

“Star of the East” – The Life of Umm Kulthum

*Adapted from Virginia Danielson’s biography of
Umm Kulthum - The Voice of Egypt*



A stencil of Umm Kulthum¹

Umm Kulthum is considered one of the greatest Arab musicians who ever lived. For over fifty years, she stunned the Arab world with her unmatched voice; her vocals able to penetrate people’s hearts and express the soul of nations. Her lyrics were written by poets who eagerly offered their pieces to her in hopes of becoming the next esteemed songwriter ordained into Umm Kulthum’s repertoire.

Beginning in 1934 and for almost forty years, Umm Kulthum performed monthly concerts in Cairo, Egypt (Danielson, 1). These concerts became the highlight of Arab life, as they were broadcast live on the radio, stretching far beyond the coasts of Egypt. Her renown exploded as households all across the Middle East considered these broadcasts as almost sacred, gathering with loved ones, making memories to the sound of her voice.

Not only was she a musician, but an ambassador of the Arab world as she represented herself and her country throughout her life. She served as president of the Musicians’ Union, as a committee member on the government division of the arts, and as an Egyptian delegate to other Arab countries (28). She set the stage for Arab musicians who gained recognition after her. She is considered to be the most authentic producer of Egyptian and Arab music, recording some three hundred songs and creating a style and form that embodied the country’s musical tradition. She transformed the cultural perception of musical performance, taking it from an elite, restricted practice to a cultural norm, opening her concerts to the general public.

Simple Beginnings

Umm Kulthum was born to a poor Egyptian family around 1904 (her exact birthday is unconfirmed) in the Nile Delta. She admits, “My childhood was not different from that of many children of my country”. Her father was the head of a village mosque and her mother stayed at home raising Umm Kulthum and her two siblings.

From a very young age, Umm Kulthum toured with her father singing at weddings and various religious functions. He had to pass her off as a boy since girls could not publicly recite and sing Quranic verses. By the age of six or seven, Umm Kulthum was performing in the homes of



Umm Kulthum, on left, dressed as a boy.²

wealthy local leaders. People were awestruck at the power of her voice, coming from someone so young. She once earned a tip of ten piasters, a sum equivalent to half of her father's salary at the mosque (51). It was not long before her fame spread locally and she toured the entire Delta performing for religious holidays and family milestones such as birthdays, naming ceremonies, and public festivals.

Transition to the Big City

In the early 1920's, Umm Kulthum and her family moved to Cairo in order to pursue a professional career for the rising star. There she pursued music lessons, often with private teachers since women at the time were not admitted to the Oriental Music Club in Cairo. Once she began holding performances, she was seen as quite the novelty to the modern, wealthy Cairo audiences. With her rural background and traditional approach to music, she became known as "the Bedouin," as her attire reflected her country origins. She wore traditional men's clothing, including a loose ankle length tunic and a long scarf on her head with a cord tied around her forehead (59). Her repertoire still included songs of village holiday celebrations and Quranic melodies, mixed with more modern love songs and poetry.



Young Umm Kulthum²

Mastering Her Craft



Umm Kulthum in 1945³

The pivotal phase of Umm Kulthum's career came in 1926. In that year, she signed a contract with Gramophone Records who paid her an annual salary in addition to royalties for each disc sold. As she clinched economic security, she also began to define herself as a performer. She no longer wore men's traditional clothes; instead she sported conservative yet fashionable women's dresses, always with sleeves and dropped below the knee.

Musically, two major changes would propel her to stardom that year. In anticipation of her fall season, she announced that she would no longer be performing with her family members accompanying her. She had received criticism for her makeshift family chorus. Instead, she would be accompanied by a *takht*, an ensemble of musicians seated behind her (59). She thus transformed her identity by finding a group of the most talented musicians to comprise her *takht*. With this step in her professional career, she moved herself "from the ranks of community performers to the realm of professional artists associated with courts, theaters, and 'classical Arab tradition' (62)." The use of instrumentalists represented sophistication in the music, a move towards greater artistic expression and modernity (61-62). The second change was that she began performing a new repertoire of songs ushering out the age of religious ballads. Both poets and composers, such as Mohammad Abdel Wahab, vied to have their works included.

In the 1930's cinema became the hottest craze in media and Umm Kulthum keenly left her mark there. She produced and acted in films which had similar romantic themes as her songs, including "exotic settings from Arab history, clearly drawn lines of good and evil, and resolutions in favor of goodness and justice" (88). By this time, Umm Kulthum was so well-known that despite her inexperience with acting, she was given great authority over the creative decisions in her films. The films usually included musical performances, though shorter and different in style from her lengthy ballads and embellishments typical of her live performances.

Apex and Legacy

The Golden Age of Umm Kulthum spanned the 1940's. It was during this time that she released her most celebrated films, *Sallama* and *Fatma*. These works illustrated current issues and values in Egyptian society, typically featuring unscrupulous rich antagonists who are brought to justice by the moral uprightness of common Egyptian people. These immensely popular films celebrated the bonds of friendship between Egyptians, and extolled the value of personal virtue in the face of temptation (108). As she and her *takht* put poetry to music, Umm Kulthum achieved the unimaginable; she brought fine literature to the masses, many of whom were illiterate. Because of her broadcasts, young and old, rich and poor now hummed the words to intricate Arabic poetry that was previously inaccessible to most (122). In her monthly Thursday night concerts, her voice flooded the radio waves across the Middle East. Listeners sat attentive, minding every undulation in awe of the vocal control for which she was renowned. Almost as anticipated as her concerts, the aftermath of critiques and reviews of her performance would permeate daily life for days and weeks after. She had earned herself the title, "the voice of Egypt" (138).



Umm Kulthum with her ensemble⁴

In the 1950s and '60s, Umm Kulthum's health declined; yet she continued with her demanding concert schedule. She finally married in 1954 to one of her doctors, a long time listener and fan. In 1967, she performed for the first time outside the Arab world in Paris. That same year, she embarked on a grand tour across the Arab World to bolster Egypt's image in the wake of its defeat in the Six-Day War. She held a diplomatic passport and sent her earnings back to the Egyptian treasury (186). She was the voice and face of the nation across all the Middle East. She served as a cultural ambassador for Egyptians and Arabs alike.

By 1975, Umm Kulthum's health continued to decline, and the Egyptian newspapers wrote daily updates on her medical state. On February 3, 1975 she died of heart failure as a nation held its breath at the passing of an icon (193). The size of her funeral surpassed even that of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution (193). Over four million people filled the streets of Cairo as the procession saw masses handing off her casket as they crossed the city, bringing her to her final resting place, in the land that had given her its voice.

Sources

Danielson, V. (1997) *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Photo credits:

1. Avedissian, C. (2004) "You are Love" in *Chant Avedissian: Cairo Stencils*. Issa, Rose (Ed.) London: SAQI
2. Danielson, Virginia (1997) *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
3. (1924) "Umm Kulthum" <www.last.fm/music/>
4. (1945) "Umm Kulthum as a Young Lady" <www.farahjassat.com/>
5. "Umm Kulthum" <www.wikipedia.org/>