

The third Palestine International Festival drew to a close on 12 July, at the end of two busy weeks that brought a rare opportunity for entertainment to more than 20,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and inside the Green Line. Thousands of people flocked to the amphitheater at the old Birzeit University campus each evening, to watch dancers and bands from all corners of the world.

The festival was organized by the Ramallah-based Popular Art Center. Performances were dedicated each night to Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons. Among featured performers were groups from Chile, South Africa, Algeria, Nazareth, Spain, the U.S., Jordan and Britain.

While the festival offered a good blend of local and foreign groups, the most memorable night was unquestionably the 7 July performance by Hanouneh, a Palestinian band from Jordan performing in their homeland for the first time. The crowd, which spilled out of all the extra seating and jammed the rafters and the parking lot, was entranced from the first moment of the performance, which featured an excellent band, playing traditional instruments, and a troupe of extremely talented dancers in gorgeous traditional costumes.

Hanouneh combined *debke*, small skits that had people in tears of laughter and recognition, and traditional Palestinian songs. Their most famous song, *Yaya*, talks about staying true to the cause, come what

may, and from the beginning of performance, the audience called for song until the band graciously acquiesced. The most moving moment of the evening came at the end, when the band and audience joined together to sing the Palestinian national anthem *Mawtani* (My homeland). Many of the groups' young members were in tears, performing the exiled national song in Palestine for the first time.

The festival's opening ceremony featured two well-known local groups: Funoun a-Sha'bya and Siriyaat Ramal. Both song-and-dance groups were greeted enthusiastically by the hometown fans. Funoun, one of the few local groups to achieve international recognition, incorporated traditional and modern dance into its polished performance.

Nazareth singer Reem al-Banna, who performed on the festival's second night, sang smooth, poetic songs with excellent guitar accompaniment, about the virtues of her homeland, and the fortitude of its people. Nida'a (The Call), another musical group from inside the Green Line, featured several vocalists with powerful voices performing patriotic songs, and two young actors who performed humorous but sometimes melancholy skits about politics in the Arab world, and particularly Palestine.

One of the actors gave a short speech about how Arabs must stand courageously together against their enemies, and immediately after the speech, turned to his partner, who was impersonating an Israeli

army commander, and began to "snitch" on her fellow countrypeople. The commander threw a few bills on the ground for the "collaborator" and then kicked her as she bent to pick up the money. The skit met with cheers of recognition and bitter amusement from the audience.

The foreign groups were largely well-received by the crowd. America's Crossing Borders featured jazz, blues, and musical numbers from Trinidad and the Arab world — and a particularly wild percussionist, who at one point drummed himself into a trance as he pounded away at the bongo drums with an intensity that brought the crowd roaring to its feet.

Two nights later, on closing night, a British band, Panonic, played Caribbean music that had people dancing in the aisles. The wildest dancer of that night was the Crossing Borders lead singer, who attended as a spectator and was literally on his feet all night, drawing the attention of much of the crowd to his dance steps.

Heart to Heart, with band members from across Europe and North America, sang songs about love and cooperation that was also well-received by the crowd, but criticized by some members of the expatriate community as a synthetic mishmash. The audience particularly enjoyed the band's last musical number, the popular Arabic song *Wein a' Ramallah* (Where to Ramallah).

Ashjan, a Bethlehem band, performed songs made popular by Lebanese singer

Fairuze. With a lead singer whose voice is remarkably similar to that of Fairuze, the six-month-old band may have a bright future, locally and internationally, as it matures and improves.

The Popular Art Center adopted an aggressive marketing and promotions strategy for this year's festival. The Center collected \$35,000 from sponsors and donors, who were given advertising space on plaques, signs and booths at the festival venue, on an overhead projector featuring video ads before each performance, and in fliers distributed by young men walking through the crowds.

Income from ads, donations and ticket sales (\$8 or \$5 a performance) were just enough to meet the festival's \$120,000 in expenses, according to Khaled Qatamesh, one of the festival organizers. If the Art Center made any profit from the festival, he says, it was negligible.

The Art Center estimates that about 20,000 people came from all over the OPT and inside the Green Line to see the festival, with a maximum of 3,000 people in attendance on any one night.

Before the festival began, there was talk of canceling it because of the ongoing prisoners' hunger strike. The Center decided to go ahead with the festival, but took the precaution of publishing a petition in the local papers signed by various Palestinian leaders on hunger strike, insisting that the festival, a rare bright spot in life in the OPT, must not be canceled.