

Female Singers In The Arab World: Cultural Symbols in A Traditional Society

By Nada Awar

The Arab's appreciation of female singers is largely due to the romantic character of their culture. Hence, there is an abundance of sentimentalism, nostalgia and religiosity. A song is perceived as a means to express feelings, spread values and norms, and get human beings closer to their creator once used in the spiritual context. Naturally, the singer secures a prestigious position among the people for using his/her voice, «a gift from God,» to spread the word of God, express loneliness, reflect patriotism, etc...

During the Jahiliyah era (before the coming of Islam) talented Jawaries, i.e. female slaves, were a prize for notables eager to entertain in their palaces. The Jawari, who were gifted in singing or poetry, were sold at higher prices than their non-talented sisters. With the coming of Islam, lead female vocalists in musical recitals of the Koran secured even higher prestige. A memorable example is the ancient Arab «Sallama» who is considered as one of the greatest singers in history. She lived during the transitional period between Jahiliyah and Islam. She was one of the most expensive Jawari. A notable who could afford her was envied by his peers and the common people who gathered around his castle every evening to hear her sing. When she adopted Islam as her faith, her popularity grew even more and she was ranked with the great male poets of her time. She sang Koranic verses to praise God, a practice commonly known as «Tajweed». Abdul-Rahman Al-Ghis, one of the most religious notables in Mecca during that time, fell in love with Sallama after listening to her Tajweed.

However, religious music and songs are not limited to Islam in the Arab world. The importance of music and the singer of religious songs is also evident in the church choir. While some of the famous singers emerged from Tajweed others started in the church choir. In this article we shall discuss two such female singers who are literally worshiped by their Arab masses: the Egyptian Um-Kalthoum who emerged from the Tajweed prac-

tice, and the Lebanese Fairouz who emerged from the church choir.

Um-Kalthoum

Um-Kalthoum came from a poor Egyptian village. Her family was very religious. Her father discovered her talent at a very young age. She learned Tajweed and trained her voice by singing to the people of her village. Accompanied by her father, she started going from village to village to give recitals. Her powerful, rich voice and charisma on stage won her popularity. Um-Kalthoum's first climb into the world of stardom came when Sheikh Zakaria Ahmed, a notable Arab musician composed a number of songs for her. Another step on her way to the top was when she played the role of «Sallama» in a movie in which she sang Koranic verses without any background music.

Eventually, talent, fame and politics got together to elevate Um-Kalthoum to the highest pedestal of fame for any male or female talent in the Arab world. During the sixties, she sang the songs of the great composer, Mohamad Abdel-Wahhab. Jamal Abdel-Nasser, President of Egypt, was personally impressed by the product of their combined talent, notably the Arab nationalist songs they produced together. Consequently, the Egyptian government created a local radio station in Cairo, which broadcasted the song of the famous 'lady', to her Egyptian audience. Whereas, «The Arab Voice From Cairo Radio-Station» broadcasted her concerts, live, to her audience all over the Arab world. The Arabs, old and young, poor and rich, were entranced by her voice, her songs, her presence on stage. The influence she had on the masses was so great that some dared to label it as «the opium of the Arab populace».

During the early seventies, Um-Kalthoum died. Millions attended her funeral. The reaction was one of devastation and profound mourning. Um-Kalthoum's legacy lives on.



Um-Kalthoum



Fairouz

Fairouz

Fairouz came from a humble district of Beirut. She started singing at an early age at home, at school and in church while attending mass with her family. At the age of fourteen she sang with the State's radio station choir after having been discovered by musician Mohamad Fulaifel. Fulaifel had discovered Fairouz in school during a tour in search of new talent. However, the father of Fairouz, a traditional and conservative man, forbade her to sing in public. But musician Halim Al-Roumi persuaded him to change his mind, which he did only under one condition: «That she be accompanied by her brother everytime she went to the radio station.»

During the course of her work she met the famous composers, Assi and Mansour Rahbani, and married the former. Consequently, a familial artistic group was created and Fairouz's younger sister, Huda, also gifted in singing was included.

Fairouz's voice and musical talent combined with the touch of culture of the Rahbani style caught the attention of government officials. Realizing their value as a national asset, the Lebanese Government invited the group to participate in the annual International Festivals of Baalabek. There, Fairouz, with a voice which inspires tenderness and strenght all in one, sang the folk culture of 19th century Lebanon, the village, the warm-hearted nature of its people, traditional values, patriotism and puppy romance. In Baalabek, the Rahbani brothers nurtured her talent as a lead actress in their musical theatre. Hers was almost always the role of the altruistic victim of love and justice in a village quarrel and sometimes in the fictitious monarchy of a vagabond king.

The singing style of Fairouz is being constantly changed and updated to meet the times by her son's, Ziad Rahbani, compositions and distribution. Ziad's modern style colors her songs with a new and more sophisticated touch. This change of style shocked some of Fairouz's loyal Rahbani fans, while it pleased others who advocate change and progress in Arabic music.

Nevertheless, the religious image Fairouz held was not overshadowed by the variety of performances, her busy schedule as an artist, nor as a wife and a mother. She continued to perform her annual Easter Gospel recitals in a church in Beirut.

Conclusion

After observing the experiences of these two female Arab artists we may conclude the following fundamental cultural characteristics: First, family support was essential for their start, i.e. Um-Kalthoum's father and Fairouz' brother and husband, as chaperons. Second, singing the sacred message of God to the religious culture of the Middle East gave both women a respectfull image in the eyes of the public. Third, both ladies had talented male sponsors, i.e. Sheikh Zakria Ahmed and Mohamed Abdel-Wahhab for Um-Kalthoum and Assi, Mansour and Ziad Rahbani for Fairouz. Fourth, governmental support and encouragement gave both singers authority and status. Fifth, both artists are considered cultural shrines by many of their extremist fans, not to mention that their voice and talents cannot go unnoticed and consequently, must be guided through the traditional channels of fame ●