

# All About Jazz

## Istanbul Jazz: So Close To The Music, So Far From New York



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“ A mystery is unlocked every time you listen to music. There can't be a jazz musician who doesn't listen. — Onder Focan ”

That any musician, old cat, young lion, or apprentice anywhere, endeavors in jazz is amazing enough, given the elusiveness of "success." That is even more true in [Istanbul](#), Turkey: not a conventional jazz capitol, far from the African-American roots of jazz, and even beyond the music's major continental domiciles. Yet the tilting cobblestoned streets of the city echo with the music.

There is indigenous Turkish music re-interpreted; progressive, experimental, and *avant-garde* to varying results. However, most dependably there is the beating heart of mainstream: adventuring in post-bop, the Great American Songbook; the impact of Blue Note Records still strong, classics modernized. Turkish jazz writer Tunçel Gülsoy sees it as a statement of musicians' commitment, not a failure of imagination. There is an emphasis on listening to the past as model, not imitation. Love has something to do with it.

## Depth, Not Frenzy

Dura And, a 24 year old vocalist, leading her Jazz Project, enunciates the Great American Songbook not only flawlessly, but illuminates it with adult sophistication. For the classic "The Very Thought of You," she slowed meaningfully the lyric "The longing here for you, You'll never know, How slow the moments go, Till I'm near to you," and dropped down a note rather than up to end that line. It conveyed a depth of longing, rather than sweet resolution. a subtle but weighty shift. Nothing more frenzied or "progressive" could have conveyed any more feeling.

Gülşah Erol is a cellist, trained in classical conservatories, separately known for experimental free music. She also leads a straight-forward combo, but with an additional element: that sonorous cello, with a distinguishing complexity ahead of alto and tenor saxophones, piano, drums. Her other work is spread widely among the Symphony Orchestra of Anatolia, the free improvisation group Abstra, as a composer for film scores, dance, and various electro instrumentation and "new music" configurations. Classical romanticism, a spaciousness from Nordic jazz, and her other endeavors float into her jazz. It is a lot to bring together while still observing a tradition, but she does it not out of obligation except to what she hears within, "precisely because we feel these kinds of music within us."

From the side of the room in the jazz club [Nardis](#), owner Zuhâl Focan watched from a seat from which she has presided for 17 years, and offered a visitor an empty spot right in front of her. To the compliment that she was the Lorraine Gordon of Istanbul, in homage to the late owner of New York's [Village Vanguard](#), she exploded with the exclamation, "Yes! You get it!," proud of what she has created with her husband, guitarist [Onder Focan](#), the first Turkish musician to have released an album on Blue Note.

Onder Focan is a bebop-based guitarist, he says, who also incorporates "local flavors." He has become an elder, teacher, facilitator, and mentor of the Istanbul jazz community. His gigs embrace younger musicians he brings along, and, correspondingly, he is included in their groups. He has said that jazz isn't something that could be done without loving it: "the jazz musician must love what he does. He should be in love with his work."

Onder Focan instructs that the jazz musician should have a big repertoire, always practice, and respect his bandmates while playing. "In other words, he should know how to listen while playing. He should have a dialogue while playing. All of these require work and dedication so a certain amount of modesty and discipline come along hand in hand.

"Every time we listen to new things we learn something new along with it. A mystery is unlocked every time you listen to music. There can't be a jazz musician who doesn't listen. He should listen to both his bandmates and the 1945 [Charlie Parker](#) album. There really is a lot of things to do."

## Ear Archive, Ear Investment

That task list includes bringing together multiple styles into Turkish presentations. Pianist Eda And, older sister to the singer Duru And, obtained advanced classical training, largely in Germany. Both sisters were raised in a musical household, a "musical circus" as Eda now recalls. The vocalist sister, Duru, has acted the lead in stage musicals, and performs Latin dance. Eda's current CD *Augmented Life* has three horns, bass, drums, percussion, voice, and piano. It is straight ahead, yet complex, diverse influences spread among all those instruments, and avoids trends toward electronica or similar styles.

Their grandfather was a violinist, their mother a classical piano teacher, and their father, Kürşat And, played contrabass in the Izmir State Symphony Orchestra for over 20 years and jazz standards in clubs. Their father's vision was that he could embrace all of this. He brought his music into the home for rehearsals, and the family otherwise listened to music widely.

Eda says this gave her "an ear archive" which she would need later for her own work. Her father taught from each genre, so that she could separate out styles without prejudice. She believes that listening so much saved her from imitation. "You need a specific point of view first to see your music yourself. You need to be sure what is going on; then what are you actually saying through the music? Telling stories, commenting, reflection, and being together in mind is difficult."

Even if audiences have a comfort with mainstream, she believes they do not want to hear copies, but rather inspiring interpretations. She describes herself rooted in [Charles Mingus](#), arranger [Gil Evans](#), and pianist [Bill Evans](#), but incorporates Ravel, Chopin, Debussy, and "anonymous folk songs" of Turkey into her original music. She likes the classic roots of mainstream,

but strives to bring something new to it. In Germany, Eda And studied classical composition for four years, then a master program in jazz composition. She says studying classical piano taught her about interpretation; she applied that in learning how to do jazz improvisation.

She had few colleagues in Germany from Turkey, and renewed listening to Turkish music as she experienced a longing for her homeland. Incorporating Turkish folk influences required an "ear investment." Onder Focan thinks the forms of "Turkish classical music," a distinct style using longer melodic forms, modal "makam" scales, native instruments, and building on folk forms, provide an auditory inclination amenable to jazz within Turkish culture. As musicians studied across western models, they include different aspects into their music.

Eda And rearranges Chopin's "Fantasie Impromptu" to "Jazz Fantasie" with piano, bass, drums, and a string quartet, in a treatment reminiscent of the "Cinema Paradiso" movie soundscape of Ennio Morricone. Her "Hamburg Melody" starts as a lyric ballad duet between piano and flute, followed by saxophone, then involves the whole band in a movement to Latin funk with piano flourishes, then returns to the ballad melody and finishes as a quick samba. She says that in using Turkish melodies and irregular rhythms, jazz harmony, and classical modern music, at first independent of each other, she seeks to revitalize each when combined together. Visiting South America, she became interested in Latin folk music in the process of trying to play it; her ear archive grew.

Guitarist Yavuz and his vocalist wife Funda Akyazici convert the songbook of Turkish standards into western jazz styles, with three albums on this theme made under Yavuz' direction, building on his 17 years of studying and playing in New York before returning to Turkey. Clarinetist Ramazan Sesler comes from a Greek-Turkish borderland tradition of playing the kaba zurna, a woodwind made from plum or apricot trees. Over generations, his family played every kind of stage, concert halls, taverns, weddings, and other festivities. The compositions of pianist Asli Özer with the trio Cazzip Project parallel the mainstream/fusion blend akin to what Japanese pianist Hiromi Uehara is famously doing elsewhere.

## A Different Draw

Istanbul's Galata Old City district visually has a village aspect something like Montmartre in [Paris](#). In the neighboring Beyoğlu district, French architectural styles remain in the many buildings of late 1800s Ottoman Istanbul. Galata has an allure different from the mosques of Istanbul's tourist-heavy Sultanahmet district. A trifecta of clubs are in walking distance of each other, on streets overlooking the confluence

of Haliç, the "Golden Horn," and the Bosphorus, the streams of water outlining Istanbul. That part of the city is, geographically, Europe. Across those channels, the Kadıköy district is something like Brooklyn conjunct to [New York City](#), but, geographically, Asia. Kadıköy's bars and performance halls are incubators for woodshedding and workshopping.

[Nardis](#), named after the [Miles Davis](#) composition that became a [Bill Evans](#) standard, is a spacious brick-walled two-tiered cube with a bit of nightclub elegance. [Nardis](#) is just below the medieval Galata Tower built of stone in 1348 by colonists from Genoa, Italy, standing watch over the Golden Horn.

[Cemiyet](#), a brick-walled rectangle with an outdoor patio, showcases emergent talent to serious listeners and celebratory supporters. Cemiyet is at Nergis Sokak No.8, a steep staircase rising up from Mesrutiyet Caddesi, a smaller street running below the major pedestrian boulevard Istiklal, near the Sishane Metro and Tünel streetcar stations where Istiklal leads to Galata.

[Salon İKSV](#) is downhill from Cemiyet, in the headquarters building of its sponsor, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (in Turkish: *Istanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı*). İKSV Salon is a performance space with elevated stage, a floor that can be converted for seated concerts, lectures, or plays, or opened for dancing, surrounded on three sides by a balcony.

[The Badau](#) in Kadıköy across the Bosphorus features classic small groups on a small stage with a curtained backdrop in what is a small, cozy home for the Istanbul jazz family and visitors. The Istanbul Metro runs under the water; a more exotic, even romantic, way to get over there is by ferry. Kadıköy is an exploration in itself, a departure from the European side of Istanbul much as a venture to Brooklyn goes beyond the known universe of Manhattan.

At Cemiyet, vibraphonist Can Tutuğ, with a style reminiscent of the clean precision of [Bobby Hutcherson](#), transfixes his audience. He has studied jazz harmony and improvisation under American vibraphonist [Tony Miceli](#), an active player and teacher in Philadelphia whose own work develops from [Thelonious Monk](#) and the [Modern Jazz Quartet](#).

Tutuğ admits he got started imitating musicians, and still listens to a song "hundreds of times until it is completely internalized. Then, I aim to reflect the breathing of the person playing or composing the song in my own instrument, to make it, in essence, mine. So whatever I 'imitate,' I'm adding something from myself, without even realizing it."

Tutuğ looks back to a legacy of Turkish jazz. "Speaking about jazz in Turkey; a lot of great things have been done in the name of jazz here. There are some great old and new albums, like the masterful *Jazz Semai* released by Tuna Ötenel in 1978. These are albums that we would listen to countless times while driving and think we should interpret this in our way."

*Jazz Semai* featured songs composed by pianist and saxophonist Ötenel, accompanied by drummer Erol Pekcan and bassist Kudret Öztoprak. It is recognized as the first jazz album recorded in Turkey. It has a post-bop, mainstream purity, and it swings. Long out of print, the album was reissued in 2016 on vinyl to renewed acclaim.

Semai is a type of folkloric singing associated with Anatolia in Turkey; the title suggests the Turkish influences brought to the album. Tutuğ explains that *Jazz Semai* was a demarcation point. It brought forth Turkish elements in harmony, melody,

and rhythm, but was different from others who played the odd meter and sounds of country melodies and called it jazz. It is considered foundational to Turkish jazz due to Ötenel's exhibited mastery of jazz vocabulary, supported by Pekcan's crisp western style drumming.

Ötenel, revered by Can Tutuğ and Eda And, is recalled by one of his students, pianist and composer Yiğit Özatalay, to have scolded "Your playing isn't copying anyone else, that's really bad!" Özatalay at first could not understand what Ötenel meant. "But later on I understood that learning starts with imitation and that jazz isn't a genre that could be learned from books. He would always say 'Listen to the oldies' and would add '[Lennie Tristano](#), [Lee Konitz](#), [Wynton Kelly](#)... and of course Bill Evans."

## Out Of Hotel Lobbies

Onder Focan recalls a period as recent as the mid-1990s when Turkish jazz musicians were dismissed as players suitable only for hotel lobbies. Turks were said to have spent many years trying to play western jazz as good as the westerner, according to Özlem Köseoğlu, a writer for *Jazz Dergisi*, a Turkish jazz publication. Now, she said, Turkey is generating its own original work, but, apart from individual efforts, it is a country not yet in demand within the European tour route. Local support, she said, is very much needed.

Turkey always carries the sense of being "other," never easily categorized, confusing even. It is neither conventionally "European" nor wholly "Asian/Middle Eastern." At a seminar sponsored by İKSV on the process of international booking, a programmer for a major European club acknowledged the difficulty for a Turkish musician to break out, although individual acts do filter through.

Many Turkish musicians have trained in the West, and have toured extensively. A few have obtained international prominence: [Mehmet Ali Sanlikol](#), Grammy-nominated and on the faculty of Berklee College of Music in [Boston](#); fusion pianist Aydin Esen; Okay Temiz with [Don Cherry](#) and Oriental Wind; Gülşah Erol with Abstra has worked with European free jazz patriarch [Peter Brötzmann](#). But the programmer found no major vogue emerging from Turkey as, for example, music from Cuba or Africa, into which an individual musician or group might be swept. Audiences follow trends, he said, more than genres.

Even when the music is noteworthy, the programmer, speaking openly but not for attribution, must ask himself whether it stands out from what he already has in his own country or elsewhere. Ironically, even when a Turkish band earns exposure in Europe, that may disqualify it from yet other bookings and kill the development of a trend. The earlier bookings may render an act no longer sufficiently "new" for promoters always seeking something different from their peers and competitors.

He acknowledged that talent is growing exponentially, especially in Istanbul. Internet exposure makes publicity easier, but also more difficult because of the flood of voices. The jazz tradition is one of collaboration, he said, suggesting that musicians build themselves locally, working their email list hard to build an extended community and groundswell in their home country. "If you can't consistently fill a 200-seat

room in Istanbul, a city of 15 million people, how can you think that Europe is waiting to hear you?," he frankly asked.

## The Journey From Home

One organization in England, Turquazz, seized its own opportunity, creating a festival in [London](#) last March with Turkish musicians, at which Onder Focan performed. Across a year, Nardis stages all interpretations of jazz including classic, modern, fusion, mainstream and ethnic. Fridays and Saturdays feature bands with vocalists, midweek are instrumental ensembles, Mondays and Tuesdays are for trios, emerging artists, and non-mainstream projects. Nardis has also hosted such Americans as [Dee Dee Bridgewater](#), [Ron Carter](#), [Benny Golson](#), [Jeremy Pelt](#), [Eric Alexander](#), [Roberta Gambarini](#).

Cemiyet often features home-grown talent supported by enthusiastic followers. Salon İKSV is always active, often pushing outward with progressive, fusion, electronica, dance or trance beats, but on selective other dates the music is more subtle. This summer Tolgahan Cogulu brought his microtonal movable-frets guitar invention. The group Toz, the Turkish word for essence or archetype, reminded at times of [Eric Dolphy](#)'s "Out to Lunch," some [Ornette Coleman](#), moderated by an icy northern sound from pianist Ercument Orkut who had spent some time in Estonia. Cultural exchange happens: Laura Misch from London brings layers and loops of voice and saxophone October 3; that cosmic jazz has a tradition becomes clear when American [Ildris Ackamoor](#) and the Pyramids visit October 10; Mario Batkovic, a Swiss accordionist born in Bosnia, ranges from moody and meditative to majestic, October 11-12; Hania Rani, from Warsaw by way of Berlin and Reykjavik, Iceland, jazz/ "neo-classical" solo piano, December 6.

During the day The Badau in Kadıköy is a coffeehouse, with jazz standards on the sound system. Dinner, with Turkish fruit and herbal seasonings, is available at 6.30 p.m. with a limitation of 12 people; concerts begin at 9 p.m. with only 30 seats. Players accustomed to working with each other combine in varied iterations nightly, and turn up in the other venues across the city as well.

Can Tutuğ's YouTube videos offer familiar standards: "Bag's Groove," "Softly As In a Morning Sunrise," "Night in Tunisia," "Satin Doll," "Monk's Blues," "I Mean You," "You Don't Know What Love Is." But then, "Julu" by [Wayne Shorter](#), and a tribute to the late Japanese freeform guitarist Masayuki Takayanagi, yet the playing stays within the bounds of comprehension even as parts go "outside."

In an outdoor festival medley of "All Blues" by Miles Davis and "Cantaloupe Island" by [Herbie Hancock](#), frequent collaborator Eren Akgün took the horn line on trombone, a companion tone which Tutuğ favors. A tuba provided the bass line, solidly within the tradition, New Orleans Second Line, but innovative in present time. The tuba player, Çağlar Ali Gürsoy, from the Turkish army band, joined at the last minute to replace the missing bassist. The audience, of just plain folks from across generations and backgrounds, grooved.

Tutuğ's Instagram links lead to a community of acoustic jazz players, many working The Badau and also turning up over in Nardis, like drummer Burak Cihangirli, who backed Eda And. One of Tutuğ's posts shows the [McCoy Tyner](#) Blue Note album *The Real McCoy* lying across the plates of his vibraphone, indicative of the legacy he follows. The threads come together when Tutuğ, Cihangirli, and Onder Focan play

Nardis on November 9.

Tutuğ backed into jazz performance. He first became engaged with jazz listening to [\[\[m: Cannonball Adderley\]\]](#) and [John Coltrane](#) on the 1959 album *The Cannonball Adderley Quintet in Chicago*. What he heard in the trading roles between Cannonball and Coltrane, "that incredible and endless state of music," engaged him. Then he encountered [Milt Jackson's](#) "bluesy walk," the energy of Ornette Coleman, "Eric Dolphy's flame, [Albert Ayler's](#) passion."

"I was very impressed as I listened. I got curious about how music was shaped like this and I started to question: What do these musicians do, how do they achieve that, what is this miracle?" Tutuğ started with saxophone but recalls he did not put in the practice time necessary as a young player, and then set the instrument aside as he committed to medical studies. He became curious about vibraphone, and as his academic schedule relaxed, he bought one and became committed to it.

## Just Once, Then More

As Tutuğ got deeper into the vibes, he formed a quartet, with a simple goal: just once to perform in a public concert in a smaller city, Edirne, to check off a bucket list item that "we will be satisfied all our lives because we have done this. We thought we would tell our children about it.

"Then, the demand for these concerts in Edirne increased and we said we should continue doing this for a little longer. Following some positive progress in our career as a band in 2015, we heard about a competition called Young Jazz competition of the 22nd International Istanbul Jazz Festival. We thought we should enter as well. We thought we would try our luck, and if it doesn't work out, we will be eliminated and go back home. Then we won."

Over time, he has shaped his life according to jazz. He followed Milt Jackson transcriptions, has transcribed most recorded solos of Bobby Hutcherson, played more than 100 concerts of Monk. He too has chosen to refrain from electronics, preferring that acoustic instruments are tactile. He hears wind instruments' accompaniments as shades of "red," "hot," and "seductive," soulful.

Can Tutuğ contents himself that jazz is a journey, not necessarily one that will lead to stardom, and one that requires work. "It is an endless path. It is a path on which you think you approach the horizon, only to realize it is farther ahead—a path that will never end and make you realize you are such a small speck on it. At least that is my description of it. This is what jazz is in its entirety for me. Not the limelight, not African-American musicians, or shiny instruments. It is an endless path for me."

Istanbul is a station on the journey.