

## EXISTING MUSIC

Reem Kelani has a very individual take on Palestinian music. **Jamie Renton** finds out what makes her tick...

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**R**eem Kelani injects Palestinian folk songs with finger snapping jazz scat and old Gershwin standards with wailing Middle Eastern improvisations. Her voice is raw and emotive, yet at times tempered with an unexpected sweetness. You never know which way it's going to go, and lost in the music and the moment, nor does she. I first heard her on the two standout contributions she made to Gilad Atzmon's 2003 album *Exile* (see *f*R240 and Root Salad *f*R241). I wanted to talk to her back then but only managed to catch up with her last year while researching a piece on *Celebrating Sanctuary* (see *f*R252). I was blown away by her performance at that festival and have been blown away by subsequent performances I've witnessed, including a delightful set in a tent at last year's WOMAD Rivermead, in which she requested and received, abundant audience participation. You see it's not just that powerhouse voice that's special. Reem has a way of interacting with a crowd (joking, chatting, cajoling), that's closer to a market stall patter merchant than the clichéd aloof and mysterious Arabic diva. We are, after all, dealing with a Palestinian refugee who counts Dot Cotton and Del Boy Trotter amongst her heroes.

As a Jewish man, getting to know a Palestinian such as Reem has been a new experience. I'm surprised by both the cultural differences and similarities. In all honesty I appear to have more in common with her than with many Israelis I've met, although this may be due to our shared London Diaspora immigrant heritage. Our interview took place over a few evenings in the West London flat that Reem shares with her English husband. Outside the flat are pots of exotic smelling Palestinian herbs and spices, many of which Reem puts to good use in her cooking and our talks were punctuated by some very memorable meals, including a delicious Palestinian chicken soup (I told you there were cultural similarities!)

Reem's cross-cultural musical identity was forged at an early age. Her first musical memories are of the songs her father sang to her as a child in Kuwait, hits from the old black and white films of his youth, both Arabic and Western. She was born in Manchester but her family moved to Kuwait when she was still very young. Originally they're from Palestine and this cultural heritage came into sharp focus when, at the age of 13, Reem visited there for the first time. She wore a small gold map of Palestine round her neck (a common gift for girls in Palestinian refugee families).

“On the bridge between Jordan and Palestine, a Jordanian soldier climbed onto the bus and advised any girl wearing the map to take it off now as otherwise Israeli soldiers would take it away,” she recalls. “This is what I call ‘Occupation of the Self’, because the map is what many exiled Palestinians hold on to, in the same way that many people of the generation that left Palestine wear the front door key to their house around their neck.” During the visit, Reem was taken to a wedding in the small village just outside Nazareth that her family came from. “It was here that I discovered my identity as a Palestinian. I can still remember the smell of the food wafting, the sense of community. There was a dance that the bride had to do. She wore a lime green dress and held two candles. She was so sensuous and yet there wasn’t an ounce of pornography in it. Something so subtle yet so feminine and that was when I decided that I wanted to be a singer.”

Her family had other plans. “Being Palestinian you have education, education, education drummed in to you ... long before Tony Blair thought of it! Music was fine, you got shown off to guests and performed at talent shows, but education was the thing.” So she studied Zoology and Computer Science at Kuwait University although her heart was still set on music. On graduating in 1986 she supported herself by working as a researcher, carrying out a survey of the shrimp population of the Arabian Gulf. At night she’d sing in hotels (the closest thing to nightclubs that Kuwait had to offer), performing jazz standards, show tunes and even old Patsy Cline hits. “I was fishing by day, singing by night,” she explains. “I would come home, smelling of fish, change out of my blue boiler suit, shower and then go off to sing.”

At about the same time her interest in Palestinian music was rekindled when she joined a *Dabkeh* (Palestinian folk dance group) and finally brought all of her musical passions together in a concert called *I Got Rhythm*, a fundraiser for the Medical Aid For Palestinians charity. “I opened with a Fred Astaire number, the next minute it was an old Palestinian song, then *Stormy Weather*, followed by a Fairuz standard and on it went. I didn’t find any contradiction in this but for the first five minutes the audience was perplexed. After a while they knew to expect the unexpected. Even some of the most religious people said ‘We disagree with what you’re doing .... *But we loved it!*’ and I realised right there that was what I wanted to do in life. But to this day, I can’t find one promoter in the UK who will allow me to do that. Here they’re interested in how ethnic you are, not in what you have to say.”

In the late 1980s Reem received a scholarship to study Aquatic Resource Management at Kings College, London. The culture shock was too much for her to cope with and by the second term she felt complete disenchantment with her life and career. Then one afternoon she wandered into the Museum Of Mankind. “I just fell in love with the place. I heard Palestinian music playing and just burst into tears.” She caught the attention of the Museum’s Education Officer who was looking for someone to run workshops on Palestinian music. As a result she gave up her studies and spent two very productive years working at the museum. Then in 1990 Saddam invaded Kuwait and Reem lost contact with her parents.

“It was very humbling, because one minute you’re from a good family, your father is a doctor and then suddenly Saddam decides to invade Kuwait and my formative years are taken from me.” Fortunately she found out later that her family were OK but at the time, it felt like another ‘Occupation of the Self’. “That’s why I’ve found myself so

drawn to a genre in Palestinian music called ‘The Songs Of Parting’, when you bid your loved ones farewell. They’re not mourning songs, they haven’t died, but you don’t know if you’re ever going to see them again. These songs aren’t in blues scales but are blues in spirit.”

At the same time she was trying to launch herself as a singer, but made a conscious decision to avoid London’s sometimes-sleazy Arabic restaurant and nightclub circuit. “Partly because of its association with belly dancers and men shoving lots of money in their cleavage and also because about half of what I sing is devotional and I thought how can I perform it in nightclubs?” She concentrated instead on playing benefits and community gigs. “What I call ‘National Busking’, I was busking for Palestine, but rather than in the street or tube stations, I did it at these NGOs and gigs.”

Through her work at the Museum she became known to Palestinian communities throughout the world and was playing prestigious venues and making radio appearances in other countries long before she received any recognition in the UK. She was also invited to sing in Palestinian refugee camps and started to record the songs of the old women she met there; soaking up the folk tunes they taught her, which now make up a large part of her repertoire. This is folk music as a political statement. By singing these songs Reem is asserting the existence of a Palestinian culture which some would seek to deny. She likens it to the way in which jazz in the 1940s and 50s was a means by which Black Americans could assert their existences. As a singer, as opposed to an instrumentalist, she feels that making a cultural statement is inevitable. “If you are a Palestinian singer, whether you are under occupation or, like me, in the Diaspora, whether you’re singing very old songs or the contemporary stuff (a lot of which is called ‘Poetry of the Resistance’), you are making a statement. Once you sing the folkloric you’re saying we existed historically, by singing the contemporary you’re saying we exist politically, and that’s frightening to some people.”

But woman cannot live by folk songs and benefit gigs alone and Reem has always supported herself by undertaking literary translations, conference interpretation and subtitling for television programmes. Through the latter she became associate producer on a number of TV documentaries, which in turn led to production work on the radio and ultimately her producer/presenter role on *Distant Chords*, a groundbreaking BBC Radio 4 programme in which she explored different diasporic musical cultures across the UK. It ran for two series and paved the way for the Beeb’s *World On Your Street* initiative. Another consistent source of work has been running workshops in schools on Palestinian music and culture and it’s easy to see how Reem’s warm, direct manner could win over a classroom full of unruly children with no initial interest in Palestinian folk songs.

Since last year Reem has been developing material with her own band, which includes up and coming jazz pianist Zoe Rahman, Zoe’s sax playing brother Idris, Samy Bishai on Middle Eastern violin and percussionists Fariborz Kiani and Salah Dawson Miller. There’s a genuine sense of warmth in the way that they work together. “There is an old Arab expression that says ‘I don’t want to marry you, I just want to work with you!’ But from previous experience I know that we really need to understand and accept each other. I don’t see myself as a bandleader, just as a singer who composes her songs and researches the folkloric ones. I see it as a team effort. When you are

performing you feel that moment of ecstasy. In Arabic we call it *tarab*, what the Spanish call *duende* and you feel it not just between you and the audience, but also between you and fellow members of the band.”

**H**opefully Reem should record her debut album this year. “So far I’ve been a performing artist and one of my concerns is that, when I go into the studio, who am I going to sing to? When you’re recording a CD, you have to make things more clinical and my fear is that I’ll lose that energy that I have as a live performer. So I am striving to reach a halfway house.” Her energised live performance style is not to everyone’s taste. She’s been accused of selling herself cheap in the way that she communicates with the audience. Not that she could do anything about this, even if she wanted to. It’s not an ‘act’ or a ‘stage persona’, it’s just Reem being herself and I believe that it is this lack of self consciousness which makes her such a compelling performer. Clearly, if she donned a veil and some belly dancing gear she’d be easier to promote and therefore, probably, more commercially successful. Equally if she posed in a PLO T-shirt, with a rifle strapped to her back, she’d be playing up to another set of western stereotypes and would probably attain more prominence because of it. Instead, she remains defiantly herself and is artistically all the better for it.

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