



BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Bill Badley on the Arab world's greatest singer

OUM KALTHOUM

There is, quite simply, nobody in Arab music to compare with the Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum. Like many great women singers from the middle years of the last century: Gracie Fields in England, Amália Rodrigues in Portugal, Edith Piaf in France; Oum Kalthoum's voice provided the soundtrack to some of her country's most turbulent times. However, what sets her apart is that, even 30 years after her death, she is still one of Egypt's most revered icons, with a fanatical following all over the Arab world.

It is only fair to also say that her dark, passionate delivery can be something of an acquired taste for Western listeners and the gravity of her music is a long way from any bellydance clichés: but once you 'get' Oum Kalthoum, her yearning voice weaves a powerful spell. Arab music commentator and esteemed café host,

David Lodge, tells a revealing story about his own introduction to her music, when he was taken to a fellow expatriate's shambolic flat in Cairo. Amongst the various bizarre inhabitants dotted around the dimly lit room, there lay a figure – dressed only in his underpants and a walkman – writhing in ecstasy to the sound of the Diva. This man had truly 'got' Oum Kalthoum...

Such longevity is partly due to the vast legacy of recordings she left behind and a casual sift through the cassette stalls of any Arab souk will show just how much her reputation has been kept alive by millions of bootleg tapes. Kalthoum's life also had the perfect ingredients for creating a legend: humble, but suitably devout beginnings; dark tales of her own thwarted love and the small matter of the fate of nations. Her enduring superstar status has grown out of a combination of factors that came together with perfect serendipity. The daughter of a

poor *imam* from the Nile Delta, Kalthoum's early musical education was steeped in Koranic chant and as an adult her inimitable singing style was a potent blend of the sacred and secular. She managed to balance her own image very neatly, adopting an immediately recognisable and striking – but never racy – look. Her rise to prominence as part of the fledgling Arab cinema industry only served to enhance this and her roles in early blockbusters like *Fatma* portrayed her as a warm-hearted woman, strong in the face of adversity. She maintained rigid control over her own business affairs and surrounded herself with a wisely chosen coterie of collaborators, including the poet Ahmed Rami and godfather of 20th century Egyptian music, Mohamed Abdel-Wahab. Together they created something that was both modern and yet defiantly and distinctively Arab. She made much of her *fallaha* (peasant) origins and this chimed in perfect harmony with the

nationalist rhetoric of Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the guiding light of modern Egypt. Oum Kalthoum's monthly radio broadcasts were listened to by tens of millions and these regular Thursday night rituals are still remembered by older Egyptians as a formative communal experience when the country established its identity after colonialism.

Four million people lined the streets of Cairo to pay homage at her funeral in 1975. And still today, you don't have to walk far down these same streets before you hear the voice of Oum Kalthoum, imploring you from a café door or passing taxi's window.

BEST ALBUMS

Oum Kalthoum's recordings are legion and one of the first things you will notice is that transliterations of her name from Arabic vary wildly! The most complete catalogue is on the Sono Cairo label but unless you are tempted by the complete boxed set (see below), choosing one can be a daunting task for the uninitiated.

El Atlaal (Sono Cairo 101)

Considered by many to be her finest work and now available in England (www.sternsmusic.com). The song's melancholy mood is reflected in its title 'The Ruin'; however, this is 49 minutes of crafted intensity that can take the listener into an altered state of sublime despair!



Statue of Oum outside the Oum Kalthoum Hotel, her former house, in Cairo (Kate Howells)

BEST COMPILATIONS

Fortunately, there are several compilations also available. To dip your toe in the water, consider either of these:

El Sett – The Lady (BUDA)

Some superbly remastered recordings from the latter years of the 30s and early 40s, when the voice was at its most flexible and haunting. If you can have only one CD by Oum Kalthoum, this might be the one to choose.

Oum Kalthoum – Diva of Arab Music

This low price, double CD box set is astonishingly good value. It includes a variety of live and studio recordings from different times in Kalthoum's career and offers the opportunity to experience her in full flight for almost 40 minutes on Riad El Soumbati's 'Gadet Hobak Leih'.

NEXT STEP, START COLLECTING:

Omme Kolsoum – La Diva; Volumes I-V (EMI Arabia)

EMI Arabia is heir to many of the recordings Kalthoum made early in her career for The Gramophone Company. The series contains many gems, though the liner notes are rather self-referential with more attention paid to immortalising the company's canny regional executives and remastering prowess than information about the recordings.



AND FOR THE TRULY DEVOTED:

Um Kalthoum – Complete Set of 72 Discs (SIDI)

The complete works, presented in a 'black luxury box and decorated with a very nice bronze tag plate'. To you, sir: \$750. Available online in the US from www.aramusic.com. Underpants & walkman, optional...



MAIN PICTURE & ABOVE: Arab Film Distribution

BEST AVOIDED

The Nazareth Orchestra 100 Year Anniversary – Tribute to Oum Kalthoum (Magda)

A valiant attempt by Lubna Salame and The Nazareth Orchestra to recreate the diva's sound, with excerpts from many of her greatest songs. Alas, this just proves that there was only one Oum Kalthoum.

LIKE OUM KALTHOUM? THEN TRY...

✦ *Asmahan: Legends of the 20th Century* (Virgin 3109312)

The only serious rival to Oum Kalthoum during her lifetime, Asmahan was a very different sort of girl. Exotic, a trifle flighty and aristocratic, her style is lighter and possibly more immediately alluring. Spicy rumours about her private life abound and she died in a mysterious road accident during World War II.

