

Around the Mall

SCENES AND SIGHTINGS FROM THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS AND BEYOND

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IRAQ'S EXILED VIRTUOSO

In 2004, Rahim Alhaj visited Iraq for the first time in 13 years and found that the Institute of Music in Baghdad—his alma mater—was burned and desolate. “There is no music anymore in Iraq,” says Alhaj, a renowned master of

Rahim Alhaj's music was banned under Saddam Hussein. Now he hopes it will help Americans better understand Iraqi culture.



Alhaj, 39, says his music is a "conversation between East and West."

MUSICIAN

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the oud, a stringed instrument that some trace to the beginning of Mesopotamian civilization 5,000 years ago.

Alhaj, who came to the United States as a political refugee in 2000 and now lives in Albuquerque, has just released his fourth album, *When the Soul is Settled: Music of Iraq*. Produced by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, it's a collection of traditional Iraqi *maqams*, or "suites," that include improvised passages. Folkways set out to produce the album after the U.S.-led invasion, largely to counter the superficial picture of Iraqi life in newscasts, says producer D. A. Soneborne. The label wasn't looking for political music, and Alhaj's *maqams*, which touch on phenomena such as the cycles of the moon, are about the ancient land's culture.

Which isn't to say that Alhaj himself is apolitical. As a young man, he was active in a secret political party that opposed Saddam Hussein's regime, and he wrote protest songs. He says he was imprisoned in 1986 and 1988—the first time for a year and a half—and that he was subjected to beatings. He says he hid his hands so they would not be injured. Alhaj's family arranged for him to leave the country; his mother sold all her possessions, even her clothes, and spent \$20,000 on false identity papers.

In February 1991, a month after the Persian Gulf war started, Alhaj fled to Jordan. Musical instruments could not be taken out of Iraq, he recalls, and when he reached the border he could not explain that he was the famous Rahim Alhaj; his oud was seized. He lived in Jordan two years and then Syria, where he met his wife, Nada Kherbik, before coming to the United States.

Alhaj performs at dozens of U.S. concerts, and he says he wants to show that not all Arabs are terrorists with "weird beards." The oud he plays was made by a childhood friend, Farhan Hassn, who lives in Iraq. The instrument bears two homing pigeons, inlaid in wood; as boys, Alhaj and Hassn raised the birds in Baghdad. Today, Alhaj raises homing pigeons in his backyard. "I learned from them," says Alhaj, who says he might live again in Iraq. "Send them thousands of miles, but one day, they will come back. They have some kind of very unique relationship with their place."

{ BY KATY JUNE-FRIESEN }