TODAY IN HISTORY

644

Uthman ibn Affan, companion of Muhammad, appointed 3rd Caliph of Islam

1287

During St. Lucia's Flood in Northwest Netherlands the Zuiderzee seawall collapses with loss of over 50,000 lives

1542

Princess Mary Stuart succeeds her father James V and becomes Queen Mary I of Scotland at 6 days old

1911

Norwegian Roald Amundsen's expedition is the 1st to each the South Pole

Reuters | Mosul, Iraq

The first thing musician Fadhel al-Badri did when Mosul was liberated from Islamic State last year was breathe a sigh of relief.

The militants who seized the city in 2014 had targeted artists like himself so when neighbours said they were hunting for him, he left home, called his wife to say he was likely to die and took to sleeping in a different place each night.

The next thing he did was recover his beloved violin and his oud, similar to a lute, from where he had hidden them in the frame of his bed.

He said he hugged and kissed them "like they were my own children," and played amid the ruins "a song ... for Mosul."

In October, Badri and other musicians and activists attended the first orchestral concert in the northern Iraqi city since the militants were defeated more than a year ago by Iraqi and Kurdish forces and a coalition led by the United States.

Thousands died in that battle or fled the city, large parts of which was reduced to rubble.

The musicians played in a park where the militants once trained child soldiers and the music, a mixture of Western and Iraqi classical, wafted along the banks of the Tigris River.

"Music is my life. It's amazing to hear it in Mosul again," he said. The concert was conceived by Karim Wasfi, former director of the Baghdad Orchestra, whose visiting Peace Through Arts Farabi Orchestra played alongside local musicians.

Mosul was long celebrated as a centre of Iraqi culture but that life was suppressed even before Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014. Al Qaeda targeted musicians in the wake of a U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and no one could remember when they last heard live music in Mosul.

Islamic State continued that crackdown, blowing up statues and monuments, said Ali al-Baroodi, a Mosul University professor and photographer.

"We continued to consume culture in secret: we would listen to music, trade books, films, music. That never stopped even though it was dangerous," he said.

Baroodi and Badri belong to a community of artists and activists who have defied fears of fresh attacks to hold weekly book markets and photography exhibitions. In a bold move, that community has also painted murals around the city in a bid to reclaim public spaces.

Rich history

Last year, he helped launch an international book drive to replenish the million books that Islamic State torched at the university library, one of the most important in the region.

"Mosul lost its identity, lost its features, lost thousands of its people with many more still under the rubble," he said. "These efforts aren't going to fix everything overnight but it gives us hope."

One new cultural centre is the vibrant Qantara cultural cafe. It opened in east Mosul in March, welcomes men and women, boasts a well-stocked bookshop and hosts readings and workshops. In addition, musicians including Badri have performed there.

Its walls show paintings and photographs of Mosul's rich history and its recent devastation. One wall depicts the crimes of IS, displaying a yellow jumpsuit worn by detainees as well as handcuffs.

Not every cultural institution in Mosul is seeing rebirth.

The central public library, a research centre that housed rare manuscripts including government records dating back to the Ottoman era, was the only one to survive Islamic State intact, even though it was used as a base.

Librarians hid the most precious texts but 20,000 books were dumped in the basement. After East Mosul was liberated, librarians salvaged what they could and stacked books on makeshift shelves.

But with no windows and holes in its ceiling, the library remains closed. Its halls, once filled with student researchers, are now caked in dust.

Library head Jamal Ahmed said funds had been set aside to repair the library, but government repair efforts had stalled.

"This library is an important cultural home," said a library employee. "We can't just rebuild bridges and roads, we have to rebuild minds."

Ban Chakib plays the piano with Karim Wasfi, conductor of the Peace Through Arts Farabi Orchestra, during a concert

Karim Wasfi leads the Peace Through Arts Farabi Orchestra during a concert in Mosul

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Hadeer Saad plays the violin with Karim Wasfi, conductor of the Peace Through Arts Farabi Orchestra, in Mosul

Items related of Islamic State militants are seen displayed on the wall of Qantara Culture Cafe in Mosul, Iraq

TRACKS

e great who voiced a generation

Joseph Sakr personified the changing landscape of musin during the 1970 with longtime friend and collaborator Ziad Rahbani

durinf a recording

ways that only he could. She was a noted fan of the duo and would request to perform some of their work, including an appearance at Beiteddine Festival. It was a crowning moment for the man who merely had a role in her earlier plays.

What set Sakr apart from his contemporaries was a distinguishable persona and vocal flair that resonated with listeners of all ages. He gladly experimented with ad-libs that added lively energy to the songs, morphing into trademarks that illustrated his image.

Long gone were the days of background singing as he joined Fairuz in two supporting roles in Loulou (1974) and Mais El-Reem (1975). With his indisputable talent, Joseph Sakr became an instrumental presence to assist Ziad in carrying the Rahbani legacy for years to come. He starred in Nazl El Sourour where he shone in the role of Barakat, carrying the majority of musical workload in the play.

While Fairuz shied away from Ziad's contentious lyrics, Sakr tackled those tracks in ways that only he could. She was a noted fan of the duo and would request to perform some of their work, including an appearance at Beiteddine Festival. It was a crowning moment for the man who merely had a role in her earlier plays.

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Joseph Sakr remained loyal to his closest associate, opting to only release songs composed by Ziad Rahbani. He turned down several offers in the '90s and remained mostly out of the spotlight until the release of his final album "Bema Enno" in 1995.

At 55 years old, Sakr was taken too early from his family and a country that needed his voice. In 1997, New Year day celebrations were cut short in some Lebanese households upon hearing the news of Joseph Sakr's sudden death, which coincidentally fell on Ziad Rahbani's birthday. While Ziad had been the mastermind behind all the classics, it was Sakr who steered the wheel to deliver his messages in a captivating way.

The greatest testimony came from Ziad Rahbani who admitted that nothing had affected his artistry more than the absence of the irreplaceable Joseph Sakr.

With the 21st anniversary of his death coming up, a new website is set to launch containing an archive of songs, videos and photos, according to his son Raji Sakr. And while most of the younger generations have been raised on his songs without having seen his image, they are still able to immediately recognize his mellifluous voice ringing through parties and various events.

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