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Beirut & Beyond our barriers



Bashar Farran, Maurice Louca and Tommaso Cappelatto perform tunes from Louca's 'Salute the Parrot,' at Station Thursday evening. Images courtesy of Elena Kukoleva

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Ruwan Teodros | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The Beirut & Beyond Music Festival got started Thursday evening with a concert by Egyptian musician and composer Maurice Louca. Hosted by Station, the show saw the artist – accompanied by bassist Bashar Farran and percussionist Tommaso Cappelatto – perform tunes from his latest record, “Benhayyi al-Baghbaghan” (Salute the Parrot). The concert followed the official announcement of the lineup for the 2016 festival, which is scheduled to be staged at various venues around Beirut Dec. 8-11.

It seems that Beirut & Beyond is determined to invigorate the independent Middle Eastern music scene while luring in international influence. Since its launch in 2013, the festival has set itself apart from other festivals because of its international partnerships – particularly their relationship with the Oslo World Music Festival. Since then, it has gone on to form new partnerships for the 2016-2017 year with Paris’ Institut de Monde Arabe and Morocco’s Visa for Music. Festival director Amani Semaan has been quoted as saying that, “Now, more than ever, Beirut & Beyond is determined to bringing people together around music and opportunities.”

Another driving force behind the festival is the diversity of the board of trustees, which includes notables from the local and international cultural scenes, including Norway, the United States and France.

One way in which the event goes “beyond” is by supplementing the local festival with a European tour, presenting select artists to European audiences in Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, France and Norway.

For each edition Beirut & Beyond invites a prominent musical figure from the region as guest curator, organizing the festival program. The aim is have the curator bring his or her artistic vision to the event, ensuring that the festival is truly different each year.

This year's guest curator is Wael Kodeih (aka Rayess Bek), who gained notoriety through his work in the region's hip-hop and urban music scene and has more recently included author and composer to his profile.

Beirut & Beyond will host four days of performances from regional and international artists as well as a program of debates, workshops, conferences and lectures featuring prominent members of the music industry.

There seems to be a theme guiding the festival's selected acts – many of whom combine genres to create music that could be classified as “out of the box.” The word fusion frequently comes to mind.

Wasl Trio – Palestinian oud player and vocalist Kamilya Jubran, French double-bass player Sarah Murcia and Swiss trumpeter and electronicist Werner Hasler – blends the worlds of traditional Arabic melodies and Western rock, jazz and electronic sounds.

Another artist featured in the 2016 lineup is the self-taught musician and producer Wael Jegham, aka Ghoula. Like Wasl Trio, Ghoula's sound is inspired by many musical genres, among them folk and Berber music and electronic beats, all blended into an ear-opening style.

Latlateh is a Syrian hip-hop group comprised of three artists who came together at the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2012. They'll take the stage and bring their thought-provoking blend of Arabic music and hip-hop with them. Using strong and descriptive lyrics, as rappers often do, they express their thoughts about the gruesome reality of life in postrevolution Syria.

Just reading the lyrics of their song “Boom Boom Bam,” which details the aftermath of a Damascus explosion, it is obvious that these young artists will leave an impression on festivalgoers.

Returning to the theme of electronic Middle Eastern music, Los Angeles-based Armenian-American DJ, music producer and composer Bei Ru will perform his own fusion of Middle Eastern music, electronic beats and percussion.

Last but not least, famed Lebanese singer, musician and songwriter Youmna Saba will present her own unique blend of electronica and traditional Arabic music.

The promise of Beirut & Beyond is months away but time will fly by, as it does, and soon you will hear the sound of electronic traditional Arabic music wafting through the city.

Beirut & Beyond International Music Festival runs Dec. 8-11.

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