

Looking Back is Looking Forward  
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## Happy Birthday, Silk Road Rising!



Twenty years ago this week, Silk Road Theatre Project, now Silk Road Rising, made its public debut with the World Premiere production of Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* (January 16 - March 2, 2003), directed by Michael Malek Najjar, and featuring Roxane Assaf and Nicole Pitman. Produced at the Chicago Cultural Center's Studio Theatre, *Precious Stones* quickly became an audience favorite, selling out nearly every performance and winning the 2003 After Dark Award for Outstanding New Work.

The production launched a national college tour and was performed at sixteen institutions across the country. Khoury's play was later published in the anthology *Four Arab American Plays* (McFarland 2014), edited by Michael Malek Najjar.

We didn't realize back in 2003 how far we would travel, the impact we would have, and the amazing artists, activists, audiences, and

scholars that would become our Silk Road Rising community.

Join us this coming year as we commemorate twenty years of groundbreaking art and arts service, roll out a slew of exciting new projects, and together stroll down memory lane to revisit milestones and proud achievements.

On that note, we invite you to share your fondest Silk Road Rising memories and email them to us at [info@silkroadrising.org](mailto:info@silkroadrising.org).

**Happy 20th Birthday, Silk Road Rising!**



Check out the trailer from Silk Road Rising's inaugural production of Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* (2003). Such a gem!

**The Polyculturalist**  
Journeys in Cultural Interchange



Polycultural  
Institute

Our latest offering of Polycultural Institute's soon-to-be-launched online publication, *The Polyculturalist*, features multi-instrumentalist musician, theatrical performer, producer, educator, and one of Silk Road Rising's cherished long-time collaborators, Ronnie Malley.

Stay tuned for expanded interview transcripts when *The Polyculturalist* officially debuts on Substack.

## In Conversation with Ronnie Malley

*This interview was conducted on November 7, 2022, by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.*

**Tasneem:** You are an accomplished musician and composer. What has your experience in the world of music composition and sound design taught you about cultural boundaries? Specifically, can you speak to the difference between cultural appreciation versus cultural appropriation?



**Ronnie:** I have been balancing two identities most of my life. I was very American—I played in a rock band, and we absorbed what you can call Western culture—but at home, we were very much Palestinian American—we spoke Arabic, ate Middle Eastern food, and listened to Middle Eastern music.

My father is also a musician, so we had tremendous exposure to our own culture through music. The subgenres of our own cultures took time to understand or absorb; the variety of diversity in Middle Eastern

music. That lens allowed me to practice asking, “How do I view other cultures as well?”

Appreciating is doing research, learning who the people are, and understanding the language. For me, as a sound designer and musician, it’s: What are the instrumentations? What is the musical style? Is this spiritual, secular, or popular?

Appropriation, however, would be just seeing something as an exotic item to be picked and mashed together. Nothing against fusion—you can fuse different cultures together because of their similarities, but it doesn’t mean they’re identical. Appreciation is to recognize the richness in that diversity.



**Tasneem:** In your experience, how does polyculturalism inform your musical aesthetic?

**Ronnie:** I play with a lot of groups that are considered “fusion” groups. My favorite phrase I’ve heard was that we try to “create a fusion, not a con-fusion;” that aspect informs my aesthetic. Learn as much as you can about the other culture: What’s that language? How do they

speak? Part of that for me is really practical because when I hear how a culture speaks, I can start to hear that come through the musical rhythms. The output of rhythm is really a reflection of the accentuation linguistically of how people are speaking. Another aspect, obviously, is instrumentation. And, ultimately, it's just respect, really. When people recognize that you see them, then they're very willing to share their world with you.



Silk Road Rising produced the World Premiere of Ronnie Malley's *Ziryab: The Songbird of Andalusia* in 2016.

**Tasneem: What aspects of polyculturalism speak to your identity as a Palestinian American?**

**Ronnie:** That's evolved. When I was younger, I didn't see the word "Palestine" in many places, growing up in America. Being Palestinian was being at home and then maybe visiting relatives. I remember being at protests and having this strong sense of identity, but then I thought, I don't want to distill my identity to simply a political identity. Even saying "Palestinian" was like making a political statement because some people would refuse to acknowledge it. By playing the music and enjoying the food, I would see other aspects of the culture that really helped me add to my identity. And I started to dig deeper

into the history of Palestine and started to realize this is historically a cosmopolitan area. It is a place of many faiths, and being Palestinian, especially prior to the 20th century, did not have a political leaning to it; rather, it had a regional one. Being Palestinian and being American are, in a way, similar. We are in such a melting pot of various cultures and societies.



To complement *Ziryab: The Songbird of Andalusia*, Silk Road Rising produced a video of Ronnie explaining the history of the oud. It remains one of Silk Road Rising's most popular videos on Youtube with over 27,000 views!

**Tasneem: Please tell us a story of a time when someone surprised you because they supported you or demonstrated compassion towards you even though you expected otherwise.**

**Ronnie:** I had an experience with an art programming series called *Caravanserai*. The premise behind *Caravanserai* was to bring in artists for a week from the Muslim/Muslim-adjacent world to show the diversity of the Muslim experience. One year, a friend and I were asked to participate as American Muslims; this happened against the backdrop of the 2016 elections.

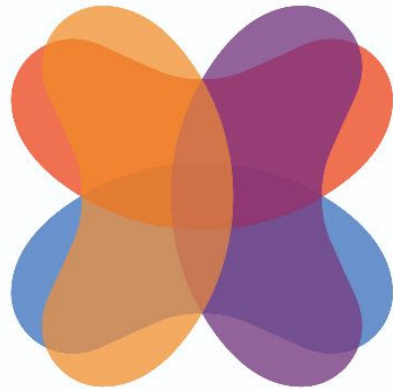
Misconceived notions came out at most of the places we went to; you could feel the tension. At one of the first events we did in Fergus Falls, MN, we heard: "Ah, so this is what terrorist music sounds like, huh."

Our host, the person who brought us there and who was responsible for the grant, said, “I didn’t want to tell you this, but many people have petitioned to keep you out of the school tomorrow.” The host was a sweet person but didn’t strike me as somebody who was about to fight for our rights—but boy, did he do so. He came back and shoved paperwork right in their face and said, “This is what’s going to happen. This is why we got funding for this.” And so we went into the school and ended up really surprising the students. It could not have been easy for this person to support us in this way and to go to battle for us with his own community, at great risk to himself; that was surprising.



This September, Ronnie (far right) collaborated with world-renowned Syrian-American MC/Poet Omar Offendum (center) and Brooklyn-born beatmaker Thanks Joey (far left) to premiere Offendum's *Little Syria*. This performance was a creative retelling of a little-known part of NYC history, exploring the stories of immigration,

xenophobia, and the ever-evolving notion of an American dream in the Lower West Side neighborhood of Manhattan once known as Little Syria.



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