

## Istanbul Jazz Festival 2018



VIEW SLIDESHOW



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Istanbul Jazz Festival  
Vitrin: Showcase for Contemporary Music from Turkey  
Various Venues  
Istanbul, Turkey  
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A leisurely stroll through the crowded streets of Istanbul offers many delights, Turkish or otherwise. The maze guides you through nested teahouses, majestic ottoman palaces, monumental sahnns adjoining mosques with exquisite interiors; down narrow covered market streets with their incongruous juxtaposition of goods and gadgets, steep cobblestoned alleys, and traffic-clogged avenues, all the way down to the busy waterfront. While Istanbul's reputation as a sprawling bee-hive of a metropolis is certainly accurate, it is also remarkably suited to producing that unique mood captured by the emblematic Turkish word *keyif*, the state of pleasure and serenity that comes from taking things at one's own pace. The sights of Istanbul offer many rewards to anyone who takes the time to idly absorb them. The city's sounds will enchant the active listener, and with the 25th edition of the Istanbul Jazz Festival now well under way, these sounds are in full swing.

## A Quarter Century Of Jazz

The [Istanbul Jazz Festival](#) turns 25 this year, and the anniversary is being celebrated in style. The festivities last for a little over three weeks, with a world-class programme of artists from the worlds of jazz, rock and folk music (headliners this year include [Melody Gardot](#), [Robert Glasper](#)'s new supergroup R+R=NOW, [Robert Plant](#) and [Badbadnotgood](#)). Part of the festival's mission has always been to provide a platform and an international collaborative environment for established and emerging musicians from Turkey. For the second year running, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV) has organised "Vitrin: Showcase for Contemporary Music from Turkey," to which All About Jazz was invited as part of an international delegation of industry professionals. As was the case last year, it was a tremendous success and showcased a wonderfully selected display of local talent.

There are many ways in which one can explore a place as dense and multi-layered as [Istanbul](#), and with its wide range of programmed events in multiple venues scattered across the city, Vitrin provided an ideal itinerary for a journey of (re)discovery. The opening night took place in IKSV's Salon, located in the heart of the historic neighbourhood of Galata. To kick off the evening, Vienna-based producer Levni concocted intricate beats and expansive electronic textures for singer and long-distance creative partner Lara Di Lara to sketch and superimpose her soulful vocals on. In a promising sign of the diverse program awaiting us, the duo's trip-hop flavours, all part of their latest project *Alike Places*, transitioned into snappy modern fusion once [Çağrı Sertel](#) made it to the stage.

Muscular piano-bass ostinatos, sparkling drum accompaniment from the spell-binding [Volkan Oktem](#), and explosive solos all around (at points Sertel's hands could be seen bouncing off his synth in lightning speed frenzies) made for some thoroughly entertaining, high-intensity jazz-rock jams, while Sertel's more mellow, impressionistic compositions provided ample space for the hauntingly expressive tone of [Sarp Maden](#)'s guitar. Maden is today one of the mainstays of the Turkish jazz scene and another of his disciples, [Ercument Gul](#), played on the same stage a couple of days later. Having learned from other great masters such as [Erkan Oğur](#) and absorbed a variety of styles into his guitar playing (from rock and R&B to modern jazz), Gül today has two successful solo albums to his name, and performed a selection of his own compositions with his quartet, offering up some subtly crafted, funk-infused jazz fusion.

## Istanbul's Voices

The aural landscape of Istanbul is quite unique. The unavoidable cacophony of the sprawling traffic, the signature ding of the city's tramways, the latest Turkish pop songs blaring out of stores and coffee shops, and the permeating sounds of voices. The simit sellers, the fish and bread vendors, the market chatter, and of course, the powerful muezzin calls. Istanbul is a vocal city, and voices were on display throughout [Selen Gulun](#)'s "Women's matinee" concert. The pianist and vocalist led her quintet down a variety of stylistic alleyways, from post-bop, to bossa and calypso grooves, to pop ballads, sprinkled with passages of atonal improvisation.

Gülün's own compositions were mixed in with her arrangements of recent compositions by Turkish women musicians, many featuring guest female vocalists (the music from the project, born in 2011, was recorded on her 2017 album *Kadınlar Matines*). [Çağıl Kaya's](#) brilliantly executed free-form improvisation had the audience hooked on every move of her vocal acrobatics, and was a notable highlight in a performance that, as intended, stood as a testament to women's solidarity, particularly in an industry where they still struggle to be heard.

As many voices continue to be stifled by censorship, Vitrin perfectly encapsulated the vibrancy of a musical scene that refuses to be impeded by politics, and no voice was more defiant than that of rapper Burak Yılmaz. He performed with his latest hip-hop trio project, Ağackakan, sharing the stage with Kaan Akay on drums and Edmil Adil on bass and electronics, who created dark and brooding metal-tinged instrumentals for Yılmaz to lay his rap on. The fact that only a handful of meters away, master improvisors [Zakir Hussain](#), [Dave Holland](#) and [Chris Potter](#) were performing in the Zorlu Center's main concert hall, is another perfect illustration of the originality and diversity of this festival's program.

Yılmaz made a featured appearance later that evening with [Ediz Hafızoğlu](#). Presenting music from his sophomore album, *Nazdrave '13*, the drummer had the audience fired up from the get-go. His versatility was readily apparent as he navigated through soul jazz and blues-rock riffs, mixed swing with drum and bass beats, and imbued his Balkan-influenced melodies with an almost punk-jazz kind of energy. It came as no surprise that this unbridled artist should also choose to venture into the world of hip-hop, and Yılmaz's return to the stage made for a spectacular ending to the evening.

## Sounds Of Anatolia

Find yourself an elevated vantage point on Istanbul's European side, whether it's the terrace of a perched coffeehouse, a 14th century Genoese tower or the rooftop pool of your hotel, and you will have Asia in your sights. Catch a ferry from Eminönü, drive across the Martyr's bridge or through the Avrasya tunnel, and you've reached Anatolia, Asia's westernmost protrusion. From here the intrepid traveller can retrace the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road all the way to China, crossing Persia and India in one uninterrupted journey. Along the way they will encounter a wealth of musical traditions, including the rich sounds of Anatolian folk music. Beyond the influence it has had throughout the eastern Mediterranean region, it is today very much part of a living tradition, with many contemporary artists incorporating and reshaping it in their music.

From a young age, Çoşkun Karademir became fascinated with the sound of the bağlama (otherwise known as the saz), the three-stringed lute that's emblematic of Turkish folk music. Today, through his many projects and collaborations, he is breathing life into the traditions of folk and spiritual Sufi music that he embraced ever since starting to play. Murat Süngü's cello moved between lilting plucked-string riffs and rich bow-driven melodic lines, forming exquisite contrapuntal movements with the bağlama and Emre Sınanmış's duduk (a traditional double-reed woodwind instrument found in parts of the Middle-East and Caucasus regions). To this Ömer Arslan added colour and rhythmic depth with his unconventional combination of drum kit and percussion instruments, resulting in a delicate, elegiac and utterly captivating music.

The sounds of Anatolia have made their way into the contemporary musical landscape in more way than one, so one shouldn't only stop at jazz's doorstep to get a feel for the way Turkish folk has fused with Western musical idioms. Moğollar was one of the pioneering bands of the Turkish rock scene (often described as Anatolian rock). Founded in 1967, it led (alongside many other artists such as Erkin Koray, Cem Karaca and Selda Bağcan) a movement inspired by the psychedelic and progressive rock genres but that embraced the use of traditional Turkish instruments and modes. True to that spirit, Taner Öngür, the band's bassist between 1970 and 1974 and again since 1993, performed some of his reinterpretations of old forgotten Istanbul songs found in his own personal gramophone collection. The music, which was recorded with his backing band 43,75, can be found on his latest release *Elektrik Gramofon*.

## Below The Ground...

Anybody who wishes to truly understand a city knows that appearances can be misleading, that what is seen in broad daylight might paint only part of the picture, and that what lies below ground is as true to the city's identity as what lies above. Our descent into Istanbul's underground began quite literally, as the Vitrin delegation was invited to a concert in one of the city's many ancient cisterns, Şerefiye Sarnıcı. The cathedral-like architecture and incredible acoustics (as well as the slight giddiness that comes from feeling like you're on a James Bond film set) contributed to the otherworldly atmosphere surrounding Sinan Cem Eroğlu and Muhlis Berberoğlu performance. The string duet (electric guitar and saz respectively) engaged in subtle modal explorations and melodic interplay, seamlessly alternating roles as accompanist and lead improviser. Their live album *Hemdem* has been receiving much well-deserved praise and is a fine example of a modern approach to traditional music.

Of course, for its inhabitants, the city's underground life evokes more than just its hidden water reservoirs. It encapsulates many of the richer and more subversive sides of its cultural landscape, in particular the city's famous club scene which continues to endure, despite rising existential threats. The busy, bohemian and increasingly fashionable streets of Kadıköy are at the heart of the Asian side's nightlife. On the evening of Vitrin's second day, the dancefloor of Moda Sahnesi was electrified by the young trio Islandman, whose remarkable debut album *Rest in Space* was released in 2017. Funk, ambient, psychedelia and Turkish folkloric sounds (in keeping with the Anatolian tradition) were all thrown into the cauldron, over a background of entrancing downtempo beats.

Beats were at the forefront of the following act too. Cevdet Ereğ's bare-bones performance was nothing if not thought-provoking. Armed only with a davul drum and a metal rod, Ereğ created simple rhythmic patterns, repetitive yet absorbing, and by moving around on stage (with microphones strategically placed in different locations) drew attention to the sound's complex and shifting timbral qualities. Once again, the rewards were there for those willing to take the time to listen.

## ... And Beyond The Shores.

What would Istanbul be without the Bosphorus, it's beating heart. The sounds of the sea mix with those of the shore, the rumbles and honks of the boats punctuating the riant sheets of sound emitted by the ever-present gulls. As waterside locations go, it doesn't get much more idyllic than the gardens of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum. [Erkan Oğur](#) busied his hands on his double-neck fretless guitar, accompanied by his new quartet, when a distant tugboat sounded its blowhorn. Fortunately for the sensitive ears of the attentive audience, it had the curtesy to pick the key note.

Alongside Can Çankaya, [Matt Hall](#), and Turgut Alp Bekoğlu, the Turkish multi-instrumentalist sketched microtonal melodies and undulating arpeggiated runs over melancholy modal textures, leaving plenty of room for his partners to take the lead. The subtle interplay made for a memorable performance in which Oğur's Anatolian musical heritage blended cohesively into an essentially post-bop aesthetic. Similar affinities were heard shortly before, during the opening concert by the rising star of Azerbaijani jazz, [Shahin Novralı](#), whose absorption of mugham and other traditional Azerbaijani forms intersects marvellously with his classically-trained virtuosic technique and masterful commandeering of jazz trio improvisation.

These two concerts marked the end of the Vitrin showcase. The setting could not have been more suited. An evening tailored for keyif, with enchanted audience members (seated on the museum terrace or lounging on the grassy incline overlooking the stage) admiring the views of the Bosphorus, absorbed by the intimate music while dusk slowly settles. On stage, two musicians of the Silk Road, performing in Istanbul, gateway to the European continent; the city a perfect metaphor for the rich, diverse and intersectional music scene we were given the opportunity to discover over the course of four days.