



BIG PLAYER

Joe Baroutjian Reaches New Height in Lebanon's Music Industry

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

Studio Joe" is tucked in the ground floor of an old, war-scarred building in a narrow alleyway of Beirut's Armenian neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud, where at night you can still park your car in the middle of the street and get away with it.

Beirut-born, 41-year-old musician and recording engineer Joe Baroutjian's studio is equipped with the most sophisticated

digital recording tools and computers, hardware, gadgets and a 24-track recording mixer, one of the largest and most advanced in Lebanon.

On any given day, Joe can be seen sitting in front of a computer and the dining-room-table length sound mixer, cueing in the artists singing in a sound proof room. He fine tunes the music and often motions instructions to the singer with broad hand movements. There is a problem with two

bars of the music. Joe backtracks and records again, and again. He goes over the lyrics and the music word by word, bar by bar. After the 12th take, the problem is fixed and Joe is happy. The artist is exhausted and takes a break.

Some of the most famous Lebanese artists—Samira Tufik, Sabah, George Wassuf, who has revived the classic songs of Um Kalthum, and others—count on Joe and his studio to produce their recordings.

Joe has also written music for Lebanese artists. "There's an Armenian element in my music and the artists like that; they want more of it," says Joe, wishing he had more time to write music.

Joe is singled out from other studios in Lebanon because, as he puts it, "Singers want me to do their job, make them sound perfect." Working without assistants, it takes him about eight to 12 hours to record one song. "Sometimes it takes several days," he adds. First he plays and prepares the music, which takes about seven to eight



Left: The set of LBC's new game show entertainment TV program, called *Yalel Yaeyn*. Right: Joe Baroutjian in his studio

hours, and then up to four hours to mix the voice.

Recording studios in Lebanon used to be run by state-owned companies, such as the famous Studio Baalbek. But in 1983, Joe opened his own studio and went on to become one of the best studios in the country.

In 1995 and 1996, Joe received the "Best Studio in Lebanon" award from Mt. Lebanon Radio and TV Broadcasting organization. He has also received an award for a song he dedicated to Hikmet Wahbi, the Radio Monte Carlo presenter who died in 1986. Recently, he was invited by the Culture Minister of Oman to lead the band for a music award ceremony in Muskat.

Since 1975, as a keyboardist, Joe has traveled and played in Europe, Africa, Thailand, Singapore and virtually all Arab countries. In 1983, when he returned to Lebanon from Abu Dhabi, he decided to dedicate his time and efforts to building a recording studio and studied sound engi-

neering through correspondence with a school in Britain.

Within a few years of operation, Studio Joe's clients included artists from Syria and Jordan as well. Famous and lesser-known artists flocked to the studio to record, even during the most difficult times of the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s.

To accommodate his expanding business, Joe is building a new, larger and more advanced studio in the hilly Beirut suburb of Awkar, where in addition to recording music, there will be three studios for translations and dubbing to foreign TV films and programs; a large studio for 35-40 musicians and a smaller studio for individual artists. It will have the most advanced US- and German-made, fully computerized recording equipment.

In addition to his studio, Joe is currently the music director of a new game show entertainment TV program, called "Yalel Yaeyn." Sponsored by and aired on LBC, the most influential broadcast net-

work in Lebanon, the pilot show is a mixture of games, songs and dances with a live audience. Joe leads the show's 14-member band, whose drummer and bass guitarist are also Armenian.

For decades Joe has played in Armenian bands and worked with a number of singers. "The best musicians in Lebanon are Armenians and they play in top bands," says Joe. "I would say about 80 percent of music teachers in Lebanon are Armenians," he adds.

Despite the effects of the civil war on the music industry in Lebanon and the economic difficulties that the country is still going through, Joe is hopeful. "After 2000, we are going to see new heights in Lebanon as new resorts, hotels and entertainment establishments develop in the country."

Among Joe's new projects is the recording of a new collection of his own compositions—a melange of Armenian, Arabic and European music. ■