

Marcel Khalife

The Power of Unity through Music



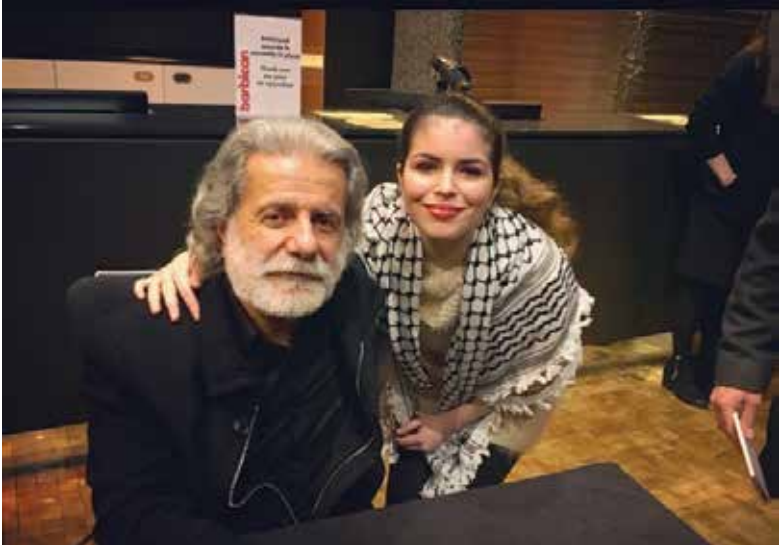
By Amira Gabarin

On April 2, I went to the Barbican in London to attend a Marcel Khalife concert. I had never heard his music but was persuaded to join my parents who were adamant that I should attend. This experience turned out to be much more than a concert. On the underground on the way to the concert, there were several Arabic speakers who, when we realized that we were all going to the same place, began to smile and converse as though we knew each other. As we walked into the Barbican, there were people of all ages greeting each other excitedly. Arabs from all over London, Muslims and Christians, united to see an icon. I didn't understand why they were so excited, what made Marcel Khalife so special. However, I soon realized. We took our seats in the packed concert hall and waited for an elegant older man to walk onto the stage followed by several musicians. I had never heard applause like this; it was seemingly endless. I looked at the faces around me and the emotion in their eyes was undeniable. Marcel said nothing. He just stood and smiled gracefully. My own father was smiling as well, but nothing could conceal the emotion in his eyes. At this point I realized that Marcel Khalife was more than a musician: he is an inspiration, and he is truly loved.

Unstoppable, roaring applause occurred throughout the night, erupting at times in the middle of a song and always at the end of Marcel's long and beautiful compositions. For me, the most striking moments were when the lights would brighten and he would stop singing and raise his hand, at which sign the audience would sing the heart-wrenching and beautiful

lyrics in unison, softly, their voices full of emotion and stoic sadness. Everyone in that hall was united by the music that sang of peace, love, and martyrs, in the magnificent poetic diction that unites and defines our collective identity as Arabs. The music was masterful. I was enchanted by the buildup of the songs, the beauty of the sound of the *oud*, and the incredible talent of the other musicians, two of which are Marcel's sons.

There were three defining, unforgettable moments that touched me to my core. One was Marcel's tribute to the late great poet Mahmoud Darwish which he introduced as a happy song. It was purely instrumental, full of life, beauty, and strength; the qualities that embodied Mahmoud as a man and as Marcel's friend. By the end, the music became quieter, Marcel bowed his head, and a somber mood filled the room. All the other instruments died down until only his incredibly gifted son played the



Amira Gabarin with Marcel Khalife after the concert in London.

piano increasingly softly and beautifully. At this point, tears filled my eyes and goose bumps covered my arms. Without any words, Marcel was able to capture the very essence of Mahmoud, also conveying, movingly, with the end of the song not only the loss of an indescribable man but also the loss that all Palestinians feel – the fear that we will die without returning to our homeland, without our great nation being free.

The second incredible moment was the song *Oummi*. Inspired by the most famous poem by Mahmoud Darwish, “To My Mother,” Marcel sang of how he yearned for his mother’s bread and coffee, for returning home. The audience sang along, knowing every word of Marcel’s most famous song that is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it simply expresses the love we feel for our mothers. Marcel’s mother died when he was 16, so its direct meaning obviously carries personal sentiment. Secondly, “mother” in Darwish’s poem symbolizes the homeland, Palestine, and he expresses his fear of dying while “my mother’s tears shame me,” the tears of Palestine.

The third moment that resonated with me was the energy of the audience after the finale of the concert: Everyone was standing, clapping, smiling, crying, singing, united as one in music, poetry,

and love of the Middle East and Marcel Khalife, the man who embodied it all, the man who had brought us all together. The applause was so great that Marcel came back on stage and the applause went on longer than I have ever heard. When it was over, one middle-aged man yelled “Long live the people of Palestine, long live the Arab world,” and everyone clapped and cheered. This moment was the most special. Tears fell from my eyes as I felt part of a family. The devastating politics and wars of the Middle East have broken every Arab’s heart; we feel lost, attacked, and hopeless at times. Yet during this concert we were united, we were unbreakable – through the sorrow and heartbreak in Marcel’s music came a fire of unification that we must remember, cherish, and keep alive in these sad times. Because no matter how much our beloved and broken nations of Iraq, Palestine, or Lebanon are bleeding, we will never stop singing, we will never stop smiling, and we will never stop being unified as the family that we are.

Amira Gabarin is a Palestinian studying international relations at SOAS, University of London. She loves to write about politics, especially the developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict. She has written in publications such as The Telegraph and has her own weekly blog.