

Jayne Comins' Firing Line: Reem Kelani

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Palestinian singer Reem Kelani studied Western classical music as a child and was also influenced by the Lebanese singer Fayruz. She has also drawn on and developed her Palestinian musical heritage, including Arab maqamat. Her visits to Nazareth in the 1970s stimulated her interest in the music of the Galilee, and in 1996 she started research into traditional music based on interviews with old women in Palestine and in the refugee camps of Lebanon.

Kelani's repertoire includes traditional improvisations and settings of contemporary Palestinian poetry. She has given many concerts in Britain, and has toured North America, Europe, and the Middle East.

She recently made a series of programmes for BBC Radio 4, exploring the hidden musical worlds of Afghan, Kurdish and Yemeni communities in Britain.

How old were you when you knew you could sing? When I was four years old and gave my first public performance.

How would you describe your voice? As powerful and vulnerable as I am.

What do you fear the most? Losing my voice from a bad cold or an asthma attack. It has only happened twice in the past 20 years, but it was unbearable nonetheless.

What's your favourite remedy? An infusion of boiled Palestinian thyme, with lemon and Spanish orange-blossom honey. La terapia mediterranea!

Which singers do you most admire? Asmahan and Fairouz (Arabic); Barbara (French); Marinella (Greek); Ella Fitzgerald (Jazz) and Karen Carpenter (Pop).

What would your motto be? Do your best, ignore the put-downs, and think of Elmo, the 2 ½-year-old monster from Sesame Street. Now HE is a great singer!

What characteristic do you dislike about yourself? My over-sensitivity, especially towards insensitive folk.

What would be your one desert island disc? A recitation of the Holy Quran. For one thing, I need to clean up my act on a desert island before I meet my Maker; and for another, the vast array of melodic modes and techniques used in recitation. A disc for spirit and voice.

What is your favourite venue and why? Place des Arts in Montreal. It was my first solo performance in a grand venue, and was organised by the General Union of Palestinian Canadian Women.

Describe yourself in three words. The sprinting gazelle (Reem is Arabic for gazelle).

If you went to the moon, what possessions would you take with you? Photographs of my husband, nieces and nephews.

What is your ideal holiday? Spending time in Granada, where everything reminds me of Palestine, without the politics and incessant family invitations.

If you weren't a singer what would you be? A poet.

What's the best advice you've been given and who gave it? Focus on Arabic melodic modes (maqamaat), use subtle vocal ornamentations and sing from your body. Given by the Arab music critic, Elias Sahab, in Beirut back in 1998.

What gives you satisfaction from your work? My interaction with the audience. Call and response is crucial for Arabic music, both classical and traditional.

What would you like to achieve musically and why? To collect and preserve as many old Palestinian songs as I can, both for my personal and collective musical survival.

What and where is your favourite meal? Muloukhiyyah, which is an Egyptian soup made of green leaves, chicken stock, garlic and coriander. Slimy yet delicious!

How do you relax? By listening to classical Iranian singing and doing my Spanish homework, both at the same time.

What would you like to change in your life? My impatience.

How would you like to be remembered? As someone who has tried to introduce the cultural and musical side of Palestine to the West.