

# Joubbran brothers head to Carnegie Hall

*Talented Palestinian oud trio set to conquer the U.S.*

Olivia Snaije  
Special to The Daily Star

**P**ARIS: Samir Joubbran, oud musician extraordinaire, has been described as having "something burning within." When he plays, the intensity of his feelings translates into exquisite sound.

Besides the beauty of his music, part of the pleasure of hearing him in concert, playing solo or with his brothers Wissam and Adnan, is witnessing what seems to be a direct transfusion of his emotions into his oud and back out toward the audience.

In every day life Samir is much the same, kinetic, tightly wound and thoroughly focused. His apartment in Paris is neat as a pin, his gestures precise. Clearly, he has no intention of letting anything interfere with the two elements (besides his wife and daughter) that make up his moral fiber: music and Palestine.

"I will never be a normal musician," he remarks. "I wish I could be, but I can't just get up on the stage and think about my career. All the emotion and aggressiveness from daily life comes out when I play."

Early this year, Samir officially created a trio with his brothers, a project he has "been waiting for, for a long time."

The trio's first CD, *Randana*, was released last April.

Samir, 31, grew up in Nazareth with an Israeli passport and all the complications this implies for an Arab Israeli. When he finished high school he studied in Cairo at the Mohammad Abdel-Wahab conservatory, then taught music in Arab schools in Israel, under the aegis of the Israeli Culture Ministry. His relationship with the ministry soon broke down when Samir began to give concerts abroad and was seen as representing Palestine.

While he was in Paris in 1996 he had the opportunity of meeting Palestinians from the West Bank such as the poet Mahmoud Darwish whom he later accompanied during poetry recitals.

That same year Samir moved to Ramallah, in the West Bank, where he got married. He quickly became involved in the intellectual circle there and



Inited by their passion for the oud: Samir, center, with Wissam, left, and Adnan at right.

most importantly felt he was finally living where he belonged.

"I developed a strong belief in my identity and when the second intifada started I stayed in Ramallah. At the beginning of the intifada the Israelis killed 13 Arab Israelis in Nazareth anyway so I preferred to be in a place where I could see my enemy very clearly and he could see me."

Twice, Israeli shells damaged Samir's house. He recently decided his young daughter should be able to experience life without daily violence; he and his family will move to Paris temporarily this fall.

France has been good to Samir. Ever since he performed at a music festival in 2002 with his middle brother, Wissam, his career has skyrocketed. Two weeks after the concert the Joubbran brothers had a manager, a label for a CD, and began to tour the world.

Adnan joined them in 2005 when the trio was created.

The music Samir and his brothers play is based on the classical tradition of Arab musical modes, but the brothers reinterpret the Arabic scales rapidly and freely when they improvise - which is much of the time.

Wissam, 22, besides being a musician, is also a master luthier, recently fulfilling his father Hatem's (a renowned oud maker) dream when he became the first Arab graduate from the Antonio Stradivari violin-making school in Cremona, Italy last month.

Samir and Wissam have been playing together for many years. When Samir performed for the first time in France at the Arab Institute in 1996, he dragged along Wissam, who was only 12.

"I was very worried about him getting stage-fright. I took him to visit the Eiffel Tower and he said 'yeah, so?' He wasn't

impressed and he wasn't stressed by the concert either."

Integrating Adnan, 19, into the trio wasn't easy - Samir and Wissam are in complete symbiosis when they play together. Adnan has only been playing the oud for three years.

"Adnan was pushed directly onto the stage," says Samir. Pushed, prodded and encour-

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aged, Adnan has taken on a difficult role with courage and talent. Samir has big dreams and is not about to slacken the pace.

"I'm very dictatorial with him," he admits. "I make him cry. Adnan's very talented but very stubborn, like me."

Luckily for Samir and Ad-

nan, Wissam is "very relaxed."

With three CD's besides *Randana* under his belt (two solo, one with Wissam), soundtracks for two films and his own record label, Samir has turned his attention to "Improvisation," a film documentary in the making on the trio by Palestinian filmmaker Raed Andoni.

Shot in Nazareth, Ramallah, Cremona, Italy, and Paris, the documentary recounts how the Joubbran brothers became a trio, their differing political views and their unifying passion for the oud.

In the film, Samir feels he is presenting himself to Arabs in the countries he is not allowed to visit.

"Unfortunately for me, most of the Arab world is what I see on satellite television. I would like my success to be part of this world."

The Sundance Institute had awarded Andoni a grant for his work-in-progress in 2004 and last January he presented 10 minutes of his documentary at the Sundance Film Festival.

For the Joubbran brothers, one of their biggest breaks came from those 10 minutes of film shown at Sundance. The renowned American composer, John Adams, happened to be at the screening and asked the Joubbran brothers to play at Carnegie Hall in New York in February 2006.

The brothers are already touring the U.S. in September and the prospect of it makes Samir nervous.

"I'm very worried about my visit to the U.S. Now that I know what I want, politically and musically, I feel like I have to prove so many things - primarily that I'm an honest human being."

Adnan and Wissam will join Samir in Paris in the fall. The brothers have gone farther than their father ever dreamed, says Samir.

"He just wanted me to have a nice safe job. I think he's more relaxed about everything now; he sees that we're serious. My mother keeps telling him 'I told you so.'"

The album *Randana* (Fairplay/Randana label) is distributed by Harmonia Mundi. For information about concerts go to [www.maitemusic.com](http://www.maitemusic.com)

Photo by Iereme Conroy