

Musicians at Brighton, UK community event speak out against Gaza genocide and in defence of asylum seekers

Our reporters
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Reporters from WSWs attended the Winter Warmer: Community Cohesion Concert, held in Brighton on January 27.

The music festival at the Jubilee Library in Brighton featured performers from Syria, Ukraine, Palestine, Russia and Sudan and was attended by around 300 people. It was organised by Best Foot Music, a non-profit arts organisation which has amassed an impressive catalogue of recordings of musicians from all over the world.

Founded by Phillip Minns in 2009, Best Foot Music has been instrumental in promoting musicians from refugee backgrounds and its events have served as an important social hub for refugee communities across the area. Many of the performers are now based in Brighton.

The WSWs spoke to Phillip about the origins of the project and its mission.

He said, “We started Best Foot Music partly as a reaction to the xenophobic narratives in the right-wing press, particularly against people from Eastern Europe. I went to see a band from Poland who played traditional Polish and Czechoslovak songs and I fell in love with the music. It inspired me to create something that could promote the music of different cultures from across the world in a positive light, so that’s how it all started really.

“I wanted to showcase the talent and cultural contributions that musicians from other countries could bring to the UK and I wanted English audiences to experience music they may never have heard before.

“We started off with bands from Eastern Europe, and when more people from Syria began coming to the UK at the height of the civil war we began working with Syrian musicians. It’s evolved since then and now we’re working with people from all over.

“I’ve always loved music so I felt the urge to do something positive with it. It’s been a real learning experience and I feel all the better for it. Today’s event is about providing a space where people can showcase their

cultural heritages and have some fun, and that’s the essence of Best Foot Music.”

The event was not simply about cultural heritage and fun. Topics were covered by those performing and organising, including the genocide in Gaza and the ongoing attack on immigrants and the right to asylum.

On the Conservative government’s Rwanda policy and persecution of refugees and asylum seekers, Phil stated, “The whole narrative of people being ‘illegal’ is racist and incorrect. I wish more of the press would reinforce the message that it is not illegal to seek asylum. You don’t have to settle in the first country you arrive in, that’s part of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, of which Britain is a founder signatory. But the demonising of migrants and refugees is part of a wider government policy to distract from all the other shit they’re causing.”

Bashir Al Gamar, a poet and musician from Sudan, opened the show. After making a living from music, he was imprisoned in the early 90s after the al-Bashir regime considered a particular poem of his to be too subversive. He moved to the UK after being forced into exile shortly afterwards. His music remains popular in Sudan.

Bashir accompanies himself on the oud, a stringed lute. His mesmerising skills on the fretless instrument provide the perfect backing to his soaring vocals. Much of his work includes themes of war and exile, but also of more optimistic subjects.

“I started playing music and writing poetry at an early age,” Bashir told the WSWs. “I was maybe around 14 years old when I started learning to play the oud. I soon found myself completely involved in music. I was composing, writing songs, sometimes singing. My grandfather is a well-known poet back home so maybe it’s in the genes. It’s a hobby but it takes up much of my time.

“I was performing throughout the 80s, but then in the early 90s it all changed. I was arrested by the Sudanese government because of a poem I wrote called ‘Patience on a

Beach'. It had nothing to do with politics, but that's how they interpreted it. I was in prison for two weeks and they tortured me, but I managed to escape and I realised I had to flee the country. At that moment it didn't matter where I ended up, as long as it was safe. I applied to the French embassy but they didn't give me a visa, so I applied at the British Embassy and they did, so I ended up in England. It was hell at that time. My family were left in Sudan and I wasn't sure if they'd be able to join me here, but luckily they were able to in the end. It's been quite an adventure. Playing my music helps me to heal my wounds."

Asked about the attacks on asylum seekers by the Sunak government, Bashir responded, "If I had left Sudan today then I don't think I would be able to come here. It's becoming nearly impossible for people to claim asylum in Britain today. It's even worse now in Sudan. People are fleeing Khartoum every day, walking for hundreds of miles just to find safety. Some of them have managed to get to Egypt.

"Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed, it's just horrible now, it's all in ruins. I don't understand how the British government could be so cruel to those fleeing war zones. Nobody runs away from their home country voluntarily, there has to be a life threatening reason for it. The British government should be helping refugees, not persecuting them. I'm just so thankful I was able to come here when I did."

Speaking about Britain's support for Israel's slaughter in Gaza, Bashir said, "The British government's support for the Israeli government is simply wrong. The Palestinians have existed in that area for thousands of years and now look at the crimes that are being committed against them. It's unbelievable, it's so sad, and yet the British government continue to fund it. They're funding Israel with weapons and supplies. They're sending billions in military aid to Ukraine while English people are suffering and struggling to get food on the table. It's all to do with geopolitics. Wherever America goes, the UK goes."

Asked if he believed the British government could be pressured to call for a ceasefire, Bashir responded, "No. They won't do that. They're too interested in their own political gains and they don't care about people suffering. But things will change. It's about changing the mentality of the public. I love the fact that millions of people across the world have come out in full support of the people of Gaza. I love it, and I think it will get bigger. Working people have been striking in support of the Palestinians, including in America. There is much potential. The change is going to come from the people, not governments."

Rabeya Eid, a Brighton-based poet and activist originally from Gaza, was scheduled to make an appearance but was

unable to attend. In his absence, two local poets, Tanushka and Sara, gave a series of moving recitals of some of his works, as well as poems by Palestinian poets Rafeef Ziadah and the late Taha Muhammad Ali.

We spoke to Sara about her work and her thoughts on the situation in Gaza.

Also on the bill were Syrian duo Jamal and Alaa, accompanied by Ukrainian duo Dina and Polina. They sang a combination of traditional Syrian and Ukrainian songs as well as a few original compositions and a piece dedicated to Palestine. Halfway through their set they were joined by the Sussex Syrian Community Children's Choir, with whom they performed a moving song titled *Salaamun/Peace*, a call for an end to war all over the world.

Husband and wife duo Polina and Merlin Shepherd performed a varied and engaging set. A Russian Jew born in Soviet Tatarstan, Polina Shepherd has spent several years running Yiddish and Russian choirs in Brighton and has dedicated much of her musical work to preserving the cultural heritage of the Yiddish language. Her husband accompanied her on clarinet, playing a mixture of lively klezmers and more sombre tunes, including some that directly referenced the Holocaust. As a professional vocal coach, Polina's extensive efforts to champion the historic Jewish music of Russia and Eastern Europe have gained many followers and admirers.

The WSWS spoke to several audience members who had attended the event. Mel, a woman of German and Czechoslovak Jewish descent described her work within a circle of Jewish anti-genocide activists who have been rallying against the bombardment of Gaza.

The artists featured in this article can be heard here at Best Foot Music's Bandcamp page



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