

MUSIC ROUGH GUIDES

THE ROUGH GUIDE to

Arabic Café

The history of the café, or coffee house, is the social history of coffee. There is no agreement as to the exact origins of coffee, but it is clear that both the substance and the café originated in the Middle East. Legend has it that coffee was known in the days of King Solomon. Another legend speaks of an Ethiopian herder in the ninth century who noticed that his goats became friskier after eating red berries from a local shrub, so he began to experiment with the berries and noticed their joyful effect. Other sources place the discovery of the wild coffee-bean plant (*Coffea Arabica*) on the plateaus of central Ethiopia around AD 600. But, whoever was the first Middle Easterner to create the drink from coffee beans, it is unlikely that they had any idea how this concoction would stir the world. Launched from Yemen around AD 1000, coffee became popular all across the Arabian Peninsula, keeping dervishes whirling and

worshippers awake through nights of ritual, and expanding its geographical domain in tandem with the expansion of Islam.

Sources also quote various locations to boast the first coffee-house establishment that provided both coffee and a social space for leisurely gathering. It has been said that the first café opened in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1475, four years after its conquest by the Ottomans, which was followed by the establishment of two coffee houses in the 1550s in the same city. Other sources claim that the first cafés were built in Syria's Damascus (1530) and Aleppo (the second half of the sixteenth century – the same time that literary cafés opened in Turkey). Yet another source claims Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of the coffee house. But, regardless of exact location, it is clear that the first café was

Low stools, hookah pipes and coffee

Arabic Café



a Middle Eastern invention. In a Muslim environment, coffee had three great virtues: it was a stimulant that was embraced as an alternative to alcoholic beverages, which were outlawed by the Koran; it was easily transported and kept fresh; and it was conducive to socializing. Over time, cafés became places where chess and backgammon were played, information was exchanged, business was conducted, hookahs were smoked, and music and dance were enjoyed. The al-Nahda ('awakening' or 'renaissance') movement – a cultural and intellectual trend of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Arab world whose debates centred on the Arab version of modernity – is said to have been born in the cafés of Beirut and Cairo, where scholars and writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Youssef al-Khal would meet to exchange ideas, literature and poetry.

Coffee and the coffee house soon became the Muslim world's legacy to Europe, as well as to the New World. By the early seventeenth century European travellers to the Middle East were commenting on the huge popularity of coffee houses throughout the Arab world. Coffee first arrived in Europe around 1600, through the port of Venice. As the coffee craze took over Europe, devout Catholics denounced it as the drink of infidels, and it took Pope Clement – who apparently tried a cup and became an instant convert – to baptize the drink into the Christian world around 1605. Italy's first coffee house opened in 1654, around the same time as the opening of the first one in London. By the end of the century, London boasted hundreds and, by 1750, coffee, along with its fraternizing home – the coffee house – could be found throughout most of Western Europe.

a musical travelogue to the cafés of today's Middle East



This compilation takes us back to the coffee houses of today's Middle East, with a selection of music that would be played in a variety of café environments that differ in geography, ambience or clientele. The Middle Eastern café can be the small establishment in Aleppo or Cairo in which *kaffiyah*-clad men are sitting on low stools, sipping coffee, throwing dice on a backgammon board, smoking a hookah and listening to a radio broadcast of a scratchy recording of the love-torn vocalizations of the great Egyptian diva Oum Kalthoum. Or it may be the trendy, smoky, urbanite Beirut café, in which, in the calmer periods of this war-torn country, one might find the young Yasmina singing a jazzy version of a song made famous by her great-grandmother, the singer-actress Asmahan. It may also be the harbour club-café of the port city of Oran, Algeria, where pianist Maurice El Médioni honed

his musical chops on a mixed repertoire that ranged from Jewish liturgical music to Algerian *rai*, French pop, as well as jazz and Latin music that came to Oran with the American soldiers of the Allied forces during World War II. And it may even be the hookah-café of New York's East Village, modelled after the ambience of the cafés of the Middle East. This compilation is, in a sense, a composite musical travelogue of the cafés of today's Middle East and their hookah-lounge counterparts beyond.

AMAL MURKUS – Palestinian singer and actress Amal Murkus was born and raised in Kfar Yasif in the Galilee, Israel. Her songs take inspiration from Palestinian folklore and traditional Arabic music – often expressing the marginalization and exclusion of Palestinian culture – and are inspired by various Mediterranean idioms. Amal has

Amal Murkus



Amer Ammouri



collaborated and shared the stage with many international artists, including Joan Baez, Mercedes Sosa, Glykeria, Nana Caymmi and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Liverpool. 'Ya Oud' is taken from her first, self-titled album, which was released internationally in 2000 by EMI Hemisphere.

AMER AMMOURI - *Oud* master Amer Ammouri was born in Aleppo, Syria, where he still resides. He began playing the *oud* at a young age and has toured with many famous singers, including Sabah Fakhri and Shadi Jamil. He is also the lead *oud* player with the great Salatin El Tarab Orchestra, an ensemble that performs regularly throughout the Middle East and the Gulf States, and has toured Europe and the Americas. He has recorded three solo albums, and 'Al Mashdal' is taken from his solo album *Eastern Strings*.

SALAMAT MEETS LES MUSICIENS DU NIL - Nubian percussionist Mahmoud Fadl and artistic director Jalilah brought instrumentalists from Fadl's Nubian band Salamat together with musicians from Les Musiciens Du Nil to assemble a Nile Delta music summit for Berlin's Heimatklänge festival. Three of the biggest names on Cairo's music scene came together for a studio session to record *Salam Delta*: vocalist Matqual, master of traditional Egyptian music; Nubian singer Selma; and newcomer Ahmed Fathy, featured on the track 'Kabadin'. Fathy is the youngest heir to a well-known music dynasty and was only 12 years old at the time of this recording.

HABIB SHEHADEH HANNA FEAT REEM TALHAMI - Composer Habib Shehadeh Hanna wrote this theme song, 'Everything Beautiful Reminds Me Of You', for the film *The Band's Visit* (2007),

Reem Talhami



Ghada Shbeir



featuring singer Reem Talhami. Based on a true story, the film tells the tale of an Egyptian police band that had been invited to play in Israel, then get stranded at the airport, ending up in a small, forgotten desert town. *The Band's Visit* received several awards, including the Cannes Official Selection and the International Critic's Prize. Habib Shehadeh Hanna received the Israeli Academy For Film & Television's award for the film score.

GHADA SHBEIR – Lebanese Singer Ghada Shbeir specializes in a variety of Middle Eastern styles, from folklore to Andalusian songs, Assyriac, Maronite and ancient chants. In 1997 she was awarded first prize in a 'Best Arabic Singer' competition held in Egypt. Ghada has published two books, the first a study of the modern *muwashahat* and the second on the music of Sayyed Darwish. She has toured many international festivals and has recorded two solo albums. 'Ahwa Kamaran' is taken from the 2007 BBC World Music award-winning album *Al Muwashahat*.

HAMDI AHMED – Egyptian singer Hamdi Ahmed features a great melody and a tremendously driving interplay of violins, *oud*, *nay*, percussion and chorus.

FATMA ZIDAN – Born in Saudi Arabia to Egyptian parents, Fatma Zidan was trained as a classical harp player, but about ten years ago she changed direction and started singing both classical Arabic music and pop, beginning with a four-year stint

as a choir singer at the Cairo Opera. She has performed and recorded with some of the greatest stars of the Middle East, including Kazem El-Saher. She has released two solo albums – the classic *Aya Haeman*, and *Elle Elzaal*, a pop production infused by the rhythms of the Gulf area, and from which 'Ger Aadi' is taken.

MOHAMMED ROSHDI – Mohammed Roshdi is considered one of Egypt's most renowned *balady*-style folk singers of the 1970s and 1980s. It was diva Oum Kalthoum who first noted Roshdi's talent and advised him to enroll in Fouad's music institution, paving the way for a strong voice that contributed around 350 songs, most of which were immediate hits. Roshdi won the Culture Legion of Merit from Tunisian President Al Habib Bou Raqeeba, and another from the former Lebanese president and the Moroccan King Al-Hassan. He died in 2006.

LOUWI TNNARI – *Taksim*, literally 'solo' in Arabic, is the instrumental improvisation by an individual musician. In the *taksim*, a musician's emotions are expressed, and the richness of the instrument is truly enjoyed. From Syria, *kaman* (violin) master Louwi Tnnari is a fine example of a musician playing in this style.

OUM KALTHOUM – The late 'Lady of Arabic Song', Oum Kalthoum (1904-1975), is the Arab world's most famous singer of the twentieth century. More beloved in her native Egypt than most can begin to comprehend, her songs defined one of the most tumultuous periods in Egyptian history as the

country made its transition from British rule to self-governance. Born to a family of talented musicians and a father who was a singer of religious poems and songs, she began performing at a young age, dressed as a boy, to supplement her family's income. In 1923, she moved to Cairo, where she studied with the greatest musicians of that age, and began to record albums of her own. By 1948, her fame had come to the attention of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who would later become the President of Egypt, and their friendship lasted a lifetime. Oum Kalthoum went on to tremendous fame in the Arab world, interpreting songs with such passion that crowds, brought to a state of *tarab* (musical ecstasy), would beg her to sing a single line repeatedly, sometimes for hours. When Oum Kalthoum passed away, her funeral was attended by three million mourners — one of the largest gatherings in history.

MAHMOUD FADL FEAT SAMY EL BABLY – Aswan-born and Cairo-bred Nubian percussionist Mahmoud Fadl launched his career as a dancer with the limbo dance craze that swept Cairo. He began performing at Cairo clubs, hotels and weddings but soon switched to percussion, and his talent made him a sought-after musician with various ensembles, including the Nile Nubian Band and Ali Hassan Kuban's orchestra. Since 1980, he has been splitting his time between Berlin and Cairo. Fadl has recorded numerous albums for Piranha Musik with his group Drummers of the Nile, the all-star Salamat ensemble, as well as several classical Arabic orchestral projects. 'Ana Wehabibi' is taken from

Love Letter From King Tut-Ank-Amen, which includes ten instrumental versions of Cairo love classics.

MAURICE EL MÉDIONI – Born in the Mediterranean port of Oran in Algeria, El Médioni's life took a turn when his brother bought an old piano at the flea market and brought it home. He practised the instrument with dedication, and once Algeria was liberated from the French in 1942, Maurice began playing piano for the American troops at the Red Cross Bar in Oran. The soldiers used his piano to play jazz, Latin and boogie-woogie numbers, and Maurice took in the music and incorporated it into his style. He was later brought into the Andalusian music culture when he befriended *rai* musicians, and was the first to introduce the piano into *rai* music. In 1962, following years of civil war, Algeria gained independence from France, and Maurice and his family (along with other Jews) were forced into exile. They relocated to Paris, where Maurice's career took off internationally.

LATIF EL IDRISSE – 'Ya Rayeh' was written by the famous Algerian composer Abderrahmane Amrani. In its bluesy delivery it pours out the sad farewells and loneliness of first-generation immigrants, and their hopes that one day they will return home from the city.

MARWAN MESHO/SALATIN EL TARAB ORCHESTRA – *Kanun* player Marwan Mesho is a soloist with the famous Salatin El Tarab Orchestra. Based in Aleppo, Syria, the orchestra

consists of world-famous *oud* player Amer Ammouri, Marwan Mesho on *kanun*, Badr Dbbaa on violin, Maaz Mousalli on keyboards, Mahmoud Hashash on *tabla* and Jamale Shamia on *duff*. The complete orchestra also includes seven vocalists who travel around the world performing *muwashshat* and *tarab*, traditional Andalusian music that continues to flourish in Syria and was greatly popularized in this century by the singer Sabah Fakhri.

GHAZI ABDEL BAKI FEAT YASMINA JOUMBLAT

– Lebanese singer, guitarist, percussionist, composer and producer Ghazi Abdel Baki has been a member of many US and Lebanon-based groups, and has composed for films and documentaries. In 2000, he co-founded Forward Music and has produced the works of several artists, including Ghada Shbeir, Charbel Rouhana

and Ibrahim Jaber. On his latest album, *Communiqué #2*, he adapts Arabic poetry to a fusion of jazz, salsa and bossa nova. 'Ya Habibi' is a reinterpretation of the great singer-actress Asmahani's hit, sung by her great-granddaughter, Yasmina.

TONY HANNA & THE YUGOSLAVIAN GIPSY BRASS BAND

– Tony Hanna was born in the small hamlet of Ma'ad, in the heart of the Lebanese mountains. He left his village in 1973, already a famous pop star, to pursue a pop icon jetsetter's lifestyle. But at the closing of the century, after years of diaspora with bases in London and Detroit, he chose to return to his village. He transformed the house of his ancestors into a monastery fortress, and keeps television, radio and other distractions of modern life out. Producer, writer, poet, painter and political

Ghada Shbeir



Fatma Zidan



Mahmoud Fadl



activist Michel Elefteriades convinced him to come out of his self-imposed hermitage for a collaboration with the Yugoslavian Gipsy Brass Band, a crossover project that fuses traditional Arabic music with the music of the Roma people. 'Lamma Bada' is taken from this album, subtitled 'My Village is Lost Somewhere Between Belgrade and Baghdad...'

Very special thanks to Stanley Rashid and to Jamal at Rashid Music Sales Company in Brooklyn, who were incredibly generous, allowing me to use their wonderful Arabic music store as a place to check out and listen to new releases, and were just as generous with all kinds of information. If you are close to Brooklyn, NY, the store is worth visiting. Otherwise, check out their online catalogue:

*Rashid Music Sales Company
155 Court Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(001) (718) 833-1982
www.rashid.com*

And further special thanks to Mher Panossian at Pe-Ko Records/Hollywood Music Center, for always coming through with great music and information. Check out their rich catalog at www.hollywoodmusiccenter.com.

Nili Belkind
www.nilimusica.com

Maurice El Médioni



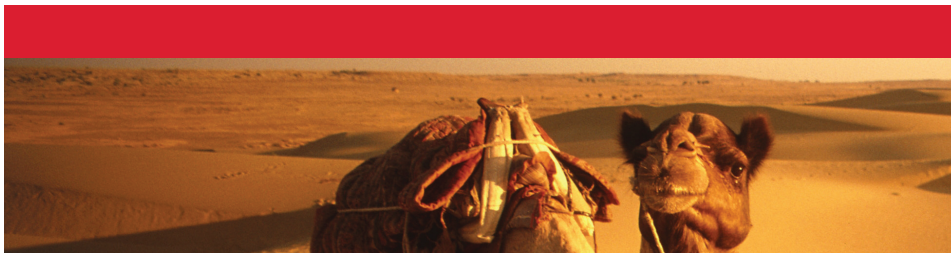
Ghazi Abdel Baki



Tony Hanna & The Yugoslavian Gipsy Brass Band



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from the album AMAL (20666-2)
[Rahabani Brothers] pub Amal Murkus (p) 1998 Amal Murkus;
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from the album Eastern Strings (12452)
[Amer Ammouri] pub Kousan Music Publishing (BMI),
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Kabadin
from the album SALAM DELTA (CD-PIR0936)
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- 04 **HABIB SHEHADEH HANNA**
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from the album TAKSIM: THE ART OF ARABIAN
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- 10 **OUM KALTHOUM** Ayoha Al Raieħ El Moged
from the album CHANSONS A L'ÉCRAN:
1935–1946 (82941-2)
[Al Charif Al Razi-Zakaria Ahmad] pub Buda Musique.
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- 11 **MAHMOUD FADL FEAT SAMY EL BABLY**
Ana Wehabibi
from the album LOVE LETTER FROM KING TUT-
ANK-AMEN (CD-PIR1257)
[Mohamed Abdel Wahab; arr Mahmoud Fadl] pub Piranha Musik.
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- 12 **MAURICE EL MÉDIONI** Ahla Oussalah
from the album CAFÉ ORAN (CD-PIR1045)
[Maurice El Médioni] pub Piranha Musik (GEMA).
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- 13 **LATIF EL IDRISSE** Ya Rayah
from the album ORIENTAL CAFÉ (280872)
[Abderrahmane Amrani] pub Atoll Music [p] & [c] 2002 Atoll
Music. Licensed from Atoll/Jonathan Music www.atollmusic.com
- 14 **MARWAN MESHO/SALATIN EL TARAB
ORCHESTRA** Kifak Inta [Kanou Taksim]
from the album MAGIC BELLYDANCE (11872)
[Salatin El Tarab Orchestra] pub Kousan Music Publishing (BMI),
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- 15 **GHAZI ABDEL BAKI
FEAT YASMINA JOUMBLAT** Ya Habibi
from the album COMMUNIQUÉ #2 (FWD009)
[trad; readaptation Ghazi Abdel Baki] pub Forward Music Sarl.
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- 16 **TONY HANNA & THE YUGOSLAVIAN GIPSY
BRASS BAND** Lamma Bada
from the album TONY HANNA & THE YUGOSLAVIAN
GIPSY BRASS BAND
[trad; arr Michel Elefteriades] pub Elef Records.
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