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Export date: Fri Oct 30 4:06:15 2026 / +0000 GMT

Laila Biali to bring genre-bending jazz performance to Opera House

Written By **Sam Odrowski**

Jazz fans have lots to look forward to next weekend.

The Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival, running May 31 to June 2, features several jazz artists, including JUNO award-winning Laila Biali.

She's played the festival a few times before and is eager for her return to the Opera House (87 Broadway, Orangeville) on Friday, May 31, starting at 8:30 p.m.

Biali's performance is in a quartet setting, with piano and vocals from her, her husband Ben Wittman on the drums, Kelly Jefferson on the saxophone and George Koller on upright bass.

?We perform original material, but we do love to reimagine pop hits, as well as what we call the ?Great Canadian Songbook.' So, those are songs that are not part of the jazz canon. It could be anything from Joni Mitchell to Neil Young, David Bowie, Coldplay. A lot of these arrangements have been driven by fans of mine who wanted to hear what we would do with songs that are a bit of a departure from what we think of as jazz,? Biali explained.

While the foundations of Biali and her band's sound are in jazz, they mix, bend and venture into other genres as well.

?The feedback that I get most from concertgoers, who see us live, is that ?I'm not typically a jazz fan, but I loved this,'? she said. ?I consider that not a slight to jazz, but a great compliment to us because our goal is to connect with as many listeners as possible, and also to challenge some preconceived notions about what jazz is.?

Jazz is known for having an offbeat swing feel to it, but Biali isn't afraid to use drum beats with a different rhythm to create something less traditional.

?I have a background in classical music and classical piano, and you can hear that a little bit in how I play. But I also grew up listening to everything from U2 to Michael Jackson,? Biali explained.

She has toured with many big names through her career, including Chris Botti, Suzanne Vega, Paula Cole and Sting.

She first worked with Sting on his ?If On a Winter's Night? project back in 2009. While living in New York, she was invited to audition and was selected as a backup singer.

?I was totally shocked,? Biali said. ?It was a dream for me. If there was anyone I could choose ? living or dead ? to work with, Sting was among the top of the list.?

She rehearsed Sting's estate in Tuscany, Italy, and later flew over to Durham, England, to film and record the winter music project.

?That was the beginning of a wonderful friendship of sorts. He stayed in touch over the years and remains an amazing source of inspiration, and he's been really wonderfully supportive,? said Biali.

In the moment, when performing, Biali draws a lot of inspiration from her bandmates, having played with her bandmates for 15 to 20 years or longer.

As an avid podcast listener, Biali said some of her writing comes from the stories that she hears, other times she draws from what

she's processing in her own life and the lives of others.

But at the end of the day, she stressed that it is the people who give her inspiration day in and day out.

?The number one inspiration for me is the people. We want to connect with people, we want to show them a good time, we want them to have a dynamic experience of music. We don't just want it to just stay in one lane, we want to give them the full breadth of emotions and range,? Biali said.

Her performance at the Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival will be sure to take listeners on a musical journey.

?There's lots of stories,? Biali said. ?The stories that weave together the songs and connect us to the audience are as important as the songs themselves.?

She told the Citizen she's eager to return to Orangeville, as she has a special connection to the region.

As a musician, she had her first memorable club date in Hockley Valley at the Woodside Restaurant (now closed), while living in Toronto, studying at Humber College.

?So, I have this real nostalgic feeling towards Orangeville and its surrounding areas,? Biali said.

?My husband and I, we also like to hike in Mono and he likes to do Nordic skiing in Mono.?

Don't miss out on the rare opportunity to see Biali live.

Festival goers can pre-purchase tickets that provide them with access to the headlining acts playing in Alexandra Park and the Opera House at www.ticketscene.ca/o/orangeville-blues-n-jazz/.

Biali said she'd encourage everyone to come out and enjoy the festive atmosphere during the Orangeville Blues and Jazz weekend.

?I would really encourage people to partake, I think they're going to love it, even if they're jazz and blues skeptics,? she enthused.