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Syrian Dabke Meets Western Media

In front of a packed audience at Johnny Brenda's bar in Philadelphia on a late November night, Mark Gergis of the Sublime Frequencies record label[i] took the stage to introduce Syrian musician Omar Souleyman: "From Northeastern Syria, from the Hassekeh region, from Jazira, and the village of Ras al-Ayn, please welcome Omar Souleyman."

Souleyman and his keyboard-synth player Rizan Sa'id received a rowdy welcome from the crowd who remained enthusiastic throughout – upon any sign of stillness in the audience Souleyman would wave his hands, prompting fervent dancing and cheering. This two-man show, a mix of Souleyman's vocals and Sa'id's skillful electronic maneuvering, stood in for a performance that is normally accompanied by more than five musicians. Instead, Sa'id simulated many of the instruments on his keyboard producing the so-called "Arab new wave" sound described by some Western reviewers.

Yet a few years ago, before Souleyman's gradual emergence on the indie music scene and before Bjork would recommend his album on NPR[ii] and before Damon Albarn of the Gorillaz would express interest in collaboration, his dabke sound existed in an entirely different context that was (and still is) far removed from your average Western music listener.

Beginnings

Gergis, an Iraqi-American musician[iii] with a keen ear, has been traveling to Syria for over a decade and paints a colorful portrait of Damascus's urban soundscape in 1997 when he first heard Souleyman's music. "Back in those days," he said, "There were myriad cassette tape stalls dotting the streets of Damascus. You would think there must have been a noise ordinance passed since that time, because since the year 2000 nothing has quite matched the resulting cacophony . . . where stalls would line up or be back to back blaring their wares at deafening volumes."

Gergis's mass of recordings of the Syrian street and radio broadcasts, including music from Souleyman and Assyrian musician Jermain Tamraz, were released by the Sublime Frequencies record label on the eclectic album *I Remember Syria*. Years later, still struck by Souleyman's sound, Gergis suggested that Sublime Frequencies release a compilation album of all the Souleyman tracks that he collected during his time in Syria. Now in 2010, Souleyman is on his

second tour of the United States and has released three albums through Sublime Frequencies. It is possible Souleyman is the first Syrian dabke artist to follow this path to notoriety in the West.

The Music

Before the release of Souleyman's music in the West, he was a seasoned performer, beginning his music career in Hassekeh in 1994 by playing his self-described "fast dabke" at celebrations throughout Syria and the Arab world. In an interview at the Philadelphia show, Souleyman told me, "Dabke is an expression of love for us in Jazira (Eastern Syria), also of happiness and sympathy with others . . . The [music and dancing] are the traditions from generations ago. But in Jazira, we are fast and the whole world likes fast dancing, since they're giving a force and strength behind the dancing."

The dabke styles of every region and city in Syria offer something inimitable and something shared. For Souleyman, "The [dabke] music is the same music, but what differs is the traditions and customs." Instrumentalist Rizan Sai'd pointed to how "the dancing differs in every area from Aleppo to Homs to Deir ez-Zour and every area has its own style and tempo." While Souleyman and Sa'id can easily weave their sound into the vast dabke trends in Syria, for some Western listeners, Souleyman is the de facto face of Syrian dabke, or more accurately, Syrian music as a whole. "Ultimately," said Gergis, "I think it's positive that a door has been opened for people. They're thinking about Syria, perhaps for the first time, and maybe even getting turned on to Arabic culture for the first time. In my opinion, whether they seek out more Syrian or other Arabic music to find out for themselves, is entirely up to them."

Souleyman downplays the differences between his performances in the West and in Syria, insisting that no matter what the location, "The audiences love the music just like the Syrians love this music – there is a lot of sympathy and understanding of it." When I remarked that there is no dabke in the West, he insisted that there was still dancing and later agreed with my joking characterization that there is an "individual dabke" of sorts in the West. This was a joke since, as Sa'id pointed out, "The Arab dabke is about people who have not seen each other for a very long time, they hold each other's hands and they care about each other."

Yet to many Western journalists and observers, the combination of checkered kuffiyeh and jalabiya is too tempting of an image to ignore, if not outright fetishize. The blurb on Johnny Brenda's website advertising his Philadelphia show remarked, "Mustachioed and kaffiyeh-bedecked, with eyes obscured by dark glasses, Omar Souleyman, 41, scarcely looks the part of an international pop phenomenon," while the Guardian's review[iv] of a 2009 concert brought with it the unfortunate headline "An Arabian night to remember". Media representations of Arabs – from film to print to text – have a disparaging, if not outright damaging, history in the United States and the West. While some may remark that mere descriptions of Souleyman are just that –

descriptions, then they would be missing out on the key fact that Souleyman is not an active participant in this system of media representation. Instead he is on the receiving end of numerous stereotypes and assumptions both about Syria and dabke music.

The Media

Parallel to the outlandish music reviews, which Gergis himself laments, is another layer of media coverage and discourse rooted in the language of authenticity and class. It is no surprise that the *New York Times*[v] is leading the way in attempts to determine what forms of Syrian art are culturally legitimate enough to be appreciated by the West.

To put this coverage in context, consider that Souleyman's hometown of Hassekeh, with its majority Kurdish population, is closer geographically to the borders of Turkey and Iraq than Damascus. Far from the central metropolis, it is not a town many Syrians consider to be a hub of "high culture", much less distinctive musical talent. Instead, Syrian cities such as Aleppo are praised as the heart of authentic Syrian musical traditions. The complexities of Syrian perceptions are being generalized here, but it suffices to say that Souleyman's musical roots in the countryside put him on the fringes of a narrow and at times elitist definition of art, even though dabke is widely enjoyed throughout the country.

With a November 3 article in the New York Times titled "Two Faces of Syria, Neither Promising for Artists"[vi], the definition of respected art emanating from Syria is even further narrowed. Journalist Michael Kimmelman portrays Syrian amateur nouveau riche who are tricked into believing their boutique hotels and restaurants are fashionable excuses for "worldly culture" and are too busy basking in their new-found riches that they miss out on opportunities to push "cultural liberalization". Yet even if there were a Syrian desire for "cultural liberalization", he says, "Stagnant social politics in this part of the world tend to preclude much of an artistic life." In this shallow treatment of Syrian creative life, Kimmelman reduces Syrian youth culture to "a culture of small-bore opportunism", all the while attributing his views to Syrian "artists and intellectuals".

Souleyman's music (or any other Syrian music) is not mentioned in the article, yet Kimmelman's reliance on politics as one of the central determinants of "creative" artistic production allows him to write off Syrian art as irrelevant since it is produced in a closed political system. On another level, the basic elitist assumptions about art promoted in this article are relevant to understanding Souleyman's status in Syria since the article perpetuates the idea that without a Western seal of authenticity on a particular art form, its cultural value is significantly diminished. Yet, is Souleyman a part of this sanctioned culture now that the *New York Times* has reviewed his recent show at the Music Hall of Williamsburg in Brooklyn?[vii]

Gergis, on the other hand, has his own views: “Syria is rapidly changing, and to the people I've argued with about bringing dabke from a Jazira region considered backward and ‘of the old guard’, Omar Souleyman or anyone like him, is the LAST ambassador of their culture they'd like to see exported . . . To me, Omar Souleyman represents an important form of music that has never been exported from a remote yet important region of Syria. It is a valid folk-art form that I liked a lot personally, and so do many others.”

For more information:
Souleyman’s song “Leh Jani”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgRUHIeaKOk
For a translation of Sulaiman’s song “Khataba,”see here:
http://www.arabicmusictranslation.com/search/label/Omar%20Souleyman

i http://www.sublimefrequencies.com/

ii http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106047345

iii http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OERcllkHWA

iv http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/jun/05/oma-souleyman-syrian-music

v http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/arts/design/07abroad.html

vi http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/arts/design/07abroad.html

vii http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/04/arts/music/04omar.html