

# Dudu Tassa & Jonny Greenwood

## *Jarak Qaribak*



photo credit: Shin Katan

“When people listen to this music,” says Dudu Tassa, “I really love to imagine them thinking. . . what is this? It sounds 1970s, but there are drum machines, there are guitars but they’re singing in Arabic. . . what’s going on?”

What’s going on is a remarkable collaboration between two remarkable musicians. Israeli rock star Tassa and Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood have known each other a long time. They’ve collaborated before –

Jonny played guitar on “Eize Yom” (“What A Day”), a track on Dudu’s 2009 album *Basof Mitraglim Le’Hakol* (“In The End You Get Used To Everything”). Asked what he likes about Jonny’s playing, Dudu replies “It’s everything I can’t do, and don’t know how to do.” Jonny, who is married into an Israeli family hailing originally from Iraq and Egypt – his wife is the Israeli visual artist Sharona Katan, aka Shin Katan; she created the album’s artwork –

remembers hearing Dudu’s music twinkling amid the prevailing gloom of mid-noughties Israeli rock when Radiohead first visited. “What Dudu was doing had its roots in the Middle East,” says Jonny, “and I just found that more interesting. I was hearing that music at home a lot, as well.”

*Jarak Qaribak* translates, more or less, as “Your Neighbour Is Your Friend”. It’s an expansive, inclusive sentiment. The songs on the album, and the singers, are drawn from all over the

Middle East – and, in keeping with the theme established by the album’s title, each singer takes a turn at a tune from a country other than their own. So “Djit Nishrab”, a sultry, slow-building lament to love gone wrong by 1940s Algerian singer Ahmed Wahby, is performed by the 2020s Egyptian singer Ahmed Doma. “Taq ou-Dub”, a defiant kiss-off, is performed by the Palestinian singer Nour Freteikh. When Dudu takes a lead vocal himself, it’s on “Lhla Yzid Ikhtar”, borrowed from Morocco. When a Moroccan – in this instance Mohssine Salaheddine – steps up, it’s on the Egyptian track “Leylet Hub”. The Jordanian traditional “Ya ‘Anid Ya Yaba” is sung by a Syrian. And when the song is Israeli – as “Ahibak” is – it’s sung by Safae Essafi, from Dubai.

If there’s one track that ties Dudu in particular to the project, it’s “Jan al-Galb Salik”, sung here by Tunisian singers Noaman Chaari and Zaine Elouati – and written in Iraq nearly a century ago by Dudu’s great-uncle. He was Saleh al-Kuwaiti, half of a duo with his brother – and Dudu’s grandfather – Daoud. The pair were enormously popular in Kuwait and Iraq especially during the 1930s and 1940s, composing classics, filling big venues and performing for royalty, before their association with a considerable musical legacy was gradually officially

erased across the Arab world following their emigration to Israel in 1951; cruelly, they struggled for recognition in their new homeland as well, as Arabic music was sidelined in the early decades of Israel’s existence. Dudu formed his band Dudu Tassa & The Kuwaitis in 2011 as a means of reviving the music of the Al-Kuwaiti brothers. The Kuwaitis have now made

rock. He has had a parallel career as a solo artist going back 20 years, to his soundtrack for *Body Song* – he has since composed the soundtracks for Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*, *Inherent Vice*, *Phantom Thread* and *The Master* and Jane Campion’s *The Power Of The Dog*, among others; he has twice been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Score.

But while Dudu grew up with this music; Jonny had to learn it, which meant unlearning a lot about being a rock guitarist – a challenge he’d previously confronted when working with another Israeli musician, Shye Ben Tzur. Jonny played on Shye’s acclaimed 2015 album with the Indian group The Rajasthan Express, recorded in Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur. “*Jarak Qaribak* presented a similar set of problems,” says Jonny, “in that you have all these scales which don’t conform to western major/minor scales, and have notes which involve

quarter-tones, and it’s very hard to impose a chord sequence on these melodies. It usually makes them collapse. It’s like reducing the resolution on a colour photo until it’s just squares.” Dudu makes the point that there’s little harmonising in Arabic music – everyone is playing a melody; Jonny eventually found a way to lock into that. “Lots of Radiohead songs have started

three albums, and opened for Radiohead on their 2017 tour of the US, and for Radiohead’s show in Yarkon Park in Tel Aviv the same year – and, thanks at least partly to Dudu’s efforts, there is now an Al-Kuwaiti Brothers Street in the Hatikva district of Tel Aviv.

*Jarak Qaribak* is scarcely the first time that Jonny has stepped beyond the boundaries of guitar



album artwork

as a melody without chords,” he says, “and then it’s about adding chords to change the colour of the melody, and it felt a bit like that sometimes.”

Jonny says that his somewhat incongruous benchmark when assembling the tracks on *Jarak Qaribak* was “trying to imagine what Kraftwerk would have done if they’d been in Cairo in the 1970s,” which is actually a pretty deft characterising of the overall sound of *Jarak Qaribak*. The backing tracks were recorded between Oxford and Tel Aviv, Jonny and Dudu joined by a group playing traditional Middle Eastern instruments – including rebab, oud, mijwiz and qanun – plus brass, strings and synthesizers. In a quirky touch nodding to the period from which most of the songs are drawn, the title of each track is introduced in advance, as was the style on the Arabic albums of the time; accordingly, the Iraqi-Israeli activist Niran Bassoon is credited as “announcer”. Kraftwerk’s role as unwitting mentors notwithstanding, it was decided that computers wouldn’t fit – though the beat is kept by electronic drum machines.

The singers mostly recorded their contributions wherever they happened to be, which presented some logistical challenges. Dudu recalls that trying to locate a functional studio in Beirut, so that Lebanese singer Rashid al Najjar could do his vocal for “Ashufak Shay” was something of a struggle. It was worth it, though: this desperate devotional, composed by the Emirati songwriter Mehad Hamad

is both a mellifluous triumph of modern Middle Eastern pop and the track on *Jarak Qaribak* on which Jonny’s guitar is most evocative of a more downbeat Radiohead track. There were other difficulties peculiar to the region whose music *Jarak Qaribak* celebrates. Dudu acknowledges that some singers they approached were uneasy about working with an Israeli artist. “And,” he says, “it’s not like all the Arabic countries of the Middle East are friends among themselves.” Getting the Iraqi singer Karrar Alsaedi to Tel Aviv to record the Yemeni song “Ya Mughir al-Ghazala” was a considerable bureaucratic feat (“I think,” says Dudu, “he was the only Iraqi passport holder in the entire country at that moment.”) And then there was the considerable detective work involved in tracking down songwriters, publishers and copyright holders in countries where such things are not always an exact science.

Though Dudu says that he scrutinised every lyric as carefully as he could for even the vaguest hint of a political subtext, and insists – accurately – that *Jarak Qaribak* is an album of classic love songs, the romance and heartbreak they chronicle exclusively personal, neither Dudu nor Jonny are naïve enough to believe that nobody will project their own political prejudices onto this project, favourably or otherwise. “We didn’t want,” says Jonny, “to make out that we’re making any political point, but I do understand that as soon as you do anything in that part of the

world it becomes political, even if it’s just artistic. Actually, possibly especially if it’s artistic.”

Dudu, however, believes that it would have been an act of bad faith to make *Jarak Qaribak* any other way. “Israel,” he notes, “is a small country between all those countries, so we’re very influenced by those cultures and by that music. And a lot of us in Israel – like my family – are descended from people who came here from elsewhere in the Middle East, so everything gets mixed up.”

That said, neither are keen for the multi-national nature of *Jarak Qaribak* to be read as some corny, mawkish exercise in attempting to teach the world to sing. Both stress that every decision they made was in the interests of serving an extraordinary songbook (and they have already started swapping ideas for a sequel).

“That was never a conscious ambition,” says Jonny. “It wasn’t the starting point, anyway. It’s maybe a by-product, if you’re lucky. Otherwise it’s just: aren’t these songs great, aren’t these musicians amazing, and what a singer, what a voice. That’s all it’s about, really. But if the songs are from all over the Middle East, why shouldn’t the singers be? It’s a covers album, is what it is.”

“It’s a letter in a bottle, thrown into the ocean,” decides Dudu. “Who will get it, who will hear it, I don’t know. But someone will love it.”

—Andrew Mueller

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT  
KRISTA WILLIAMS, JOE COHEN OR CARLA SACKS AT SACKS & CO., 212.741.1000,  
KRISTA@SACKSCO.COM, JOE.COHEN@SACKSCO.COM, OR CARLA@SACKSCO.COM.