

EUROPE

Jazz It Up: Arab Musicians Bring Their Songs to Germany

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BERLIN — Arab musicians in Berlin are bringing their musical roots to Germans — with a little help from American jazz.

At the monthly Arab Song Jam in the German capital, musicians use famous Arab songs as a starting point before inviting other musicians onto the stage for a jam session in a style pioneered by American jazz musicians before World War II.

"All musicians know these jazz sessions. So we use that technique on Arab songs," said Moroccan musician Alaa Zouiten, who plays the oud, a kind of lute, and who led a recent session. "It is a great idea because it brings popular Arab songs to life here in Berlin."

Berlin's already large Arab community has grown since 2015 with the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees from Syria.

That has led to an increased interest in Arab culture and music in the city, said Philippa Ebene, CEO and artistic director of "Werkstatt der Kulturen" — the "Cultural Workshop" — where the jam sessions are held.

"We have all these new Berliners from the Arab world and they brought their music with them," she said. "At the same time, Berlin is a city that is always hungry for new culture."

The Arab Song Jam is part of a yearlong celebration of Arab culture at the venue, also including poetry readings and Arab film nights.

The first jam session was held in March and it has become so popular that the basement venue often has to close its doors because it has reached its capacity. The audience is mixed — elderly Arab couples mingle with young European hipsters and groups of curious, middle-aged Germans.

"Is there a singer in the house?" Zouiten asks the crowd after the first song, and several people raise their hands.

Milo Kanefaty from Syria joins the musicians on the stage and as he sings the first words of a song by famous Lebanese singer Fairuz, the crowd cheers wildly and sings along. Soon people start dancing, hugging and applauding.

"This is a big event for me," says Benin Am Zakaria, a 31-year old student from Algeria who is in the audience.

"I know all the songs by heart. I learned them when I was young and it is a really big thing to hear them here."

At other sessions, Germans from the audience also join in.

While Zouiten said he does not want to turn the Arab Song Jam into a political event, he does hope the music will help break down barriers between migrants and Germans who remain concerned about the large influx of newcomers.

"We all live in 2017 and it isn't important anymore where people come from," he said. "In the end, we are musicians and we are all the same regardless of where we come from."