

East Bay Express

MUSIC » CD REVIEWS

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Eliyahu & The Qadim Ensemble

Eastern Wind

By Mark Keresman

The respective tracts of land known as North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans are hardly known for harmoniousness. But the music of these regions share a great deal of common ground. Local combo **Eliyahu & The Qadim Ensemble** has dedicated itself to this commonality, the modes and rhythms.

Leader **Eliyahu Sills** has studied jazz, Indian classical, Arabic, and Turkish music, all of which embrace improvisation. Though he plays the upright (acoustic) bass and *saz* (a Turkish variant of the lute), Sills' main axe is the *ney*, a deep-toned wooden flute indigenous to a good-size chunk of the aforementioned lands. *Oud* (a large lute) player **Rachel Valfer** sings songs secular and sacred in Arabic, Hebrew, Armenian, and Turkish (plus a few Sills originals). The amber tone of the *oud*, the plaintive cry of the *ney*, and the cyclic percussion intertwine in sublime fashion throughout, whether the subject matter is love's joys and pitfalls or the Creator. Valfer's voice is dusky and soulful, beautifully conveying restless yearning and devotion. On the up-tempo selections, the results of commingling the *oud*'s and *ney*'s lower ranges and the complex yet mesmerizing rhythms range from soothing to ecstatic. On the lifting "Maghrebi" some West African influence slips in via what resembles a *mbira* (African thumb piano) and a darn catchy chorus. The brief solo *ney* piece "Segah Ney Taqsim" is so elemental it seems to waft in from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. **Eastern Wind** is truly world music, some of the most open, human music you'll hear this year. Essential. (Embarka)