

ARTS MIDWEST WORLD FEST

Study Guide Egypt - Music and Instruments

About Wust el Balad

Wust el Balad means “downtown” in Arabic and is a fitting name since the band got their start on the streets of downtown Cairo. Wust el Balad began with a goal to reach people who couldn't afford to buy albums or concert tickets, and became the original Cairo street band. Now they are one of the most popular and successful bands in Egypt.



Wust el Balad, 2011

Wust el Balad did not become famous instantly. When they started rehearsing and performing together, they gave many free performances and sometimes had to beg the venue owners to let them play. But all of their hard work paid off, because now the ensemble sings and performs at galleries, cultural centers, and clubs all over the world, including prestigious music halls in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Germany. Their first full-length album, *Wust el Balad*, was released in 2007.

Wust El Balad's unique sound can be attributed to the members of the band, who come from different musical backgrounds. Whether playing at Al Qala'a Festival at the Citadel or at the Cairo Jazz Club, the band always connects to their audiences, who sing along and sway to the music, dancing and clapping their hands to the soft rhythms and beats.

Musical Instruments

Wust el Balad plays many instruments that are commonly found in the United States, such as the guitar, flute, and bass. They also play some instruments you may not have seen or heard before, such as the oud and djembe.

Oud

Since the 9th century the musical tradition of the Mediterranean Sea was based in great part on the oud. Often called the prince of Arab instruments, the oud is an ancient stringed instrument which probably originated more than 3,500 years ago in Persia. The Arabic name, Al Oud, means thin wood. Sometime during the 10 -13th centuries, the moors or the Crusaders carried the oud to Spain, where it became known as the lute ("al-ud") and was ultimately transformed into the six-stringed fretted guitar. The oud is pear-shaped, and it has a relatively short handle and no frets. The precise shape and dimensions differ throughout the world, as do the number of strings.



An oud maker in Cairo, Egypt.
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Djembe

A West African drum, the djembe is shaped like an hourglass, with a wide top and thin bottom section. The body of the drum is made from wood and typically has animal skin stretched over the top. Along the sides of the djembe are ropes that are used to tune the instrument. The djembe can be played sitting or standing, though it is always played with bare hands. Different hand techniques produce many different sounds.

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