

ANOUAR BRAHEM  
AFTER THE LAST SKY

بعد السماء الأخيرة

ANJA LECHNER  
DJANGO BATES  
DAVE HOLLAND

ECM

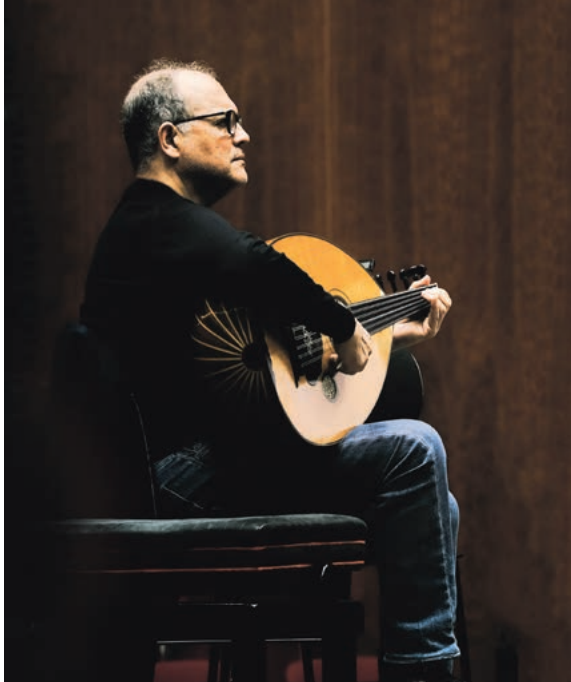
Anouar Brahem

*After The Last Sky*

Anja Lechner

Django Bates

Dave Holland



Anouar Brahem *oud*

Anja Lechner *violoncello*

Django Bates *piano*

Dave Holland *double bass*

- 1 Remembering Hind 1:52
- 2 After the Last Sky 5:42
- 3 Endless Wandering 8:11
- 4 The Eternal Olive Tree 4:00
- 5 Awake 8:49
- 6 In the Shade of Your Eyes 4:27
- 7 Dancing Under the Meteorites 4:25
- 8 The Sweet Oranges of Jaffa 7:13
- 9 Never Forget 7:49
- 10 Edward Said's Reverie 2:58
- 11 Vague 3:13

All compositions by Anouar Brahem  
except *The Eternal Olive Tree* by  
Anouar Brahem and Dave Holland



## بعد السماء الأخيرة

*While preparing the music for this album, the tragedy of Gaza was very much on my mind. After reading author Adam Shatz's previous writing on the subject, I invited him to contribute this essay.*

Anouar Brahem

## In the Presence of Absence

In 1991, Anouar Brahem released his first album on ECM, *Barzakh*, a trio featuring Brahem on oud, Béchir Selmi on violin, and Lassad Hosni on percussion. 'Barzakh' – 'separation' or 'barrier' in Arabic – is a word rich in significations. In Islamic theology, it refers to the intermediate stage between death and resurrection, when the spirit is separated from the body. But within Sufism and other forms of mysticism for which Brahem feels an affinity, barzakh is a bridge between the material world and the spiritual world: a space of transit, a jumping-off point that initiates a process of becoming, transformation, and transcendence. Brahem has worked in this zone of metamorphosis throughout his career. Steeped in the musical traditions of the Arab world, he is in no way confined to them. His is an art of the in-between, an art of liminality rather than 'fusion,' performed by musicians who practice a range of genres, yet who share a sense of complicity, of adventure, of attraction to the unknown.

*After the Last Sky*, his 12th album on ECM, has many of the signature features of Brahem's work: elegance of articulation and structure; sensitivity to the silence between notes; a sense of searching and striving to overcome barriers; an oscillation between moods of melancholy and rapture. It is an unabashedly beautiful album, at once a sanctuary from, and a protest against, a world that has grown uglier, noisier, and more violent. As on his previous album, *Blue Maqams*, Brahem is joined by the bassist Dave Holland and the pianist Django Bates, the supplest of

improvisers, each with decades of experience in advanced jazz. But there is also a new voice, hailing from the world of European classical music. It belongs to the cellist Anja Lechner, who infuses *After the Last Sky* with lithe lyricism. The music Brahem and his quartet make here reflects their distinctive personalities, the traditions that formed them. Barzakh is, once again, the place where they meet.

But the place of encounter is more sorrowful, more unsettled, this time around, because death feels more present than the promise of resurrection. Brahem finished composing the music on *After the Last Sky* in the summer of 2023, but by the time he recorded the album in May 2024, the Gaza Strip had been subject to one of the most merciless military campaigns in modern history, while the countries of the 'civilized' West either looked away or abetted the slaughter. Horrified by the West's indifference to Palestinian suffering, gripped by an overwhelming sense of anguish and urgency, Brahem reached what he calls "a breaking point," and could no longer "perceive the world without the filter of this tragedy." In the months that preceded the recording session, his mind turned inexorably to the people of Gaza and Palestine, and to a question that still plagues him: "What allows for this indifference?"

In choosing song titles that evoke Palestinian experience, Brahem had no interest in instructing or preaching to listeners: aims utterly foreign to his delicate, elliptical sensibility. But neither could he pretend that his playing hadn't been shaped by the fury, sorrow, and grief that Gaza provoked in him. It is too early to say whether this 'quartet for the end of time' will be remembered as prefiguring the end of Gaza, or the end, at

last, of Gaza's suffering. But we can be sure that the album will always bear the imprint of its origins, of which it is a trace. "Music remembers us," Jeremy Eichler writes in *Time's Echo*, his haunting study of music written in the aftermath of the Holocaust. "Music reflects the individuals and the societies that create it, capturing something essential about the era of its birth. Memory resonates with the cadences, the revelations, the opacities, and the poignancies of music."

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On the morning that I first heard *After the Last Sky*, I had been listening to an interview with the Gazan journalist Rami Abu Jamous, who lives and works in a plastic tent in the coastal city of Deir Al-Balah. Things could be worse, he said: "To have a tent is practically a luxury in Gaza these days." Abu Jamous and his family had been forcibly displaced twice since the war began: first from their neighborhood in northern Gaza, which the Israeli Army demolished within hours of their exodus; then from a temporary residence in Rafah, in southern Gaza, when the same scenario repeated itself. When the family's tent was flooded in the autumn of 2024 and his son, who loves the rain, began to play, Abu Jamous continued to play with him, "so that he wouldn't know we'd been flooded." Each morning, if he has internet, he posts two messages on his WhatsApp group, "Gaza. Life": "Hi friends" and "Still alive."

This has been "ordinary life" for the people of Gaza since October 7, 2023, when Israel responded to Hamas's murderous attack by launch-

ing a war of devastating brutality that would ultimately acquire the dimensions of a genocidal campaign. Before October 7, it was almost impossible for Gaza's besieged inhabitants to leave: a 17-year punitive blockade had made the territory the world's largest 'open-air prison.' Since October 7, it has been one of the world's largest graveyards. More than 44,000 officially dead, the majority of them women and children – and possibly tens of thousands lying under the rubble. A resurgence of polio, widespread malnutrition, a growing famine. An epidemic of amputations, a generation of orphans. There is nowhere safe: not hospitals (most are destroyed or barely functional), not schools (more than 200 have been hit by airstrikes), not mosques, not even tents. People in Gaza know that every time they look up at the Israeli fighter jets circling over them, they might be seeing the sky for the last time.

In his 1986 book *After the Last Sky*, Edward Said evoked Palestinian history, in musical terms, as a "counterpoint (if not a cacophony) of multiple, almost desperate dramas" with "no central image (exodus, holocaust, long march)... Without a center. Atonal." In the last year, however, the desperate, contrapuntal dramas that have punctuated the lives of Palestinians since the loss of their homeland in 1948 have found a 'center' in Gaza's cruel and pitiless destruction. In early October 2024, ten days before he was burned alive in an Israeli strike while sheltering in a hospital in Deir Al-Balah (the same city where the Abu Jamous family lives in their tent), Shaaban al-Dalou, a 19-year-old engineering student, posted an Instagram message about a friend who had just been killed in an Israeli strike on a mosque. "I've never felt anything more terrifying than the

thought of the dead being absent," Shaaban wrote. "The human mind, with all its brain cells and all of its capacity to absorb and to create, is helpless in the face of this absence."

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*After the Last Sky* was made in the shadow of this erasure: what the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish called "the presence of absence." Darwish's phrase was intended to capture the spectral presence of Palestinians, their history and culture, in Israel. Today, talk of 'absence' inevitably conjures the physical destruction of Gaza and its people. I spent many hours with Darwish, in his last years, in Paris and in Ramallah, and it seems to me that his spirit, as humane as it was radical, as well as that of his friend and comrade Edward Said, permeates Brahem's album. The title is drawn from a question Darwish posed in one of his poems, one that has assumed even greater force since Gaza: "Where should the birds fly after the last sky?" It is hard enough to absorb the absence evoked by Shabaan and Darwish. It is still harder to imagine the 'day after' Gaza, or the 'day after' Lebanon, where Israeli bombardment has wreaked havoc once again; hard in fact to imagine a day after' any of Israel's wars, which promise never-ending torment for its neighbors and, above all, for the Palestinians.

You might wonder what all this has to do with *After the Last Sky*, a work of instrumental music without words. The glory of music, formalists teach us, lies precisely in its pristine, non-referential nature, its transcend-

ence of politics and history. Rest assured, formalists: *After the Last Sky* stands on its own as music. And while the music on this album grew out of his horror at the catastrophe in Gaza, Brahem, an oud player and composer, does not seek to foist his own interpretation on listeners. "Music, and particularly instrumental music, is by nature an abstract language that does not convey explicit ideas," he told me. "It is aimed more at emotions, sensations, and how it's perceived varies from one person to another. What may evoke sadness for one person may arouse nostalgia for another... I invite listeners to project their own emotions, memories or imaginations, without trying to 'direct' them."

*After the Last Sky* is in no way a didactic work of art and still less an anthemic expression of 'protest.' You can choose to ignore the titles of the tracks, with their allusions to the orange grove and olive trees of Palestine, and to its literary chroniclers, Darwish and Said, and listen to *After the Last Sky* as a work of intricate chamber music for oud, piano, bass, and cello – which, of course, it is. But as with "Alabama," John Coltrane's harrowing elegy for the four girls killed in the 1963 bombing of a Black Church by white supremacists, or "Quartet for the End of Time", composed by Olivier Messiaen in a German prisoner of war camp, your experience of Brahem's album can only be enhanced by an awareness of the events that brought it into being.

Brahem is Tunisian, not Palestinian, but he is no stranger to the tragedy of the Palestinian people. Born in 1957, a year after Tunisia achieved independence, "I grew up in a country that had experienced colonization, which naturally aroused my interest in situations of occupation, and,

in particular, the Palestinian cause." In 1982, after being driven out of Lebanon by Israeli forces, the PLO found a refuge in Tunis. (A precarious one: in 1985, Israel bombed its headquarters; three years later, it assassinated one of the PLO's most respected leaders in Tunis, Khalid al-Wazir, known as Abu Jihad.) As a young musician in Tunis, Brahem befriended Palestinian intellectuals, artists, and musicians, and deepened his knowledge of the Palestine question. He read the work of Israel's 'new historians,' who dismantled the state's foundational myths; studied the 'dynamics of cultural domination' revealed by Said's *Orientalism*; and discovered Darwish's poetry, which left such a deep impression that he would later compose a tribute to him, *The Astounding Eyes of Rita*.<sup>1</sup>

What Brahem found especially moving and suggestive about Darwish's poetry was (in his words) the way it moves "between the intimate and the universal." It's a description that applies with no less force to Brahem's music. His relationship to Arabic tradition is one of poetic, not literal, allegiance: despite his formidable knowledge of the maqamat, an ornate system of melodic modes that anchors Arabic music, Brahem seldom bases his improvisations directly on the maqams. Though evocative of Arabic traditions, his work also draws upon European classical music,

1) The writing of the music for *The Astounding Eyes of Rita* was interrupted by Israel's 2006 war with Hizbullah in Lebanon, which left well over a thousand dead, many of them civilians, and devastated large parts of the country. "I couldn't return to music as if nothing had happened," so the day after the Beirut Airport reopened, he flew to Lebanon to interview some of its leading intellectuals, journalists and artists. Set to his own music and released in 2007, Brahem's documentary, *Mots d'après la guerre*, has acquired a newfound pertinence since Israel's most recent war on Lebanon began.



jazz, tango, and other styles. Like Darwish's "lyric epic" verse, Brahem's musical language is elegaic and sensuous, steering clear of declamatory affirmations in favor of undertones and whispers. While he is an heir of Arab musicians like Munir Bashir, the Iraqi 'emir of the oud,' he also has much in common with free-thinking jazz musicians who crisscrossed musical geographies and found inspiration in non-Western musical genres, like Don Cherry and Charlie Haden. To listen to Brahem's music is to experience something Haden called 'closeness,' the sound of like-minded musicians forging an even deeper, ever more intimate relationship among themselves.

On *After the Last Sky*, that closeness – a fragile, constantly renewed conversation that grows out of trust and a shared project – feels particularly pointed, perhaps because it is the antithesis of the logic of violence, separation, and destruction to which the album is a response (however oblique). Listen to the way Django Bates mimics Brahem's phrasing on piano on "Never Forget"; or to the drone of Anja Lechner's cello beneath Bates's piano and Dave Holland's bass on "Endless Wandering"; or to Holland's heartbeat-like notes behind Brahem on "The Sweet Oranges of Jaffa." Among the album's many pleasures are the shifting configurations of the four instruments, as they venture into what Brahem describes as his preferred territory: "the unknown." The music is full of subtle surprises – perhaps the most enchanting being the presence of Lechner's cello. This is the first time Brahem has featured a cellist on one of his albums, and, as much as Brahem himself, Lechner – an ECM artist with whom he'd long hoped to work – is the album's principal voice.

*After the Last Sky* has arresting passages of dissonance – the longest track, "Endless Wandering," is a turbulent evocation of the peripatetic lives of Palestinians expelled from their homeland – but Brahem largely works in the lyrical and mellifluous register characteristic of his work. Is there something suspect, even something ethically wrong, about creating art of such seductive and disarming beauty in the wake of such destruction? The German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno is famous for having said that after Auschwitz it was no longer possible to write poetry. But in 1962 Adorno revised his imposing maxim. Precisely because the "world has outlived its own demise," he argued, "it needs art as its unconscious chronicle." Brahem's album is not simply a chronicle of Gaza's destruction; by its very existence, it offers an indictment of the 'rules-based order' that has allowed this barbarism to happen.

Much of the music on this album is mournful, and it could hardly be otherwise. "The language of despair is poetically stronger than that of hope," Darwish writes, because it brings the artist "closer to God, to the essence of things, to the first poetic word," to an "almost absolute solitude in the land of exile." But *After the Last Sky* is also a celebration of the lives Palestinians have forged, and continue to forge, in the most unforgiving of conditions. To listen to "Dancing under the Meteorites," a breathless, tango-like piece in which Lechner creates mesmerizing sul ponticello effects, is to hear the spirit of resilience and resistance in Palestine, the ethos of sumud that enables a man whose house is being flooded to continue playing with his son – and to remain on his land even as it is being devastated by one of the world's most powerful

armies, with the backing (and the arms) of the world's greatest super-power.

The theme of Palestine, Darwish writes, is "both a call and a promise of freedom." *After the Last Sky* reverberates with this call, and this promise, to which millions of people throughout the world have rallied in demonstrations over the last year, insisting that their future, the future of humanity, is inextricably tied to the fate of Gaza and of Palestine. "Reducing this conflict to a simple opposition between Jews and Muslims is unbearable to me," Brahem told me. "The real barriers are neither religious or cultural, but rather result from a growing separation between those who denounce injustice and those who choose to remain indifferent." The barrier between opposing cruelty and looking away from it (or explaining it away) is in no way confined to Israel/Palestine itself; it exists in every country, even in every heart. Listening to this profoundly stirring work of remembrance, homage, and defiance, I found myself thinking of an ECM classic, the 1982 suite *The Ballad of the Fallen*, a tribute by Charlie Haden and his Liberation Music Orchestra to the people of Central America, made as a protest against Washington's support for the death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala. This, too, is a 'ballad of the fallen,' a tribute to an oppressed people that is neither a requiem nor an act of surrender but rather a work of 'liberation music.' After the last sky, after the ruins of Gaza, Brahem and his ensemble imagine a future of Palestinian freedom – the day when, as Darwish writes, "our blood will plant its olive tree."

Adam Shatz

Liner note in French at [www.ecmrecords.com/2838](http://www.ecmrecords.com/2838)





RSI

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