

# **The past and the current in the Palestinian music scene, a personal perspective.**

*Please note that all what's in this paper is based on my personal experiences as an activist and a working music in the occupied territories since the early 1980s. The opinions and/or analysis expressed in here are subjective and solely my own.*

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While the story of the Palestinian songs and the lyricists and musicians who wrote them on Palestinian and non-Palestinian lands remains untold, Palestinian music evidently has gone through intense fazes of development each came with its own features and characteristics that distinguished it from the rest; each with its own set of criteria; influences, necessities, agendas and aesthetics. This in ways makes the pursuit of the task of understanding it not an easy one, especially since primarily the Palestinian national identity started to develop more intensively since the Israeli occupation in 1948. Collectively, the arts continue to respond pivotally to this condition. So the specific question that comes to mind is how important music has been to the Palestinian struggle and to which extent the struggle itself influenced Palestinian musical landscape? To answer this question we must first understand that the importance of music as an artistic tool of expression within a given culture and to Palestinians specifically.

Cultures in general respond to changes using the various tools that are available to them. Weather cultural transformation take place gradually or rapidly, the embedded tools of expression within a given culture continue to being merely practices that are carried by the people and may not be at times interpreted as conscious artistic efforts of making art, rather social practices. Although mostly, the outcome of these social practices appears in a specific contexts and/or occasions, in essence, they can also be considered to be practices that that express the values of a culture, and maintain its customs, traditions and beliefs. The Palestinian struggle is essentially another manifestation of how cultures respond to change, regardless of how its displayed. Music in general plays a crucial role in highlighting the struggle of a people. It helps bringing the people under a unified goal while setting up their view of certain issues. In the Palestinian case, it indeed helped setting up the Palestinians' new sense of identity and helped identifying cultural values that are relevant to their historical conditions and provided a common perspective on various political and social issues.

## **Introduction**

In his *The Land and the Book*, the American missionary William Thompson provided an account of Palestinian urban music (classical) in the last quarter of the 19th century. Music was played in cafés, sung to the accompaniment of the *qānūn* (plucked zither),

*kamanja* (violin), *'ūd* (short-necked lute), *daff* (frame drum) and *nay* (rim-blown flute). This classic set of instruments making up the *takht* chamber ensemble is the basis of Middle Eastern art music though to a lesser extent of Palestinian music today. At the folkloric level, most of the working musicians at that time played folkloric wind and string instruments such as the *rababa*, *shabbabah*, *yarghul*, *mijwiz*, *buzuq*, *tabla*, *daf* and *'ūd*. This folkloric repertoire is mostly vocal, instrumental music, however, is quite prominent and dominantly associated with various forms of dance.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the musical culture of Greater Syria continued to portray congeniality, differences, and variations as part of the whole socioeconomic structure and make up of each of the regions within. These characteristics are reflected in musical forms, *maqam*<sup>1</sup>, melodic structures, rhythms, social function, lyrics and venues. Vocal musical practices were the most dominant and were so in all regions of Greater Syria, urban and rural, and in almost all social venues. Collectively, musical practices throughout Greater Syria at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were of immense social significance due to their function in society and aesthetic content. They carried and celebrated various time-tested cultural codes such as traditions, customs, beliefs while reinforcing a strong sense of a broad regional identity and unity. Its appeal to the common taste, direct relevancy to the time, and artistic flexibility were factors that contributed to its status and added a dynamic element of creativity to its structure. At the same time, other more versatile musical practices were becoming more popular in Greater Syria but rather in some urban settings, namely the classical genres. Those had been for the most part particular to circles of a higher social and/or economic caliber found in major cities such as Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem and Haifa. When compared to the musically more complex urban repertoire, the musical practices of rural Greater Syria that are universally defined as folklore, continued to be orally transmitted traditions. The practitioners of these musical arts were the poet/composers. They were the ones who indirectly carried the beliefs, myths, tales, and practices of a people across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite all the circumstances that lead to the establishment of other new urban trends, these individuals managed to maintain a somewhat compromised but reasonably coherent and dynamic dimension to their art, maybe to this day. Palestinian musical practices share these aspects with that of Greater Syria, and go beyond to including influences of the southern region bordering the Naqab desert<sup>2</sup>, which is dominated by the music and dances of the nomadic Bedouin tribes as part of the wider musical culture of the North Arabian Peninsula.

The Palestinians confronted the 20<sup>th</sup> century with all the changes that it brought to them, and folk music continued to be one of the most essential tools through which they were able to express themselves, articulate their sense of reality and identity. The later transformation of Palestinian music during the 20th century has been strongly associated with the political changes and their geographic manifestations that took place in the Middle East as a whole and in Greater Syria in particular early in the century. The end of Ottoman rule in 1917 followed by the British Mandate (1922-1948) in Palestine, the rise

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<sup>1</sup> A musical system that defines the pitches, patterns, and development of music and it's unique to the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup> The desert region of southern Palestine.

or Pan-Arabism, Zionism and the Israeli occupation, and the later uprooting, dislocation of the Palestinian people in 1948 and 1967, brought new topics to Palestinian musical tables. While Palestinians took refuge in neighboring countries, especially Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the resulting war and exodus slowly forged a new concept of cultural and musical thought from that time onwards and evolved in its own way.

### **In the Diaspora**

Although Palestinians lived in several countries while adjusting to new living conditions, they were able to carry out their traditional musical practices and articulate common means of expression. This continued to be the case after the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, which played a crucial role in connecting the Palestinian Diaspora to Palestine as its main constituency and bringing the struggle for Palestine to the forefront of World issues. Not yet though playing a role in music-making, the PLO rather left it to advocates of Pan-Arabism in the rest of the Arab World particularly those of Egypt and Syria to actually utilize vocal music and address the question of Palestine. During that time, music was already being used as a tool of mobilizing the masses but even more since the question of Palestine was determined to be a Pan-Arab issue. This particular type of vocal music highlighted popularly consumed musical forms, trends and expressions that would collectively serve the purpose of mobilizing the masses, just like military marches. As these practices became elaborate musical productions that gradually became common and unified in terms of their structure and function in society, they set the bases for the further development and transformation of other neighboring musical cultures, including that of the Palestinians. Distant from the aesthetics of Palestinian folkloric repertoire with regard to the role of the poet/composer and the social condition of its creation, this Pan-Arab repertoire became dominant as not only a way of writing music, but also as mindset and model for musicians and artists who identified themselves with the general objectives of Pan-Arabism. The question that remains is that if the mobilizing role of music was equally vital for Palestinians and Arabs in the struggle against Zionism's colonization of Palestine, in what ways have this role influence both the Palestinian artist in terms of freedom of expression and the Palestinian masses in terms of the general Pan-Arab cultural identity and more particularly their own?

By exploring this and other questions, this paper attempts to explore the nature of musical transformation in the context of the Palestinian musician as individual artist, examining the challenges that faced the poet/composers, and the issues of revival and preservation of Palestinian traditional musical arts. While most academic engagements deal with the overall history of Arab music and the role of patriotic, nationalist, and revolutionary songs in the modern Arab world, this approach aims to fill the gap with regard to the history of music in the struggle for Palestine from the perspective of those who created them, and those who practiced them in both rural and urban settings.

### **History**

The stories of Palestinian working musicians writing songs dealing with the Palestinian struggle, provides an informal history of the Palestinian struggle itself. Although these musicians, including the poet/composers, wrote quite a bit about their own experiences as

ordinary Palestinians, their works remained non-popularized either because of the lack of production means or because of the nature of these practices as local to a village or a community or town. While mostly non-Palestinian musicians and poets wrote songs supporting Palestinian liberation starting in the 1950s through the 1970s, they maintained a comfortable line with the major political players and ideologies of the day, particularly Pan-Arabism. The production of these songs took a peak during the 1960s and thus becoming the ultimate Pan-Arab voice symbolizing the struggle for Palestine. These composers also maintained a comfortable relationship with the musical traditions of the West -which the ideals of Pan-Arabism embraced indirectly- and reflected on the transformation of their communities from rural to urban and they also carried these reflections to the music itself. The influence of Arab-nationalistic music was augmented by the mass availability of transistor radios in the 1950s and the mass availability of television sets beginning in the 1960s and of cassette players in the 1970s. In the post-1967 era, and following the defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 war, the same songs started to express despair and defeat, while later providing a little hope especially in conjunction with the emerging Palestinian guerrilla movement after al-Karamaih<sup>3</sup> battle in Jordan where the Palestinians claimed victory in 1968. All in all, for over two decades up until the 1970s, mostly non-Palestinian Arab singers, composers, poets, song writers and lyricists continued to dominate music-making that is relevant to the Palestinian struggle, those include Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers, Um Kulthum, al-Shaikh Imam, and later on Marsil Khalifaih. At various levels, this repertoire was still alien to Palestinians in terms of the way the lyrics were setup, musical sonorities, performance practices, composition, rhythms, venues, etc. This in many ways initiated aspects of marginalization and simplistic treatment towards all Arab cultural diversities especially at a point where advocates of Pan-Arabism were promoting a specific type of Arab identity that carried certain features and characteristics that seemed to be the right one for every individual to pursue. For some Palestinian artists, the lyrics used in this Pan-Arab repertoire for example weren't entirely down to the point when it comes down to what Palestinians were actually going through. They were rather very general statements about the conflict and often lack artistry. The music itself also sounded more like European military marches rather than Arab folk airs. Some Palestinian musicians and artists, even those who have had a different take on how Palestinian music and arts should be pursued while expressing the issues at stake, had to adhere to the Pan-Arab approach in pursuing what they wanted to say. And some went further and took a stab at doing things their own way.

### **Palestine**

In the early 1970s and as urbanization was sweeping the whole Middle East; the socioeconomic conditions in Palestine were changing rapidly. The Israeli occupation added to that dynamic by launching an ambitious campaign to confiscating Palestinian agricultural lands and build Israeli Settlements. These factors forged a wave of rural migration into urban centers which is still going to this day, primarily seeking jobs. As a result of this and combination of other factors that I will come to later, several of the traditional musical genres were either influenced and/or becoming increasingly less viable venues for expression in urban settings.

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<sup>3</sup> A town in Jordan, near the Allenby Bridge which spans the Jordan River.

This in many ways forced traditional practitioners of these art forms namely the poet/composers, to either go with the flow, modify some more popular genres so they can cope with the changes, or restrict themselves to genres that are dear to their hearts and deal on their own with the issues of marginalization and alienation by restricting themselves to venues that embrace their own status in society. During that time, poet/composers were labeled according to their loyalty or faithlessness to the struggle for Palestine, which was the issue that all art forms were concerned with, and what they sang and wrote and performed was evidence to their commitment or non-commitment. Poet/composers were often identified as patriots if their work is inline with what's being addressed at the national level, thus supported and promoted, or as non-patriot, passive or disloyal, thus ignored and alienated. This was also true in most art forms. The nationalized repertoire that is imported from the centers of Pan-Arabism, namely Egypt and Syria, has become a tool of mobilization that was promoted as part of a political machine that identifies political commitments and popular sentiment and responds to them.

Although this is a historically typical defense mechanism and a natural reaction to historical events, the overall changes to the socioeconomic conditions played a crucial role in marginalizing the role of the poet/composer since the reasons for his/her existence in society were vanishing with urbanization. In addition, poet/composers didn't have a production machine needed to spread their word so they can correspond to the high demand of providing such services to all Palestinians wherever they are. Nor have they had the approval by the overwhelming popularity and power of the Pan-Arab ideals to in fact pursue their particular cultural ways. It was obvious at that point is that if one attempt to establishing a new machine that is indigenously Palestinian it would require recruiting a young generation to deliver these tasks at the national level and maybe some careful selection of what's to be represented at the artistic level, production means, and above all required political commitment.

### **Al-‘Ashiqin**

It was in the early 1970s when some Palestinian musicians, who were also refugees since 1948, became more visible at their local refugee camps in Jordan and later in Syria. They offered a familiar and a more relevant alternative to the Palestinian taste and issues while adhering still to the most common musical Greater Syrian genres. However, still operating underground at least for one more decade, it wasn't until the late 1970s when Hussain Nazik, a Palestinian composer originally from Jerusalem and musically educated, added a new perspective on Palestinian music with his group Aghani al-‘Ashiqin. It's not exactly clear how al-‘Ashiqin came about and how it ended up becoming the ultimate representative of the Palestinian struggle or to which extent have the PLO played a role in its promotion and popularity. What we know about them is that in the summer of 1977 Ahmad Da`hbur, a Palestinian folk poet who lived in Cario at the time wrote a song titled “*Wallah la Azra‘ak bi al-Dar,*” which Hussain Nazik picked up and set the music for.<sup>4</sup> The song was produced by the PLO's department of Culture and

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<sup>4</sup> In here book *al-Funūn al-sha‘bīyah fī Filasṭīn* published in 1968, Yusrá Jawharīyah ‘Arniṭah takes a note of a song that carries the same title of the hit song “*Wallah la Azra‘ak bi al-Dar*”. She found it in Shu‘fat, a

Broadcast as part of soup opera that a Syrian director was commissioned to work on for the department. The song became an instant hit among Palestinians everywhere and upon Ahmad Da`hbur's return to al-Yarmuk refugee camp, they were invited by Abdallah al-`Hurani, head of the department at the time who encouraged them to establish a group where Da`hbur writes the lyrics, Nazik composes them, Ahmad al-Jamal is the head administrator. Ahmad al-Jamal was deputy to al-`Hurani at that time. Al-Hurani suggested the name "Aghani al-'Ashiqin," They were all affiliated with Fati`h since its early days, and employed by the Department of Culture and Broadcast in the PLO. Despite all that, their work in the group was considered voluntary and was still pursued after their formal working hours. Al-'Ashiqin approached folklore as a dynamic repertoire that can be used to reflect the most current conditions and sentiments of Palestinians while maintaining its musical and aesthetic value.

At that time, several generations of Palestinians were born in the Diaspora in refugee camps. Since they haven't been to their homeland since 1948, the things that they knew about Palestine were its songs, stories, customs, traditions, memories, etc. But at the time where a new generation was emerging and a new wave of refugees was once more filling refugee camps throughout the Arab World and establishing new ones, all Palestinians in the Diaspora were confronting the fact that they have become refugees once more and while refreshing the old painful memories of the past, the immediate emotional magnitude that surrounded these events after the 1967 war constituted and renewed the idea of Palestine as a physical place in addition to being also a nostalgic entity. Subject matters addressed in the songs of al-'Ashiqin were consistent with what Palestinians have become, a people with a strong and clear sense of national identity with an emerging and quite popular resistance movement. Although romantic at times in terms of idealizing Palestine, the idea of Palestine in the minds of Palestinians in the Diaspora has become a homeland on its own, while dynamic in its own way it was also quite different from one place to another. The overall content of al-'Ashiqin songs offered a more musically-authentic aspect of the resistance movement other than the ones promoted by the Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The Pan-Arab repertoire essentially covered wider objectives and goals from that perspective, where the emerging Palestinian one was covering the Arab/Palestinian perspective. This repertoire consisted of songs about Palestine, and was primarily telling the stories of ordinary people. This repertoire was indeed used for recruitment and mobilization of all Arabs, especially Palestinians. In fact at some point the Palestinian energy that was boiling throughout the Arab world early in the 1970s was used by some factions in the PLO to pursue change in the whole the Arab World. Some of these attempts ended catastrophically. At all rates, al-'Ashiqin gained ultimate popularity in the following few years among all Palestinian regardless of where they were. Angry at the failures of all Arab regimes in the past wars, and urging within the Arab League to give a formal recognition to the PLO as the sole representatives of Palestinians and the right to determine their own destiny and make their own decisions concerning the conflict, this was the first time were Palestinians were in fact telling their own stories at least at this level rather than having someone else doing

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refugee camp and a town north of Jerusalem and it seemed to have mostly different lyrics and a totally different melody in 5/4 meter. At this point we're still not sure which came first, the lyrics or the music.

it for them. Subsequently, in 1974, the Arab League recognized the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people; and this gave Palestinians a formal and much more familiar penetration of their past experience and their take on the future was very much within their reach. Meanwhile, al-‘Ashiqin was prolific in terms of the number of songs they wrote during that time period and in terms of the number of performances they delivered throughout the Arab World, Europe and the Americas. Al-‘Ashiqin continued to rely on Palestinian traditional arts as main resource for inspiration while incorporating a more complex treatment of its musical forms, types of instruments used, orchestration, *maqam*, arrangements and above all subject matter. In other word, melodies, musical forms, lyrics, dances, dialects and the Palestinian subject were carried through all of their works while attempting to express from the perspective of the contemporary Palestinian musician the ways through which Arab classical instruments in conjunction with folkloric and Western ones can be used in modernizing traditional musical practices and accommodating change while maintaining the main elements of traditional Palestinian musical thought. This approach to music-making differs from that of the poet/composers. In a way, this time around the idea of having both poetry and melody created by one person was becoming more of two people a poet and a composer delivering the job of one. We don’t have a full picture of how the role of the poet/composer transformed in the Palestinian Diaspora<sup>5</sup>, but as this research continues, an examination of the ways of the poet/composers in the Diaspora will be explored.

### **In the Occupied Territories**

Since the success of al-‘Ashiqin transcended itself at many different levels in Palestinian culture, having non-Palestinian songs reminiscent of those of the 1950s and 1960s that were relevant to the Palestinian struggle but not necessarily to Palestinian culture started to fade, including those that were considered the songs of the revolution, Aghani al-Thawra. This encouraged several individuals and groups in the Diaspora and the occupied territories to express themselves as individuals and communities and attempt to speak to their constituencies. Those include George Qirmiz, al- al-Sha‘biyyah, Sabrin, Sirriyat Ramallah Dance Troupe, Rim al-Banna, Jamil al-Sayih and al-Ra`hhala, al-Bara‘im, etc. Later capitalization on this movement came about in the late 1970s in the occupied territories where some Palestinian intellectuals who for the most part happened to be politically committed to one of the main active political parties started to formally establish folkloric dance groups that are supported by specific political parties. These groups started exploring folklore and looked for means for its preservation and maintenance. Although they never had a formal platform for discussing such strategies, some presented the argument or justification that the only way of preserving folklore it to institutionalize its practices and provide patronage and production facility, and pursue local venues to present these traditions. While realizing how influential of a tool it may become, they soon attempted to capitalize on the past experiences and successes of al-‘Ashiqin and the model they created and started to present a repertoire that is parallel to that of al-‘Ashiqin, subsequently playing a role in mobilizing the masses and in recruiting more individuals to their own parties.

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<sup>5</sup> The only strong reference that we have of Abu ‘Arab is that he is a Palestinian from ‘Ain al-`Hilwa refugee camp in Lebanon. His role reflects the go-with-the-flow approach that many poet/composers in the Palestinians territories ended up pursuing.

## **The Poet Composers**

While these individuals and groups defended folklore fiercely, the role of the poet/composer shifted. For centuries, the role of the poet/composer was an essential and dynamic part of how Palestinian musical culture functioned as a whole. They were the main guardian of these traditions in terms of how the practices are carried, or in how they are taught to the next generation. As their role became more of practitioners of certain desired forms or genres that were more familiar to the general population thus serve in mobilization and delivering the message, several of these masters and their practices gradually faded and a newer urbanized generation was about to replace them with a much different view and knowledge of the past. Before going deeper into how this whole story folds, it's important to understand that very few of these masters depended entirely on practicing these arts as their main livelihood, but in all cases, and because of these changes and other socioeconomic reasons that I discussed earlier, many ended making their living otherwise. Just like most of the rural population that was heading towards the cities seeking employment. The impact of this on their participation as poet/composers in occasions and gatherings is that it began to diminish. Some even stayed out of the whole scene and lead a different life all together. As their role as creators and guardians of traditional music arts has obviously for good changed, the ultimate authority that they have had over these traditions and the way they carried their practice in society was also jeopardized by urbanization and politicization. On the one hand, the new urban generation had modest knowledge or experience in carrying these traditions and even though they presented it to the best of their knowledge, which often came short when compared to the original works of the masters and the variety of genres that they presented. They were also politically more inclined to commit themselves to a specific political goal or even entity. On the other hand, political parties thus indirectly entrusted this heritage to these motivated groups and individuals based on both their political commitment to the struggle for Palestine, regardless of their talent and mastery of the art, and on their need to collectively express themselves as people suffering under occupation. During that time, in the early 1980s, the migration from the country to urban centers has reached its peak and it also had its piece on how traditional music is generally perceived in urban settings. Musical practices that have been associated with rural settings such as the harvest, olive picking season, etc., started to gradually fade out of fashion as the economy was also changing rapidly and these practices became less important to their livelihoods and lifestyles.

## **Arab Pop**

Various musical forms and genres became quite popular in urban centers, namely the so called Franco Arab, which was a Lebanese genre that incorporated primarily Western musical instruments, and the Egyptian genre Aghani al-Shabab. Musical instrument were becoming much more affordable to purchase through several newly established music shops in the West Bank and a magnificent number of local groups were established to perform this music and other Western repertoire. These groups performed regularly in hotels, restaurants, banquet halls and suitable spaces like auditoriums, schools and concert halls. The number of venues that based their business idea on putting together daily and weekly parties was so high to the level that it wasn't at all unfamiliar to hear

live music coming out from a building or a backyard that was transformed into an outdoor restaurant or at any major street whenever and wherever you wander around any of the major cities, particularly Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus and Jericho. It wasn't long when several of these urban musical groups started to travel to villages to perform in weddings and other celebration. The same repertoire that was common in the cities would also be partially carried in rural setting but in addition to it other more traditional-sounding repertoire was also performed. This more traditional-sounding repertoire wasn't quite popular in cities and maintained its appeal almost exclusively to rural areas or urban communities that maintained their rural values. Although the vast majority of these groups used primarily Western instruments, including new and affordable *sharqi* keyboards<sup>6</sup>, they all managed to make of the 1980s quite a musically vivid scene. For example, in any of the weekly parties that take place at any banquet hall you would hear a repertoire that covers Michael Jackson, Fairuz, Modern Talking, Ataba and Mijana, Qudud, Um Kulthum, Farid al-Atrash, Abd al-`Halim, Sami Clark, Adonis Aqil, Mil`him Barakat, Ghassan Saliba, Amru Diab, Warda, Raghil `Alama, Walid Tawfiq, Air Supply, Foreigner, Madonna, and many others. This is flourished and appealed particularly among middle class Palestinians. Some musical groups restricted themselves to Western instruments and to Arab pop genres and American pop, which appealed mostly to urban middle and upper middle class youth. Other groups incorporated some elements of traditional repertoire that may even included traditional instruments particularly the oud, these groups appealed primarily to audiences with some taste for the modern but rather more at the traditional end especially towards the end of the evening when requests for *tarab* start to emerge. Essentially, they all wanted to appeal to audiences that can hire them again. The vast majority of these groups attempted to target middle class constituencies, that's were the money was. The second largest were groups that targeted the rural areas and its parallels in urban centers, in result somewhat bridging the gap between the traditional repertoire and the modern one.

### **The Urban Folk Scene**

Towards the end of the 1980s, folklore was mostly carried by those who have established themselves as guardians of all traditional arts. And those were for the most part maintained by political factions. At that point, despite the new lyrics that were infused into it, folklore was becoming more of a canonized repertoire both at the musical and poetic levels verses its dynamic past. At the musical levels, folkloric presentations from that moment on gave the impression that the artistic pool that was attached to what's being presented is limited. Given that preservation was the main argument that these groups provided in defense of these presentations, these presentations also gave the impression that authenticity with regards to the general approach is also being implemented and conserved. In these urban settings where most people didn't precisely know how authentic Palestinian folkloric genres varied from each other in terms of musicality and function and even how they actually sounded like, what they heard from these groups on urban stages became their main and only point of reference. Although those who presented this argument of preservation later presented a contradictory claim the need for experimentation and modernization – in ways bouncing back to the original rural aesthetics of these musical arts- , the later repertoire that came out of these groups

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<sup>6</sup> A keyboard that plays Arab quarter tones.

was for the most part lacking both, authenticity and creativity, see *Zagharid* by al-Funun al-Sha'biyyaih.

In addition to all the rapid changes that were taking place in terms of the economic transformations and reconfiguration of who does what in society, the convincing but deceiving view of preservation imposed itself on the general population and mostly alienated the rural population and those who were expressing themselves through these art forms as a dynamic tool that was still alive and healthy. While the same urban intellectualized preservation argument on a tradition that was very much alive at the moment was bearing no fruit, these groups insisted on presenting themselves as guardians of Palestinian folklore, to this day. This authoritarian approach was indeed self-declared and supported by some circles of political and/or literary affiliation and interest in the approach. While the music scene was exploding in terms of the number of musicians and venues, the traditional groups were for the most part concerned with the politics of the day and hoping to bring more people to listen to what they have to say and hope to expand their popular base and bring more resources towards the struggle for Palestine while maintaining certain features of Palestinian musical heritage. So to them, it was a win-win situation, at least that's how it seemed to be. In general, the arts play a role in highlighting the objectives and goals of any given political party. This is true everywhere and it manifests itself through various mediums, including audio-visual media. At that time however, the arts in general as mobilization tools were strictly monitored by the Israelis, even those that were displayed in demonstrations as leaflets or those hanging in some art gallery as abstract art. To Israelis, all of these arts were considered potential tools of incitement; especially when they allegedly lead in some shape or form to resisting occupation and to the establishment of political and armed cells. The urban folklorists thus operated under underground names or attempted to portray a sense of symbolism to their work. The later though was much more of a problematic approach since the intended message to be delivered to the public could not be explored and clarified to the fullest. Across the board though, the vast majority of lyrics used in their musical presentation were adjusted in ways that reflected either their own most current political agendas or the general political situation as a whole and reinforced the message of resisting the occupation. While these groups were also monitored closely by the Israeli authorities, some affiliated themselves with some politicized and/or independent institutions that helped them gain some legal cover from the Israeli authorities and even provided them with space, venues, and often acted as a production facilitator.

Despite urbanization and migration and all the factors that lead to this decline in the role of the poet/composers, the consumable remains of this type of music were still commonly practiced throughout the Palestinian territories especially in rural setting in weddings and other social and cultural events, away from stages and the urban emerging venues. They were also practiced among villagers who came to the cities to settle but wanted to embrace their own rural traditions, practices and values. The main venue for practicing these musical arts used to be an agreed-upon open space in the village or neighborhood where these performances can be pursued for the participation and pleasure of all the people. In the case of the Urban Folk, it was practiced on stage, and away from its social context. These shows appeared mostly as musicals where the performance as a whole

seemed to have some pre-determined elements or organization, canonization, and apparently urban. The later had features that are especially apparent in the design of customs, decoration, lighting, dances, and the interaction between males and females on stage. It was then clear that a new genre was born, the Palestinian Urban Folk. Audiences watched these shows for the most part silently, participated or sang along when seemed right. This music has become urbanized in terms of the instruments used, performance practices, dialects, and features of its original traditional manifestations by the poet/composers started to fade out. The Urban Folk genre was becoming the most known of all Palestinian genres, it's basically the pop version of the hardcore *zajal* forms carried by the poet/composers for centuries.

As I mentioned before, traditionally, those who carried these musical practices were all considered poet/composers and masters of the art and had authority and knowledge with regard to Palestinian poetic and musical folkloric arts; some of them depended on this for their livelihood. While these masters were mostly needed to enhance the newly emerging trend of urbanization, although under the umbrella of preservation, they were for the most part left aside as they mostly worked for hire and not as volunteers. Since most of these Urban Folk groups had no financial resources to cover these expenses or even had a moral issue with a master not volunteering to do this for free for the cause, this in turn further affirmed the new alternative system which consists of recruiting under talented and volunteering individuals who had prominent commitment to the political agendas of the time and often to a given political party. Once more, despite the fact that they were for the most part not quite knowledgeable of the traditions they wanted to present and/or preserve nor to what these traditions entailed, the role of the poet-composer thus switched from the role of the creator, to becoming merely a commodity and an occasional point of reference. The cultural justification of the existence of the poet/composers was already compromised by all the factors I mentioned before, and thus the poet/composers were marginalized.

In comparison to al-'Ashiqin, although contradictory to each other, most of these Urban Folk groups used the same musical forms that were available to them at the folkloric level however lacking the musical knowledge that was evident in al-'Ashiqin's work. Collectively, and in result, those examples provided a rather simplistic view of Palestinian music and offered little perspective on how music being made and by whom in addition to contributing to causing further alienation to the general rural population which started to ignore its own traditional ways of expression sentiment through artistic means while leaning towards the musical exports of Palestinian urban centers, and those of Lebanon and Egypt, as if realizing that what they have been doing for hundreds of years in fact belongs in a museum. This resulted in a freeze on the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the poet/composers literature. This in part led to the beginning of the end of folklore as we know it, though a new beginning of another alternative Palestinian urban music.

### **The Urban Alternative Genre**

During this period, Palestinian music remained for the most part based on simplified folkloric elements that have been throughout history aesthetically quite flexible to

accommodate changes. Some individuals and independent groups from the West Bank and abroad have managed to however offer a different take on Palestinian-music-making as many were partially responding to the limitations of the Urban Folklorists and seeking contemporary methods in displaying their artistic views. Since under the Israeli occupation, direct rhetoric in any medium was punishable by law, this in ways drew a parallel towards the mystic and metaphorical elements in both Arab and Palestinian poetry and encouraged several of these individuals and group to set them to music. Some poets and musically trained composers and musicians attempted to explore this aspect and in result offered an alternative genre to both traditional-rural and urban groups and managed to reach different audiences particularly the then well established middle class, independents, intellectuals and university students. Those songs covered a more personalized aspect of the Palestinian condition and thus gathered a very loyal following around them. Sabrin, a group based in East Jerusalem is one of those groups that became a haven for independent writers and musicians and hence became quite influential in terms of what Palestinian music has become today. The group became notable in the discussion of the role of music in the Palestinian struggle as it offered a much more intellectual and philosophical take on the function of music in society and the way it facilitates change. Despite the fact that the vast majority of individuals and groups worked underground, many were known quite well-known in their own regions as individuals even when they operated under various “undercover” names. The advantage that Sabrin had over the other emerging groups that were following the same path is that they were all Jerusalemites (except for Kamilya Jubran who came from al-Ramaih in northern Israel), which gave them relative protection when it comes down to freedom of expression as Jerusalemites were protected by Israeli law. Between 1987 and 1993, the Israeli Intelligent Services aggressively pursued all the groups and individuals operating in the West Bank and administrative detentions were taken against some of them.<sup>7</sup>

As cultural and political tools, the Palestinian Urban Folk and traditional music (poet/composers) and the Urban Alternative started to decline after the first Intifada. This gradual decline deepened even further the lack of a music production scene. Aside from what’s considered a political leaflet or message to the people, PLO institutions after Oslo didn’t offer formal support towards the musical arts. It seems that it was approached still as a tool for mobilization and as if this role has come to an end. Palestinian alternative music, on the other hand was still undiscovered by the general population and didn’t fully mature in terms of forms, poetry and lyrics, production, and objectives and goals. By the second Intifada, the role of mobilizing the masses was either taken once more by other composers from the Arab world or by local composers and singers. Some attempted to once more use music as a tool of political expression, or capitalize on a public sentiment.

## **Conclusion**

Traditions are dynamic reflections of beliefs and/or belief systems and time-tested practices that exist in the context of geography, language, religion, aspirations and

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<sup>7</sup> This type of music flourished from the mid 1980s all the way to the late 1990s. Several groups made their way to becoming influential in their own way though this was destined for later retreat especially after the Oslo Accord, which I will come to in detail in my subsequent research.

common interests. In order for these traditions to be maintained a system has to be in place, which could be defined as tribal, nationalistic, regional or political. National Palestinian traditions have been articulated in conjunction with the process of struggling for free Palestine. The PLO as a cluster of active institutions have played a crucial role in highlighting Palestinian values and traditions through various ways including music, embroidery, poetry, and dance. The current role of the PLO however has changed dramatically since Oslo. At the time when relative peace was in place after Oslo, the PA didn't see fit to continue with the campaign of using music as a tool nor attempted to properly support Palestinian musical arts. The PA's role pragmatically shifted towards embracing Arab Pop and pooling a great deal of resources towards bringing in Arab Pop icons and organizes festivals that tended to parallel themselves with the general music scene in the Arab World. Except for few independent festival organizers such as the Palestinian Festival for Music and Dance established by the Popular Arts Center and the Jerusalem Music Festival organized by Yabus, alternative approach to music-making was almost absent from how the PA viewed itself regarding its role in preserving traditional musical arts and/or promoting new ones. Some individuals in the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, namely Nadir Jalal, however attempted to utilize their position in the Ministry as Coordinator for Music and Dance and pursue such alternatives and approaches but these attempts did not collect the proper support or intimate attention of the PA as a whole. Essentially, Palestinian music is currently in a position where it needs to find its own way once more. That's in the way it appears in the culture, by the people, from the people, and to the people. As several Palestinian musicians are still trying to choose a topic that means something to them as individuals, that topic however is still in the making to being totally and subjectively personal in ways that shed the light on the different perspective on music making that Palestinians have thrived to articulate in the context of humanity, not by being identified by the "other" as most of what's been done is actually portraying.

## Supplement

Some of the groups and individuals that appeared to have had something to do with this scene as I recall subject are listed below; please advise that the ones that I am listing here are by no means comprehensive; those are only the ones that I am acquainted with and/or find to have had some influence over the scene as a whole, and they include<sup>8</sup>:

**Mustafa al-Kurd** / 'ūd player, singer and composer / Jerusalem

**Jamil al-Sayih** / 'ūd player, singer and composer / Ramallah (originally from Nablus)

**Sabrin** / a Palestinian group lead by 'ūd player and composer Sa'id Murad / Jerusalem / an influential group throughout the 1980s and mid 1990s.

**Kamilia Jubran** / multi instrumentalist, singer and composer / Jerusalem (originally from al-Rammah village in northern Israel) (She is the lead singer of Sabrin . / Paris

**Al-Ra`hallah** / an influential group lead by Jamil al-Sayih (mentioned above) since late 1980s to late 1990s.

**Amal Murqus** / Singer / Northern Israel

**Rim al-Banna** / Singer / Nazareth / Israel (quite popular)

**Suhail Khury** / composer / Jerusalem

**Issa Boulos** / 'ūd player and composer / Ramallah / USA /

**Basil Zayid** / Singer, 'ūd player and composer / Ramallah

**George Qirmiz** / Singer, 'ūd player and composer / Jerusalem / USA (An influential artist from late 1970s to late 1980s)

**Bshara al-Khil** / composer / Nazareth / Israel

**Simon Shahin** / 'ūd player and composer / Tarshi`ha / Israel / USA (International figure)

**Samir Jubran** / 'ūd player and composer / Nazareth / Israel / Europe (International figure)

**Taysir Elias** / 'ūd player and composer / Haifa / Israel

**Haytham Safia** / 'ūd player and composer / Kufur Yasif / Israel / Europe

**Ala` 'Azzam** / 'ūd player and composer / Haifa / Israel

**Khalid Jubran** / 'ūd player and composer / Jerusalem (originally from al-Rammah village in northern Israel)

**Adil Salamaih** / 'ūd player and composer / Nablus / Europe

**Ahmad al-Khatib** / 'ūd player and composer / Ramallah / Amman

**Jurj Ziadih** / singer, 'ūd player and composer / Bir Zait / USA

**Rim al-Kilani** / Singer and story teller / UK

**Muhsin Subhi** / 'ūd player and composer / Ramallah / Member in al-Ra`hhalah

**Samer Totah** / 'ūd player and composer / Ramallah

**Zafer Tawil** / multi-instrumentalist / Jerusalem / USA

**Tha`ir al-Barghuti** / poet/composer / Kubar near Ramallah / New generation

**Abu 'Arab** / poet/composer / Lebanon / (An influential artist from late 1970s to the mid 1990s)

**Musa al-Hafidh** / poet/composer / Salfit near Nablus

**Patrick Lama** / composer / Jerusalem / Germany

**Al-Funun al-Sha`biyyaih** / A group based in al-Biraih under the umbrella of the Popular Arts Center and Jam'iyyat Asdiqa` al-Mujtama' / Established in 1979 and is considered

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<sup>8</sup> I left some group out due to either their short life or insignificant influence.

the leading force in articulating the Urban Folk genre. Associated with the Popular Front of Palestine

**Sirriyat Ramallah Dance Troupe** / A group based in Ramallah under the Sirriyat Ramallah al-Ula, a scout organization / Established in 1986 and a secondary influence in articulating the Urban Folk genre. Associated with the Popular Front of Palestine

**Firqit Sharaf al-Tibi** / Named after a martyr. A group based in the Ramallah region used to be under the umbrella of Bir Zait University. Associated with Fate`h.

**Sanabil** / Bir Zait University formal musical group. This group became a symbol for university students and a haven for musicians and composers to introduce their own work in University settings.

**M`harib Dhib** / poet composer / Ramallah region

**Imil Ashrawi** / Guitar and vocals and actor / A Jerusalemite, co-founder of the first Bara`im in the 1970s, former director of Sanabil.

**Udeh Turjman** / multi-instrumentalist, composer and singer / A Jerusalemite, co-founder of Sabrin .

**Mahir Turjman** / multi-instrumentalist, composer and singer / A Jerusalemite, co-founder of the second Bara`im in the later 1980s.

**Yu`ad** / A choir from al-Ramaih in northern Israel.