



BELEDI BEAT

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Arabic Music Masters: Susu Pampanin & Miles Jay

Susu Pampanin

The drum is a forceful instrument—it's the energy within rhythm and its sounds compel people—uniting those who hear it through music, dance, and story. When Susu Pampanin was still a girl, she intuitively felt that power and was passionately drawn to it. “Way before I was 12 I knew I wanted to play drums,” she said. Her mother Amina, a well-known belly dance performer in San Francisco during Susu’s growing-up years, sparked Susu’s intense interest when she introduced her to a small clay drum she was learning to play. “She sat me down on the couch with my brother and sister and played a beledi beat. Then she passed the drum from child to child and let us try it. I couldn’t get the rhythm out of my mind. The next day I asked her about it, and she taught me another rhythm.”

When Susu was a teenager, her mother arranged to give her lessons with master percussionist and composer Vince Delgado who also lives in San Francisco. Through her practice with Vince, and her mother’s dance career, she met a lot of traveling musicians and eventually sat in as a drummer for some of their shows. “I wanted to learn as much as I could,” she said, grateful for the experience at such a young age.

Now Susu Pampanin is one of the world’s few female masters of Arabic percussion, and treats audiences everywhere to a strong and passionate



Georges Lammam Ensemble, Raqs Nouveau, Southern Theater 2009.

Susu is second from the left on tabla. Miles is on string bass.

Photo by PCML Photography.

sound that is also remarkable for its nuance and intimacy. Beginning in her teens she began to play in Arabic orchestras, and has continued to impress dancers and musicians around the world with her performances. She’s the woman behind Susu Pampanin and the Cairo Cats, and their classic *CD Dancing Drums*, as well as *Hands of Time*, both favorite recordings of legions of dancers. Last year she released a DVD with dancer Zaina Zehesha called *Zill Drills: How to Play Finger Cymbals*, a fantastic instructional video on many zill patterns and drum rhythms. Susu also has a strong connection to Jawaahir Dance Company as a musician with the Georges Lammam orchestra.

The journey from practicing in her family’s living room to the international stage is truly an inspiration, and demonstrates how fully embracing the drum has completely changed her life as a person and an artist. As a girl and a young woman, Susu struggled to get certain

adults to take her drumming seriously, and, sometimes against big challenges, she persevered to reach a level of unparalleled excellence.

Susu has expanded her mentorship role in the last few years as a member of Women Drummers International, which brings together women drummers from around the world from a variety of percussion disciplines. The organization strives to give women and girls the opportunity to learn how to drum, especially if they have been denied that opportunity at some point in their lives. Every year they hold a camp in California called Born to Drum for girls and women 15 years old or older.

Susu does think there is a certain sensibility that is unique among women. “We are striving for balance and a full range as musicians, but also to be able to express softer, clear sounds, because sometimes drumming can be bombastic,” she said. She thinks this is especially useful when playing for

dancers, something she really likes to do. She explained that some drummers play drum solos for themselves and feel like they have to “dumb it down” to play for a dancer, but Susu believes that the drumming is highlighted with good dancing. “How a dancer uses music to create a really dynamic show is a visual manifestation of me doing my job,” she said. “The most important part of a drum solo is my own creative expression and dialogue with the dancer.”

NOTE: For the full version of this article, go to www.jawaahir.org/JawaahirNewsletter.htm.

Miles Jay

Like Susu Pampanin, Miles Jay is another native Californian who fell passionately in love with Middle Eastern music after being introduced to world music through a parent. His father, Steve Jay, is a professional bassist and composer, and exposed Miles to music from Africa and India, as well as jazz and rock. Miles grew up in a world populated by musicians, and one of his dad’s gigs is to play for Weird Al Yankovic. (Check out Weird Al’s video “Amish Paradise” for a view of the young Miles playing an Amish child in the video).

As a youth, he went the standard musician route: he studied piano and was in his junior high school’s band. He became enamored with the upright bass when he spied one in a family friend’s closet, and the friend let Miles experiment with it. Soon enough he got his own instrument. When he went to the University of California in Santa Barbara he focused primarily on jazz and classical music, until one day he overheard a group rehearsing an Egyptian folk song that made him stop in his tracks.

“So I went to see them,” Miles said, and soon met Georges and Elias Lammam and Naser Musa of the Georges Lammam Ensemble. Miles switched his major to Middle Eastern ethnomusicology and began performing with the group. Miles’ musicianship is remarkable for its meditative and cerebral approach, distinct for its precision and technique.

After Miles graduated, he moved to Cairo, Egypt and played for the symphony there and immersed himself in many other traditional and fusion musical groups. After a year he came back to the U.S. and started recording, at first with his own laptop and microphone, and again when he met a Lebanese music producer who recorded two Miles-produced ensembles called Bakash and Masar under the

Lebanese record label Incognito. He’s been living in Beirut, Lebanon on and off since 2004. To him, it is home.

“My main reason for living in the Middle East is that Arabic music is so rooted in the culture. There’s only one place to pick up the nuances, and that’s from people doing it. It’s fine to sit and study, but I get most of my schooling on stage. The safety net is gone and you have to rely on intuition,” Miles said about why he likes the total immersion. “The stage forces you to create and the audience gives you energy. That’s where things sink deeper in my imagination.”

He plays music with a variety of musicians—professional and pickup artists—at venues that range “from the *Cristal* to the shisha set” and goes where the music takes him. He’s highly sought after, and has been all over the world, including Minneapolis for the Jawaahir Dance Company productions.

“I love what Cassandra does. It takes a lot of artistic talent to do what she does. Dance is one of the reasons I like to play. It makes me think of different things, movement and the spirit of dance. It is great to create something worth watching and listening to. It’s a circular exchange.”

Coming Events

Cassandra and Jawaahir in Winnipeg
 Jawaahir’s Annual Gala and Fundraiser
 Cassandra at Cairo Caravan on the Queen Mary
 Jawaahir annual show, Ritz Theater

May 7–9
 May 20
 June 4–10
 Aug 26 – Sept 5

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