

Kamilya Jubran's Solo Journey:

Lemon by Lemon and Cigarette by Cigarette

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When Mounira al-Mahdiyya began to sing publicly in Egypt in 1893, she was said to be the first Arab woman to do so in the modern age. She was followed shortly after by Umm Kulthum. Since no women were allowed onstage prior to that, no female singing tradition existed yet at that time. Singing softly, or sweetly “like a girl”, was unheard of. Singing was something learned from male *mashayikh* (i.e. religious figures). If you ever hear Umm Kulthum recite the *Qur'an* you will understand. This is no nightingale, this is not a lullaby, this is not Fairouz. Their voices had to be strong, assured, and dead precise in key and diction. They had to carry religious songs and *qasa'id* (i.e. epic poems) comfortably. They had to project across a wide space to reach an audience well before microphones could do the work.

This is the particular vocal tradition embedded in Kamilya Jubran from childhood, when her father began to train her. Kamilya makes no effort to sound pretty or “feminine”. Her voice cannot be categorized as sweet, although it can take sweet and playful turns. It is always permeated by serious emotion, but never sentimental.

In one black and white photograph, she is about four years old singing on a chair in the village square surrounded by her father, the priest, and a gathering crowd. Her voice sweeps through the narrow streets of al-Rama, over the hills of Galilee where this village sleeps. It reaches for the vast expanses of Umm Kulthum's *Anta 'Umri* with all the might it can muster from those tiny lungs. A child singing on a chair, until the chair becomes a stage in Cairo, Paris, or Bern and the year is 2003.



Kamilya Jubran singing on a chair in the village square in al-Rama Galilee

From 1982 until 2002, Kamilya was lead singer and *qanoun* player for the Jerusalem based Palestinian band, *Sabreen*. During that time, *Sabreen* released four albums, each corresponding somehow to the Palestinian situation: from the Sabra and Shatila massacres to the Oslo Accords, or to everyday life under occupation. Lyrics included poems written by Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qassim.

In 2002, Kamilya headed to Europe to begin her solo journey. Since then, she has released the groundbreaking album, *Wameedd*, a collaboration between Kamilya on *oud* and vocals and the Swiss musician Werner Hassler on electronics. With her first solo album, Kamilya is setting sail as a composer, her love of language serving as a compass. The result is minimalist and poignant and downright beautiful.

Wameedd is a rare kind of collaboration between East and West. This is due to both Kamilya and Werner's conscious effort to avoid the pitfalls of

the “World Music” genre. At no point does Kamilya sound sampled¹ or exotic. Instead, the electronics work to understand and underline her mood. Kamilya presents haunting minimalist melodies and stripped down *oud* phrasings. What is interesting and wonderfully contradictory about Kamilya’s idea of minimalism and abstraction is that it always contains pockets of ornamentation.

Even though Kamilya is clearly rooted in the vocal traditions of certain Egyptian schools, and even though she has been singing with *Sabreen* for 20 years, with *Wameedd*, she breaks the conventions set by them and set by the Egyptian schools and *Sabreen*, to the point where you can barely hear those influences or ghosts anymore. Kamilya has liberated herself. With her solo work, she is her own unique invention, no *déjà entendu* here. Kamilya’s voice is her laboratory, a diary.

First and foremost, Arabic is a language of onomatopoeia. Think of the word *bala’* (i.e. to swallow) which begins on the lips, moves to the tongue, then down to the throat. And Kamilya has been trained in and has internalized schools of pure Arabic musicality where the sound and meaning are ecstatically wedded and where diction is king. Kamilya makes classical Arabic cool again.

She grafts her unparalleled craft onto a careful selection of Arabic poems (both original and translated). She probes them without inhibition. Kamilya clearly has a love and understanding of poetry. This is evident in her choice of poems and in her delivery. The texts are written in free form style and are void of cliché. They range from Gibran Khalil Gibran to Paul Shaoul to Sawsan Darwazeh. They are deeply relevant both to her and to our times. This produces a truly contemporary effect.

“A stranger in this world
I wandered East and West on earth
But found not my birthplace nor met one who
recognizes me
Or who heard of me”. (Lyrics from *Ghareeba*, by
Gibran Khalil Gibran)

Which of us has not known war and exile? These

are the motifs of our Arab lives and the motifs of Kamilya’s life. She packages and delivers back to us in such a way as to make us love them for an instant because she renders them beautiful.

Kamilya tastes the sorrow and ecstasy of each syllable in her mouth. She is clearly enamoured by the sound of words, like a child discovering the power of their sounds for the first time. The *Nafad al-Ahwal* series remains a strong example of this. She gives each and every word in these contemporary poems by Paul Shaoul due pause and natural nuance, delivering with perfect classical Arabic diction. One could even call it classical Arabic rap. For any lover of the language, the result is pure pleasure. The same pleasure she herself is deriving.

“I remembered the day I was killed, raped, cut to pieces lemon by lemon, cigarette by cigarette, was ripped and for the first time I cried for my death and for nature”. (Lyrics from *Nafad al-Ahwal* by Paul Shaoul)

Due to the diverse travel restrictions placed on Palestinians, it is mostly in Europe (sadly) that Kamilya can be free to tour now. And while the reception of her shows there has been very warm, one wonders how deeply European audiences can appreciate the scope of Kamilya’s achievement. After all, they don’t really have an Arabic reference - linguistic or musical.

Ironically, amongst the audiences who do have a reference, this reference in itself proves to be a barrier. These are the crowds nourished on Rotana pop² or maybe even a kind of “Rotana *tarab*”³ found plentifully on the independent Arabic music scene. Kamilya is not a neoclassicist, to the chagrin of many Arab audiences. Worse, it is not unusual that requests for folksongs pour in at her concerts, for confounded audience members to talk or to get up loudly and leave, or for a baby to cry, unabated.

Attempts to broadcast concerts live via satellite to several Arab cities simultaneously have failed because of dangerous situations on the ground (such as the Second Intifada). These are some of the sad ironies that Kamilya lives and which feed her songs.

Kamilya is a singer who cannot be entirely divorced from the burden or the gift of her political and historical context. In the past, Arab families and friends used to gather around their radio sets every other Thursday for the communal musical experience of listening to a new Umm Kulthum song. Now, most of us walk around with headphones in our ears, exiles riding the dank metro in Paris, or drowning out the lingering sound of a car bomb in Beirut, or watching a tank from the window in Ramallah. *Tarab* is now a private experience. The Arab Left is for all intents and purposes, dead. Secularism is a bad word. Rabid capitalism is the name of the game. The Arab Gulf is consuming itself into oblivion. The “situations” in the region especially Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon get worse every time we think they can’t. Who better than Kamilya to sing the anthems for our broken times?

I would like to think of Kamilya’s work as a harbinger of an Arab renaissance. Few people realize the political darkness that gave birth to the Italian renaissance. Consider this quote from the film *The Third Man*: “In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love; they had five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock”.

Despite the frustrations, there is, however, a growing and loyal Arab fan base that eagerly awaits her concerts in places like Cairo and Amman. Videos clips from her concerts are appearing on YouTube and a Facebook fan page has been set up. Word is going around. It has only been two years



Kamilya performing at Al-balad theater in Amman

since the release of her first album. Considering its avant garde nature, considering that internet access in the Middle East only reached reasonable levels last year, considering the fact that Kamilya cannot travel and tour freely in Arab countries, this is remarkable. As the radio and cassette tapes once crossed impossible boundaries to bring music to her home in the Galilee, so Kamilya stands proudly poised on her website, defying passport control and visa requirements and entering the homes of Arab populations torn and separated from each other by politics and war. Where Kamilya cannot go for political reasons, her music is going. Kamilya is creating her own musical territory where she has none on land.

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ENDNOTES

1. When small sound bytes or samples of a song are placed in another, the phenomenon of sampling takes place.
2. The most popular and Arabic music label today, known for its reliance on the sex appeal of its artists, rather than their musical talent.
3. A term of my own invention: If tarab is the ecstatic musical state experienced through the classical music, Rotana tarab would be a cheap copy or attempt at the higher forms of Arabic song.