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Rahbani to perform in Dubai next year

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The Skywards Dubai International Jazz Festival 2010 has one more feather to add to its cap of international, regional and local talents

By Nathalie Farah, Staff Reporter

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Image Credit: Reuters

Rahbani will be returning to after a long and illustrious career to his first musical love - jazz.

It took some convincing, but Ziad Rahbani is stoked about performing in Dubai next year

The Skywards Dubai International Jazz Festival 2010 has one more feather to add to its cap of international,

regional and local talents that are set to perform at the highly anticipated yearly event from February 10–19. That feather is the critically acclaimed composer, musician and singer-songwriter Ziad Rahbani.

Rahbani, who comes from a musically rich background as the son of the highly regarded Lebanese composer Assi Rahbani and the legendary Lebanese diva Fairuz, will be returning after a long and illustrious career to his first musical love — jazz.

“I worked with [legendary tenor saxophonist] Charles Davis recently at the Jazz Lounge in Beirut. To be playing with someone as acclaimed as he from the jazz world made me feel as though I was going to school, but without any obligations,” Rahbani said, laughing.

“Usually, when you go to school you don’t like it because it’s obligatory, but with Charles we were learning as we played. He even played some tunes that I had composed. But he played it in his style and asked for the score of one [of my pieces]. I think he will try to do something with it, either live or on a CD.”

However, Rahbani admitted that it took some time to discover the genre, and when he did, he always tried to add his own touch to the music scores his teacher made him practice.

“Even as a student, my teacher, who at that time was performing with Fairuz, did the right thing with me by trying to be serious and focus on classical music. But I wanted to combine classical with jazz, which I thought was normal.

“Looking back, it was funny. I was 14 years old and wanted to tweak Chopin — change the melody without altering the main idea. He told that story during a television interview and I was surprised because I don’t remember doing that.

“My teacher had also said that I would be able to manage on my own because even though I may write music that has 10 errors on the page, it would sound good overall,” Rahbani added, with a laugh.

Lacking instruments

The conversation becomes slightly more serious as Rahbani reveals his thoughts about what is occurring in the music industry nowadays.

“These days, instead of saying ‘I heard a new song’, now people are saying ‘I saw a new song’. Maybe that’s good, I don’t know, but I feel that it disturbs the ear because now we are watching [video] clips instead of using our imaginations. But that’s how the majority of the market is now. Maybe that will change...

“I hope that music will go back to the way it was in the ’70s and earlier... before all this ‘Egyptian/techno/aerobic’ style that started in the ’80s and is still being used [in Arabic music].”

Rahbani also expressed his dismay at the lack of instruments and musicians to be found.

“We had to contact musicians to come especially to Beirut to record with us because we don’t have those instruments. Can you believe that we have the latest models of Nokia and BlackBerry mobile phones, but not a double bass?”

Nevertheless, there still may be hope. “I think that the younger generation is returning to listening to jazz. I think it’s a reaction to limited styles of music these days, such as rap and electronic loops. They hear electric sounds wherever they go... even the tones that their mobile phones and laptops make when they start up sound like that!

“Last summer, we went on a tour in Lebanon. It felt as though there wasn’t a single town we didn’t play in, we even played in places where we thought that no one would come, but they came. We played to a packed audience in Sur [Tyre]. It was so full that we had to add a third night — and this was all done without any publicity!”

Rahbani also hinted at a possible collaboration with Egyptian singer and actress Sherine Abdul Wahab, who had recently performed as part of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage’s series of National Day concerts.

“Sherine has a good voice... maybe she could sing a funk/soul song. She has something interesting about her — she reminds me of Chaka Khan. I have written a song called Song Shadows and I think her voice would be great for it,” he said.

As for the Skywards Dubai International Jazz Festival 2010, Rahbani said that it took a bit of convincing before he agreed to come aboard. “I was approached by Anthony [Younus, founder and festival organiser] about three months ago through a friend. I had a lot of questions for him, because I felt that the festival was not a purely jazz one like those in Europe. But he explained that it was more than just jazz in order to make it accessible for everyone. Maybe he’s right, because it’s difficult to get an audience for a pure jazz event.”

‘Spirit OF JAZZ’

But Rahbani added that he is looking forward to the event, as it will give him a chance to meet other artists and trade ideas and CDs.

“I will be there throughout the festival. My band and I have to rehearse at the venue itself, because several

members have to fly in, such as our very talented drummer, who is coming from Holland. We will be playing a variety of pieces because I always try to tailor the programme depending on the venue. I was hoping to sit with the sound engineers during the performances, but I was told I couldn't," Rahbani said, chuckling.

"But I will give the organiser this: the festival has the spirit of jazz, much more than other, similar events."

Rahbani also noted that this is the first time that he and his band have many other events lined up, something that he is very satisfied about. "We will be also performing in Germany in May 2010. It will be the first time in my life that someone wants me to do a concert without a singer. Which is just as well, since the Germans and Europeans won't be able to understand the Arabic words in the songs," he said, smiling.

Right now, though, Rahbani has one project that he is hoping to focus on — the completion of his latest album.

"There are 10 new songs for this album. Hopefully, it will be completed before New Year, but I never know when inspiration will strike. One thing is sure though, it always happens when I don't have a paper around. Whenever anything is prepared, papers, equipment... most of the time nothing happens. These days, I carry around a digital recorder with me. Sometimes, I'll sing on it, go home and then make a note when I hear it again," Rahbani said.

"There are times when I start something but don't complete it because it may not be recorded or produced. But that doesn't happen a lot."

Don't miss it

Ziad Rahbani will be performing at the Dubai Skywards International Jazz Festival on Wednesday, February 17 along with U-Nam, The Brand New Heavies and the James Taylor Quartet.

The Skywards Dubai International Jazz Festival 2010

Dates: February 10–19

Venue: Dubai Media City Outdoor Amphitheatre

Total acts: 26 throughout the 10 days

For more information, visit the website www.dubaijazzfest.com, send e-mail to info@chilloutproductions.com, or call 04-3911196.