

# CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: JUMANA MANNA

**Jumana Manna**

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***Katie Guggenheim:** Your new film, *A magical substance flows into me*, (2015), is developed from your research into Robert Lachmann, an ethnomusicologist who was based in Palestine in the 1930s. What interests you about Lachmann and his project in Palestine?*

**Jumana Manna:** I came across Robert Lachmann in the memoirs of a Palestinian musician called Wasif Jawhariyyeh while I was doing research for another project on Los Angeles and Jerusalem, as two ‘promised lands’ two over-mystified cities. As I was looking into the social and urban history of Jerusalem before 1948, Jawhariyyeh’s memoirs became quite important to me. They were unique in their satirical accounts of daily life and the interactions of the various communities from the turn of the century until the 1950s. In one of the chapters, Jawhariyyeh talks about his meetings with Robert Lachmann. He recounts how in one instance, they argued about the future of Arabic music. The disagreement was primarily around the question of notation and the influence of radio and the circulation of records on the development of Oriental music.

***KG:** Your film opens with a voiceover of you reading from Lachmann’s notes in which he talks about music becoming neither Western nor Eastern; becoming nothing.*

**JM:** Lachmann says, ‘Instead of the real thing we obtain a hybrid production that is shallow like ditchwater’. Basically, Lachmann was against Arabic music adopting Western systems of notation. Similar to other Westerners arriving to Palestine, he wanted to see it as a kind of pure, unspoiled Bible Land. He argued that Arabic music was too ‘emotional’ and also that it would be difficult to notate with Western notation because of the modal system, the quarter-tones. He believed that if change were to come, it should emerge from the depths of Arabic music itself, not with the West as an ideal referential model. Jawhariyyeh disagreed: he thought that Arabic music was no more emotional than Western classical music, and that the only way to preserve the tunes that people weren’t memorizing like they may have in the past, was to write them down. He believed that notation could be both a tool for preservation and advancement, which I found to be a fascinating discussion. For me, this argument encapsulated the dilemmas of modernity, and the bifurcated relationship of Palestine to the West.

***KG:** And Lachmann emigrated to Palestine from Germany?*

**JM:** Lachmann was a German Jew who had arrived in Palestine from Berlin in 1935. He had just been dismissed from his position as music librarian at

the Berlin National Library, following the Nazis' rise to power. His partner and recording technician, Walter Schur accompanied him to Jerusalem where Lachmann aimed to found an archive and department of Oriental Music at the Hebrew University. It was Judah Magnes, president of the Hebrew University that invited him to come to Jerusalem. He was inviting many Jewish scholars who were losing their jobs in Germany at the time. Lachmann, like others, arrived to Palestine trusting in the promise of funds and possibilities to continue his scholarly research, but these expectations couldn't always be met.

**KG:** *The disagreement between Lachmann and Jawhariyyeh is interesting. The native Palestinian is interested in preserving music as an object of study for the future and the immigrant is interested in it more as a live, corporeal event. Do you think that there was any Colonial exoticisation in Lachmann's approach?*

**JM:** I think that there was a certain Orientalism on Lachmann's behalf. His views were shaped by the position of European schools of thought at that time, which thought of the East as something that should remain unspoiled by the West. And yet, there was a logic to what Lachmann was saying: that the influence of the mass-production of records arriving from Egypt, and even Western Classical music was changing the taste of the locals, making them devalue the local traditions they had. In a sense, both Lachmann's and Jawhariyyeh's opinions are correct, both arguments are addressing a certain lack. What Lachmann feared came true: musical notation and record companies did have a constraining effect on the development of Arab music. But it's one thing to write music down, and another to maintain a relationship to the soul of music and know how to improvise. One could have criticised Lachmann differently: yes we should preserve the essence of traditional music, and reform the education of Arabic music to suit the social changes that were taking place, but we should also allow for new genres to develop.

**KG:** *At the beginning of the film Lachmann talks about the criticism that the radio programmes received from both Arab and Hebrew newspapers. You've spoken about making the film answer to the question that he poses, or the problem that he poses.*

**JM:** In a sense, Lachmann's project in Palestine was somewhat of a failure. Through my film, I try to ask why it failed, and ask what the stakes might be for such a project today. In the recording I've used he asks for advice about what changes could be made to the musical programs to stop these attacks by the press. I feel like this film is trying to give advice: the present is giving advice to the past.

**KG:** *The separation of these different groups is made very visible in the film. You see many domestic spaces, and a lot of kitchens, which are very generic and all very similar although they're completely isolated from one another. The film moves between these spaces and as a viewer, you have no idea what is being crossed, geographically, between them. Could you map out the*

*geography of the film? Where did you travel to meet the musicians and what borders did you cross?*

**JM:** The film is shot in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, and inside Israel. In Israel I shot in the Galilee. The last chapter, with the Palestinian village wedding music, was shot there. We also shot in the south, in Naqab, where most of the Palestinian Bedouins inside Israel live. In the West Bank we shot in Nablus. There are several scenes in Jerusalem, both in East and West: the Coptic Priest; the young Moroccan Jewish woman, Neta El-Kayam; Said and Wissam Murad on the Oud; my parents; the appraisers' office with the Kurdish Jewish musicians. So, actually, most of the film is shot in Jerusalem. The scene at the beginning with the former police and secret service officer is in Tel Aviv. The Yemenites are shot in Rosh HaAyin, not far from Tel Aviv, where many of the Yemenite Jews, who were airlifted to the country, were placed in the 1950s.

I chose not to emphasise borders, in terms of what is Palestinian territory and what is Israel given that Lachmann's radio programme took place before the partition of Palestine. I thought of Lachmann's programme as radio waves spilling out across a territory, defining a certain polity, and participating in shaping the territory. In a sense, when making the film, I physically follow those waves. I follow the path of Lachmann's research, performing the radio waves as I travel to the different parts of the country bringing the recordings on my smart phone to where these groups live – even more segregated today than before. In this way, the structure of the work expresses both the loss of that political space – historical Palestine – but also my effort to retrieve it. This labor, and the traversal of various borders are not to idealise the period of the British Mandate, but rather to provide a space from which another Palestine can be imagined. It is part of my interest in going beyond the logic of segregation and separation. This paradigm of partition, the two-state solution that is still the prevalent one for Israel/Palestine is, I believe, no longer realistic or appropriate. It neutralises history by underestimating the pre-1948 realities, and is dysfunctional in the present conditions of the occupation. This is a big discussion, but essentially, given the increasing intertwinements – even if they are asymmetrical and devastating – resulting from the colonial expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, it is becoming increasingly impossible to imagine two separated states. Part of the decision to ignore borders in the film is also part of my interest in a long-term one-state, bi-national solution. Moreover, Israel is the only recognised state in the world that doesn't have borders, so why would I adhere to the ones it imposes?

**KG:** *Music is something that transcends boundaries and also defines identities in relation to those boundaries. How does music relate to identity – national identity, cultural identity?*

**JM:** One of my interests in music is precisely this ambiguity. I find it to be both dangerous and also celebratory and transcendental. It carries a lot of potential.

**KG:** *Could you explain what you mean by dangerous?*

**JM:** Music can be a place to transcend identities and affiliations, geographies and temporalities. But it can also be used, and it has historically been used, to strengthen feelings of collective identity that are based on exclusion of ‘the other’, based on who doesn’t figure into that collective identity. I’m interested in this double bind or dual potentiality of music. I think music both can hide and reveal politics at the same time, almost like a masquerade.

Growing up in Shu’fat, in East-Jerusalem, it was not uncommon to hear, late at night, young men blasting Mizrahi music out of their cars. Mizrahis are Sephardic Jews and Jews from the Arab and Islamic countries. It would always, intrigue me, how these young men – who are Palestinian, and most likely identify with the struggle against occupation of the city and the discriminatory policies of the Israeli government and municipality – were able to listen to and also blast, within a Palestinian neighbourhood, Israeli music. I sense that they listen to this music because of its Oriental beats: it is essentially just like Arabic music but with Hebrew words, and the songs often talk about love and longing and loss — also clichés of Arabic pop. There’s another layer in this phenomenon that is perhaps more complex: my reading is that it is also a way of identifying with ‘the other’ who is in fact controlling them, this ‘other’ becomes a model of strength.

**KG:** *So music is excused of political affiliations? Do you think the Mizrahis are aware of this contradiction?*

**JM:** Well, it makes a lot of sense for Oriental Jewish groups to listen to Arabic music because they came from that world. They were part of the Arab and Islamic world for hundreds of years; they are indigenous to it. But today, as a result of the suppression of their identities as Arab, Kurdish, Berber, and so forth, and the traumas they’ve gone through, Mizrahis have taken on an Israeli identity; one that has been set up as distinct from – and superior to – being Arab. Most Mizrahis therefore don’t identify as Arab: they would most commonly say they are Israeli, with Moroccan heritage, for instance. The Palestinians, and Arabs in general, have become ‘the other’: the enemy that attacks them and from which they need to protect themselves. Despite all of this, Mizrahis can still culturally identify with Arabic music.

**KG:** *Yes, and I guess that links to what we were discussing before, about corporeal memory... music and memory.*

**JM:** Yes, right. So this was also why I found it so interesting to do a historical narration through music. If memory is a symbolic representation of the past, embedded in a set of practices and affiliations, I think that musical memory is the most libidinal form of it. It’s something that is deeply engrained in your body. Based on what you grew up on, you immediately have stronger connections to certain kinds of rhythms and certain kinds of melodies. This is

not something that you necessarily choose. It also creates bonds with others, with groups, with territories, or with areas that you, at least in part, inherit.

**KG:** *So for example musicians playing, not from sheet music, but from their body memory – their muscle memory – it's an extension of that? The idea that you can hold music physically in your body?*

**JM:** Yes, and I think that this is something that I am also exploring in sculpture, but maybe more through sensibility and touch, and physicality. I am interested in what kind of memory lies in the senses, if it's accessed through audio, through touch, or through smell. Jean-Luc Nancy talks about the difference between listening and seeing. He talks about listening as making-resonant, whilst seeing is about making-evident. When you make something evident you see it, but it's something that is outside of you, you witness it in front of you. When you hear something you have to understand it because it's going into you, it's becoming a part of you. Listening collapses this division of self and other, or of singular and plural, or inside and outside.

**KG:** *You absorb it rather than beholding it.*

**JM:** Yes.

**KG:** *Especially with that subwoofer!*

**JM:** Exactly! Your whole body has to shake while you are listening to it. This idea of the body as a medium, and as a place of resonance has been something that has followed me, both throughout the film, and in the making of the sculptures. The sculptures are hollow chambers or empty containers like our bodies, which are also kind of hollow, and are filled with fluids, air and other matter. I like this idea that sound is taking place in space but it is also spreading within me, which is also what happens when you are singing, for instance, it's within you, and within the other person simultaneously.

**KG:** *We were talking yesterday about the idea of the sculptures acting as witnesses. Maybe it's to do with the way that they resonate? Although they are mute objects they are listening.*

**JM:** Yes, I mean, they are carrying sound.

**KG:** *It's interesting that you have installed the sculptures so they are positioned alongside you as another audience for the film. When you are sitting there you are aware of them without having to look at them.*

**JM:** Yes, I've also thought of them as body parts – muscles, organs – shaped as disproportionate and mutated vases. As vases they might suggest archaeological objects or something from the past, or an urn for instance. They are dimly lit, and appear almost as specters: maybe similar to the way that Lachmann is a specter in the film. The recordings that we hear in the film are

also specters. They are potent as things that are alive and impacting us in the present, because they continue to live with us, these voices of musicians from eighty years ago. They are kind of like the living dead.

*KG: And there is one moment in the film, with the elderly Samaritan couple, where the husband calls his wife over to hear the recording of her father playing but she doesn't want to hear him.*

**JM:** Yes, that's right. The Samaritan community lives in Nablus, on Mount Gerizim. It is a very small community; the smallest and possibly the oldest minority in Palestine, comprising of just 780 people. They are like living archaeology. Because of the way that the priesthood is passed on through generations, when Lachmann recorded with the high priest, and when I met the high priest of the current community 80 years later, there was a familial link. The father of the wife of the current high priest was the high priest at the time when Lachmann was alive and Lachmann recorded with him. It was completely unexpected. She had never met her father because he died when she was very little, and so after she listens to this recording she says 'I wish that I could only dream of him'. She doesn't care to listen to him because she has a certain anger that he bore her mother all these children and left her very young to raise them on her own. On the other hand, she desires to see him, at least in a dream.

*KG: And I guess that is the most direct example of that, but you deal with similar issues with all the musicians you visited: ideas of inheritance, or, put simply, what stays the same, and also what has changed.*

**JM:** And how the distinct traditions are influencing and forming one another.

*KG: The Bedouins are an interesting example. They're obviously a nomadic people but in the film they talk about being 'put' somewhere by the Israeli state.*

**JM:** Yes, they are nomadic, but already in 1948 they lived in villages and cultivated lands. Their expulsion and displacement outside and inside Palestine is part of the settler colonial policy of the Jewish state and its expansionist nature. In the Naqab, Israel continues this dispossession of the Bedouins until today in the so-called unrecognised villages, like the one we filmed. Most of the communities that I meet in the film have experienced displacement of some sort, my own family included. However, it might be important to mention here, that there is a difference between the displacement of the Palestinians who lost their homeland and were rendered stateless until today, and the Jewish communities that we meet in the film. They too have experienced displacement because they immigrated, sometimes willingly, other times less willingly, to Palestine/Israel, but they were immigrating to a new home where they came to implement this pervasive notion of 'one Jewish people' reunited in their ancient homeland. They were discriminated by the ruling class, largely

Ashkenazi, European Jewish communities, but nevertheless, have participated in and become a part of the settler colonial project of Israel.

**KG:** *So these are the Mizrahis... I understand it's quite unusual for a Palestinian to approach the Mizrahi's in the way that you have?*

**JM:** On a political level, one of my main motivations for making this film was to rethink the history the Mizrahim, and of the Palestinians, so as to challenge the false constructions of Zionism. The idea that Arab and Jew are distinct and opposite categories is a recently constructed idea. As the academic, Ella Shohat called for, already years ago; an engagement with Mizrahi studies, alongside and in relation to Palestinian studies would critique and bypass the founding premises of Orientalist representation and Eurocentric discourse inherent in the Zionist imaginary. After all, the same historical process that dispossessed Palestinians was intimately linked to the process that dispossessed Arab Jews of their rootedness in Arab countries.

There is a scene in the film where my father talks about a letter exchange between Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism, and Yusuf Dia' al-Khalidi, a Palestinian politician, and Mayor of Jerusalem. It is 1899. Yusuf reads about Zionism for the first time in an international newspaper. He is surprised to hear that the Jews want to come and create a state in Palestine, when Palestine is full of Palestinians. So he decides to write a letter to Herzl. This letter is fascinating because it's from an early stage of Palestinian Nationalism. Even though Dia' al-Khalidi identifies with a broader, regional, Ottoman sense of belonging, in addition to being Palestinian, or Jerusalemite, he understands the threat of Herzl's proposal. He understands that a Jewish National Project of this sort will bring catastrophic results to Palestine and to the relationship between Jews and Arabs in the region. He writes to Herzl to inform him that Palestine is already full of its inhabitants, and that it is sacred for Muslims, Jews and Christians around the world. He tells him that Jews and Arabs should unite and fight together against any foreign occupation of Palestine. He doesn't see the Jews as 'other'. Disappointingly, Herzl replies like a real estate developer, talking about how the prices of houses would rise once Jews would emigrate to Palestine, and that therefore the Palestinians would have nothing to worry about.

**KG:** *The section of the film where your father tells this story is one of several scenes with your parents that are shot in your family home. Are these scenes based on real conversations? Are they re-staged or are they fictional?*

**JM:** The film is both scripted and unscripted.

**KG:** *I remember when you were working on the film you set about meeting the musicians as part of your research but then you realised that the conversations that you were having would become the film itself.*

**JM:** Yes, so the film is a series of encounters, which are usually first encounters, a series of beginnings, really. I wanted to record musical performances in a similar way that Lachmann made his recordings. As I was traveling across the country to find musicians to cast and to learn more about the different traditions, there was so much in those encounters that I realised that was what the film would be about. It is about me making contact with these communities, a lot of which I would otherwise have no contact with. This traversing of different locations in different areas of Israel and Palestine became central to the film itself. I would write about my encounters when I got home everyday, and after many weeks of doing this I selected the characters and the scenes that I found most compelling and complex. The scenes with my parents are based on a collection of stories and situations that I was witnessing as I was spending time at my parents house while researching this film.

**KG:** *I guess you were coming home and talking about what you were doing with your parents?*

**JM:** Yes, but actually, I was more listening and watching, in an almost ethnographic sense. I was experiencing their lives in a similar way that I was experiencing the lives of the people that I was going out to meet. I also started noticing details of my parents' daily life and their stories that were resonating with the various places I travelled to. I felt that my family home could also become a metaphor for the country, especially within a context of Colonialism: which at heart is about home and ownership. Throughout the film the question of how much to script, of what is scripted and what is not, seemed appropriate since the film emerged out of this disagreement about notation between Lachmann and Wasif Jawharriyeh... about what gets written down, and what escapes, what gets improvised. So the film, for me, is a little bit like a musical score.

**KG:** *Something that recurs, almost like a motif, throughout the film, is this question of trash.*

**JM:** There are several instances in the film where trash is an interruption. It becomes almost a recurring joke. My mother asks my father, 'did you take out the compost'. With the Samaritans, the wife is complaining that they have taken away the garbage can before she threw out the trash. These interruptions take place during moments where a very big political topic is being addressed. My father is talking about his Iraqi-Israeli friend's attempts to obtain back his Arab culture. He is talking about a memory of something he lost after becoming an Israeli, and the music he listens to as a tool to regain this language and culture. The Samaritan is talking about the Holy Tora, which is three thousand five hundred years old, and his wife is talking about the trash. The film moves between these kinds of binaries, the sacred and the profane. We started out by talking about what Jerusalem has come to symbolise but

there's often this kind of crassness and presentness of daily life that takes over the sacred. Also in previous films I shot in Jerusalem, the melancholic mendacity of the vernacular and the religious fantasy of Jerusalem has been something I've been interested in capturing. It has all these layers, which can also be felt in the architecture and the tension of the city, but there is also the feeling that life goes on. I think the film is also about that: even if it is talking about these grand historical narratives it's also about daily life and its resilience and its perseverance as continuity.

**KG:** *You've also spoken about this in relation to the sculptures.*

**JM:** Yes, I think that the sculptures also have that contradiction. They are at once vulgar and precious. They are glazed organic, hand-crafted and painted plaster pieces, propped onto mass produced objects like trash cans or plastic chairs.

**KG:** *There is a sense of desire that comes up a lot in your work. It's in the music as we already discussed – the love songs – and the film ends on a wedding song. It's in the strange eroticism of the sculptures. It's also there more broadly in this sense of desire for life to continue.*

**JM:** Music is something that contains a libidinal energy and carries that desire. The film ends with Palestinian village wedding music. There is a grandfather who is losing his eyesight and he hears the music from outside and he comes and he starts dancing. That was not scripted.

**KG:** *Oh I thought that bit was scripted, that's amazing!*

**JM:** It was such a beautiful moment. But more on desire, the film ends on a song for lovers, on desiring bodies. I wasn't necessarily suggesting hope – even though I don't want to deny that aspect – but I wanted to present desire, beauty and celebration as forms of resilience to erasures and effacements.

**KG:** *I want to ask you, finally, about the title of the film, which I believe comes from Michael Taussig?*

**JM:** It is inspired by a title of a chapter in Michael Taussig's book, *What is the Color of the Sacred?* There is a chapter called 'A beautiful blue substance flows inside of me', in which he talks about Sartre and Burroughs' encounter with yage, a Colombian hallucinogenic brew.

**KG:** *And Taussig has written so much about magic...*

**JM:** He is talking about magic and colour and I think that music operates in a very similar way to colour. Both colour and sound move through time, and are similarly at once authentic and deceitful. They are mediums that connect to the vibratory quality of being, and mediums that encounter us, in a way that doesn't always give us the possibility to control their entry into our bodies and our psyche. Colour connects to cosmology and the seasons in the same way

that music does. While Taussig is talking about Sartre and Burroughs' state of intoxication, the film makes several references to intoxication, demons and magical powers. Historically, the scales of Oriental music were based upon on

a cosmological system, with consideration of seasons and times of the day. The scales are thought to have real impact on bodies and human temperaments. I think there's also a transcendental layer within the film, carried by the music, which manages, despite this state of impasse in the daily reality to carry magical potentiality.

*Jumana Manna interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, September 2015. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*