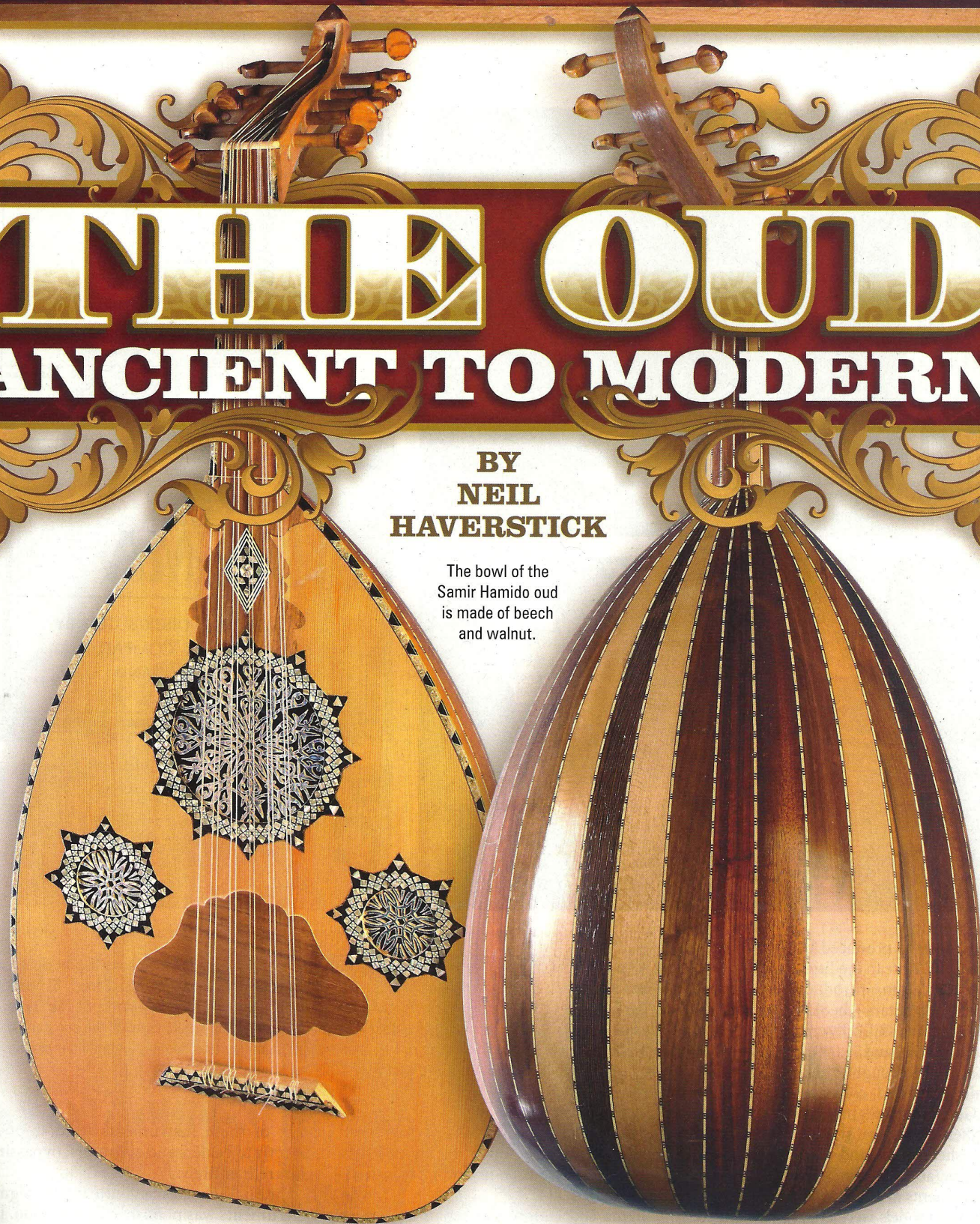


THE OUD

ANCIENT TO MODERN

BY
NEIL
HAVERSTICK

The bowl of the
Samir Hamido oud
is made of beech
and walnut.



If Beatles guitarist George Harrison had used an oud instead of a sitar to give “Norwegian Wood” its distinct sound, the name Munir Bashir may be more recognized today than that of Ravi Shankar.

That didn’t happen, of course, and Harrison’s spiritual pursuits led to the sitar becoming part of rock culture in the ’60s, as bands beyond the Beatles explored Eastern sounds – from the Yardbirds, The Doors, and Pink Floyd,

to The Paul Butterfield Blues Band and Jefferson Airplane, etc.

The oud, meanwhile, is known only to the most adventurous musicians. Perhaps the first American album to feature an oud was the 1958 effort *Jazz Sahara*, by Ahmed Abdul-Malik, who played bass and oud for Thelonius Monk. In '65, folk artist Sandy Bull played one on his *Inventions* LP. In '67, *Hard Rock From the Middle East*, by The Devil's Anvil (produced by Felix Pappalardi), featured the oud of Kareem Issaq. That same year, Nubian oud player Hamza el Din played with the Grateful Dead in Egypt, and Kaleidoscope's *A Beacon From Mars* included the oud playing of Solomon Feldthouse. Though the oud did not catch on in the pop world of the '60s, it's an instrument with a deep, mysterious sound and colorful history.

For centuries, the Middle East, Turkey, Central Asia, and Persia (Iran) have been the birthplace of many plucked stringed instruments with the general title of "lute"; the tar, tanbur, dutar, dombra, sehtar, saz, bouzouki, rubab, sarod, sitar, komuz, and more – some with frets, some without. The oud is classified generally as a bowl-

Modern Arabic-style ouds like this one typically have backs made of thin strips of hardwood like maple, mahogany, walnut, and cherry, while their sound boards are softer woods like pine or spruce.

shaped, short-necked lute, distinguishing it from those with longer necks and flatter bodies (which were closer to the ancestors of the guitar). Today, it is fretless, but in the past it had moveable pieces of gut tied around the neck, serving as frets. With this design, musicians could adjust frets to accommodate various tunings. Today, ouds typically have five courses, with a low string for drones, but there are also seven- and eight-string ouds.

In contrast to other lutes, the oud has survived from these ancient origins, traveled to other parts of the world, and had a great influence on instruments such as the Chinese pipa, Japanese biwa, and European lute. Today, there is a resurgence in music featuring the oud, as it is being heard on numerous modern recordings, being nominated for Grammy awards, and placing in critics' polls.

How did the oud travel to these far-off locations? How has its influence stretched across centuries?

The oud went East on the legendary Silk Road, an ancient trade route that stretched from the Middle East to China, and included India, Europe, Mongolia, and Japan. It also traveled sea lanes. It found its way to Europe by way of returning Crusaders, and the troubadours who doubtless used it to accompany their songs. For thousands of years, merchants traveled between cultures, trading goods. And, of course, musical instruments went along. Though indigenous Chinese lute-like

instruments probably existed up to 2,000 years ago, Chinese pipa virtuoso Gao Hong said, "The oud is the root of the pipa."

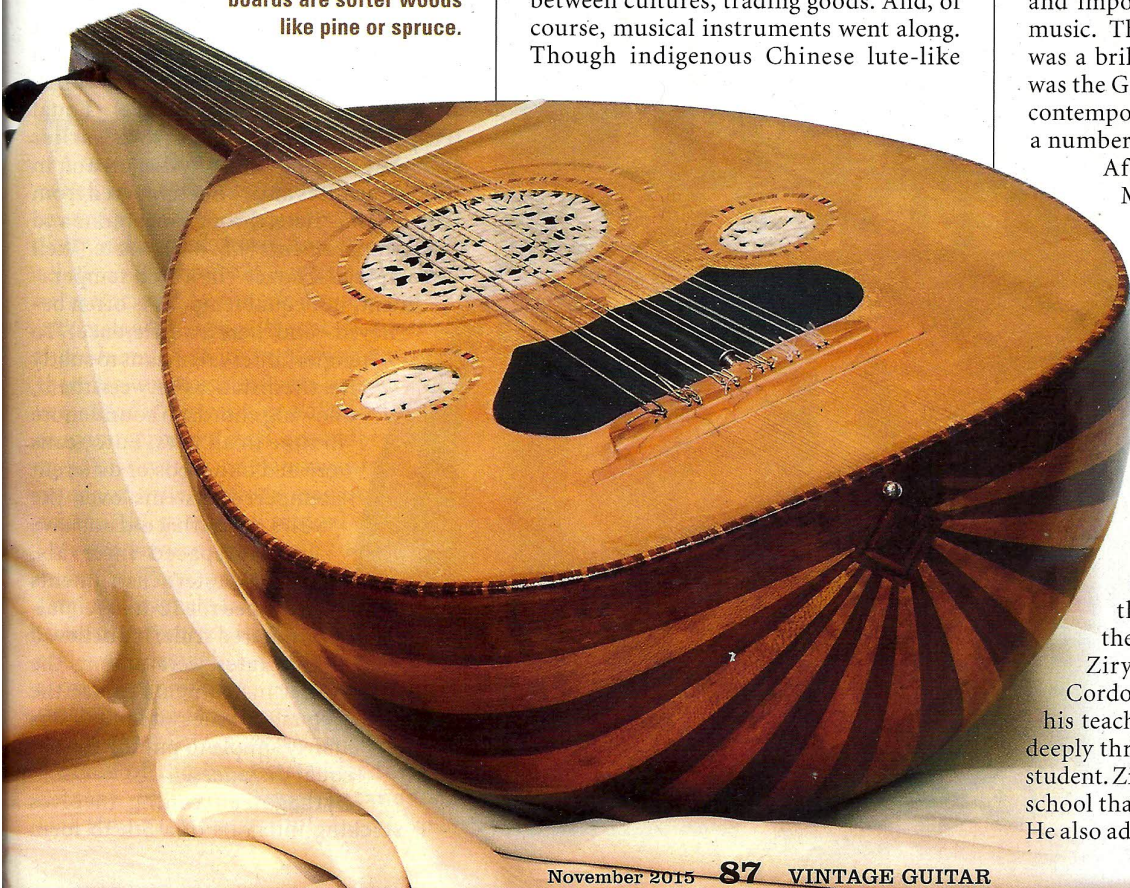
"The second kind of lute to arrive in China, the four-stringed/pear-shaped lute, is most directly related to the modern pipa in terms of its shape and the number of strings," John E. Myers wrote in his book, *The Way of the Pipa*. "The earliest illustrations of the pear-shaped pipa are found in sculpture from Gandhara, a kingdom that existed at approximately the same time as the Han dynasty." Gandhara was in the area of present-day Afghanistan. From China, the pipa found its way to Japan, where it became the biwa; in Vietnam it was called the tyba, and in Korea, the bipa.

AL-ANDALUS AND EUROPE

In the Western world, the oud was the direct ancestor of the European lute; except for a wider fingerboard, the lute looks exactly like the oud. "Western Europe owes both the instrument and its name to the Arabic al-ud, as we see in the Portuguese alaud, the Spanish laud, the German Laute, the Dutch Luit, the Danish Lut, the Italian liuto, the English lute, and the French luth," wrote Henry George Farmer, the renowned British musicologist known for citing the influence of Arabic music on the musical traditions of Europe. At one time, the lute was an extremely popular and important instrument in European music. The Englishman John Dowland was a brilliant composer for the lute, as was the German Sylvius Leopold Weiss, a contemporary of Bach. Bach himself wrote a number of masterpieces for the lute.

After the death of the Prophet Mohammed, Islam spread far and wide, from Central Asia to Spain, and the oud went along. Baghdad became the capital in the East, and in Spain, which the Arabs called Al-Andalus, Cordoba became a great center of culture and education in the mid eighth century.

Farmer noted that many European musicians studied music at the University of Cordoba. Doubtless, some of them carried ouds back to their home countries. One of the most legendary oud players, Ziryab, moved from Baghdad to Cordoba in 822, after a dispute with his teacher, Ishaq Al-Mawsili, who was deeply threatened by the brilliance of his student. Ziryab (Blackbird) started a music school that taught both men and women. He also added a fifth string to the oud and





These ouds were made by Alan Suits in 2013. One has ribs of cherry and walnut, the other is figured cherry.

began using an eagle's quill for a pick. For years, the musical forms he created were influential in Spain and North Africa. An extremely popular figure in his day, he was also an innovator in the areas of fashion and fine dining.

The Arabs translated the works of many Greek writers, such as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and others, years before Europeans translated them into Latin. When it came to early theories of scales, intervals, and tuning, the Greek philosopher/mathematician Pythagoras of Samos was a towering figure, as his ideas influenced the Arabs, Europeans, Indians, and others, down to this day. Basically, Pythagoras took the first four notes of the Harmonic Series (C-C-G-C), and from the intervals formed by the ratios of 2:1, 3:2, and 4:3 (the octave, perfect fifth, and perfect fourth), created a system of scales that shaped the way Arab and European musicians tuned their instruments. Which brings us to...

MICROTONES AND THE OUD

One of the most significant differences between Eastern and Western music is the interval structures of their scales. The Western system uses what is called 12-tone equal temperament, which means that each note has the exact same mathematical distance between them (in other words, 12 half-steps within an octave). Equal temperament developed from earlier systems, starting with Pythagorean, in which the intervals are not tempered from their original state, through meantone and well temperaments (J.S. Bach wrote "Well Tempered Clavier," in a well temperament, not equal temp, as is often believed – and there *is* a difference). To "temper" intervals means to subtly alter the distances between them, allowing chords to sound more in tune in all keys. Europeans created hundreds of different tempered systems over the years, many that did not have equally spaced intervals. Today, Western instruments are tuned the 12-tone/equal-tempered scale. It's believed that lutes were among the first instruments to use the equal 12-tone system, as it was fairly simple to put the frets at equal distances.

Pythagorean tuning involves stacking intervals of a 5th to form

the scales. Starting from C, going up, it would be C-G-D-A-E-B-F[♯], continuing as far as one wanted to go. The Arabs also went down in 5ths, C-F-B[♭]-E[♭]-A[♭], D[♭], G[♭], and lower. In Western music, this is known as the “circle of fifths,” but in its natural state, it’s actually a “spiral” of fifths; when instruments base their scales on the naturally occurring ratios of the overtone series, they are *not* going to be equally spaced – there will be intervals smaller than the usual 12-tone Western system, and this is where terms such as “microtone” and “quartertone” originated.

Since Arabic and Indian music did not traditionally use chords, these microtonal intervals were used in their scales to achieve more-subtle melodic inflections than are found in Western music. Arabic theorists such as Ishaq al Kindi (d. 874), and Abu Nasr al Farabi (d. 950) were using the fretted oud to create many different scales, some with up to 22 notes to the octave. A 17-tone/unequally-spaced scale is often thought to be the basic Arabian tonal system used on the oud. Yet, tunings can be even more complex. In *The Music of The Arabs*, author Habib Hassan Touma says, “The Syrians, in particular, subdivided the octave into 53 equivalent steps.” It’s vital to remember this as one studies and listens to music played on the oud... the intervals are generally not the same as the Western tempered scale.

So, what’s the equivalent foundation of much Arabic, Turkish, and Central Asian music?

THE MAQAM CONCEPT

A maqam is similar to a raga in Indian music, in that the performances are based on scales/modes with names like rast, ajam, nahawand, kurd, and more. These relate to different Western scales such as major and harmonic minor, but the intervals are not equally spaced. However, there is much more to playing a maqam than just improvising over a scale. There are melodic phrases identified with each maqam, primary and secondary notes, specific ways to modulate away from (and return to) the primary maqam. And, of course, the many microtonal inflections between maqams add depth and color. For example, Persian composer Safi Al-Din cataloged 84 melodic modes, 800 years ago. In Iran, they refer to their modal system of scales as “dastgahs.” In Central Asia, the term “Shashmaqam” is used to describe the modal system, and it can have deep spiritual meanings, as well.

Some of the oud masters of the 20th century, including Yorgo Bacanos and Udi Hrant (also a soulful singer), spent



Alan Suits checks the shape of the center rib on an oud he is building. “I use a simple mold – just the outline of the table and the widest section of the back, with panels for the neck and tail blocks at the ends. Building the back is the most difficult part; I use 17 ribs for a nice shape, and that way there are not so many rib/glue joints and a somewhat stronger construction. Different woods yield a striking contrast, or all the same wood gives a subtle effect. In Syria, a major proportion of ouds were built with walnut backs, and it’s one of my favorite woods for that.”

INSIDE THE OUD

So, what makes an oud what it is? The deep, round bowl, short, fretless neck, and steeply angled tuning peghead separate it from many other stringed instruments. And don’t forget what Alan Suits calls “a helluva lot of variations” when it comes to bracing, sound holes, and other facets of their construction.

Suits is a luthier who builds and repairs ouds, lutes, sitars, and vihuelas at his shop, Coyote’s Paw Gallery, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “I’ve been building instruments for 25 years, but have been restoring,

repairing and refurbishing them for more than 40,” he said. “I started making ouds about seven years ago – it was a natural progression after making a lot of renaissance lutes and vihuelas. It’s fascinating to see how the oud changed into the renaissance lute. Obviously, they are closely related, but there also huge differences in size, bracing, thickness of sound boards, and playing technique, to list only a few.” The aforementioned variations from one oud to the next, he adds, are “extremely personal,” depending on the luthier.

The bowl of an oud is

made from thin strips of hardwoods (up to 30 of them on a Turkish-style instrument, 15 or so on an Arabic-style) like maple, mahogany, walnut, and cherry, each about 1.5 millimeters thick after finishing. The sound board – typically left unfinished – is made from softer woods such as pine and spruce, and measures 1 to 1.5 millimeters in thickness. The approximate dimensions of the oud are a bowl from 7½” to 8” deep, with a sound board width of approximately 14½”. From the back of the sound board to where it joins the neck is about 19”. The neck itself is about 8” long, and the angled peg box is about 8½”. String length is 23” to 24”. Most ouds have five sets of double strings, with a single string for the sixth.

There are, of course, many oud makers in the Middle/Near East and Turkey. But, where in America do you go to find an oud? Perhaps surprisingly, there are several options. On the East Coast, Richard Hagopian builds them at Unique Strings, in the Boston area. In New York City, Najib Shaheen (brother of Simon Shaheen) is known as the Oudman, and is a fine player, as well. John Vergara builds and repairs ouds at Lord of the Strings in Beacon, New York. Out West, Suits is an option, and Viken Najarian builds in Anaheim; he and Godin make electric ouds, as well. In fact, Najarian has crafted instruments for David Lindley, including two of his E-2000 models, and an acoustic. For guitarists who may not be quite ready for an oud, Godin’s Glissentar is a fretless electric guitar that sounds close to an oud. — **Neil Haverstick**

For further information on Middle Eastern music and instruments, maqamworld.com offers links to artists, luthiers, recordings, history, and playing techniques.



The top of an oud (called the "table," shown here at the bottom left) is made of a veneer measuring 1.5 to 2 millimeters thick. This one rests on the bench of Alan Suits.



Oud maestro Rahim Alhaj was recently awarded a \$25,000 Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. It's the highest honor bestowed on folk/traditional artists in the U.S. In early October, he and other Fellows will be honored in Washington, D.C.

their careers in Turkey, as did Egypt native George Michel. Armenians John Berberian and George Mgrdichian lived and performed in the United States. One of the most influential masters is Munir Bashir, an Iraqi who is often credited with bringing the oud to a wider audience in the 20th century. Author Hassan Touma calls the maqam performances of Bashir "deep meditations, philosophizing on the lute with mystical expressive content."

The young Bashir was inspired by Sharif Muhyiddin Haydar, who in 1934 founded the Baghdad Academy of Music. He also studied Western music in Budapest (earning a doctorate), "...hoping to create a bridge between the Western listener and our own music," he said. Bashir and his brother, Jamil, went on to teach at the Baghdad Academy, where a study of Western music is a part of the curriculum, and their students are also active on the oud scene today.

One of those students is Rahim Alhaj, who in 1989 earned a degree in composition from the Academy; because of problems with Saddam Hussein's regime, he left Iraq in '91 and now lives in Albuquerque while performing all over the world. Alhaj has a deep understanding of traditional maqam music.

"The musical and aesthetic intention of the tradition is to settle the soul," he said. "When your soul is settled, only then are you really inside the maqam." In 2009, he was awarded a U.S. Artists Ford Foundation grant, has performed his compositions for oud and strings at the Kennedy Center, and has had two albums nominated for Grammy awards—one a disc of duets with Indian sarod master Amjad Ali Khan. His last, *Little Earth*, features the oud in many settings, including with jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, Peter Dinklage of REM, pipa virtuoso Liu Fang, and duets with sitar, kora, ney, didjeridu, and accordion. Alhaj is a unique bridge between the past and the future, and is very active on today's world-music scene.

Naseer Shamma is also a graduate of the Baghdad Academy. Alhaj calls him "one of the best oud players in the world." A listen to his piece "Al-'Amiriyya," from his *Le luth de Bagdad* reinforces the sentiment. Shamma's tribute to children that died in an air raid in Operation Desert Storm may be the closest an acoustic instrument will ever get to sounding like Hendrix. He runs a school in Cairo, Beit el Oud (House of Oud), and his students include prodigies like Muhammed Abozekry and Yousif Abbas, who shake things up by playing Mozart and hip hop on their ouds.

Palestinian-born Simon Shaheen is another maestro with deep roots in traditional music, but who has collaborated with artists such as Indian slide-guitar master Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and bassist Bill Laswell. He has written symphonies for the oud, and received degrees from the Manhattan School of Music and Columbia University. Also a violin virtuoso, he teaches in the String department at Berklee. Yurdal Tokcan is an award-winning Turkish player with stunning technique who has toured widely, has a degree from Istanbul Technical University, and accompanied Turkish ney master Kudsi Erguner. And while Moroccan Hassan Erraji is well-versed in tradition, his trio, Arabesque, is as close to an oud power trio as you're likely to hear, featuring outstanding fretless-bass playing by Ralph Mizraki on their CD, *Nikriz*.

Not surprisingly, the oud has also appeared in the flamenco world. Flamenco has always had a strong Arabic influence, so the oud is a natural fit. Guitarists Chris Carnes, Carlos Lomas, and the late Paco



de Lucia all recorded with the oud in 1976. Guitarist Juan Martin played and recorded with oud player Abdul Salam Kheir, who also worked with Jimmy Page and Robert Plant. As for blues, it doesn't seem that the oud contributed much to its early African roots, though Sudanese oud players/singers such as Muhamed el Amin and Abdel Gadir Salim, with their minor-pentatonic scales and droning rhythms, may well remind a listener of Lightnin' Hopkins and Son House. Pentatonic scales are found all over Africa, as are a number of lutes, including the ngoni, xalam, and ekonting. The ekonting seems to be an ancestor of the fretless banjo, which started appearing in the Caribbean in the early 17th century. It's also possible Muslim slaves transformed the Islamic prayer call into field hollers, which would indicate a link to Arabic musical practices, according to researcher Sylvaine Diouf. Of course, this is a vast area for more exploration, and

(LEFT TO RIGHT) An oud with six two-stringed courses. A Viken Najarian oud, made in California. This modern oud was made by Farhan Hassan, in Baghdad.

Gerhard Kubik's book *Africa and the Blues* is recommended reading.

THE OUD: STILL TRAVELING

After 6,000 years, the oud is still making its way to new places, such as *Downbeat* magazine's 61st Annual Critic's Poll in 2013, where Rabi' Abou-Khalil, Anouar Brahem, and Omer Avital placed in the miscellaneous instrument category. Egyptian-born Joseph Tawadros lives in Sydney, Australia, and has recorded with Mike Stern, Bela Fleck, John Abercrombie, and Richard Bona. Guitarist/oud player Beau Bledsoe performs in the Kansas City area; his group, Alaturka, plays a mix of Turkish rhythms and jazz improvisations. Yoshiko Matsuda lives in Japan, and studied in Tunisia with oud maestro Ali Sriti. Her

trio, Le Club Bachraf, performs traditional North African music. Mustafa Stefan Dill lives in Santa Fe and plays maqam-based original compositions on his oud. In perhaps its furthest trek yet, the oud found its way to the hands of Finnish oud player/fretless guitarist Jussi Rejoinen, who has studied with Simon Shaheen, and currently lives in Boston.

Perhaps the fretless guitar now joins the pipa, biwa, and lute, as the ancient oud takes its place in the 21st century in yet another form, one which could reach a potentially vast new audience. Fretless virtuosi such as Erkan Ogur, Jon Catler, Ned Evett, and Jack Mazzenga are blazing new musical trails. Jeff Beck's latest band features Swiss born fretless guitarist Nicolas Meier. Beck's Arabic-sounding guitar on the Yardbird's "Over Under Sideways Down" brought Eastern sounds to rock audiences in 1966.

From Sumeria to modern rock concerts, the oud is still an influential voice in music around the world. **VG**