



Meet the Lotus Festival Artist: Dena El Saffar

Can you tell us about yourself?

My name is Dena El Saffar, I grew up in Chicago in an eccentric household filled with a lot of different languages, a lot of artistic personalities. My Dad and Mom were both professors, but both of them were *huge* music lovers. My Dad was born in Iraq and he had this very broad palette of music that he loved. We had the stereo and he was always putting on records. And my mother, she played piano and ukulele and sang.



When I was six, I started playing the violin. And at age ten, I switched to viola, which was a really important moment for me, because I found my own voice in a way. I was 100% into classical music through youth orchestras and the Chicago Civic Symphony. When I was a senior in high school, my Dad took me to Baghdad for the first time. I'd been begging to go, but there was always a war. In 1990, this was a time of peace and the trip was life-changing. I ended up really connecting with Iraqi music. Then in college, I was self-learning Arabic music. At first it started with recordings, but eventually I was able to connect with teachers. Sometimes I'd have to travel overseas, because there wasn't a teacher here I could learn from and I was gathering information from wherever I could. Then I formed my band *Salaam*. We started in 1993 and now it's 2020. So that's a big, big part of my life.

Can you tell us a little bit about your band *Salaam*?

What we do is play from West to East - Morocco, across North Africa, to the Levant area, as far East as Iran, and then as far North as Turkey. The Middle East is a funny region, because it's not contained neatly. It actually covers three continents - Africa, Asia, and Europe. It's an interesting spread of countries, but the music of those different places is very connected. They all use a certain type of music theory called *Maqam* that kind of holds it all together. There are some similar music traditions, and, yet, each one has its own specific and unique tradition, too.

In 1997, we started an education program that we've taken to elementary, middle, and high schools. The whole point of it is assuming that they don't know the basics of Middle Eastern music. But generally speaking, in every audience, there will be a few kids that are actually Middle Eastern and feel like "Oh, I've been represented, finally!" So that really warms my heart, because I also was a kid who grew up kind of isolated from other people that had a background like mine, and was just wondering "why am I so different? How come all my friends are of German heritage and I'm not?" It's just nice to feel like I'm completing a circle when I make some kid out there in the audience feel special.

What is it like to be a musician today?

I feel like music has taken on a new importance on one level. I am a teacher, so I have a lot of students and we wound up having to move to Zoom. Shockingly, they got more serious about music this year than they ever were before. I think in the past they were so busy doing other things, like sports and they didn't get much time for their music. And in 2020, I've seen people go more deeply into music and get more out of it. It's a great antidote to deal with the feelings of stress, worry, or depression. And I think a lot of people are discovering that. When I play my violin, I actually get this breath of fresh air and I feel like I have a new lease on life.

What would you say to children who are curious about music?

I think music is cool to watch, but cooler to participate in. So I think for a kid who is interested in music, watch and see what really appeals to you. Is there an instrument that's calling you? What's really cool is to experiment with things that make sound in your house and they don't have to be actual instruments. I just want to give permission to children to go for it. You don't have to have an official instrument to make music, you can sing, and clap, and make body percussion, too. Don't just watch music, make it.

Salaam will perform at Lotus Festival on Thursday, September 24, 2020

For more information, visit: <https://www.lotusfest.org/schedule/>