

# Umm Kulthum:

## A Legend or a Story of Will!

**Hind Soufi Assaf**

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This article sheds light on the life of a unique female performer who managed to earn the respect of the whole Arab nation through her art, at a time when public performance by a female was still considered to be a taboo. It aims at introducing the reader to a unique phenomenon in the Arab world which has contributed to reforming the perception of women professionals in the fields of music and singing.

Umm Kulthum is one of the most important Arab female singers of her time. She was known as *Kawkab al-sharq* (i.e. the star of the East) as well as *Sitt* (i.e. lady) Umm Kulthum. She was considered the lady of all ladies. The title *Sitt* was granted to upper-class virtuous ladies. No female singer or artist other than Umm Kulthum was able to earn such a title, regardless of her status and the value of her art.

As for the choice of Umm Kulthum's name, according to Neemat Ahmad Fouad (2000), Umm Kulthum's father had once a vision after the *tajahhud* prayer (extra night prayers). In the vision he saw Umm Kulthum, daughter of the prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him), engulfed in light. She approached him and gave him a piece of jewelry, asking him to take care of it. Upon interpreting the vision, the father decided to call his daughter Umm Kulthum. The fortune (i.e., jewelry) descending from heaven was interpreted as a symbol of the daughter who was expected to be a carrier of blessings and hope. The interpretation seemed to be affirmed by her birth on *laylat al-*



Umm Kulthum with Aimée Kettaneh, organiser of the Baalbek festival. Lebanon. Photographer; anonymous. Collection Aimée Kettaneh ©Fondation Arabe pour l'image

*qadr* (i.e. the night of excellence). *Laylat al-qadr* is a special night during the month of Ramadan. Muslims believe the first verses of the *Qur'an* were revealed to the Islamic prophet Mohammad on that night.

## Her Singing Career

Umm Kulthum's exact birth date remains unknown, though many researchers believe that she was probably born in 1902 (Sahhab, 2003). She grew up in a conservative milieu. Her father was a *muazzin* (i.e. announcer of the hours of prayer at the mosque), and a religious singer who had been preparing his son to succeed him. The father was amazed with the speed with which his daughter learned the *Qur'an*. Umm Kulthum used to recite the religious supplications without any help and without committing any mistakes. One evening, quite unexpectedly, her father invited her, when she was only five, to accompany him to a performance that was organized by the village mayor. Umm Kulthum's performance was a great success and ever since her father started taking her along with him to the singing sessions.

Umm Kulthum's parents played an important role in shaping her personality and in her future career. Her mother Fatima insisted on educating her daughter. She was adamant about sending her to school, despite her husband's hesitation (because of financial obstacles, and perhaps out of fear of people's gossip). Most Arab families, especially peasants, did not send their daughters to school at the beginning of the 20th century (Sayyah, 1985).

In another instance, at a time when women were neglected and did not enjoy the same attention and rights that men did, Fatima, Umm Kulthum's mother, sold her jewelry to treat an eye injury that had afflicted her daughter. Umm Kulthum's eye problem persisted throughout her life, which led to her continuous use of opaque eye-glasses (Sahhab, 2003). Fatima had such a positive influence on Umm Kulthum's life that the latter considered her mother the ally to whom she resorted during critical periods of her life.

Out of fear of going against the prevalent customs and traditions, and in order to avoid offending his entourage, Umm Kulthum's father sought to hide her feminine features when he took her with him to the singing gatherings. He disguised her in men's clothing and covered her hair with a traditional masculine head-piece. Justifying this practice, Umm

Kulthum's father used to repeat that she did not need to depend on her looks to sing. He considered the other famous female singers' mode of dressing shameful. He looked down on them. In his opinion, all what they were doing was trying to distract listeners away from their bad performance. This disguise continued until Umm Kulthum reached adulthood. With time it became evident that Umm Kulthum could no longer appear in rural masculine garb that hid her identity as a woman. It is said that Umm Kulthum once wrote a letter to her mother asking her to persuade her father to allow her to exchange the masculine clothes he made her wear at parties for feminine clothes instead.

Finally, Umm Kulthum took the decision to change her clothing style, in spite of her father's objection and anger. When performing in women's clothes for the first time, she wore a black head-piece because she was shy to appear uncovered in front of her father, brother, and the audience as well. On this evening, Umm Kulthum held a handkerchief in her hand to alleviate the level of tension resulting from her new feminine appearance (Sayyah, 1985). Since then, the handkerchief became a trademark of Umm Kulthum.

Because of the stigma attached to female performers, Umm Kulthum's father confined her repertoire, for many years, to religious songs. However, he approved of her teacher's recommendation that she sing worldly, non-religious songs after Sheikh Abul 'Ula Mohammad personally intervened. The Sheikh convinced her father that singing poetry would not compromise Umm Kulthum's status as a singer and the respectable image she had earned from singing religious songs (Sahhab, 2003, pp. 53-63-81).

Umm Kulthum always performed in the presence of her father and brother and she always behaved in a serious manner. Her moral integrity remained unquestionable throughout her singing career. She was also a devout Muslim. She used to read from the *Qur'an* before every performance and whenever she faced difficult times. She also used to pray and thank God at the end of every performance. Umm Kulthum used to thank God for granting her the gift

of voice and blessing her with the ability to make others happy (Sayyah, 1985). She used to criticize the behavior of female performers in nightclubs and criticized their taking pride in the private meetings they held with ministers in their homes. Umm Kulthum strove to distinguish herself from other performers such as Munira al-Mahdiyya whom she specifically looked down upon.

According to Sahhab (2003), Umm Kulthum did not provoke the jealousy of eminent women singers, because she sang without a music band and was dressed in men's clothes. He adds that it is possible that other women singers were neither threatened nor jealous at first. However, they started feeling threatened and started attacking her after Umm Kulthum shifted to worldly singing (Sahhab, 2003).

Umm Kulthum and her family were angered when pictures of her unexpectedly appeared in magazines (Sayyah, 1985). In one incident, a photographer managed to take a picture of Umm Kulthum while she was relaxing with her girlfriend in an isolated spot at the beach. Umm Kulthum managed to persuade him to return the camera film to her. She explained to him that she is a peasant and has her own values and that it was not proper for the photographer to invade her privacy while she was relaxing and not properly dressed. The photographer returned the film to her and apologized (Sayyah, 1985).

Umm Kulthum maintained a solid relationship with the Azhari Sheikh, Mustafa Abdul-Razik, who came to her defense several times, whenever her father decided that his daughter should quit her career and go back to singing religious songs. Certainly, the protection extended by an Azharite and a conservative rural man, a man of religion of Abdul Razik's stature, constituted a source of assurance to the father. This is why Umm Kulthum (and her father) chose to live near him. For similar reasons, Sheikh Abul 'Ula Mohamed, who was known for his ethical and conservative principles, was chosen to be the primary composer of Umm Kulthum's songs (Sahhab, 2003).

It was Sheikh Abul 'Ula's wish that Umm Kulthum succeed him in singing *dawr* (a specialized genre

of classical Arabic music) that was exclusively performed by male singers. Her being a woman did not seem to make a difference to him. What apparently mattered to Abu al-'Ula was the fact that she was the most suited performer for this genre of music. This support, coming from a prominent religious figure, constituted the first step in Umm Kulthum's transition from singing religious songs to worldly, romantic singing. It was a transition that she insisted on making in spite of her father's fear that it could be the beginning of her moral deterioration. Umm Kulthum's decision to defy customs and participate in Sheikh Abu al-'Ula's funeral (a traditionally segregated event), in spite of both her father's and brother's objection, should not come as a surprise. It was a decision that no woman, except the *sitt* Umm Kulthum, could dare to carry out.

Acting in movies constituted a short phase in Umm Kulthum's career. It was after her father's death that she acted in a limited number of movies (six movies in total). Umm Kulthum added a condition in her contracts that there will be "no kissing" on her part. In these movies she performed a series of songs that tackled the life of a historical figure or a rural woman. In the movie *Salamah*, in which she was the heroine, a *Qur'anic* recital by her was recorded. A unique event in the Arab world she was. No *Qur'anic* recital was ever recorded in a woman's voice before or after Umm Kulthum.

### Search for Self and Female Rebellion

Umm Kulthum had a very strong personality and presence. Her professional journey and her singing career started off at an early age, when she performed in front of audiences from diverse backgrounds (from countryside to city). This reinforced early on her self-esteem and developed her singing abilities.

Umm Kulthum was very ambitious and had very high hopes. She learned several languages, especially French. She also learned to play the *oud* (i.e. an oriental string instrument similar to the guitar). Armed with knowledge, she became empowered to play an active role in shaping her career. As time passed, she gained professional

maturity. She started behaving confidently, giving her opinion to poets, and asking them to follow a style that is more readily accessible to people. She also chose the poems, changed words in them, and interfered in the writing and composition of her songs (Sahhab, 2003).

In a presentation she delivered at the academic conference on Arab music, which was held in Cairo in 1932, Umm Kulthum stated: "Reform is a necessity. This does not mean, however, that in order for us to assert our modernity, we should lose our spirit" (Sahhab, 2003, p. 111). She proposed the idea of a modified piano that would better fit the oriental demands and also the idea of a modified *qanoun* (i.e. an oriental musical string instrument). During the conference, Umm Kulthum appeared provoked by what she perceived as the organizers' underestimating of her role as a musician. In order to affirm her status as a musician, she, for the first time, played the *oud* and the piano while singing.

Umm Kulthum played an active role in advocating for women's right. In her tours in Egypt and the neighboring countries, Umm Kulthum frequently asserted women's right to vote, criticized female circumcision, and called for raising the marriage age. She insisted on running for the presidency of the Artists' Syndicate. She eventually won, becoming the first woman to ever head the Syndicate.

Umm Kulthum often spoke of her appreciation and respect for women's contributions: "I always empathize with women for the courage that they demonstrate on all occasions" (Sayyah, 1985, p. 143). In one of her keynote speeches in Tunisia, she said: "My sisters, uncover your heads, we are the productive force in society. We can keep our heads up and without a cover" (Sayyah, 1985, p. 165). Describing the extent to which Umm Kulthum influenced these women, Sayyah (1985) wrote: "the women took off the veil ..." (Sayyah, 1985, p. 165).

### Nationalist par Excellence

Umm Kulthum's songs stirred the emotions of Arab audiences. According to Sahhab (2003), the songs produced during the royal era were dedicated to

the country and not to the ruling elite. This is why the Arab audiences identified with those songs that moved beyond the narrow geographical boundaries of Egypt and expressed national sentiment shared among Arab populations.

Umm Kulthum was known to be sympathetic to people's suffering. Even though she sang for King Fu'ad of Egypt, "Shall I be loyal to him whether he was loyal or not (...) I can do nothing", and despite the fact that she honored Crown prince Farouk by singing "the kingdom is in your hands", "she sang for Farouk while dreaming of liberation" (Sahhab, 2003, p. 21).

King Farouk honored Umm Kulthum with the royal medal, "the Nile Star." She was the first woman to receive such a medal in the modern history of Egypt. According to Sahhab (2003), "despite the limited number of songs she sang for King Farouk, she earned the title of 'the Infallible', a title that was granted to women of high family rank" (pp. 89-105). Yet, when the King's uncle fell in love with Umm Kulthum, the royal family rejected the prospect of him marrying her given that she did not belong to the aristocracy. This was painful and offensive to Umm Kulthum who believed that she had attained an elevated status through her profession and high art.

Umm Kulthum believed that the audience of the revolution was her real audience. Hence, when a decision was taken by the revolutionary leadership to prohibit the songs of Umm Kulthum from being broadcasted given that she had sang for the monarchy, President Abdel Nasser rose to her defense. When he was told, "She sang during the monarchy", his historic response was: "The sun, the Nile, and the pyramids existed during the Monarchy, should we eliminate them because of that?" (cited in Soufii-Assaf, 2005, p. 131).

Umm Kulthum was a nationalist par excellence. She is the first woman artist in the Arab world who managed to give citizenship a real meaning. According to Sahhab, Umm Kulthum's interest in public issues began early on in her life, long before the 1967 revolution led by Abdel Nasser.

After Abdel Nasser's revolution, Umm Kulthum's national awareness matured. She supported the revolution and the Nasser program which ran in her veins. The intimate connection between her songs and the ongoing developments at the level of the Arab nation began ever since her relationship with Saad Zaghloul started. He was the founder of Egypt's most important political party, the *Wafd* Party. Zaghloul led the nationalist forces in Egypt that called for independence and advocated for reform. Umm Kulthum sang for him "Saad did not die", seeing in him, along with the rest of the Egyptians, a symbol of salvation. Using her songs, she also appealed to the president not to resign from his post following the 1967 defeat in the Arab-Israeli war.

Umm Kulthum sang for Abdul Nasser, for the revolution, and for the Arab identity. She was "the Voice of the Arabs": "I will not become a mother, my life journey has become about working for the sake of my country, and my friends will help me continue the journey". Umm Kulthum believed that working for the sake of the Arab cause was a calling in and of itself, and described herself as a singer who loves her country (Sayyah, 1985, pp. 141-144-164-168).

Umm Kulthum also supported the military. During the 1976 war, she extended an invitation to the soldiers upon their return from war to honor them. She had heard that her voice united them in times of difficulty. She founded "the Union of Women" for the support of the soldiers and played an active role in re-building her country thanks to her generous monetary contributions. She was the first Egyptian woman to donate her jewelry to the military and to the martyrs' families, which led others to follow in her footsteps.

She participated in international and Arab tours in support of her country, becoming the first woman artist to represent Egypt and to give performances in support of her country. Her trip to Paris constituted a significant event that was discussed by international critics who were awed by her presence and remarkable ability to affect people, leaving them almost in a state of intoxication.

## The Kulthumic School

Umm Kulthum was not only an excellent performer. She was also an innovator who developed the notion of improvisation when singing during live performances. She won at a relatively late stage in her career "the Award of Musical Creativity". She is responsible for three fourths of the developments that Arab music had undergone during the twentieth century. Sahhab (2003) states: "Everyone who composed melodies for Umm Kulthum got kulthoumized" (cited in Soufi-Assaf, 2005, p. 140) The Lady (i.e. *sitt*) was responsible for introducing the extended live radio broadcasts on the first Thursday of every month. It is true that despite the fact that Egypt had given birth to male voices that mastered the art of improvisation, Umm Kulthum had reached the highest and most refined peak in this art. She had a vocal quality that carried some of the qualities of the masculine voice. She also demonstrated such mastery over her voice to the extent of performing musical phrases that were considered miraculous. She could sing phrases that could hardly be played by musical instruments. She also tolerated immense pressure during performances which lasted four hours, even when she was at an advanced age. That was exceptional.

According to Sahhab (2003), "It is certain that exceptional singing through the lower levels of her voice occurred at the expense of her voice's feminine nature" (cited in Soufi-Assaf, 2005, p. 135). Sahhab wonders: "We do not know whether mistaking her voice for that of a man was purely physiological, or whether disguising her feminine appearance in masculine clothes during the first two decades of her life (in a conservative society which considers girls' singing a source of shame) had left a psychological impact that affected her larynx" (cited in Soufi-Assaf, 2005, p. 137.) There is no doubt, though, that the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics in a voice with exceptional zones was one of the reasons that distinguished her voice from the rest.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the group of people which contributed to Umm Kulthum's success was ahead of its time. The male entourage surrounding her



included Azharite Sheikhs, singers, musicians, modern and traditional composers, as well as poets who set for themselves the goal of guiding the Lady. They helped refine Umm Kulthum's professional identity and were also instrumental in shaping her personality and her career (Sahhab, 2003). Umm Kulthum, for her part, did not let them down. She was receptive to their comments and support, and committed to their shared societal values. Had it not been for this harmony between the two parties, the "phenomenon of Umm Kulthum" would probably not have seen the light and the general perception of women singers would have continued to be influenced by earlier prejudices - biases from which Umm Kulthum herself was not initially exempt.

It was the first time in the history of the Arab nation, that men in the field of music collaborated towards creating an example of a female artist who

does not promote consumerism. They managed to create a new example of female star. The example seemed to be the product of a sub-culture that was both culturally conservative and open to change and creativity, a sub-culture that sprang out of religious singing, keeping a distance from *taqatiq* (i.e. pop) nightclub singing.

Even though male figures were behind very many decisions taken on her behalf, this does not negate the fact that Umm Kulthum was personally determined to prove to herself and to her competitors that she was indeed "the Lady of Singing" in Cairo. She managed to do so thanks to her unique talent and intuition, qualities which were seldom found together in a single personality.

Hind Soufi-Assaf is a lecturer in Art History at the Lebanese University and Notre-Dame University.  
Email: hindsoufi@hotmail.com  
Translated from Arabic by Ghena Ismail

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