

Iraqi-American Oud Master Rahim AlHaj Calls for Peace and Unity on His Deeply Personal New Album

'One Sky', from the Rahim AlHaj Trio, Due Out 4.27 on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



Rahim AlHaj has long functioned as a politically conscious musical goodwill ambassador. Last year, the Iraqi-American oud virtuoso, who fled his native country in 1991 after being imprisoned twice for his opposition to the Saddam Hussein regime, issued the powerful album 'Letters From Iraq,' which brought to life correspondence he received from Iraqi women and youth. Now the two-time Grammy nominee tells his own remarkable story with 'One Sky,' his third album for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

'One Sky' serves as the debut album for the Rahim AlHaj Trio, featuring in addition to AlHaj the supreme talents of Iranian santūr player Sourena Sefati and Palestinian-American percussionist Issa Malluf. The record is a deeply immersive sonic experience as the three world-renowned musicians weave transfixing textures and melodies that transport listeners to a world of tranquility and beauty.

[Check out this 3-song sampler](#)

Beyond its music, the album represents AlHaj's artistic appeal to each of us to make a positive difference toward a better world, however we can. Sefati and Malluf join AlHaj in this spirit of friendship, tolerance and an acknowledgement that everyone must live in peace under the same sky.

For AlHaj, the seeds for the album date back to the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. At the start of the conflict, he was a star student of the oud at the prestigious Institute of Music in Baghdad; by the time he graduated in 1990, he was a vocal opponent of the war. Following his imprisonments, he fled Iraq, ultimately emigrating to the U.S. and arriving in Albuquerque, New Mexico. AlHaj became a U.S. citizen in 2008, and his career took flight: He performed hundreds of concerts all over the world, released a string of albums and collaborated with artists such as R.E.M.'s Peter Dinklage, jazz guitarist Bill Frisell and the Kronos Quartet.

But after 40 years, he was still haunted by the carnage he had witnessed as a teenager, along with the emotions he felt when the U.S. and the U.K. aligned to combat the "axis of evil" (North Korea, Iran, and Iraq), and he set out to create an album that would be his personal statement of peace, friendship and unity.

He reached out to Sourena Sefati, master of the santūr (Arabic hammered dulcimer). Beyond Sefati's impressive resume (he holds numerous music degrees, has performed as a soloist and in ensemble concerts across the globe, and has been featured on over 50 albums), he understood the power of AlHaj's mission. Born in Ramsar, Iran, Sefati emigrated to the U.S. in 2014 and now teaches, performs and resides in New Mexico.

Supporting AlHaj and Sefati is Palestinian-American percussionist Issa Malluf. Born and raised in New Mexico, Malluf is a self-taught musician who has been internationally recognized as a specialist in Middle Eastern, Arabic and North African percussion. Among the artists Malluf has performed with are Amjad Ali Khan, folk duo A Hawk and a Hacksaw, and Peter Dinklage.

"Dialogue," the opening track on 'One Sky,' unfolds like a dream, with the three players painting an elaborate tableau of delicate musical layers. AlHaj and Sefati engage in a dance around Malluf's precise yet nimble rhythms. The music is soothing, but its story is harrowing: AlHaj originally wrote the piece for violin and oud to honor his friend Nazar al-Jabar, who played 1st violin for the Iraqi Symphony

Orchestra. The violinist once told AlHaj of the time in 1994, during UN Security Council-imposed sanctions against Iraq, when he was forced to burn his violin to keep his infant son warm. It would be the last time he touched a musical instrument.

"Time to Have Fun" conveys an entirely different mood. Playful and hypnotic, it springs forth like a bolt of hi-beam light. The dance rhythm is called a khaliji, common throughout the Arabian Gulf and Iraq. Listeners might feel compelled to move their bodies, which, as AlHaj explains in the liner notes, is the very idea: "If you don't feel moved to dance here, go find some children and dance with them."

"A Gift from a Sufi Soul" features an almost Western-sounding rhythm that supports sinuous and vaguely mysterious riffs. As the song opens up, the rhythm (an intriguing pattern of 14 beats counted as 4+4+3+3) grows more insistent and the melodies expand. The meaning behind the song stems from the Sufi belief that, with guidance from someone who has already experienced it, one can become awakened to the soul's connection with God. Awareness of who you really are, a state of being described as beyond "I am" and "I want," is the gift a Sufi soul offers.

"Dancing Planet," built around engaging and invigorating polyrhythms, is a fitting and celebratory coda to this mesmerizing journey. Asked how he came to write the piece, AlHaj explains that he envisioned an Irish jig or a Scottish reel. He recounts how he had never danced until his wedding day, when every molecule in his body was filled with joy and everyone seemed to dance with him in celebration.

With 'One Sky,' Rahim AlHaj, along with Sourena Sefati and Issa Malluf, makes good on his commitment to creating music that bridges cultural and sociopolitical divides. Filled with intoxicating waves of sound and brilliant melodies, it succeeds in spreading AlHaj's message of global understanding and love.

'One Sky' Track List:

1. Dialogue
2. Wandering
3. Time to Have Fun
4. Fly Away
5. A Gift From a Sulfi Soul
6. Dasht
7. Ayoub
8. River
9. Dancing Planet

**Included in the release of One Sky is a 20-page booklet with bilingual notes in English and Arabic.

ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS:

Going into its 70th year, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the "National Museum of Sound," makes available close to 60,000 tracks in physical and digital format as the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian, with a reach of 80 million people per year. A division of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the non-profit label is dedicated to supporting cultural diversity and increased understanding among people through the documentation, preservation, production and dissemination of sound. Its mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document "people's music" from around the world. For more information about Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, visit folkways.si.edu.

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For more information, contact [Mark Satlof](#) or [Andrea Evenson](#) at Shore Fire Media, (718) 522-7171.