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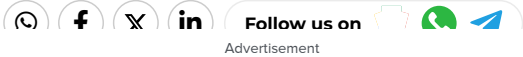
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## 'People stared at me because a girl playing drums was new to them': Syrian expat in Dubai on challenges of female drummers

From being considered weird for playing the drums to now being hailed a wonder woman, Dubai-based percussionist Inas Halal reveals how her passion set the tempo of her life

By Asha Iyer Kumar



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Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub – that's how the heartbeat sounds. It is the sign of life and a symbol of the cadence that is inherent in all that exists. And Dubai-based Syrian percussionist Inas Halal is an embodiment of this rhythmic pattern of life. Her smile is infectious; so is the energy that emanate when her hands dance across the drumming ensemble in front of her. She beats the blues away as if there is no tomorrow, and the audience sits mesmerised by her felicity that she inherited from her late percussionist father, Rabee Halal. Mention her winsome merits and she says, "you make me feel shy", a proof to the modesty that comes with a true artist's dalliance with her art and its natural culmination in something greater than the art itself.




## The first among unequals

Halal found her place in history when she became the first female professional drummer in Syria, driven by a passion that she discovered as a little girl when percussion was still a man's play area. "Whenever I saw drums lying idle in the church, I would play them inspired by something inside me. People would stare at me because a girl playing the drums was totally new to them."

The fact that no girl had ever ventured into this most rudimentary element of music – rhythm – surprised her and later, she created history when she joined the all-female Mary Orchestra in Syria as their first female drummer. “Until then the orchestra used to hire a male drummer for that part alone,” she says laughing at the memory. Then she picked up the sticks to play in informal settings around schools and at sixteen or seventeen, she started to learn formally, going on to become the queen of drums, breaking the stereotypes that had existed until then.



Why this discrimination in music – a universal language? “There are certain notions in society about what a man can do and what a woman can. Plus, drumming by itself is viewed as an art form that requires a lot of muscle power. The size of the drums, the complicated installation and repairing process also makes it more challenging for women,” she contends.

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However, she hastens to add a moot point with regard to the man-woman distinction – the fact that the percussion, considered a man’s forte, can acquire a rare finesse in female hands. “I don’t think the drums need to be hit hard, with aggression. It’s about hitting the right point of the drum and creating the perfect rhythm which can be done smoothly

too.”

Times have changed from when Halal first held the drumsticks in her hand. There are more women now taking up percussion with many famous drummers playing anything from the marimba to the snare drum. She ascribes this progress to the fact that “it is not about age or gender or the instrument but having music inside you and loving it.” It makes one conclude that anyone who has a sense of rhythm and tune can take to music easily.

## Drumming it up with children





It is Halal's deep faith in the inherent sense of rhythm and music humans have that motivated her to expand her sphere of influence beyond being just a performer, and introduce the idea of marching bands and drum corps in the Middle East, especially for children in Dubai. Starting marching bands in schools is something that she has set her heart firmly on and it was with this objective that she founded Drum Corps UAE in 2016.

"In Syria and Lebanon there are scouts who have their own bands, but they are different from the international marching bands. In this format, children will not only play music, but they'll move around and make formations. It is not about learning music or drill. It is about the values – teamwork, collaboration and co-ordination – children will learn."

The marching bands she aims to establish for children are not about making musicians, it is about building a holistic generation. "No matter what profession they take up, they will be more synchronised, organised and loving in what they do. These are the things children need in a world that is dominated by gadgets and technology," says Halal revealing her vision for the future. The fact that children are more engaged with the virtual world with minimal human connection troubles Halal and she believes that drum corps and marching bands can instil these human qualities through music. There will be no forced learning, she says; children will learn these principles automatically when they are part of the band.

## Music and healing



Going further, it also aligns with her mission of employing music and sound as a means to heal ailments of the body and mind. It was an unplanned connection that came after two years of pain she suffered owing to fibromyalgia, a disease that relies more on self-management techniques for cure and control.

"I did two years of research on how to heal myself and realised that the only ways to heal the body and soul from big traumas is through theatre, music, yoga or sports. My music helped me survive my disease." This foray into sound healing (for which she trained formally) opened new doors for her, and she indulged in it for a while giving comfort to suffering patients. It later led her to combine her drum corps plans with her intention to heal people from afflictions of different kinds. What she sought to achieve with sound healing then, she now aims to achieve through her music education for children.

"If I can get children into marching bands from a young age, I will be healing them from their pains and trauma without them knowing. I will be teaching them how to handle life," she says. She emphasises that being a part of a band will have a similar effect on the body and mind just as a sound healing session has. The vibration, resonance and balance in frequency will happen automatically.

"From what I know, have read and been through, I know this activity will release tension. When you are inside the bands there are vibrations and harmony happening and they can impact us in a hugely positive way."

## Merging with the local milieu



Halal's earnest attempts to bring the Drum Corps to the Middle East is certain to reverberate across the region, especially because she finds new ways of making it align with local traditions. She collaborated with award-winning marching band Spirit of America to launch her project in 2016, and her bands now boast numerous shows at events across the UAE, the most recent being their performance at Baseball United Showcase in November 2023 with a 200 piece marching ensemble. 'It was iconic,' says Halal, her pride at the feat carefully concealed behind her modest demeanour.

"We do many events, but in 2024, my focus will be on getting every school their individual band and then organise a local contest after which we can take them to international championships," Halal says, elaborating on her future plans.

Her proposals have generated a huge interest in the local schools and she is hopeful of having many institutions signed up before long. "Some schools have budget constraints, but I am going to take it up personally if need be, and say, 'we will provide the instruments, just give us the kids to train', because this is something I really want to happen. I want to see the kids doing this activity because I know the happiness it will bring them. I am going to do it even if there will be numerous obstacles," Halal reiterates.