

Ali
and his
golden
sax

By Shamim Padamsee
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Ali and his golden sax



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In Al Darb Al Ahmar, a busy old neighbourhood in Cairo, lived a boy named Ali.

He shared one small room with his family. Ali's father carried heavy loads at construction sites, and his mother worked long hours as a hairdresser.

When Ali was only seven, he had to leave school because his parents could not afford the fees.





To help his family, Ali started working in a shoemaker's shop. The job was hard. The shoemaker often shouted at him and sometimes even hit him.

Ali's hands ached from cutting and stitching leather, but he refused to give up. By the time he was thirteen, Ali had become the youngest shoemaker in the whole neighbourhood.

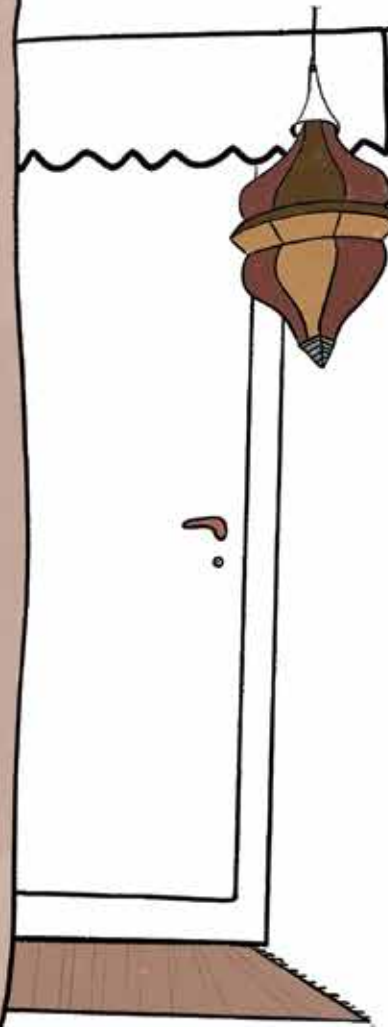
Although Ali earned very little, he felt proud to be earning money for his family. But as his skills grew, so did his pay. By fifteen, he was earning enough to support everyone at home.



Still, deep inside, he dreamed of something bigger – though he didn't know what it was yet.



One day, something amazing happened. On TV, Ali saw his friend performing music in a big show!



Ali's eyes widened.
"How did you get there?"
he asked his friend.

His friend told him about a special music school that served aspiring young musicians from Al Darb Al Ahmar. Ali's heart raced.
"Maybe... I could join too!"



When Ali visited the music school, he saw rows of shiny instruments. One sparkled brighter than the rest - a golden saxophone.

Ali picked it up.
It felt magical in
his hands.



"This is the one for me!"
he thought. But learning
to play music on it was
not easy.

At first, every note Ali
blew came out squeaky and
funny.

He felt embarrassed
and wanted to quit.
But teachers at the
school smiled and
encouraged him.

"You can do it, Ali. Keep playing!"
So he continued playing - and
little by little, the squeaks
became music.



Ali's mother worried.
Could music ever be a real job?

A kind teacher told her,
"Ali is very talented."

At last, his mother agreed to
let him stay – and soon became
his biggest fan!



One day, Ali's teacher took him
to a grand theater.

"You'll play here someday,"
she promised. Ali's eyes
shone like diamonds.

From then on, he practiced
for hours every single day.



Soon, Ali began playing
in small shows.



But success didn't come quickly.
For a whole year, no one wanted to
hire him. He felt discouraged and
almost gave up – but he kept going.



Finally, he got his big break in Sharm El Sheikh, a beautiful city by the Red Sea. There, Ali played music for people from all over the world!



Today, Ali plays many styles of music – Egyptian songs, jazz, even modern house. He even learned to speak English by chatting with visitors at his shows. His neighbours and family are all very proud of him.

Ali never stopped believing in his dream – and now, he's living it.





مدرسة الدرب الأحمر للموسيقى
al-darb al-ahmar music school

The Aga Khan Music Programme (AKMP) began providing arts and music education to marginalised communities in Cairo in 2010 and in Aswan in 2017. These educational programmes led to employment opportunities for performers, enhancing a strong connection to cultural heritage while creating pathways to professional and social success. Almost five hundred young Egyptians benefited from the classes, and almost a hundred had a chance to complete the programme and graduate.

Music classes in Aswan focused on traditional Arabic instruments such as oud, *darbuka*, *riqq*, and *tanbour* (an ancient form of lyre) or regional genres played on oud and *darbuka*. These classes attracted close to eighty students per year and provided them with the skills to generate income by performing for the community or for tourists. In doing so, they also contributed to keeping regional traditions alive.

In Cairo, the music school that served the community of Darb Al-Ahmar responded to a strong interest among urban youth in Western instruments such as trumpet, trombone, saxophone, clarinet and accordion along with *riqq* and *darbuka*. There were also classes in oud and solfeggio. Students generated income from community or restaurant performances, joined Cairo's musicians union, or pursued higher education in music. More than a hundred students yearly enrolled in the school's two-year programme.

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