

FIELD TRIP

Love songs assume global value

Cultural Center program assembles a diverse cast to their hearts' content

By Donald Liebenson

Special to the Tribune

What the world needs now (as ever) is love, sweet love, and the artists who will perform at "Love Songs of the World" are happy to oblige—especially during Valentine's season.

The free concert, to be held at 6 p.m. Wednesday in the Chicago Cultural Center's Preston Bradley Hall, 78 E. Washington St., also promises a chance to experience a diverse array of cultural perspectives on a universal theme.

Each of the five Chicago-based performers will perform traditional songs or original compositions inspired by the musical traditions of their native countries. American jazz vocalist Bobbi Wilsyn has been performing in Chicago for 25 years ("at least," she says with a laugh) and teaches at Columbia College. Palestinian Issa Boulos is a prolific composer, oud player and singer. Brazilian Paulinho Garcia is a Chicago Music Award-winner for "Best Jazz Entertainer" and currently performs with his band, Jazzmineiro. From China, Baimei has performed her brand of contemporary Chinese pop at the Park West. Michaela Marchi and Joe Reilly will perform songs that reflect their Native-American roots.

"Our hope is to not only explore the differences between cultures, but also to make people aware of the similarities," says concert organizer Cynthia Quick. "Everyone can relate to love songs."

Jorge Felix, the program director at the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture—who originally proposed the idea for "Love Songs of the World"—adds, "We want to showcase all these artists to the greater Chicago community, and diversify cultural expressions downtown."

Wilsyn remarked that she welcomed any opportunity to perform, but for her and the other scheduled artists, this concert is truly a labor of love.

For Issa Boulos, the concert will give audiences an opportunity to reconsider cultural stereotypes. "Anytime you mention the Middle East or the word 'Arab,'" he says, "people think politics rather than love. They tend to think war rather than peace. And conflict rather than resolution. As a Palestinian artist, I am trying to make a point that Arab cultures are not only about war and politics."

In fact, "95 percent of the Arab repertoire is somehow related to love. We have thousands of years of poetic tradition. When we sing about love, we are recalling the great love stories in our history that have been documented in poetry," Boulos says.

Paulinho Garcia, too, says that he meant to counter popular perceptions about his own



Palestinian artist Issa Boulos says he wants his audience to leave the concert with a view of Middle Eastern cultures that stretches beyond stereotypes of war and politics.

'All You Need Is Prem'

Love is the universal language. Here are a dozen ways the word translates around the world:

Armenia: Ser
Hungary: Szeretet
India: Prem
Iran: Mohabbat
Ireland: Gra
Israel: Ahava
Korea: Sarang
Lithuania: Meile
Malaysia: Sayang
New Zealand: Aroha
Norway: Kjaerlighet
Saudi Arabia: Hobb

country. "Love is in the air in Brazil," he says. It is not just about "soccer and Carnival."

Brazilian love songs, he says, are very much in the Latin tradition: very romantic and very passionate. Latin songs use symbolism to "express our love or convey its purity." On the Mars-Venus front, Garcia says that when a man sings a love song, it is usually to express that while "we are king of the world, we will do whatever she wants." When a woman sings a love song, it is usually "about how beautiful that love is."

Garcia's song selection also upends expecta-

tions. He will sing a song by Antonio Carlos Jobim, but it will not be in the rhythm of the bossa nova, which Jobim popularized in this country. It is a waltz.

Performing at "Love Songs of the World" appeals to Garcia's "romantic nature," he says. "I do believe that the world is beautiful no matter what. I see the beauty in people being committed to each other by love and that love conquers all obstacles."

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the artists was deciding which songs to sing.

"The theme is a little bit overwhelming," says Wilsyn, whose latest CD is the self-produced collection of standards, "It's About Time." "Do you know how many songs there are about love?"

She says she was certain she would include a song by Duke Ellington, and was considering singing "For Once In My Life," co-written by Chicagoan Orlando Murden.

But whether a love song is happy or bitter-sweet, whether it hails from the Middle East or South America, "the common denominator stays the same," Boulos says. "People are people. We carry with us wherever we go the idea of relating to someone and having feelings toward that person."

And, Wilsyn adds, "You have to sing it as if it's the first time its ever been sung."

"Love Songs of the World" is a part of the Chicago Cultural Center's Multicultural Voices and Perspectives series. Call 312-744-6630 or visit www.cityofchicago.org/culturalcenter.