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## JOSEPH TRUDO: If music is universal, Aramaic makes it powerful

Joseph Trudo

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"Aramaic? No one speaks Aramaic anymore. It's a dead language."

That was my initial response to meeting Shlimon Bet Shmuel ("Sam") and learning that his native language was Aramaic. Sam just smiled. I was soon to learn that ancient Aramaic (also known as modern Syriac) was very much alive and forms the cultural foundation for millions of people.

In January, 500 people gathered in Christ the King Retreat Center for a Eucharistic-centered retreat involving prayer, music and inspirational speakers. Sam was among those invited to speak and sing. He spoke simply and movingly about what is happening today in his native Iraq.

Following his address, Sam sang the Lord's Prayer in his native Aramaic language — the same language in which Christ delivered the prayer 2,000 years ago. The audience of mostly teenage youths sat in rapt silence as the ancient prayer song penetrated their hearts. It was a moving experience.

Sam is an anachronism, a throwback to the age of troubadours and wandering musicians who blend human discourse with flowing currents of melody and word.

Lately, Sam hasn't been singing many happy songs. Even his love songs are sad. They speak of hopes crushed, dreams denied and a people still looking for a homeland after two millennia.

Sam is an Iraqi Christian. He and the people from whom he descends are inheritors of a religious tradition stretching back in an unbroken chain for 2,000 years to the first apostolic missionary, St. Thomas, the founder of the Eastern Church.

Sam speaks fluent English, Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish but his native language, the language of his people and his songs, the language in which he communicates his heart, is Aramaic.

Yes, Aramaic — the same language spoken by Christ in communicating his heart so long ago. Sam refuses to sing in any other language. As a linguist, Sam understands the ability of words to transform, move and energize people. When those words are put

to music, their power is amplified many times.

As a musician, he has written and produced five CDs, all in Aramaic, which describe both the historical reality and heartfelt conflict of an ancient people still searching for a homeland.

Sam discovered music early and it opened a foundational wellspring in his life.

Born in the small village of Bet Baidey in northern Iraq, he showed an early interest in music, honing his gift by chanting hymns in the village church (later destroyed by Saddam Hussein). As a young adult, he joined the Assyrian Culture Club in Baghdad, where he participated in numerous plays and other cultural events.

His life changed dramatically in August 1973 when he performed "Simele," a song he had written commemorating the 1933 massacre of 600 Assyrian Christians by the Iraqi army at the village of Simele. The subsequent targeting of Assyrian Christians ultimately led to the destruction of 63 villages and the deaths of 3,000 people.

Government authorities took note of Sam's song and labeled him a "nationalistic singer." That label made life difficult. In Iraq then as now, it doesn't pay to be noticed by the government.

As a potential source of "agitation," Sam was forced to flee to Iran, where he spent almost three years attending the University of Tehran, studying music and English literature.

In 1976, Sam left Iran for the United States, settling in Chicago. Following his hurried departure from Iraq, it would be 32 years before he would see his homeland again. He worked for a magazine publisher, owned and operated two convenience stores and stayed involved with the Assyrian Christian community in the Chicago area. And, of course, he continued to write music.

In 2004 he sold his business and in 2005, amid an exultant surge of hope born of free elections, he supervised the first free Iraqi elections for the expatriate community in Illinois. In May 2005 he joined Operation Iraqi Freedom as a contract interpreter for the Titan Co. and served in his homeland until June 2006.

In April 2007 Sam moved to San Angelo and has resided here while working as an instructor at Goodfellow AFB.

In 2011, Sam returned to his homeland to perform a series of concerts and lectures. He was invited by Saadi Al-Maleh, director general of Syriac Culture and Arts, to perform before cabinet ministers, university intellectuals and leaders of the Assyrian Christian community..

Wherever he went, he found that people knew him, either personally or through his music, which is widely known and greatly loved by the Assyrian community in Iraq.

During his stay in San Angelo, Sam has greatly enjoyed the unique lifestyle of West Texas. While here, he viewed his first rodeo, rode his first horse, ate his first (real) barbecue, attended his first rattlesnake roundup and otherwise immersed himself in the unique flavor of West Texas life.

The local music scene has held a special lure for him, whether it be events at the RiverStage, live music groups playing at the clubs or special presentations at ASU.

In October 2009, he was asked by the Honors Student Association of ASU to present a lecture on the "Cradle of Civilization," followed by a rendering of his song "Ashurina," which is loved and widely sung throughout the Middle East.

If it's musical, Sam is there both to appreciate and to learn. He has never missed a presentation by the San Angelo Symphony and counts conductor Hector Guzman as a special friend.

Sam's life is busy. Each evening he walks along the Concho River, followed by hours on the computer maintaining a worldwide correspondence on matters ranging from politics to music, from linguistics to Middle Eastern culture. He has just finished writing his autobiography (in Aramaic) and is researching an upcoming book tracing the development of modern musical instruments from their ancient Sumerian/Babylonian /Assyrian roots.

He has been a featured performer at concerts from California to Canada and from Europe to Australia. In between and always there is the music. He is currently creating new songs for his sixth album.

To learn more about this interesting man, visit his website at [shlimonbetshmuel.com](http://shlimonbetshmuel.com) or Google him at Shlimon Bet-Shmuel. A word of caution, though — don't expect a short visit. You will learn fascinating things and end up wishing you had stayed longer.

*Joseph Trudo of San Angelo is a commercial helicopter pilot.*



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