



Music in Palestine, Then and Now

By Amira Gabarin



One way in which Palestinians enjoyed music in the 1960s was by going to the cinema to watch performances by their favorite actors and singers. In September 1962, *Eternal Melody* was being shown at the Edison Theatre in Jerusalem, starring the Syrian actor and singer Farid al-Atrash. Farid was so popular and beloved that when his song was shortened from the original, longer version, the audience went on a rampage, smashing seats and demanding their money back. The majority of Farid's songs were about love and relationships, and some were patriotic. It was rumored that he composed a Palestinian national anthem in anticipation of an independent Palestine. His music was so broad and inclusive that it managed to connect people from all around the world. Moreover, part of his song "Awal Hamsa" is found on The Beatles *White Album*, in "Revolution 9." So wide was his popularity that when he died on December 26, 1974, the entire region mourned his loss.

Up until 1967, much of the popular music dealt with the exile of Palestinians, the refugee crisis, and the right to return. This is demonstrated by the popular song, "Raji'un," by Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers, which pined for freedom and the return to the homeland. Post-1967, the most popular music was by Fairuz who created "Zahrat al-Madae'n," which is believed to be the most popular song of the period. Lyrics such as those of "Zahrat al-Madae'n" spoke of the exile of Palestinians in 1967, and the devastating effects of the 1967 war. In this song, Fairuz speaks nationalistically of captured East Jerusalem: "This is our home and Jerusalem belongs to us. / And in our hands we will celebrate the splendor of Jerusalem / by our hands peace will return to Jerusalem."



Palestine Youth Orchestra. ESNM Archive.

"Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent."
Victor Hugo

A new theme was also created after 1967, which incorporated ideas of resistance and liberation into music in Palestine. Umm Kulthum sang her one and only song about Palestine in 1969, "Ashbaha al-Ana 'indi Bunduqiyyah," in which she sang of how "I am one of the revolutionaries, for there is only one path to Palestine, and it passes through the barrel of a gun." Moreover, Sheikh Imam 'Isa sang "Ya Falastiniyyeh" in 1968, which was also about a more forceful form of resistance that was

being developed during the period. This song was so popular at the time that Yasser Arafat asked to meet Sheikh on a visit to Cairo in the same year and requested that he sing for him. This meeting shows how music was connected to politics on a significant scale, even touching the leader of Palestine.

Radio artists, PBS [Palestine Broadcasting Service], Jerusalem. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



Post-1976 music introduced yet another theme which was about the treatment of Palestinians in Israel and living under occupation. Poets such as Mahmoud Darwish became extremely popular during this time as his work was being used widely as lyrics for songs. One of these was the popular song “Sajjil Ana’ Arabi,” sung by both George Qirmiz and Ahmad Qa’bur. It depicted a Palestinian at an Israeli checkpoint: “I am an Arab... Does this anger you?” Darwish’s poem “Ila Ummi,” became one of Marcel Khalife’s most popular songs. The song described Darwish’s personal feelings of nostalgia and loss as he was exiled from Palestine “yearning for my mother’s bread.” The popularity of this song and poem demonstrated that, whilst there

Music in Palestine, as with all forms of art, has lived and developed throughout decades of resistance, occupation, sorrow and, above all, love for a tormented country.

had been significant developments within music about Palestine, the 1948 musical theme that had so greatly highlighted the right to return and never-ending feelings of loss and yearning to return were still felt by and connecting with Palestinians all over the world, especially those who were in the diaspora. I remember my own father, someone who had lived outside Palestine his entire life, only returning for brief visits, telling me that Darwish’s poems and the music that encompassed them, made him feel a “deep sense of loss,” one that is inherent in all Palestinians, no matter where they go. “A deep sense of sorrow for my missing nation. A sense that can only be

compared to someone’s feelings towards his/her own mother.”

It can be said that there have been significant developments and changes regarding which kinds of music Palestinians have listened to. Although they have continued to listen to iconic and traditional music about Palestine and other subjects such as love, there has been – since the late 1980s – an emergence of more modern and different styles of music. For example, the band Sabreen combined Palestinian folk songs with innovative musical techniques. This connected traditional styles of music with modern and new sounds, which brought the roots of Palestinian music together with the sound of younger generations.

Khalil J. Aldabous, who works at Radio Gaza FM, said that the new generation of Palestinians has continued the ongoing message of Palestine: “New Palestinian singers from Gaza have shown up to deal with a variety of Palestinian topics that represent the reality that we are witnessing in the occupied territories ... That is our happiness, our hope, our sorrow, our suffering, and so on.” Khalil also spoke about how the development of technology has been a significant factor in the developments and changes in music in Palestine. “Earlier on in the 1990s, radio would broadcast national songs and news. Today there are more than 30 radio stations in Gaza and the West Bank and most of their programs focus on news, entertainment, and discussions, and include various types of new songs and music.”

Mc Gaza, a rapper with limited yet growing popularity, has felt some of the very real constraints of being an artist in Gaza. These include severe restrictions on access to electricity. This is a problem that has become progressively worse over the years, due to the blockade of Gaza in 2007, as well as the three major wars since 2009 that have taken their toll on Palestinians. The Revolution Makers, a band that sings about “love, freedom, and revolution,” has stressed the difficulties of recording in Gaza as “we are under siege

everywhere ... We only have one chance every three or four months to find enough money to record.” Mc Gaza believes that most Palestinians prefer traditional Palestinian music and are not keen on rap. Much of the rap music prevalent in Gaza and Palestine is about connecting and rising above oppression.

One of Mc Gaza’s most popular songs, “Law Ba3ref,” speaks about how the national colors of Palestine connect Palestinians and how “no colors can cause problems between us.” Rafael Saadeh, who is also a rapper from Gaza, believes that his music “connects people through honesty and truth in the words that I speak ... It connects people all over the world who are in a similar situation of constant discrimination, segregation, occupation, and separation. It connects people who can relate or feel my pain.” In one of his songs, “Scars of Gaza,” the lyrics read: “But don’t fear, we connect through blood, sweat, and tears.” Raffoul has also chosen to rap for the most part in English so that, “it is not limited to those who speak only Arabic. English is more universal and creates a wider audience.” Even though this new wave of music may be restricted in some ways from reaching both Arab and international audiences, there have been artists in the last few years who have proved through their international success that new Palestinian music can appeal universally. Palestinian rap band DAM have several hundred thousand views on YouTube, with songs such as “Meen Erhabe” gaining support throughout the Arab world and even on an international level. DAM’s tour around the world in 2014 included such places as Sweden, Belgium, Holland, and London. I attended one of their concerts in London, and the sense of international support was overwhelming. People from Britain, Asia, Africa, and all over the world were there – proving that their kind of music can in fact both appeal to and connect with people all over the world.

Arab Idol winner Mohammed Assaf is also an example of someone who has created an international audience with a truly

Palestinian music has been among the most diverse and inclusive types of music in the Arab world, communicating its core message of unity and strength whether in 1950 or 2014.

global fan base. According to Star Count, a social media tracker, Arab Idol became the most popular show in the world in June 2013, and the third most popular channel on YouTube in the same year. Not only does Mohammed sing new and popular Arab songs, he also incorporates the *mawwal* and demonstrates his mastering of the traditional *maqquams*. This shows how even with the new adaptations and developments of Palestinian music, traditional roots are far from forgotten and are incorporated into new styles, connecting not only more Palestinians but also more people internationally. New technology and a variety of platforms ensure that the Palestinian voice is being heard. In the words of Palestinian prisoner Hussam Shaheen, “We Palestinians have depth and a national umbrella through the talented young Mohammed Assaf; the Palestinian voice whose throat warbles gracefully like the shores of Gaza of Hashem, the full bloom of the mountains of Carmel and Galilee, and the sweetness of soulful hymns in the streets and alleys of old Jerusalem.”

Amira Gabarin is a Palestinian student who resides in London. She hopes to study international relations next September at university. Amira 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.