

Film Review: 'Jazz in Turkey'

An engaging, well-researched history of jazz music in director Batu Aykol's homeland.

By Alissa Simon



Cast: Hakan Atala, Murat Beser, Terence Blanchard, Sadettin Davran, Craig Dicker, Baki Duyarlar, JB Dyas, Ilhan Ersahin, Feridun Ertaskan, Muvaffak Falay, Michael Farquharson, Emin Findikoglu, Onder Focan, Zuhale Focan, Bozkurt Ilham Gencer, Kerem Gorsev, Selen Gulun, Ediz Hafizoglu, Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones, Emre Kartari, Dost Kip, Can Kozly, Joe Mardin, Gungor Mimaroglu, T.S. Monk, Dan Morgenstern, Pelin Opcin, Tuna Otenel, Ali Perret, Mike Ringquist, Mehmet Ali Sanlikol, Cuneyt Sermet, Cagri Sertel, Wayne Shorter, Selcuk Sun, Gorgun Taner, Orhan Tekelioglu, Okay Temiz, Sabri Tulug Tirpan, Hulya Tuncag, Senova Ulker, Nail Yavuzoglu, Aysegul Yesilnil, Nezhil Yesilnil, Ahmet Yesiltepe, Gokhan Akcura.

A thoroughly researched oral history spiced with a fine selection of archival performances, Batu Aykol's docu "Jazz in Turkey" is both a chronological history of jazz in his homeland and an exploration of the impact of jazz music there. As compiled from more than 50 interviews, the film considers the evolution of jazz and its musicians in the context of Turkish history. The engaging result is the country's first cinematic investigation of this topic and has been making the rounds of Euro fests; with some judicious trims, it could appeal strongly to global and specialty broadcasters.

Not only does jazz have a rich and multifaceted history in Turkey, but, as several interviewees point out, jazz music and traditional Turkish music share an openness to improvisation and the ability to incorporate new forms and variations. There is perhaps no better proof of this than the jazz standard "Blue Rondo a la Turk," composed by Dave Brubeck and inspired by the rhythms of Turkish street musicians.

According to Aykol's research, the roots of jazz in Turkey lie with the country's Armenian, Jewish and Romanian populations in the early 20th century. The director assembles period photos and sometimes scratchy-sounding vintage recordings to document these little-known musicians.

Meanwhile, one of his interviewees, the writer, researcher and radio presenter Gokhan Akcura, highlights an early tie to African-American musicians. He relates the story (which Aykol documents with photos) of a black man named Thomas who worked as a nightclub manager in Tsarist Russia but moved to Istanbul before WWI, taking a post at the Maxim Casino, where he also played in a jazz orchestra consisting entirely of African-Americans.

Nesuhi and Ahmet Ertegun forged other important connections between jazz in Turkey and America. As young sons of the Turkish Ambassador to the U.S. in the mid-1930s, they reveled in the lively music scene in Washington, D.C. Later, these brothers founded Atlantic Records, where they championed groundbreaking jazz artists such as John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus and Dave Brubeck and the Modern Quartet.

The Berklee College of Music in Boston, the world's leading institution for the study of contemporary music, also built bridges between jazz and Turkish musicians. Since 1990, more than 100 Turkish musicians have enrolled at Berklee. Most of them returned to Turkey, where they work as performing artists, producers and educators, furthering a cross-pollination of Western and Eastern rhythms. The docu provides prime performance footage of many of these, including contemporary pianist-vocalist-composer Selen Gulun.



theater and its destruction could easily be cut without damaging the primary theme of jazz's exceptional collaborative appeal and commanding ability to transcend cultural, sociological and racial barriers.

The abundant archival footage varies in image and sound quality, but overall, the sound is quite good. The talking-head segments with Turkish musicians and music historians are nicely shot and manage to provide a sense of both personality and place. The shorter snippets featuring American performers seem to have been shot on the fly, and offer less pertinent information.

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Reviewed at Istanbul Film Festival, April 19, 2014. Running time: 100 MIN. (Original title: "Turkiye'de Caz")

PRODUCTION: (Documentary — Turkey) A Lokya Prods. production. (International sales: Lokya Prods., Istanbul.) Produced by Batu Akyol.

CREW: Directed, written, edited by Batu Akyol. Camera (color, HD), Akyol; sound (stereo).

WITH: Hakan Atala, Murat Beser, Terence Blanchard, Sadettin Davran, Craig Dicker, Baki Duyarlar, JB Dyas, Ilhan Ersahin, Feridun Ertaskan, Muvaffak Falay, Michael Farquharson, Emin Findikoglu, Onder Focan, Zuhale Focan, Bozkurt Ilham Gencer, Kerem Gorsev, Selen Gulun, Ediz Hafizoglu, Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones, Emre Kartari, Dost Kip, Can Kozly, Joe Mardin, Gungor Mimaroglu, T.S. Monk, Dan Morgenstern, Pelin Opcin, Tuna Otenel, Ali Perret, Mike Ringquist, Mehmet Ali Sanlikol, Cunevt Sermet, Cagri Sertel, Wayne Shorter, Selcuk Sun, Gorgun Taner, Orhan Tekelioglu, Okay Temiz, Sabri Tulug Tirpan, Hulya Tuncag, Senova Ulker, Nail Yavuzoglu, Aysegul Yesilnil, Nezhil Yesilnil, Ahmet Yesiltepe, Gokhan Akcura.



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