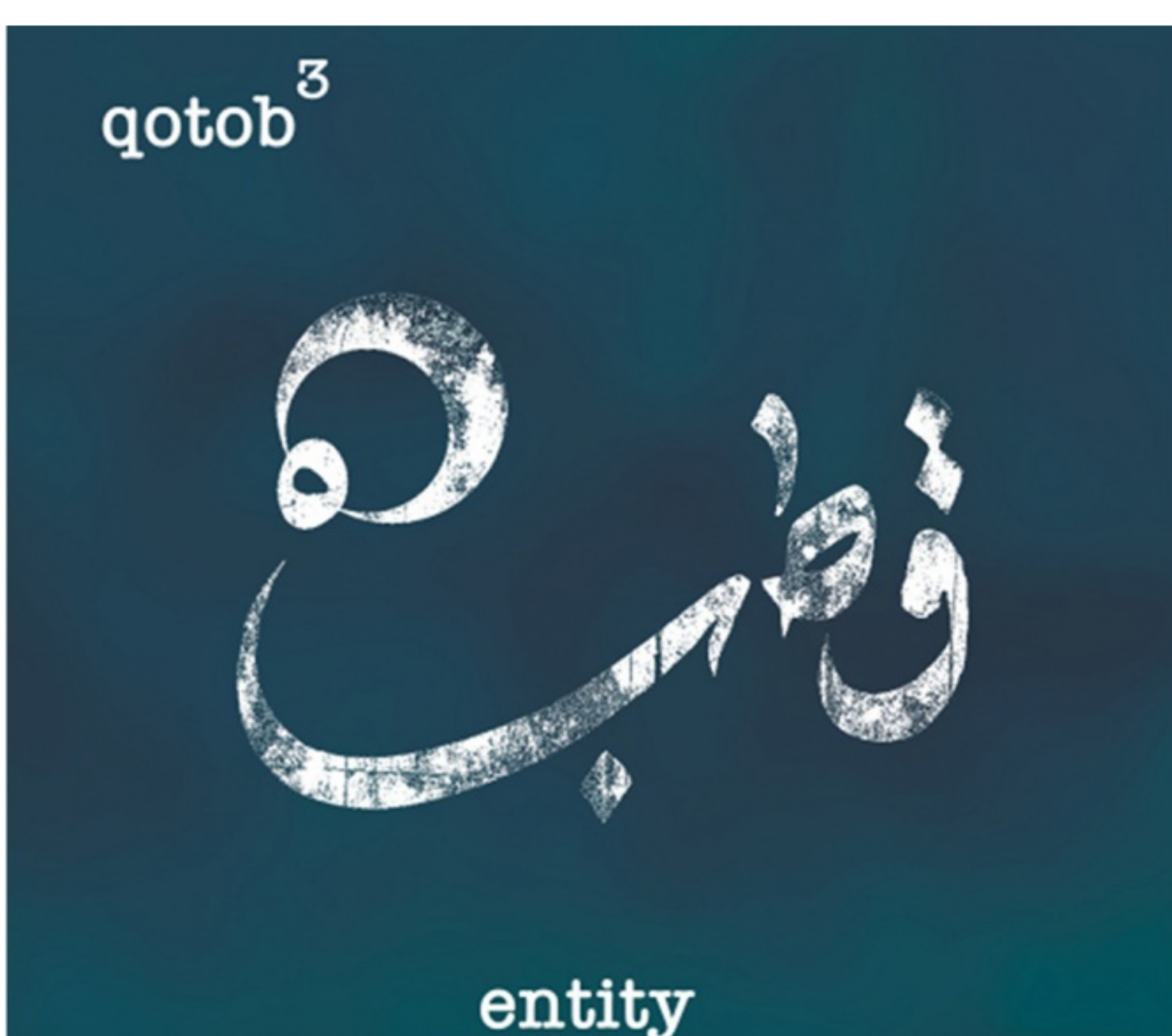


**Jazz with Chris Searle**

# Crossing continents, from Damascus to Brussels



**Q**otob Trio  
 Entity  
 (Choux de Bruxelles)

THE HEART blood of jazz is syncretism — a crucible of musical forms, cultures and peoples. In the amalgam of sounds from the Caribbean, Europe, the Americas and the Mississippi Delta, jazz was forged a century ago in the Louisiana port city of New Orleans and immediately began to spread relentlessly outwards throughout the world.

It keeps happening today in the most unexpected of locations. In 2016, young cellist Bassel Abou Fakher, from a war-ravaged neighbourhood of Damascus, found refuge in Brussels. In his home city he had been part of a quartet of young musicians including a trumpeter, percussionist and zither player who had struggled to keep music alive in a context of barbarism and deathly conflict.

They called their band Qotob — the Arabic word for axis or pivot — and, using music, they sought to keep their people in accord. They combined Syrian traditional themes and classical genres with contemporary jazz forms and managed to release an album which they promoted as a message of unity.

In Brussels, Abou Fakher found his way into musical meetings and jamming sessions and met the pianist and trumpeter Jean-Baptiste Delneuvillle, who had a deep interest in jazz and classical music as well as Balkan, Gypsy and Middle Eastern forms.

They joined with Piet Maris, the Belgian accordion and guitar virtuoso from Meerbeke, who is also a committed campaigner for the rights of refugees, to form a Brussels-based reincarnation of Qotob. It became “a platform, a pole, a point of reference for musicians to meet and communicate through music.”

The trio played at benefit events for refugee action, including at a large-scale celebration of the UN Human Rights Day in Brussels in December 2016.

Uncannily, the three make melodies and improvise as if they have been musical confreres all through their very different lives. On the album's opener Yara, they create and invent notes with their phrases rising, falling, pausing and increasing and decreasing pace apparently instinctively and with a powerful spontaneity.

At the start of that title track — all the tunes are his compositions — Abou Fakher's cello begins the narrative before Delneuvillle enters beside him. There's a slight pause and a sudden much weightier and faster sound and a tripartite harmony which expresses the power of their extraordinary sonic unity, as if there were many more instruments being played.

Cone has a mournful opening, with Abou Fakher's full and mellow notes peeling from their wooden womb and you wonder if this is the same cello that he played in the war-torn buildings of his neighbourhood in Damascus. Delneuvillle's strongly struck solo follows, slowing almost to stillness in exchanges with Abou Fakher's bowed beauty.

Maris's accordion begins Epidemic with an ironic, tuneful levity before Delneuvillle builds up the intensity with a stream of fast-paced notes. As the speed slackens, Abou Fakher's cello is sombre and a similar mood opens the longest track, the 11 minutes of Demonstration, where he plucks his strings while Maris's notes sing out with a tender serenity.

Delneuvillle's playing is sometimes reminiscent of Bill Evans, at others of the muscular sound of Errol Garner. The steps seem to be heavier, more forced and determined, as Delneuvillle's keyboard passion moves to a climax of excitation.

His notes carry a resolute timbre at the outset of Resistors before the reflective piano and cello duo guides you to think of Syrians in their own land or as refugees in an unwelcoming Europe. This music embraces them all with a powerful empathy.

Al Ruba begins with an echoing solo cello before Delneuvillle and Maris add their wordless voices to their keyboards. On the final track is Onec, the three instrumental sounds seem to coalesce across continents to become one.

As Delneuvillle says of their Brussels encounter, prompted by sheer serendipity and chance: “The values of sincerity and the search for beauty are universal, far outweighing differences of origin, culture and life journey.

“The balance between us speaks of these values, which are indispensable in today's complex and constantly changing world.”

Certainly Entity is a record to savour, as well as one to provoke similarly deep reflection.