

# Jazz album: *Crisis* by Amir ElSaffar and the Two Rivers Ensemble

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*Crisis*, by Amir ElSaffar and his Two Rivers ensemble, is a memorable, distinct and timely album. It combines technical prowess, unique musical forms and political subject matter in a way that is certainly rare.

Amir ElSaffar was born in the Chicago area in 1977 to an American mother and Iraqi father, and initially studied and performed trumpet in a jazz and classical context.

In 2001, he won the Carmine Caruso Jazz Trumpet Competition and used the proceeds to fund a trip to Iraq. He focused there on a study of Iraqi *maqam*, a variation of an Arab musical form based on patterns of scales used as a guide for melodic improvisation. Each pattern is said to evoke a different emotional state. Iraqi *maqam* also incorporates classic poetic texts into performances.

Many features of *maqam* music are passed on through oral tradition, and when ElSaffar arrived in Iraq, many musicians had already left the country, in part because of the US invasion. He subsequently sought out the masters of the genre and learned to speak Arabic. He began playing a type of hammered dulcimer known as the *santur* and learned vocal techniques unique to *maqam*. In Europe and America, he began to synthesize these forms with jazz. *Crisis* is the most recent product of his artistic progress.

The music for *Crisis* was composed in 2013, after ElSaffar spent a year living in Egypt, “where he witnessed revolution first-hand,” and Lebanon, where he worked with Syrian musicians affected by war. Each of the nine tracks is distinct, yet they string together like an unfolding story that winds its way through the war in Iraq and the Arab Spring revolutions across the Middle East.

Bringing the music to life is ElSaffar’s Two Rivers Ensemble, an international group of musicians. In

addition to ElSaffar himself, who provides trumpet, vocals and *santur*, there are Palestinian-Americans Tareq Abboushi on *buzuq* (a type of lute popular in the Middle East and in the Caucasus region) and Zafer Tawil on *oud* (a distant relative of the guitar) and percussion. Norwegian Ole Mathisen plays tenor and soprano saxophone, American Carlo Derosa plays upright bass and fellow American Nasheet Waits plays drums.

The song titles—“The Great Dictator,” “Flyover Iraq,” “El-Sha’ab (The People),” and “Tipping Point”—indicate what the group’s mostly instrumental compositions are intended to evoke.

In “The Great Dictator,” which received thunderous applause when it was premiered at the Newport Jazz Festival in 2013, there are memorable *santur*, trumpet and saxophone melodies. Waits’s drumming meanwhile is both nimble and surprising as he rapidly shifts from militaristic drumrolls to supporting textures, depending on the passage. A beautiful *buzuq* solo contrasts with a saxophone solo that begins with swagger and ends in frenetic desperation. The instruments seem to suggest contending social forces. The tune rewards repeated listening.

“El-Sha’ab (the People)” with its persistent, undulating bass line, is a lively number. The seventh track, “Tipping Point” drives toward a point of breakdown, seemingly in reference to the popular uprisings that swept dictators like Hosni Mubarak out of power. Employing some of the more “avant-garde” sounds on the album, this track appears to suggest the unresolved nature of the situation.

Elsewhere on the album, there are more traditional *maqam* pieces that offer more-subdued, yet moving passages. “Love poem” features ElSaffar singing a poem by Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), which

asks, “The loved ones of my heart, where are they?” and ends—just prior to “Flyover Iraq”—with:

“How long, how long was I seeking them?

And how often did I beg to be united with them?”

These verses, written some 800 years ago, make for a haunting comment on the present, and bring to mind the suffering of refugees fleeing the misery caused by decades of imperialist war and aggression.

ElSaffar’s *Crisis* is in part an effort to maintain, preserve and popularize an endangered musical art form. UNESCO includes Iraqi *maqam* on its list of the “intangible cultural heritage of humanity,” but the musical form—along with Iraqi culture as a whole—has been gravely threatened by bloody conflict and the political instability of the last 20 years or more.

Funding and performances were limited under Saddam Hussein, and some artists left the country in search of better opportunities. The American invasion in 2003 prompted many more to flee, and the violence that followed nearly wiped out the country’s musical culture.

US-stoked sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiites has made it even more perilous for musicians to perform. The state-funded Baghdad Institute of Musical Studies, which focuses on Iraqi musical heritage, including Iraqi *maqam*, has not experienced a recovery in enrollment numbers since the neo-colonial US invasion. At times, students have had to hide instruments on their way to school. As a secular form of music, *maqam* has been banned outright by extremist Islamic forces when they have come to power.

ElSaffar has said that “[practicing the Iraqi *maqam* ] is potentially very powerful as a way of accessing the collective memory of Iraqi society, which is not only being eroded, but brutally destroyed.”

The blending of *maqam* and jazz on *Crisis* is largely a success. The combination of Arab stringed instruments with jazz instruments never feels forced. Part of what makes the sound of *Crisis* so alluring is that the saxophone, trumpet and bass have themselves adopted the techniques of *maqam*, including the extensive use of microtones—the notes between the notes, as they are sometimes called—to blend seamlessly with the *santur*, *buzuq* and *oud* .

Indeed, the fusion of American jazz with Arab and Middle Eastern musical traditions in the work of not only ElSaffar but also bassist Omer Avital and

trumpeter Avishai Cohen, among others, has provided one of the more serious and meaningful musical trends in recent years.

With *Crisis*, ElSaffar and Two Rivers have created a powerful work that pays tribute to this endangered art form and that speaks directly and organically to the tumultuous events of our time.



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