamation of the Arabic text that he wrote in response to the Hebrew lyrics of this song. Jamal and Shoham reached out to Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking audiences by pairing sung texts in one language with spoken ones in the other.

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<sup>7</sup> Dalal first made his mark on the international stage by arranging an extravaganza performance of *Zaman es-Salam (A Time of Peace)* for the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize concert in Oslo. This involved the Oslo Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta, a group of Israeli pop musicians, and three children’s choirs — Israeli, Palestinian, and Norwegian. Although Dalal has also had longer, deeper engagements with Palestinian musicians, his track record is replete with temporary collaborations of this sort.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, songs composed by the Lebanese Rahbani brothers for the singer Fairouz, or Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish.

<sup>9</sup> Usually these consisted of a *darbukkah* (a goblet drum) and a small or medium frame drum.

Figure 1: Transcription of “Erev shel shoshanim” Interlude

The image displays a musical score for the interlude "Erev shel shoshanim". The score is arranged in four systems, each with two staves. The top staff of each system is for the Voice, and the bottom staff is for the Violoncello (Vc) and Violon (Vn). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins with a rest for the voice and a complex rhythmic pattern for the strings. The first system (measures 1-5) shows the voice entering with a melodic line, while the violin and viola play intricate patterns. The second system (measures 6-9) continues the vocal line and string accompaniment. The third system (measures 10-14) features a more active vocal part and string accompaniment. The fourth system (measures 15-19) concludes the interlude with a final vocal phrase and string accompaniment.

[Audio track 1](#)

For most of its career, “Bustan Abraham” consisted of seven Israeli men, five Jews

and two Arabs.<sup>10</sup> The instrumentation was more eclectic than that of “Aleï Hazayit.” It included ‘*ud*, *qanun* (plucked zither), and violin alongside guitar, banjo, flute, bass or bass guitar, and an array of hand percussion that went well beyond its roots in Middle Eastern drumming. The band also drew on a much broader array of stylistic resources, sometimes presenting them in stark juxtaposition, at other times blending them. Their repertoire consisted almost exclusively of instrumental compositions, mostly written by members of the band. Most compositions underwent extensive development and revision at the hands of the entire band. With so many authors and resources, the band achieved considerable variety, while creating a recognizable sound and a high level of individual and ensemble virtuosity.

### **Emergent Musical Competence through Sustained Interaction**

Both of these efforts were pioneering — the musicians explicitly turned their backs on most prior attempts at mixing musical idioms — and they were collective, marked by a high degree of mutuality. The members of “Aleï Hazayit” and “Bustan Abraham” invested much time and effort in discovering ways to work together and merge their resources. During this process, musicians expanded individual competences and developed new methods and understandings that formed the basis for an emergent form of musical expression and, by extension, competence.

Briefly defined, competence comprises the knowledge and skills a musician acquires and deploys in and for performance.<sup>11</sup> It is multifaceted even within a single musical practice, and differs from one musician to another, depending on the repertoire and instrument played and other aspects of personal experience. Most musical practices have a core competence that all musicians need to know in addition to more specialized competences (Brinner 1995: 77ff.). Competence is usually attained, maintained, and altered through interaction with other musicians, within the conventions of a given

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<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1991, it initially included as many as twelve musicians. This number decreased to eight by the time of the time the band released its first recording (1992), and to seven shortly thereafter. During its last months, the band was reduced to six members and a subset of three members formed a short-lived quartet with a jazz pianist in 2003.

<sup>11</sup> See Brinner 1995 for extensive discussion of many facets of musical competence.

musical practice, but the musicians of “Aleï Hazayit” or “Bustan Abraham” shared no single *a priori* set of conventions. As they experimented with combining elements of various musical practices, they developed ways to interact in musical frameworks that they adopted, adapted, and invented. Thus, new aspects of competence emerged from group interaction.

A few examples from the recordings of “Bustan Abraham” will illustrate how that band juxtaposed different styles, synthesized elements from disparate sources, and extended existing practices. The title *Jazz Kar Kurd*, by Taiseer Elias, references not only jazz, but the Arab *maqam hijazkar kurd*. The pairing of ‘*ud* and guitar featured in the opening phrases of this piece was first developed by Elias and guitarist Miguel Herstein in their “White Bird” duo, which preceded “Bustan Abraham” by four years. These two individuals, an Israeli Arab and an American-born Israeli Jew brought different types of competence to their partnership. Elias plays ‘*ud* and violin in Arabic and Western styles, while Herstein plays banjo and guitar in a variety of styles, including flamenco, old time, blues, and bluegrass. Each had experimented with stylistic crossovers before meeting, but they learned from each other as they sought common ground. This process was amplified and the pool of resources enlarged when “Bustan Abraham” was formed.

Composing frameworks for improvisation was one of the primary areas of innovation for “Bustan Abraham.” Only a few of their pieces featured improvisation over a harmonic progression, as is common in mainstream jazz. More often, the musicians improvised over a repeated pattern, an ostinato of some sort. This type of musical organization is common in a broad range of musical practices across the Middle East, but members of the band extended this by composing many new ostinato patterns rather than relying on the small family of closely related patterns commonly used in Arab music for this purpose (see Figure 2a). The ostinato from Taiseer Elias’s *Jazz Kar Kurd* (Figure 2b) implies a harmonic progression and is highly syncopated. The bassist (Emmanuel Mann on the original recording, Naor Carmi in the band’s later years) constantly varied this pattern. By contrast, the ostinato that supports a violin improvisation in Emmanuel Mann’s *Gypsy Soul* (Figure 2c) is harmonically static but features additive meter.





Figure 3: End of “Solaris” by Emmanuel Mann

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and one sharp (B-flat and F-sharp), and a 6/8 time signature. It consists of seven staves of music. The first staff is labeled 'ud solo and contains three measures of sixteenth-note runs, each with a bracketed '4' underneath. The second staff is labeled flute solo and contains four measures of sixteenth-note runs, with brackets and '4' indicating groupings. The third staff is labeled flute & 'ud and contains three measures of sixteenth-note runs with brackets and '4', followed by a measure with a quarter rest and a quarter note, and a final measure with a half note. The fourth staff is labeled tutti and contains four measures of eighth-note patterns. The fifth staff contains four measures of eighth-note patterns. The sixth staff contains four measures of eighth-note patterns. The seventh staff is labeled flute & 'ud tutti and contains four measures of eighth-note patterns, ending with a double bar line.

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and one sharp (B-flat and F-sharp). It consists of seven staves of music. The first three staves feature a complex, fast-moving melodic line with many sixteenth notes. The first staff is labeled 'ud solo and includes three groups of four sixteenth notes. The second staff continues this pattern with four groups of four sixteenth notes. The third staff also has three groups of four sixteenth notes and is labeled 'tutti'. The fourth, fifth, and sixth staves show a more rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The seventh staff is labeled 'flute & 'ud tutti' and concludes with a double bar line.

[Audio file Solaris](#)

These combinations and modifications of elements demanded new skills and ways of musical thinking that were specific to the band's musical repertoire. Those who had not trained in Arab music became competent at creating convincing improvisations over ostinato patterns. They may even have found it easier than someone with training in conventional Arab music, since the patterns were unconventional. Yet, this did not enable them to improvise competently within a typical Arab music context because they did not absorb all the conventions associated with Arab modes. By the same token, band members who had not had experience improvising over a harmonic progression learned to do so within the framework of their band's compositions, but this did not mean that they were ready to go out and solo over jazz standards. However, they did become remarkably fluent at improvising in the synthesis that they created. I see this as a key achievement.

Perhaps still more significant is the fact that younger musicians have followed in their footsteps in bands such as "Joseph" and "One." In the summer of 2007, I witnessed an impressive performance of Taiseer Elias's *Jazz Kar Kurd* at an MFA recital at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance where Elias directs the Department of Oriental Music.<sup>12</sup> A group of Arab and Jewish students performed the piece in a new arrangement, with a fluency that pointed to the emergence of a core competence of skills that is far more than a simple blending of Arabic and Western art or popular musics. The mix of personnel likewise pointed to an expanding network of like-minded, interconnected musicians, coming from different sociocultural backgrounds.

## Networks

The ethnic music scene in Israel is an informal network characterized by a high degree of connectivity. Musicians tend to be linked quite closely with numerous ties. Any two musicians within this scene are only one or two degrees removed from one another, either having worked together or having each worked with a third musician who serves as a

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<sup>12</sup> In Hebrew this is entitled the *hamahlaka lemusika mizrahit*. Note that the popular music genre known as *musika mizrahit* is definitively not a part of the curriculum. See <http://jamd.ac.il/English/Article.php?Single=1&TopID=21&CatID=84&SubCatID=65&ArticleID=267> for a diagram of the academic structure of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance.

common link. Moreover, the number of venues and recording companies is sufficiently small that their paths frequently cross.<sup>13</sup>

Yair Dalal serves as a particularly good example of the high degree of connectivity within this field, and the linking of networks that do not usually mingle. Dalal is an astonishingly well-connected musician, who is not only widely linked within the emerging field of ethnic music but has numerous connections outside that network. In the partial representation of Yair Dalal's musical connections shown in Figure 4, circles represent recordings while ovals represent individual musicians and hexagons represent bands. For clarity, I have omitted the numerous lines linking Yair Dalal to each of these entities. Musicians are grouped according to the musical fields in which they are principally active (labeled somewhat inconsistently, in accordance with categories used by musicians and marketers). The field of Israeli ethnic music (more extensively represented in Figure 5 and discussed further below) is just one of the areas in which Dalal is active. For many years, he was extensively involved with older Iraqi Jewish musicians and other members of the Israel Broadcasting Authority's now-defunct Arab Orchestra, who formed a circle where Yair studied Iraqi music. Dalal performed for several years with a pair of Palestinian musicians from Jericho, and began to work with other Palestinian musicians when this collaboration became impossible due to the virtual impossibility of travel between Jericho and Tel Aviv. He also has a long-term involvement with Bedouin musicians from the Azazme clan, living in the south of Israel. Like several other musicians in the ethnic music scene, Dalal has also been invited to collaborate with composers and performers in Israel's thriving Western art music world.<sup>14</sup> Dalal owes his connection to the field of early European music to Jordi Savall, an eminent figure in this field, who sought out Yair Dalal for his re-creation of nominally old Sephardic music because of Dalal's competence as an *'ud* player and an improviser. The field labeled "world music" hints at the transnational dimension of Dalal's connections and of this scene. Yuval Ron is an Israeli while Omar Faruk Tekbilek is from Turkey, but both live and are professionally active in the United States as well as performing in Israel.

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<sup>13</sup> For instance one engineer, Uri Barak, has worked on the majority of recordings produced.

<sup>14</sup> Note that two compositions by Benyamin Yusupov, the subject of Ronit Seter's paper at the 2008 *Hearng Israel* conference, are included on the *Sheshbesh* album.

Figure 4: Yair Dalal's Network

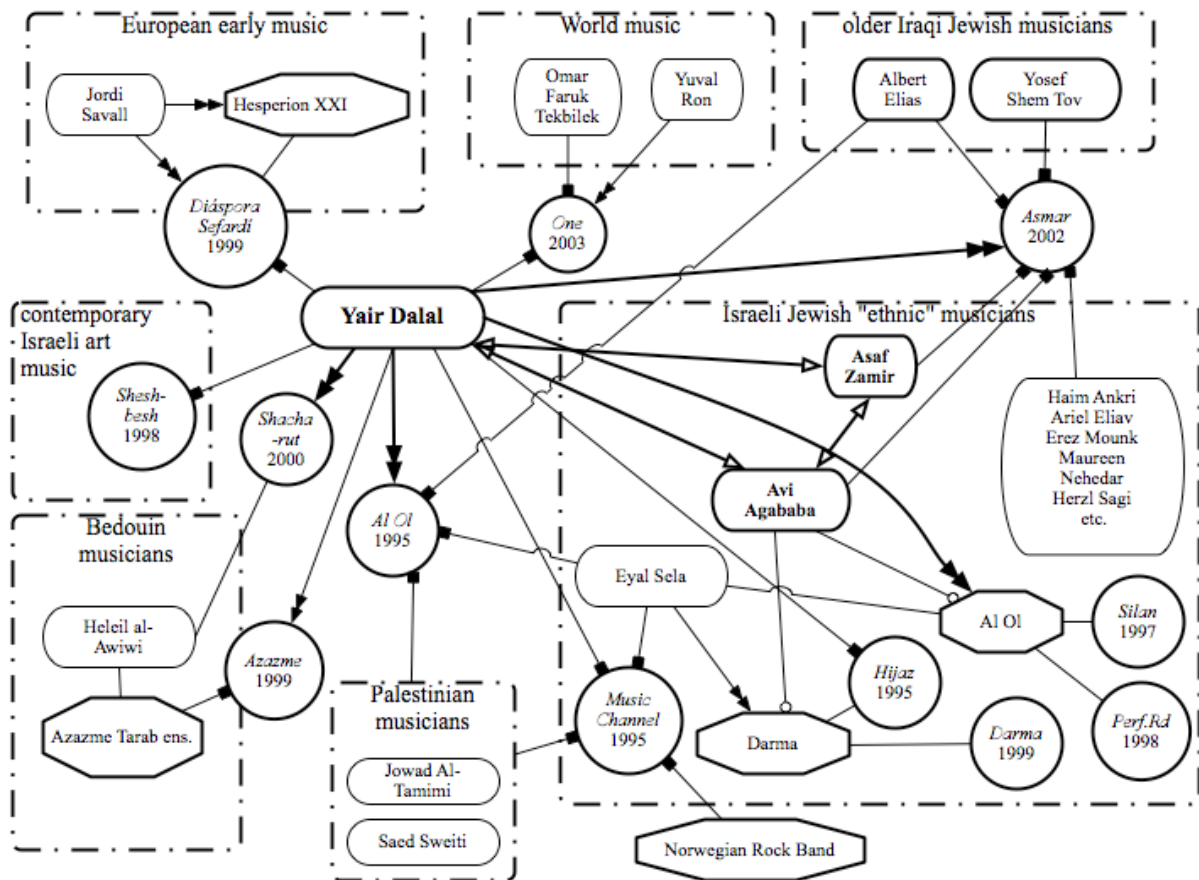


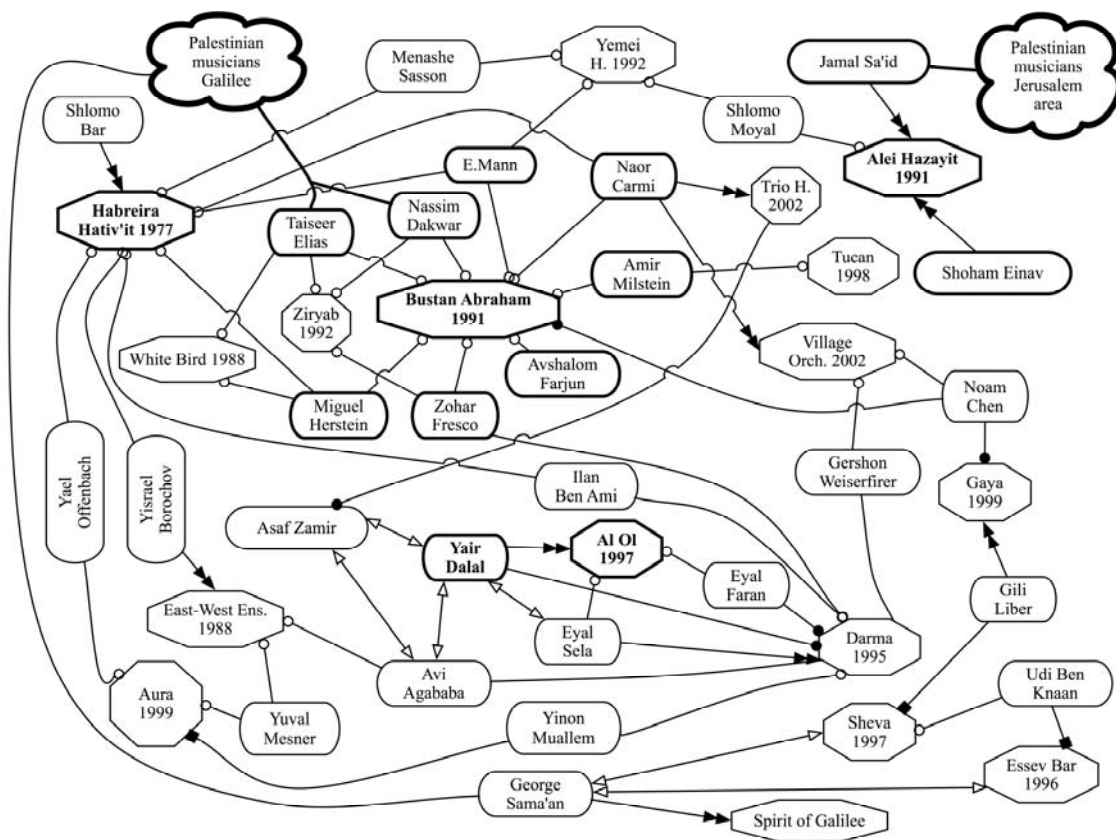
Figure 4 is a partial representation, focused on recordings. Yair's full range of associations cannot be captured in a legible map because he is connected in so many directions with so many types of links: as musician, band leader, composer, student, teacher, and producer. He is also an advocate and a gatekeeper, in short, an intermediary.<sup>15</sup>

Moving outward from Dalal's world, Figure 5 presents a partial map of the ethnic music network that includes "Aleï Hazayit" and "Bustan Abraham," as well as Yair Dalal. Again, hexagons and ovals represent bands and individuals, respectively, while support personnel or institutions are not included. Since the links between musicians are numerous and multidimensional, this mapping is arbitrary in many respects and could be

<sup>15</sup> See <http://yairdalal.com/> for video and audio clips as well as photos, concert listings, and other promotional material on Dalal.

redrawn in infinite ways. But several important points are likely to emerge in any case. For instance, “AleI Hazayit” is marginal to the network compared to Yair Dalal and the members of “Bustan Abraham.” Two of the most significant aspects of the ethnic music field in Israel apparent in this map are the development of a professional network in ethnic music that supports the transmission of the new, emergent competence and the linking of Arab and Jewish musical networks.

Figure 5: The Israeli Ethnic Music Scene



Principal actors in the field of “ethnic music” play key roles in several competing musical institutions that have sprung up since the mid-1990s. These include the Oriental Music Department at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance mentioned above, where numerous musicians in the ethnic music scene have studied and/or taught, and the Center for Classical Oriental Music and Dance (also in Jerusalem), where Jamal Sa’id of “AleI Hazayit” taught Arabic drumming. Yair Dalal has taught at various institutions and runs

his own weekly workshop in Jaffa, which has served as a stepping-stone for students who have continued their studies at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. These institutions are linked to each other and to festivals, workshops, and concert series through the involvement of ethnomusicologists, composers, bureaucrats, promoters, and performers. For instance, an annual workshop run by Edwin Seroussi has served as an important instructional focal point, bringing working musicians into contact with each other and with foreign guest artists (see Seroussi 2003).

I argue that these institutions, created to support the transmission of Middle Eastern (and, in some cases, Central Asian) musical traditions, also support the field of ethnic music by conveying essential components of the competences necessary to function therein even though that is not their mandate. Teachers at these institutions who are also active as performers in the ethnic music field serve their students as links to that network. Jamal Sa'id, for instance, brought one of his Jewish students to "Aleï Hazayit" to serve as a drummer, either as his assistant or his replacement. Both Taiseer Elias and Yair Dalal have connected their students to the ethnic music network. These programs also serve as meeting grounds for like-minded individuals. In the case of Jews and Arabs, this is particularly important because there are few other places where this can happen.

This linking of hitherto discrete networks is one of the most significant aspects of these Israeli-Palestinian collaborations. A new "art world" is in the process of constituting itself out of a loosely connected scene that emerged from connecting discrete art worlds.<sup>16</sup> When Avshalom Farjun, a promoter and self-taught musician, sought out Taiseer Elias, a rising star in Arabic music, in order to create an "ethnic super group," he was seeking not only Elias's prodigious musical skills but also his connections to a network of musicians highly competent in Arabic music. Farjun drew on his own connections among Jewish musicians, and the result was "Bustan Abraham." In a somewhat different manner, Shoham Einav, an amateur Jewish singer, began to work with Jamal Sa'id, an Arab drummer, through a mutual acquaintance, a member of the professional network involved in Israeli television broadcasting. When it came time to form a band, Jamal drew on his extensive network of Palestinian musicians to help

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<sup>16</sup> See sociologist Harold Becker's seminal *Art Worlds* (1982). Bourdieu's field theory (1993) offers another productive analytical approach to this phenomenon; see Regev (2007) for a recent application of this approach to music in Israel.

Shoham create “Aleï Hazayit.” Two of these connections are schematically indicated in Figure 5 by “clouds” that represent two discrete networks of Arab musicians, one centered in the Galilee and the other around Jerusalem.

Farjun, Elias, and Sa’id are highly connected individuals, serving as hubs through which others, such as Einav, connect. To a certain degree they also served as gatekeepers: Sa’id, for instance, maintained control over which Arab musicians Einav met and worked with, because he had the connections and she did not. Dalal is also a hub, as I showed earlier. His extensive network building is exceptional in degree but not in kind. Many other musicians forge multiple links and performance associations. The former members of “Bustan Abraham” have gone on to various endeavors, their bassist Naor Carmi being particularly prodigious in the number of bands he has led or joined.

## **Conclusion**

Networks, interaction, and musical competence are not the whole “story,” by any means. Other aspects worthy of analysis include power differentials, gender dynamics, and political connections, such as Israel’s relatively close relationship with Turkey. Nonetheless, several conclusions can be drawn at this point regarding the significance of the collaborations described here.

This relatively new network, with its instructional programs, recording labels, and festivals, became a viable field and professional network by the late 1990s. It moved beyond ethnic “tinge,” developing its own means of musical expression, which integrated aspects of so-called ethnic musical practices more deeply than ever before. And the network has achieved some recognition as the popular and classical mainstream(s) have turned to musicians active in ethnic music to enrich their projects.<sup>17</sup>

Have these musicians also moved beyond the ethnic fringe? I believe that a qualified “yes” is the answer, for at least two reasons: 1) the institutional supports that have developed for instruction and interaction between musicians of different backgrounds and levels; and 2) the backgrounding of specific ethnicities in the service of a musical

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<sup>17</sup> Examples include Noa (Ahinoam Nini) including Zohar Fresco, “Bustan Abraham”’s drummer, in her band, or Shem Tov Levy’s work with Zohar Fresco and other “ethnic” musicians.



synthesis that draws on many sources. The fact that the various musicians and bands use these resources in different strengths and combinations further supports the argument that the marginality of this field of musical activity, relative to the mainstreams of Israeli or Palestinian culture, is not primarily due to ethnic prejudices.

Still more important than these developments, however, are the transformative and performative effects of these musicians and their music. When “Alei Hazayit” and “Bustan Abraham” (see Figures 6 and 7) took the stage, they implicitly contested widely held notions regarding boundaries — the separation and supposed sociocultural incompatibility of Jews and Arabs in and around Israel. They were neither the first nor the last to do so, but they were particularly effective thanks to their highly interactive ensemble performance, their mixing of musical elements identifiable with distinct sources, and their joint ownership of the resulting sounds. The musicians benefited from the lived experience of working together; the audience benefited from witnessing the collaboration of actors coming from very different positions, ones that are often seen as irreconcilable.

Figure 6: Alei Hazayit (courtesy Shoham Einav)



Figure 7: Bustan Abraham (courtesy Avshalom Farjun)



For Palestinians and Israelis, such mixed groups present the possibility of interaction as equals, at least within the field of music. I argue that these musicians perform coexistence: they literally enact and embody it through their collaborations. Even when they are not primarily concerned with playing the role of peace activists, they open the door to seeing and hearing the humanity in the other, making him or her less alien in a country where mutual fear and suspicion are the norm. Because such collaborations produce a new kind of music, their effect is not just humanizing. It also presents new possibilities for the future, offering a shared cultural field, in which people from various backgrounds with conflicting political aspirations can find meaning and enjoyment. By expanding musical vocabulary, techniques, and understanding, they have staked out common ground.

These musicians are not, in themselves, the solution to the fundamentally intractable

Israeli-Palestinian problem. However, if a solution is to be found, to be implemented and to last, it will only hold if people can develop trust, mutual respect, and visions of ways to live together. These bands provide exactly that: Rather than confronting directly the pain, inequities, claims and counterclaims that scar both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they demonstrate the benefits of mutual relationships. Trust is of the utmost importance if the Israeli-Arab conflict is to be resolved. It takes a very long time to build and next to no time to undermine, as events of the past few years have shown.<sup>18</sup> Like the music that “Bustan Abraham,” “Aleï Hazayit,” and others have created, peaceful coexistence is a matter of improvising within compatible frameworks. These must be collectively created and negotiated, not imposed.

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<sup>18</sup> Hermes has argued that popular culture only rarely produces a revolutionary impulse. We need to look instead for long-term changes in identity construction, representations, and ideologies (2005: 15-16). While some Jewish and Arab musicians are currently working together, others who collaborated in the 1990s are no longer interested in doing so. Both “Bustan Abraham” and “Aleï Hazayit” disbanded early in the first decade of the twenty-first century due to a complex of personal, economic, and musical changes.

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## Audio tracks

Track 1: "Erev Shel Shoshanim," by Yosef Hadar and Moshe Dor, arranged and performed by Aleï Hazayit (Aleï Hazayit 2001).

Track 2: Ostinato pattern from "Gypsy Soul," composed by Emmanuel Mann (Bustan Abraham 1994).

Track 3: Ostinato pattern from "Jazz Kar Kurd," composed by Taiseer Elias (Bustan Abraham 1994).

Track 4: Excerpt from "Solaris," composed by Emmanuel Mann (Bustan Abraham 1997).