

4-1-2004

## Star of The Orient

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### Recommended Citation

Havandjian, Nishan (2004) "Star of The Orient," *Moebius*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol2/iss1/7>

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## STAR OF THE ORIENT

*Nishan Havandjian*

It's the first Thursday of the month. The streets of the Arab Middle East from Baghdad to Casablanca are practically deserted. Millions of families are huddled around home radio sets, waiting for the ritual to renew itself. Meanwhile, in a downtown Cairo theatre, a capacity audience of well-dressed men and women from all over the Arab World waves concert programs to cool itself, waiting impatiently for the magical hour of 8:00 p.m. They are waiting for "The Lady," as they call her.<sup>1</sup>

And here she is.

The black-and-white TV relay depicts a zaftig woman well into middle age, wearing a long brocade dress, her hair in a bun. She is bug-eyed, with dangling earrings; she holds a long silk handkerchief long before Luciano Pavarotti made it his trademark.

"The Lady" starts to sing:

*Your eyes took me back to my days that are gone  
They taught me to regret the past and its wounds*

*With your light, the dawn of my life started  
How much of my life before you was lost  
It is a wasted past, my love*

*Taste love with me bit by bit  
From the kindness of my heart that is longing for the kindness of your heart  
Bring your eyes close so that my eyes can get lost in the life of your eyes  
Bring your hands so that my hands will rest in the touch of your hands*

*You are my life that starts its dawn with your light*

The song lasts over an hour and her falcon voice, a cross between a soprano and a mezzo, weaves endless arabesques and modulates its tone in mesmerizing variations. Between couplets, men and women stand up and shout their love for her. Both female and male audience members, unable to control themselves, jump on the stage to kiss her hands and her feet. The audience is in a state of “Tarab,” a word difficult to translate into western languages. In its practical form, “Tarab” occurs when an audience is transformed into drunken ecstasy induced by the beauty of music, poetry and a melismatic voice. By the time the audience filters out, “The Lady” has sung well past midnight .

In a career spanning 50 years, Oum Koulthoum (1902–1975), also known as “Star of the Orient,” mesmerized Arab audiences.<sup>2</sup> She was born of poor parents in a small village in the Egyptian Delta. Her father was an Imam who served at the local mosque and taught her to recite Koranic verses. He was too poor to send both of his children to school, so he chose the boy; the young girl learned her brother’s lessons and homework. And although the brother did not live an especially noteworthy life, the sister became the biggest singer the Arabs have ever known. “The Lady” left an astounding legacy of over 280 songs, ranging from love poems to patriotic anthems and religious invocations. Though admittedly uneducated, she inspired the greatest poets in Egypt to compose specifically for her. Oum Koulthoum was Patsy Cline, Mahalia Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, and Barbra Streisand all rolled into one. She was the soul of Egypt—some even called her the Fourth Pyramid.

Her monthly Cairo concerts were eagerly awaited events which spanned 27 years, first relayed live on radio and later occasionally on tv. “The Lady” also starred in about half a dozen movies from 1936–1947. Most notable among these is a rarely seen Egyptian version of Verdi’s *Aida*, which was recently shown on the ART satellite channel in the us. She certainly did not need to wear the black paint which is de rigueur for most protagonists in the West. She was Egyptian, authentic enough for this *Aida*.

Her CDs and videos are widely available in us megastores, and Arab satellite channels which broadcast into America regularly show her movies and play her songs. Twenty-eight years after her death, she still sells about 300,000 CDs annually in Egypt alone. Her legacy lives on in many venues: a museum dedicated to her in Cairo, a hugely successful multipart tv series about her life, an assortment of vocal competitions to find a worthy successor, and—just like Maria Callas—a play about her life and art. Several documentaries have been made about Oum Koulthoum, such as *A Voice Like Egypt*, which was shown on PBS and more recently, *The Great Voice of the Orient: Oum Koulthoum*, on the French international satellite channel tv5.

Her death in 1975 sent her admirers into frenzied mourning. Cairenes rushed from all corners of the city to meet her draped coffin. By tv5 estimates, about two million people surrounded her body to pay their respects. The images are unparalleled for a

celebrity. Thousand and thousands of Egyptians are seen rushing from side streets to meet her coffin. When Maria Callas died in Paris in 1977, the crowd was at best in the hundreds, emitting a few shouts of “Brava Callas.” For Oum Koulthoum there were no tepid, diffident “bravas.” The people were burying their Mother Egypt.

Perhaps her art and spell on her public can be best expressed by her song “Al Atlal” (“The Ruins”), which is composed in literary Arabic. She sang it in the late sixties at the Baalbeck Festival in Lebanon. Here we were, high school students joining the adoring masses. The Arab World had just witnessed another humiliating defeat by Israel. The Palestinians were still refugees, and the masses were feeling increasingly the pain of economic deprivation and the frustrations of curtailed freedoms. “The Lady” began to sing a verse which castigates her lover:

*Give me my freedom, unchain me  
I have nothing left, I gave you everything  
Your chains bleed my wrists  
Oh why do you wait?*

Pandemonium ensued. Once again, even for one night, she brought all Arabs together. She reminded them of their past and their unfulfilled aspirations. She still does. 

## Notes

1. This article is based on the personal recollections of the author, along with the following documentaries: *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt*, produced & directed by Michal Goldman, aired on PBS in 2002; and *Oum Koulthoum*, aired on TV5, France, in 2003.
2. Many spellings and pronunciations of the star’s name exist.