

In the midst of today's frenzied Middle Eastern music scene, Fairuz stands in a league of her own. She started off as a chorus girl on Lebanese radio in the late 1940s before going on to achieve the iconic status of 'The Soul of Lebanon' three decades later. No other Arab singer has received such acclaim since the death of Oum Kalthoum, the Egyptian 'Star of the Orient'.

A great part of this reverence is owed to her significance as a unifying figure in a country that has suffered multiple sectarian divisions in its recent history.

Born Nuhad Haddad in 1934, the eldest child of a Maronite Christian typesetter in

a print shop in Beirut, she used to entertain her family and their friends with her singing, for want of a radio. Her rendering of the songs of Leyla Murad and Asmahan, two Egyptian women singers famous at that time, caught the proficient ears of the Lebanese Conservatory and the newly established Lebanese Radio.

She was soon associated with composers Mansour and Asi Rahbani, her talent having persuaded the latter to give up his policeman day job and they later married. As the Rahbani brothers realised her ability to render Western modes as perfectly as the *tajwid* of Quranic verses, they composed tunes for her that were largely inspired by

Argentinian tangos and *rumbas*, widely popular in Beirut at the time.

Ahead of their time, they devised an early brand of oriental fusion, with a recording with the Eduardo Bianco band from Argentina in October 1951, featuring the newly named 'Fairuz' – the 'gem' or 'turquoise'.

But it's a melancholic song called 'Itab' (Reproach), performed in the true Arabic tradition of emotional yearning that made her famous throughout the Arab world. The Rahbani brothers were then ready to swerve away from the established styles, heavily influenced by Egyptian singing, to herald their own brand of Lebanese songs,

# FAIRUZ

Reda El Mawy on the grand diva of Lebanese song



Performing at the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, Athens, July 2007

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DEJCE ABBOUR



Fairuz and Antoine Kerbage performing in the play *Sah El Nom*, at Baalbeck, on July 12 2006 – the day before the Israeli bombardments started

“echoing the wind of our mountains and reflecting the colour of our sea,” Mansour once said.

The gods seemed to be on their side when Fairuz faced a large audience for the first time, as she stood sternly in the Roman temple of Jupiter in Baalbeck in 1957. The public couldn't get enough of that innovative mixture of popular dance rhythm expressing romantic love and nostalgia for village life, stripped of the usual ornamentations that generally characterise Arab singing.

The new musical 'campaign' drew its resources from Lebanese folklore, but also carried influences from Byzantine liturgical

## At her concert at the Royal Festival Hall tickets reportedly changed hands on the black market for more than £1,000

songs and the Arabic and Andalusian repertoire. The trio didn't shy away from borrowing Western dance tunes either. Most of it was performed by a delicate orchestral blend of Arab settings, subtly complemented by European instruments.

Her music outraged the purists but it caught the imagination of a new urbanised generation, craving for a modern language affirming its personality. The hybridised version of Mozart's 40th symphony ('Ya Ana Ya Ana') is a feat rarely reproduced since. Less elaborate, 'Lina Wa Ya Lina', is a reproduction of Mendelssohn's first movement for violin concerto.

Performances in operettas and musical films soon followed, and her rather modest ability to act was largely surpassed by the power of her voice and confidence on stage. The Rahbani plays explored time and again the themes of village life through drama, philosophy, comedy and contemporary politics.

By then Fairuz was also working with the most creative Arab poets and lyricists who wanted to be celebrated by her voice, contributing to her over 1,500 songs, of

which 800 were released. In the 60s and early 70s, she performed in most Arab capitals and reached out to the large Lebanese and Arab diaspora in the Americas and Australia.

At her concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London in 1986, tickets reportedly changed hands on the black market for more than £1,000.

She refused to leave Beirut during much of the Lebanese civil war, which lasted from the mid 70s till the early 90s. During that period of sectarian hostility and shifting alliances, she withdrew from performing publicly in her country until the bloodshed stopped.

The only exception was a performance of the operetta *Petra*, held in both the Western and Eastern parts of the then-divided capital.

Her emblematic silence fuelled the hope of the ordinary Lebanese from all faiths for the return of peace and harmony, a power which still holds its grip today. A Palestinian owner of a radio station once told me that he always started the early morning programmes with a song by Fairuz. "It helps people getting by," he said.

After the death of her husband Asi in 1986, Ziad, her son from their marriage, took over and started a new phase of collaboration in which foreign modes, especially jazz, would feature more prominently. On the album *Wala Kif* (2002), Fairuz demonstrated again that she can still adapt to new styles while in her late 60s.

Fairuz still performs regularly at sold out concerts in Lebanon and around the world. Since 2004, she has performed in Amman, Montréal, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and made a much-acclaimed comeback at Baalbeck. Her last concert to date in Europe was in July 2007 at the southern slopes of the Acropolis during the Athens Festival (see left).

In 2006, she took to acting again after a 29-year break amid extraordinary circumstances. Her stage revival of the classic play *Sah El Nom*, composed by the Rahbani brothers and rearranged by Ziad, was initially scheduled for the Baalbeck International Festival but due to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the entire festival was cancelled. Instead a pre-premiere of the play was staged on July 12 for 6,000 Baalbeck residents, during a period of extreme political and social tension.

The massive turnout to witness Fairuz in her first performance since 1994 in Beirut, confirmed once again the inexhaustible affection of the Lebanese for their diva, and their resilience in the face of adversity. ●

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You can hear an excerpt from *The Lady and The Legend* on this issue's podcast

# BEST...

## ...ALBUMS



**Jerusalem In My Heart (A Chahine & Fils/ Voix De L'Orient, 1972, reissued 1997)**

This album features poignant anthems to 'Zahret El Mada'en'. The melancholic and lyrical songs evolve around the themes of displacement and longing for the motherland. Many of the songs became a rallying cry for Arab nationalists.



**Andaloussiyat (A Chahine & Fils/ Voix De L'Orient, 1966, reissued 1997)**

Although only two of the songs actually date back to the tenth century, this album is performed in its entirety within the ancestral tradition of the *Mawwal* and the *Muwashah* inherited from the Andalusian era in Spain.



**Wala Kif (EMI International, 2002)**

Fairuz imprints her omnipotent style on Ziad's jazz and Latin arrangements (like 'Sabah Wa Masa' and 'Sobhil Jiz'). Much to our relief, the adaptation of 'La Bamba' ('La Wallah') is quite different from what one might expect.

## ...COMPILATIONS



**The Lady & The Legend (Manteca, 2005)**

This compilation is probably the most readily available release in the UK and an ideal introduction to Fairuz' mesmerising charms. Reviewed in *Songlines* #30.



**The Very Best of Fairuz Volume 1 (A Chahine & Fils/ Voix De L'Orient, 1994)**

This album samples the many genres performed by Fairuz up till the 80s (traditional *dabkeh* dance songs, Arabic classical poems). It also contains the Rahbani's adaptation of Mozart's 40th symphony ('Ya Ana Ya Ana').



**Immortal Songs (EMI/A Chahine & Fils/ Voix De L'Orient, 1993)**

Another must have. Includes her early success from the 50s, 'Loubnan Ya Akhdar Helou', and two of Sheikh Sayed Darwish's classics 'Tel'e't Ya Mahla Nourha' and 'Zourouni', with which Fairuz ends almost every concert.

## IF YOU LIKE FAIRUZ, THEN TRY...

### MACADI NAHHAS

**Khilkhal (OrangeRed, 2007)**



This talented Jordanian artist was revealed to a large audience during 1997's Jordan's Jerash festival, aged only 20. Nahhas

previous debut album *Kan Ya Ma Kan* (OrangeRed, 2004) confirmed her reputation as the young voice of Oriental folklore revival. *Khilkhal* features many Palestinian folkloric ballads, while *Kan Ya Ma Kan*'s most acclaimed songs were of Iraqi inspiration. She is following Fairuz's footsteps, and has already teamed up with several Lebanese theatrical groups.

