

UMM KULTHUM By David Stuppelbeen

Personal Reflection

As I worked to find just whom I would write a biography on, I found myself attracted to the idea of the anti-hero, who in the public mind of her country would still be somewhat well thought of, someone along the lines of Eva Peron, or even Imelda Marcos. I had seen biographical documentaries on both of these women, but another film that I had seen only ten minutes of stuck out in my head: "A Voice Like Egypt."

The antithesis of the type of woman I was thinking of originally, Umm Kulthum proved to be a more challenging, and in the end, a more rewarding woman to write on. In examining Umm Kulthum's life, I was fascinated to find the wealth of information that I did regarding her continued inspiration in Egyptian culture. The love that Egyptians, and for that matter, the Arab world still feel for her is amazing in itself, considering that she is still the top selling artist in the region. I was most enthralled by her commitment to the Pan-Arab cause. How many artists today would still stand in the minds of Westerners for their patriotism and drive? After 9/11, and with the current situation in Iraq and Palestine, I wanted to connect with the Arab past to gain a greater understanding of the culture. I believe that writing a biography gave me the tools to better understand the artistry of Arab music, and the importance of her singing style.

In many ways, music is a truly international language. Although when listening to her music, I am unable to understand the words, the emotion shines through. Her music at some points will fill you with sadness or with excitement. It is not unlike listening to Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Hartmann's *ony No. 1*, or Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. Although each of these pieces' choral and solo pieces are in a different language, one can not help but connect with the disheartening strains of *Carmina Burana*, the unending sadness of Hartmann's work, nor the jubilation of Beethoven's *9th*. You can make the same connections in Umm Kulthum's works as well. The emotions that we as a community of human beings can share through cross-cultural exchanges are key to fostering a global community. We all feel the same emotions: pain, joy, suffering, or love...

Umm Kulthum, although a minor footnote in the world of Western music and politics is a giant in the Arab world. To deny a region's cultural existence (with the only exception being food) we are really robbing ourselves of understanding and replacing true understanding with, as Said says, "Orientalistic" points of view. As Said writes in his great work, "Orientalism," we have romanticized and demonized the so-called "East." Rather than truly experiencing a culture, we look only to our gain politically, or perhaps worse, financially. In looking at the life of Umm Kulthum, I hope that I have been able to scratch away at the Orientalist filter that we as Americans have lived our lives looking through, to see a real glimpse of a great culture.

Biography

Umm Kulthum is quoted as saying, "My childhood was not different from that of many children of my country." From her humble and poor upbringing in a Nile Delta backwater, her meteoric rise is nearly incomparable with other stars of that generation, with the exception of Egypt's largest historical figure of the modern age, General Abd' al-Nasir. The junction of music, politics and revolution make for an intriguing story, all surrounding one singular voice, "The Voice of Egypt."

Umm Kulthum may have not been a woman who fought for the rights of women, or had suffered extraordinary hardships, but her influence on Egyptian music and the imagination of the political life of Egypt continues today. With her nationalistic and pan-Arabic fervor, Umm Kulthum remains a powerful figure, as Egyptians wax nostalgic about the past. As Katherine Zirbel opines, "The forty-odd years surrounding the 1952 revolution... was also the golden era of Egyptian song."

Music and well-loved singers of the time such as Umm Kulthum... played a central role in the development of a national consciousness, unity, and pride."²

Not only is Kulthum revered because of her association with Egyptian political life, but also her longevity as a performer, a pinnacle of traditional Egyptian values, and her raw talent and ability to bring both herself and the listener to the plane of *tarab*, or the state of enchantment. In all, Umm Kulthum's main contribution to society may very well be bringing back "classical" Arab music back to Egypt, when many of her contemporaries were forsaking it for more "western" sounds.

Umm Kulthum's exact birth date is unknown. Based on research though, it is estimated to be May 4, 1904. Umm Kulthum was born in Tammay al-Zahayra, near the city of al-Sinbillawayn, a Nile Delta town south of Cairo. The family house was a small one made of mud brick. Her father, al-Shaykh Ibrahim al-Sayyid al-Daltaji was the leader (*imam*) of the local mosque. Her mother, Fatma al-Maliji was a housewife. Umm Kulthum had two siblings, a sister Sayyida, was ten years older, and a brother Khalid, who was one year older.³

When she was five, she went to a Qur'an school, or *kuttab*. The *kuttab* included first and foremost the memorization of the Qur'an. This is most import, as she and her classmates acquired an ability to enunciate Qur'anic text, as well as the value of proper pronunciation and phrasing. "Education for the girls was by no means the norm, but neither were they excluded from the life of the *kuttab*."⁴ However, due to the family's financial circumstances, Umm Kulthum was almost unable to continue attending the *kuttab*. On her mother's insistence, the family saved the meager funds to allow her to continue to go.

Her father supplemented his income from the mosque by performing at weddings in the area with Khalid and his nephew, Sabr. Kulthum's musical career started at the *umda's* (local leader) house when Khalid fell ill during the time of a performance. Umm Kulthum's premiere at the *umda's* house was between the ages of five and eight years old. Word spread about the little girl with the powerful voice. This created quite an attraction, and she began traveling more extensively to sing up and around the Nile Delta and eventually into Cairo. By the 1920s, Umm Kulthum had attracted a large following. She began giving concerts, at which sometimes alcohol was served. As an *imam*, her father became concerned that the inebriation of the audience members and the disturbances that they would cause made him anxious. These concerns were rectified by dressing Umm Kulthum as a boy.⁵

By this time there was much encouragement for Umm Kulthum to move to Cairo to perform and receive further musical training. When Umm Kulthum arrived permanently in Cairo, one paper describes her as wearing a black men's robe. But in 1926, after much bad press brought forth by the allies of her female contemporaries in a bid to sabotage her, Umm Kulthum went through many transformations, including changing the way she dressed and firing her band—which included her father, cousin and brother. This sea change worked. One person who had seen Umm Kulthum as a girl wrote:

The simple girl has been transformed into a graceful, elegant girl, flirtatious and charming. I saw her and I sat with her and I was astonished by her quick wit, her nice engaging conversation, and her female wickedness which fills the soul with bewilderment and surprise.⁶

In the 1930s, Umm Kulthum launched seasons of public concerts, which were broadcast as well, and continued them almost every concert season until 1973. The main songs would run from thirty to sixty minutes each.⁷ In 1935, Umm Kulthum began production on her first film, *Widad*. It would be the first of six that she would make. The second film she made, *Nashid al-Amal (Song of Hope)*, featured "The University Song," which appealed to students to rouse themselves for the sake of progress. At this particular time, student demonstrations against Britain occurred regularly and forcefully. "The University Song" was sung repeatedly by Umm

Kulthum during this time period. These songs featured lyrics, such as “You [Muhammad, the Prophet] gave justice to the poor in front of the rich,” which confronted corruption within the Egyptian government.⁸ It was about five years later that the political voice of Umm Kulthum was to truly be heard.

The 1940s saw Umm Kulthum elected the head of the Musicians Union, and head of the Listening Committee of Egyptian Radio. At the same time, she introduced a new set of *qasa'id* (a particular poetry and song style) that was particularly religious. “I take pride in singing Arabic *qasa'id*, especially religious ones,” Umm Kulthum told a group of Arab ambassadors. “*Qasa'id* are the foundation of Arabic song whose history extends over 3,000 years.”⁹

In the 1940s, Umm Kulthum began to voice her own opinions more publicly than ever before. Her most dramatic effort in this regard was certainly her entertainment of the Egyptian troops who fought at al-Faluja. Interestingly, this engagement was to be the first time she met Gamal Abd al-Nasir. The minister of war asked that Umm Kulthum not draw attention to the battle: the loss at the hands of the Zionists was due to faulty munitions owing to a corrupt arms deal by their own government. Umm Kulthum’s response was: “I have made my invitation.... and my invitation stands.”¹⁰

The 1950s saw her continued concert series, charity work and growing nationalistic fervor. Her monthly concerts drew an audience of about 2,500 persons on one occasion. Customarily they were four hours in length, and broadcast by the Egyptian State Broadcasting Company reaching much of the Arab world. These concerts also served as a political platform as well. After singing about the long history and greatness of Egypt, the the verse asked, ‘In view of this culture, are we in need of protection?’, and shortly thereafter, a verse declared, ‘The situation is critical, everyone must stand prepared to fight.’ The theater crowd cheered wildly at these sentiments.¹¹

When the bloodless Egyptian Revolution happened in 1952, Umm Kulthum commissioned the poet Ahmad Rami to write an appropriate national song, which was titled “Egypt, Which Is in My Mind and My Blood.” Along with this song, other works supporting the new Abd al-Nasir government appeared, including pieces about the Suez Canal and the High Dam. Her monthly concert series was more than just an Egyptian event—it was a pan-Arab event. The first Thursday of every month, millions of Arabs planned to be by their radio sets. Even taxi cabs stopped by the street sides, as the drivers and other nearby enthusiasts listened to these broadcasts on the car radios.¹²

Umm Kulthum was one of the best practitioners of *tarab*. *Tarab*, more definitively, is “the traditional urban music, especially the *qadim*, or older more ecstatically oriented repertoire; and also the ecstatic feeling that the music produces.”¹³ As Umm Kulthum puts it, when she performs, it is “as if I were at a school, and the listeners were pupils.” The *haflah*, or musical gathering, consists of the artist, and the audience. The active participation of an audience is typical in *haflah*.¹⁴ During a *haflah*, the audience will call for certain lyrics to be sung, over and over again. “Essentially,” says Racy, “the Western notion of background, or soft ‘dinner’ music is alien to the tarab culture, whose practitioners tend to view direct and continued interaction between performer and listener as prime conditions for good entertaining.”¹⁵ The most common expression of audience participation is *Ah!* which reflects pain, bewilderment, or pleasure. Another is *Ya ruhi!* or “Oh my soul!” These are shouted at the performer as both performer and audience reach *tarab*. *Kaman ya Sitt Umm Kulthum!* is yet another audience response: “Once more, oh Lady Umm Kulthum!” or *win-Nabi kaman!* which is “Again, for the Prophet’s sake!” These responses are peppered over live recordings, which also account for the length of some songs. In particular, a performance of “Inta ‘Umri” lasted for two hours in 1972. Her performance in Paris in 1967 ran until 3 A.M., setting a local record for concert length—just over seven hours. Audience participation is the key factor for the length of these performances.¹⁶

The most dramatic step that Umm Kulthum took in the 1960s was her creative collaboration with Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, at the behest of Abd al-Nasir. Abd al-Wahhab was a star in his own right; he was a popular recording artist and film star, running a parallel path with Umm Kulthum. At a concert in 1960, the seeds of their collaboration were sewn after Abd al-Nasir invited them both to supper after the concert. The fruit of their combined labor produced “Inta ‘Umri” (You are my life), one of Umm

Kulthum's most famous songs, which would last upwards of an hour with demands for certain lines to be repeated during performances. Not only was Umm Kulthum talented, she took care of many of the back end business decisions, which included the choosing of songs, composers and texts.

The close of the 1960s saw the defeat of Egypt in the 1967 war; national pride was at an all time low. Moved by patriotism, Umm Kulthum embarked on a concert series to various Middle Eastern countries to raise morale, the biggest political effort of her life. In each country she visited, local poets would be asked to supply lyrics about the country, and the poem would be set to music and performed. Each of these were characterized as state visits, due to her diplomatic passport status. She would meet local political leaders and tour important sites. Between 1967 and 1971, she traveled in Egypt, to ten Muslim countries, and to Paris to do benefit concerts to replenish the Egyptian treasury. By 1971, she had donated two million dollars, much of it in gold and hard currency to the Egyptian government.

In 1971, Umm Kulthum's health deteriorated. Although she continued to try and perform, her last album had to be recorded while sitting, as she was too weak to remain standing. In February 1975 she died of a heart attack. Four million people attended the funeral, more than Abd al-Nasir's, and more than the authorities were expecting.

Summing up the life of Umm Kulthum and her important contributions to both Arab musical culture and Egyptian nationalism is difficult. Musically speaking, her practice of *tarab* into popular culture is important. More important, as Egypt reimagines its identity today, we can surmise the connection between politics and music. Just as Bono is heavily involved in political discussions on poverty with a variety of world organizations, the relationship will probably not solidify in the collective memory of the public as the memory of Umm Kulthum and Abd al-Nasir. This intersection is the reason that Umm Kulthum is truly "The Voice of Egypt." Here music fused together traditionalism—a return to roots—that provided a perfect time for the discussion of national identity, and a perfect space for exploration of a new reality—one free from British rule. Her music celebrated the victory of over colonialism, and sought to fuse the Egyptian identity into one nation.

ENDNOTES

1. Virginia Danielson, The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) 21.
2. Katherine E. Zirbel, "Playing It Both Ways: Local Egyptian Performers between Regional Identity and International Markets," Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond, ed. Walter Armbrust (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 124.
3. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 21.
4. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 22.
5. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 29.
6. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 62.
7. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 78.
8. Virginia Danielson, "Performance, Political Identity, and Memory: Umm Kulthum and Gamal Abd al-Nasir," Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts in the Middle East, ed. Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo: The American University Press in Cairo, 1998) 111.
9. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 123.
10. Danielson, "Performance, Political Identity, and Memory," 112.
11. Danielson, "Performance, Political Identity, and Memory," 112.
12. A.J. Racy, Making Music in the Arab World, (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2003) 73.
13. Racy, 229.
14. Racy, 59 & 64.
15. Racy, 65.
16. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 137.
17. Danielson, Voice of Egypt, 184.

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TIME LINE

1904: Umm Kulthum is born

1909-12: Performs at village celebrations

1922: Performs in Cairo

1930s: Public concerts and radio broadcasts

1935: First film, *Widad*

1939: Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. British troops allowed to stay in Egypt

1940s: Heads Musicians Union.

1944: Palestine war. Defeat of Egyptian army

1946: Marries Mahmud Sharif, a fellow musician. Marriage dissolved within a few days

1948: Offers support for Egyptian soldiers who fought in Sinai

1954: Marries Dr. Hasan al-Hifnawi

1952: Egyptian Revolution. Abd al-Nasir brought to leadership

1960: Decorated with Order of Merit by Egyptian government

1967: Military defeat of 1967. Kulthum's money raising concerts for Egypt.

1975: Death and national mourning