



Belly Dance

New England

## Feeling Hot, Hot, H.O.T.

by *Amina Delal*\*

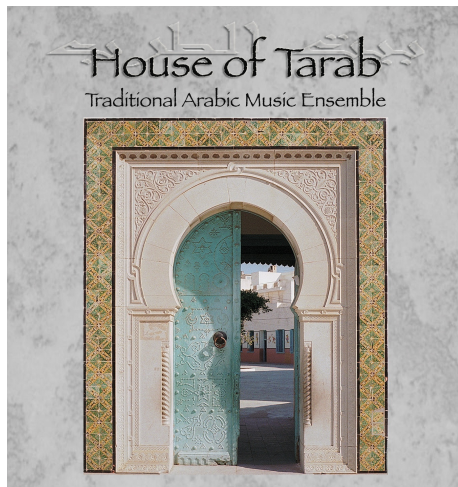
I arrived at The House of Tarab in my favorite fashion, circuitously, as recordings are passed among enthusiasts along what I call "the jungle drums of the Belly Dance Nation". Well sure I got them second- or, in this case, third-hand, but that's okay because you also receive that good dancer mojo woven into the slightly worn grooves. In this instance I have to thank not only the ever-thoughtful Alizah Afet (my CD Genie), but also lovely Nadira Jamal, who has a very good ear. What she found benefits us all, since I'm not so sure I'd have discovered this music left to my own devices.

Don't know exactly how I missed them when they came out in 2008. Well, actually I do. Undoubtedly I was nosing around the imports, as usual, while these recordings were made domestically (Seattle in fact). I guess it serves me right. So under the heading of "better late than never", let us turn a tad retro to these two quite splendid recordings from The House of Tarab.

Tarab? Yes, "tarab" is our word for today, as defined beautifully inside the cover of the first, self-titled volume, *House of Tarab*, where they explain:

"Tarab is a state of ecstasy and the surrender one enters while listening with body and soul to music. Whether it's the dancing strings of the oud, the weeping melody of the violin, the mystical call of the nay, or the pulsating rhythm of the drums..."

Baby oh baby, I am so there and you, too, will find yourself under the music's transcendental spell. Both of the H.O.T. recordings - the *House of Tarab* and their second volume, *Beledi* - feature enticing versions of belly dance classics exhibiting the band's uncanny interpretive skills to transport you. And they really do. But this is what they are all about, the thoughtful rendering of vintage nightclub repertoire for they only aspire to inspire us to dance. In other words, they're not groupies, they just like belly dancers. And that certainly works for me. When I played these CDs, they both had me up raqing away, feeling very much at home.



So what's going on at their house? A great deal in fact. The House of Tarab is a five-piece acoustic Arabic ensemble cranking out just the sort of music we classicists adore. Their focus is on authentic versions of what I irreverently refer to as "the hits" with some dynamic modern touches that make the sound sparkle.

The band is an international mix of musicians from this country and overseas. Their musical director, Sallah Ali, conveys the benefits of his classical training from the Iraqi National Orchestra to the band's arrangements. You can hear his educated ear at work in his East-meets-West embellishments. Although I think the band's members are all Middle-Eastern in their musical souls. (And why not? If we can do it, so can they.) The beautiful balance of oud, violin, nay, and drums with several types of tambourine sounds rich and full, giving you a nice range of tones to stir your steps. Everything they present is appropriately dancer-attuned and not at all like, as is more commonly the case, when the band plays the show how *they* think it should go (because they don't have to dance to it!). H.O.T's renditions are so dance-friendly it is obvious they were listening to the sound guidance of West Coast dance doyenne Delilah, who is one of their big supporters. (Her photo is featured on both albums.) You'll find a variety of musical moods to inspire your steps. All of it resonates with the intimacy, immediacy, and breath of life that simply cannot be approximated in an electronic box.

Classical yet not at all stuffy, the tempos vary but never drag as do the dynamics, creating many interesting choices within the scope of this music. Each member of the ensemble plays with passion and gusto. And the sound is so immediate and clear you can hear all the intricacies of their playing. Purists might be struck by some rather western, sometimes almost jazzy, harmonics but they are all tastefully and artistically applied to enhance the show. Many of the songs are sung but the voices are part of the music and enlarge the body of the sound. I'm sure there are native speakers who would pooh-pooh their pronunciation, but since few of us have advantage of speaking the language, we are spared that.

I must tell you this you will have some work to do, as this music is not all easy. There are a few challenging selections with time signatures like 8/4 and 10/8 that are a bit unusual for dance (fear not, they list them for you with the titles). But this is a matter of some applied listening and (dare I say it?) a little counting. And if you find them baffling, ask your teacher for help.

Then if neither of you can fathom it, contact me and I'll give you some pointers on working with them.

You can make yourself up some nice mix and match routines from the play list featuring some must-know songs as well as others we don't hear around these parts so often. *The House of Tarab* album features a full dance program within the first seven cuts. They are all from the traditional repertoire including (their spellings): Zeinah, Lama Bada, an excellent Azizza (with the classical ending), a nice oud taksim, drum solo, Hibbina and Tutah for the finale. It's a 5-part show (in more than 5 parts) that can cross over to most any Arabic situation. If you're not excited about L.B.'s 10/8 time, you can substitute the Gamil Gamal (in 4/4) from later on in the album, although I'll warn you, it's perkier than you're accustomed to.

Everything on both these recordings is completely dance-worthy and you'll be pleased with the mileage you'll get for practice, performance, or class. I like them both very much and will be returning to them for my own dancing and when I need to achieve some nice tarab at my place. You too may easily find your dance zen when you bring their house into yours. The hospitality is warm, completely in our groove and you may visit any time. Come on in, the door is open and welcome home.

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