

Canton jazz musician explores people, places during gig

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When jazz musician Melanie Brooks was younger, she had no idea she would travel across the ocean to play.

Brooks, who lives in Canton, is a software engineer to pay the bills, but plays with the Beantown Swing Orchestra, the Jazz Composers Alliance Orchestra, and jazz fusion group, Whatsnext?.

In July, she traveled with Turkish-born Whatsnext? band leader Mehmet Sanlikol on a 10-day jazz trip to Turkey and Cyprus.

While Brooks expected to learn quite a bit, she didn't realize how much the trip would open her eyes. Using the Turkish she had crammed to learn before the trip, she was able to communicate with Turks almost everywhere she went. She expected a degree of friendliness and hospitality, but didn't expect the warmth she found among the Turkish and Cypriot people.

"Even though I didn't have a deep grasp of Turkish, just the experience of trying to use it made getting to know someone even deeper," Brooks said. "Even something as simple as going to the breakfast buffet, and saying, 'Good morning' in Turkish to one of the ladies who was hosting – it opens a door to a little bit more of a conversation with somebody."

She even found herself getting into conversations with old women in a 700-year-old village near the metropolitan city of Bursa.

"Going up there, they had the bazaar, and the little old ladies that were up there didn't speak any English, and I started a couple conversations about our kids," Brooks said. "I did the same thing at this Turkish bath in Bursa. ... I ended up

talking to the hostess and the gal who does the massage ... in the bath, and ... we all had our phones out, talking about our kids.”

There was also a more academic side to Brooks’ trip. Both Turkey and Cyprus are rife with history, but Brooks didn’t realize how much the past still carries through into the present for both countries.

For instance, she said, the narratives surrounding Cyprus changes, depending on whom you ask. Following the Cypriot coup d’etat in July 1974, an uprising that allowed Greece to annex the island, Turkish forces recaptured the northern portion of the island, and the democratic government there collapsed. While Turkish forces advanced no further, that portion is still under the control of Turkey, in violation of international law.

But “on the Turkey side, they call it a rescue mission. On the Greek side, they call it an invasion,” Brooks said.

Brooks also learned more about Sufism, and its role in providing a sort of “check” to the more conservative Sharia practice, which she said was invaluable to her understanding of Islam.

Like most Americans, Brooks didn’t realize Islam is a “spectrum,” rather than the rather Western viewpoint of Islam, which sees the religion as one uniform whole.

“It’s like being a Christian, but realizing there are Protestants and Baptists, there are Catholics – they are all pretty different, and they all span the gamut between conservative and liberal,” Brooks said. “They have the same thing in Islam, and the more I learned about it, the deeper I got into the history, especially in Turkey.”

Brooks believes that it’s particularly important for people to learn about the world around them, particularly now, with regards to the Middle East and majority Muslim nations.

“The more understanding you have of someone else’s culture, the more you can make informed decisions on everything,” she said.

A self-described “overly-friendly” person by nature, Brooks said it isn’t difficult for her to start up a conversation with strangers. She believes it’s important to get outside her comfort zone in order to be a better global citizen, and encourages both adults and kids to do the same.

“It is never too late to learn,” she said. “If you can, learn a second language – doesn’t matter what it is. Get to know somebody who’s totally different than you are, who doesn’t look like you. Maybe somebody who doesn’t do the same things you do. Look for those opportunities, and try to reach out to people who you maybe normally wouldn’t interact with.”

She also hopes other young women interested in music will see that other musical styles don’t necessarily eclipse jazz – that jazz can open up doors in their lives that they never would have believed existed.

“I never thought [traveling] would be a possibility, when I was studying jazz in middle school or high school,” Brooks said.

Brooks will perform with “Whatsnext?” at the free Beantown Jazz Festival at noon Sept. 30 in Boston. Check out <http://tinyurl.com/y94g5fs2>.