

CAIRO

↑ SOUNDING OUT

A bustling, timeless scene in the Khan El-Khalili souk



Reda El Mawy delves into the city's bubbling cauldron of musical creativity

With a population of up to 20 million (no one knows exactly), the Egyptian capital is the largest city in Africa. And since the first Conference of Arab Music in 1932 and the rise of singing superstar Oum Kalthoum, it's been the centre of music production in the Arab world – the Egyptian dialect remains the lingua franca of Arab singers who want to make it big. As in many parts of the Middle East, the number of veiled women in the streets (which has increased in recent years) is indicative of a revival of Islamic conservatism in society, but the city remains a musical powerhouse with top singer, Amr Diab, a musical heartthrob of the Arab world. Religious MPs regularly call for the banning of 'decadent' video clips on music satellite channels, but bellydancing as a popular entertainment persists, mainly for foreign visitors. The decadent side of Cairo's life is famously portrayed in the novels of Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz.

Although the Gulf states have emerged as a new entertainment hub, Cairo is still favoured by many for its history, authentic atmosphere and relative tolerance. And it's not just well established institutions

such as the Cairo Opera House, the Arabic Music Institute or nightclubs by the pyramids – restored buildings in the historic Fatimid part of the city have become venues for music and theatre performances. Private 'cultural centres', too, have been responding to a growing appetite for traditional folk music, long overlooked by the Egyptian middle classes. These venues are likely to programme Sufi music, regional performers or re-creations of zar rituals traditionally for healing and exorcisms.

More authentic experiences are found in the *moulids*, the festivities held each year to celebrate the anniversary of a Muslim saint with their carnival atmosphere of fairground lights and snake charmers, swings and shooting alleys. *Munshid* singers (many of whom are stars in their own right, such as Ahmad Al-Tuni and Yasin Al-Tuhami) recite Sufi poems followed by the ecstatic, rhythmic swaying of the *zikk* – a practice that is intended to lead people to a heightened state of spiritual consciousness. Moulids attract people in their thousands and their growth in popularity has been interpreted by many as an affirmation of a rooted sense of identity in a fast changing world.

BELLYDANCING

Cairo is the 'Oriental dance' capital of the world and many organised tours include a bellydance cruise or similar. There are a range of performances to suit every taste and pocket – from the luxury hotels and glitzy joints where visitors from the Gulf throw banknotes at the dancers, to the low-down dives around Sharia Alf, frequented by Egyptians on a drunken night out. These can be fun with a group of friends, but nothing starts till after midnight and the music and dancing is generally poor.

These more upmarket locations generally offer reliable and authentic bellydancing experiences: **The Disco at Le Meridien Heliopolis, 51 Sharia Al-Orouba, Heliopolis**
The Aladdin Restaurant, Cairo Sheraton, Midan Galaa Dokki
Giza Omar El Khayam Restaurant, Helnan Shepherd Hotel, Garden City



Oud workshop at Gamil Georges

INSTRUMENT MAKERS AND SHOPS

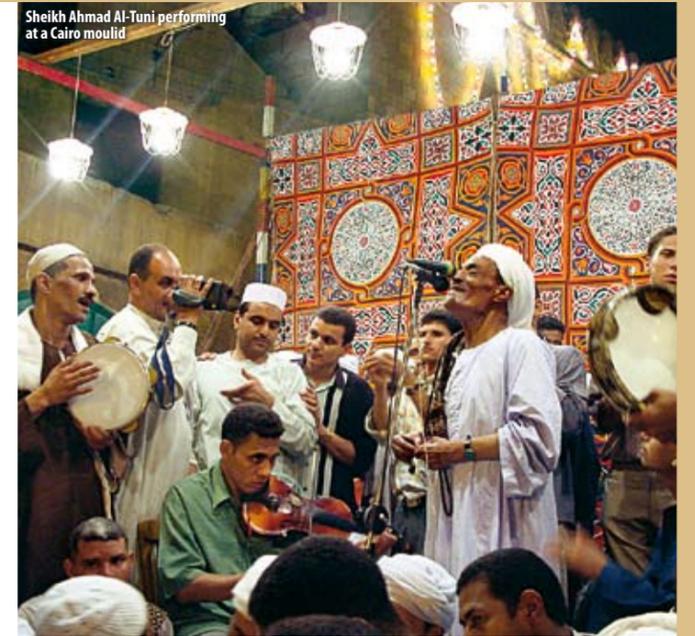
It's a fascinating walk along Sharia Mohammed Ali (also known as Sharia Qalaa) from Midan Ataba towards the citadel to see the musical instrument workshops concentrated at the northern end. Most notable is Gamil Georges' oud shop at number 170, trading since 1906.

MOULIDS

Al-Hussein shrine and its vicinity opposite Al-Azhar mosque hosts Cairo's largest moulid. The festival gathers pace over a week, culminating in Al Leyla El Kebira (big night) on the last Wednesday of the Islamic month of Rabi Al-Thani (last week of March this year). Tents are erected around the mosque for poets, entertainers and *zikk* circles. Sufis attending the festivities parade through the streets, each brotherhood with its own banners and musical instruments.

The moulid of Sayeda Zainab, granddaughter of the prophet Mohammad, is celebrated during the seventh month Rajab (mid-July this year). She is affectionately celebrated as the protecting saint of the feeble and the powerless.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tuni performing at a Cairo moulid



VENUES

Cairo Opera House

Cairo's most prestigious music venue. It opened in its new location in Zamalek in 1988 after its predecessor on Opera Square was destroyed by fire in 1971. Alongside Western opera, there are various performance spaces for classical Arabic music and other styles. It hosts the annual Arab Music Festival each autumn which attracts some of the best singers and ensembles from all over the Arab world.

Gezira Exhibition Grounds 11567, Zamalek, +20 227 350 911, www.cairoopera.org

El-Sawy Culture Wheel

A lively arts centre stuck in the space under a bridge and flyover in the prosperous Zamalek district. There are two main performance spaces; the larger, outdoor one sits alongside the Nile. Concerts by Egyptian performers and visiting world music artists are often held here.

End of Sharia 26th of July, underneath the 15th of May Bridge, Zamalek, +20 124 400 100, www.culturewheel.com

Cairo Jazz Club

One of Cairo's few live music clubs, just over the 15th of May bridge from Zamalek on the western side of the Nile. There's a multitude of musical styles on offer and a cosy performance space, a good bar and snack food.

197 Sharia 26th July, Agouza, +20 233 459 939, www.cairojazzclub.com

After Eight

A popular spot for live and DJ music in an alley behind the Kasr-El Nil cinema. Regularly hosting Oriental jazz bands such as Eftekasat and El Dor El Awwal.

6 Sharia Kasr El Nil, +20 103 398 000, www.after8cairo.com

Makan Centre

Close to the mausoleum of nationalist Saad Zaghloul, and probably the best place in Cairo to hear traditional music in an intimate space run by the Egyptian Centre for Culture & Art. There are regular music sessions on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, including folk and Gypsy

performers, plus ritual zar and Sufi music.
1 Sharia Saad Zaghloul, Al-Mounira, +20 227 920 878, www.egyptmusic.org

Al-Manasterly Palace

Also known as the International Music Centre, this was home to Cairo's governor in the 1850s. The halls of the palace are excellent for solo and chamber music concerts and its grounds also house the Oum Kalthoum Museum.

2 Sharia Al-Malek Al-Saleh, Roda Island, +20 223 631 467, www.manasterly.com

Al-Ghuri Complex

This newly-restored 16th century *caravanserai* and mausoleum, close to Khan El-Khalili souk and the Al-Azhar mosque, hosts regular musical performances of the whirling dervish Tannoura Dance Troupe, the Nubian Drum Band and the Sama' Troupe for Sufi and religious singing. The dervishes are rather touristic, but the *munshid* singers of Sama' can be good.

Al-Azhar Sharia, just by the footbridge, +20 225 107 146

Al-Geneina Theatre

An open-air amphitheatre situated inside the impressive Al-Azhar Park, overlooking Old Cairo and bordering the inhabited mausoleums of the 'City of the Dead'.

Al-Azhar Park, Sharia Salah Salem, Darassa, +20 223 625 057, www.mawred.org/genainatheatre.htm



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