

The collective traditional song versus the individual original tune: *The Example of the American Songster*

By Reem Kelani

In an old building which looks more like a family house than an official headquarters in Camden, north London, you can find field recordings of old English folk songs which were documented by the British musicologist Cecil Sharp (1859-1924), after whom the building was named. The official name of the establishment is the English Folk Dance and Song Society; it houses a library of musical recordings and books, as well as various performance halls.¹

Cecil Sharp did much to preserve English folk music, which is still ignored by many Britons; they seemingly prefer to listen to Western Classical music, pop or “World Music”, the latter almost wholly a colonialist offshoot (but that’s for another discussion).

This article is based on a concert I attended in Cecil Sharp House by the African-American singer and musicologist, Dom Flemons. He was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1982.² For the most part, the audience seemed to comprise British lefties, researchers in folkloric music, performers of political protest songs, and ranging in age from 50 – 90 years. These admittedly over-hasty observations might give an insight into the narrative of the songs which Dom Flemons was about to sing.

The American Songster, as Flemons titles himself, entered carrying some small bones in his hands. They reminded me of what we used to see in American cartoons: African characters with large bones through their noses, grotesquely fat lips, and singing the Blues in a style more reminiscent of comedy than tragedy (even though the songs were more properly full of the sadness of the downtrodden and the pain of the defiant, not the victim’s whimper). These films were produced in the 1930s and 1940s during the days of official segregation in the US, before the era of political correctness, which avoids referring to the other in a derogatory way. What matters to me here is the humanist aspect more than what is ‘politically correct’, in the eyes of the white man.³

Before he began to sing, Flemons started to play the bones, one in each hand, in fast complex rhythms which grabbed the audience’s eyes almost before their ears. Even for me, as a woman from the East, what ensued was a process of re-adjustment (of ideas and attitudes belonging to the West and the East, both of which are imbued with the colonial story as manifested in the racist undertones of many Hollywood cartoons and films).⁴

¹ <http://www.cecilsharpouse.org>

² <https://theamericansongster.com>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH4ivOyO0PQ>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEyAvDKqCuQ>

Despite the difference in tonality with Arabic singing, the vocal accompaniment seemed to date from the slavery era and was full of a sense of resistance. In that moment, I felt the same sweet burning ache which enveloped me when I attended, as a child, a traditional wedding in my mother's village of Nein, one of the Zu'bi villages to the south east of Nazareth in the Galilee.

So how can a Diaspora Palestinian feel the same sense of hauntedness when she listens to an African-American singer who's not even 34 years old? The answer is that despite the differences in our music (scales versus modes), the differences in us as human beings are less. In fact, we are one and the same. The similarities here are much more than the shared suffering of subjugated peoples, albeit this is a major element. In other words, we can benefit greatly from the experience of African-Americans, by understanding and documenting the suffering which they endured over centuries, long before the creation of the state of Israel. This doesn't mean that we, as Palestinians, artists and historians, have not documented our own history of Palestine before 1948. On the contrary, our creative output as an indigenous people is rooted in the land and is full of historical, oral, musical and artistic records.

What caught my attention in Flemons' delivery was his emphasis on the collective musical tradition as retaining primacy over original song. This is in spite of the fact that Flemons' repertoire comprises many of his own compositions. We may agree or disagree with him, inasmuch as original songs written by the artist, whether inspired by tradition or poetry or personal experience, will ultimately contribute to the collective record of a people.

Despite the fact that Flemons' philosophy is, in his own words, to sing "good music", be it traditional or original, he insists that folkloric music is no less important than works of literature, and I agree with him on this point. As he says: *"When someone performs Shakespeare, everyone knows the material is good, but it is all about how the people who perform it elevate it that makes the show."* By so doing, Flemons has taken on the responsibility to present old musical traditions in a contemporary style.⁵

To this end, he focuses on the undocumented stories of African music in America as well as on re-claiming the historical and political context of 'minstrel' and 'black cowboy' songs. The minstrel artist in American history was, in the main, a white singer who would black up in order to sing songs of African origin which, in essence, had nothing to do with him. White artists appropriated this form of singing at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century; they 'negro-ised' their faces with black polish, misrepresenting black singing and black mannerisms. Thanks to serious musicians like Flemons, however, we now know about key

⁵ <http://www.uprootedmusicrevue.com/2012/02/in-depth-discussion-with-dom-flemons-of.html>

African minstrel singers and are able to listen to their songs which have been largely forgotten in terms of the musical history of America.⁶

Flemons tells us that during the 19th century 'black cowboys' constituted a quarter of the total number of cowboys in Texas. In the main, they were African slaves who had been 'liberated'. These cowboys, whose stories mostly went unrecorded, used to perform their songs during the long night hours, around the camp fire, after a long day's work...the scene is familiar to us through Westerns, save for the fact that the cowboys we saw in those films were white. Thus Flemons devotes his time and his talents to dust off the black cowboy musical heritage in his recordings and presentations.⁷

I personally find great relevance in Flemons' experience for anyone interested in documenting and presenting their musical heritage, not only oppressed people, but anyone whose aim is to preserve their collective heritage. The onus is on us as Palestinian artists and researchers into folklore, or at least on me personally, to learn from the experience of those who have trodden this path before. More importantly, it is for us to reclaim our traditions and to put them faithfully in their original historical context. All of this needs to be tackled before the occupier goes any further in re-writing history to erase mention of the indigenous people.

We shall endeavour, in forthcoming articles, to shed light on the Zionist efforts to do the same as the white man in America. Consider the case of Yair Dalal (b. 1955), the Israeli musician of Iraqi origin, who refers to himself as a 'peace activist', although he served in the Israeli Army (IDF). In his curriculum vitae, Dalal boasts about performing traditional songs in the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1994 of the ill-fated Oslo Peace Process. Dalal has full right, of course, to document the traditional music of the Iraqi Jews, from whom he descends, and his work in this respect has gained excellent academic and performance plaudits. By his own admission, however, Dalal renders this ancient singing tradition in his Zionist narrative. The error is ours, as Arabs, who ignored the contribution of the Jews who lived within Arab society before 1948, and thus we have left the door open to Israeli cultural establishment to appropriate this rich heritage.⁸

Of greater concern is when Dalal claims an *existential* experience of the music of the indigenous Bedouin in Palestine and presents it to the outside world as 'Israeli Arab'. Thus, the original cameleer becomes a fake minstrel, singing to paint the occupation in a positive light under the guise of 'preserving' tradition. The Israeli ministry of foreign affairs even boasts about the Bedouin Cultural Festival in which Dalal participates in the official propaganda effort:

⁶ <http://mccartenviolins.com/2015/11/dom-flemons-the-american-songster/>

⁷ <http://www.gonorthwestoregon.com/index.php/2016/08/17/grammy-winner-returns-to-eastern-oregon/>

⁸ <http://nijewishnews.com/article/24842/a-musician-crosses-and-bridges-cultures#.WJ7YVV-g8qB>

<http://njewishnews.com/article/24842/a-musician-crosses-and-bridges-cultures#.WJ7YVV-g8qB>.

The question remains whether we, as Palestinians, can weave these songs *like a songster* to confront the existential threat we face. To borrow Flemons' own description of the Blues: "*It's the art of laughing to keep you from crying*". It is this profound laughter which should help us in documenting and celebrating our own heritage, instead of crying over it.

Bibliography

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Disclaimer: the author's views vis-à-vis Palestine are not necessarily those held by the subject of this essay

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