

Amir ElSaffar Bio, Summer 2015

Trumpeter, santur player, vocalist, and composer Amir ElSaffar has distinguished himself with a mastery of diverse musical traditions and a singular approach to combining Middle Eastern musical languages with jazz and other styles of contemporary music. A recipient of the 2013 Doris Duke Performing Artists Award, ElSaffar has been described as "uniquely poised to reconcile jazz and Arabic music without doing either harm," (the Wire) and "one of the most promising figures in jazz today" (Chicago Tribune).

ElSaffar is an expert trumpeter with a classical background, conversant not only in the language of contemporary jazz, but has created techniques to play microtones and ornaments idiomatic to Arabic music that are not typically heard on the trumpet. Additionally, he is a purveyor of the centuries old, now endangered, Iraqi maqam tradition, which he performs actively as a vocalist and santur player. As a composer, ElSaffar has used the microtones found in maqam music to create an innovative approach to harmony and melody. Described as "an imaginative bandleader, expanding the vocabulary of the trumpet and at the same time the modern jazz ensemble," (All About Jazz), ElSaffar is an important voice in an age of cross-cultural music making.

ElSaffar's most recent Two Rivers release, *Crisis* (2015, Pi Recordings) chronicles the continuing development of trumpeter his critically acclaimed Two Rivers Ensemble, a band purpose-built to explore the juncture between jazz and music of the Middle East, in particular the Iraqi maqam. The new work is his reflection on a region in turmoil and strife: revolution, civil war, sectarian violence; a culture's struggle for survival. It sets aside some of the more exploratory work that he has done in recent years to focus on music that is passionate and visceral, a cry from the heart. *Crisis* was commissioned by the Newport Jazz Festival, where at its 2013 premiere, it made a clear emotional connection to the audience, receiving a rousing standing ovation after just the first piece.

His latest Quintet release, *Alchemy* (2013, Pi Recordings), received significant acclaim, including from veteran jazz writer Howard Mandel, who dubbed ElSaffar an "exquisite alchemist," noting his ability to surmount the difficulties of bringing jazz and maqam together, "a challenge that he's accomplished with aplomb." The album was described as a "milestone session," in *Point of Departure*, and "radically contemporary in its sound even as it connects with music's most ancient roots" by the Irish Times.

ElSaffar appeared with his Quintet this past summer at the Newport Jazz Festival, following his debut the previous year with Two Rivers that was later broadcasted on Dee Dee Bridgewater's Jazz Set on NPR. A recent flurry of European performances included premieres of a new work, *Ashwaaq*, composed for string quartet, santur, and voice, at the prestigious Aix and Avignon Festivals. Subsequent performances included his Quintet at the Saalfelden Jazz Festival, a week of shows in Berlin, and a performance with Aka Moon and South Indian percussion master, U.K. Sivaraman.

In addition to performing and composing, ElSaffar is Music Curator at Alwan for the Arts, New York's hub for Arab and Middle Eastern culture, which hosts semi-monthly concerts and the annual Maqam Fest. In 2013, he collaborated with the Metropolitan Museum to create a festival of Iraqi culture in 2013. He also teaches maqam classes at Alwan, and is the director of the Middle Eastern Music Ensemble at Columbia University, where he also teaches jazz ensembles.

Born near Chicago in 1977 to an Iraqi immigrant father and an American mother, ElSaffar was drawn to music at a young age, listening incessantly to LPs from his father's collection, which included Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Blues Brothers Soundtrack (but interestingly, no Iraqi music). His first musical training was at the age of five, singing in a Lutheran church choir at the school he attended. His mother, an avid lover of music, introduced him to the music of Bach and Haydn, and taught him to sing and play American folk songs on ukulele and guitar. ElSaffar eventually found his calling with the trumpet in his early teens.

Chicago offered many opportunities for the young trumpeter: he attended DePaul University, earning a degree in classical trumpet, and had the opportunity to study with the legendary principal trumpeter of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Bud Herseth. As a trumpeter of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, ElSaffar worked with esteemed conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Mstislav Rostropovich, and Daniel Barenboim, and recorded on the latter's 1999 Teldec release "Tribute to Ellington," with members of the Chicago Symphony and Don Byron. Additionally, ElSaffar gained experience playing regularly in Chicago's Blues, Jazz, and Salsa clubs.

He moved to New York at the turn of the century where he performed in the ensembles of jazz legend Cecil Taylor. He also performed with Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, who were in the early stages of their careers, making forays drawing upon their ancestral background toward forging a new sound.

Amir gradually found himself drawn to the Musical Heritage of his Father's native country: Iraq. In 2001, after winning the Carmine Caruso Jazz Trumpet Competition, he funded a trip to Baghdad to find and study with the few surviving masters of the Iraqi Maqam. Some were still in Baghdad, but he discovered that most had left the country. Amir spent the next five years pursuing these masters across the Middle East and Europe, learning everything he could about the tradition. During this period he learned to speak Arabic, sing maqam, and play the santoor. His main teacher during this period was vocalist Hamid Al-Saadi, currently the only living person who has mastered the entire Baghdadi Maqam tradition.

In 2006 founded Safaafir, the only ensemble in the US performing Iraqi Maqam in its traditional format. Later the same year, ElSaffar received commissions from the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia and from the Festival of New Trumpet Music (FONT), to compose *Two Rivers*, a suite invoking Iraqi musical traditions framed in a modern Jazz setting. ElSaffar has since received commissions from the Jazz Institute of Chicago (2008), the Jerome Foundation (2009), Chamber Music America (2009), Present Music (2010), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013), The Newport Jazz Festival (2013), Morgenland Festival (2013) and the Royaumont Foundation (2014), creating works integrating Middle Eastern tonalities and rhythms into an contemporary contexts.

He currently leads four critically-acclaimed ensembles: **Two Rivers**, which combines the musical languages and instrumentation of Iraqi Maqam and contemporary jazz;

the **Amir ElSaffar Quintet**, performing ElSaffar's microtonal compositions with standard jazz instrumentation; **Safaafir**, the only ensemble in the US performing and preserving the Iraqi Maqam in its traditional format; and **The Alwan Ensemble**, the resident ensemble of Alwan for the Arts, specializing in classical music from Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq. In addition, he has worked with jazz legend Cecil Taylor, and prominent jazz musicians such as Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway, Marc Ribot, Henry Grimes, and Oliver Lake. ElSaffar has appeared on numerous recordings, and has released six under his own name, *Maqams of Baghdad* (2005), *Two Rivers* (2007), *Radif Suite* (2010), *Inana* (2011), *Alchemy* (2013) and *Crisis* (2015).