

WEEKEND *BOUNDARIES*

and Arab musicians from other cultures is crucial.

Bram’s work with Sufi communities is unique within the project, Belkind added, because, especially in Israel, not much of Sufi tradition remains.

“There are very few Sufi lodges in Israel or Palestine,” Belkind told me, because few cultural groups are invested in the maintenance of Sufi gathering sites.

For Bram, this work is vital in understanding how Jewish and Muslim cultures coexist and grow together.

“We can learn a lot about their own existence from listening and engaging with the spiritual traditions of Jews in the Middle East and Iran and North Africa,” Bram said, “because there are so many points of commonality.”

Bram said that sometimes she’ll listen to a piece of music, and although it sounds like it could be Muslim, it is actually Jewish.

Like music, language provides Bram with a way to create connections across cultures. Hebrew was also something she almost took for granted, because she grew up speaking it. But when she

learned Arabic, a whole world opened up to her.

“You can find new ways to express yourself and find new emotions that you weren’t able to express in your known environment,” Bram said. It is a phenomenon familiar to her from playing the santur.

Bram and I sat in her apartment, the santur between us, and she showed me the different strings and the soft mallets she uses. Sometimes, she feels like she is still learning how to play it.

The santur is both percussive and melodic – by hitting the strings with mallets, the musician creates a rhythm, but by varying where they hit it, they can change the pitch. It’s easy to make a beautiful sound using the santur, Bram told me.

Some people say that even a cat walking across the strings could make music. But the skill lies in the technique of playing each distinct note, the ornamentation of the melody and even the tuning.

It took Bram three years to fully learn how to tune the santur. Though she played for me on a smaller version,



*AND I SAID: OH THAT I
HAD WINGS LIKE A DOVE!
THEN WOULD I FLY AWAY,
AND BE AT REST.
LO, THEN WOULD I
WANDER FAR OFF, I
WOULD LODGE IN THE
WILDERNESS...
WE TOOK SWEET
COUNSEL TOGETHER,
IN THE HOUSE OF GOD
WE WALKED WITH THE
THRONG.*

- PSALM 55

she has used a santur with 96 strings, each of which has to be tuned.

“It’s a very educated instrument, because you really have to know how to tune it, and you have to think about it, and it’s always a bit like a puzzle,” Bram told me. “How am I going to tune it? How am I going to play this piece? It’s challenging, and I like this challenge.”

The nuance, the multiple dimensions to playing a santur – it all reminded me of how Bram spoke about her music and her academic work. Breaking the barriers between percussion and melody created a thoughtful fusion of sound.

I wondered how this syncretism impacted Bram’s outlook on life. What did it mean for her to read and absorb Sufi mysticism, to live in Arabic, Hebrew and Farsi and to play the infinitely intricate santur?

On the one hand, she said, it makes her more empathetic.

“I speak Arabic, I speak Farsi, I speak Hebrew, and this makes me very sensitive to human suffering around me, because I can see it in its own language,” Bram she told me.

Bram finds a sacred “human-to-human” connection through the music she releases under her stage identity, Princess Laila. Invented during the time after her accident, while Bram was recovering at home, Laila embodies the fluidity that Bram harnesses in her academic work and her identity.

Laila lives in a “sort of third dimension,” Bram explained, where there are no borders in the Middle East, where someone could travel all the way from Israel to Iran. Laila speaks Hebrew and Arabic, and represents the syncretic, evolving identity that Bram herself feels when she speaks different languages.

Using the santur alongside hip-hop beats and rap, Laila also blends the musical styles

that Bram described as exciting and “empowering.”

To date, Bram has released two albums as Princess Laila. Her second one is mainly about Jerusalem.

“It really talks about the very material feeling of the city, and all of its tensions and conflicts, with this sublime feeling at the same time. This album tries to bring together my feeling of Jerusalem as a city of hope,” Bram told me. “And on the other hand, a city of things that I feel like are very far from transcendent and sublime.”

The album ends with a prayer, inspired by the Persian Jewish tradition of interweaving pieces of Sufi poetry with Jewish texts. Bram connected a Poem No. 466 by the 13th century mystical poet, Saadi of Shiraz, with part of Psalm 55 and layered it with electronic sounds. Then, she added the santur.

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