

The last concert, 6th March 2017, of the festival of the city of Sfax, capital of Arab Culture is about to begin, and I am making my way past the entrance into the court of the theatre, a building of the city council, dedicated to the legendary Tunisian musician Mahmud Jamoussi and devoted to the promotion of Tunisian music. The hall is already chock-full so I decided to stand in the back to take some photos next to some friends and well known *mālūf* aficionados. There are young and old, men and women, chatting and greeting, here people never listen in silence, mostly well dressed. After some opening remarks by the director of the festival, the invited orchestra of the Town of Sfax takes the stage. They are dressed in typical costumes of Andalusian musicians in Tunisia, colored robes topped by red woolen hats. The ensemble consists of some 15 musicians performing on the standard Egyptian/Oriental style Arab lute (*'ūd*), violins, *riq* (tambourine) and *darbuka* drum, a mixed choir of male-female and, and only one Tunisian *'ūd* player in the middle. They proceed to perform the *nūba* in the Tunisian mode *māya* from the established national repertoire (1960s). It is a typical festival performance, convivial, cheerful and well presented. As the melody lifts into the higher register and the rhythm is accentuated; the Tunisian *'ūd* plays several distinctive breathy accents, I could feel the strong touch of the boned plectrum.



This account traces one route through the central topic of my travel: how music and identity come to be intertwined in the lives of some Tunisian *'ūd* players and makers. My research explores the cultural and social meanings of this Tunisian *'ūd* in the emergence of its local and global scenes, and part of my accounts draw directly on ethnographic material covering the *mālūf* musical scenes of the city of Tunis and Sfax during my trip in March 2017 funded by The Royal Holloway Travel Award. I had the chance to travel to North Africa in order to conduct interviews, observe concerts, events and gather data at several workshops of *'ūd* making, and at the *mālūf* festival/competition within the celebration of Sfax as capital of Arab culture (2016/2017).



From left to right: luthiers Faïsal Twirī and Lotfi Bellasfar, me and the musician Zied Mehdi

The *'ūd* is the most prominent musical instrument of the Arab Islamic world. Traditionally and by now normative, the general definition of *mālūf* is the Arab–Andalusian Muslim music performed today in North Africa, with its roots in the courtly tradition of medieval Islamic Spain. Tunisia is situated on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, midway between the Atlantic Ocean and Nile Delta. Because of its special geographical position in the Mediterranean Sea, this country has always been a place of contact between various civilizations, including Arabs, Berbers, Jews, Ottoman Turks, who have co-existed and intermingled throughout its long history.

During the fieldwork in Tunis the capital, I was immediately drawn to the finest craftsmanship of *'ūd* making in Tunisia. I had chosen two makers, who I consider a representative example, of how *'ūd* making differentiated in innovations and improvement at the turn of 21st century. Rīdha Jandoubī, for example, produces his *'ūd* by first using metal reamers to shape the mould of a rib length of wood, sealing the ribs together, then shaping the inside of the *'ūd* gluing papers.



Ribs model, Rīdha Jandoubī atelier



Ribs, Rīdha Jandoubī atelier

Faīsal Twirī instead, fabricates the case of his *'ūd* still by using a mould based on his measurements of standard *'ūd*. For the face, made only of two pieces, Twirī applies techniques that “allows for exact reproduction of a fine face profiles in every instrument made”. Both makers are now using laser technique to drill the three face holes and then making final adjustments by hand.



Face, Faīsal Twirī atelier



Mould, Faīsal Twirī atelier

The trip was highly valuable, enabling me to reconnect with friends and colleagues known at the beginning of my doctorate in 2015, and giving me greater purpose and credibility among those involved in the Tunisian music scene. On the other hand, spending time in Tunisia with 'ūd makers provided an obvious variety of 'ūd construction observations, including specific divergent beliefs about how 'ūd(s) were made, what 'ūd evoked when designed and shaped, or what potentially identity reconfigurations 'ūd making might have on makers or other people. The scholarship covered the costs of my flights, accommodation (including meals), travel insurance etc.. and without the help of the scholarship I would not have been able to conduct this research for my dissertation.