

Palestinian but Manchester born, the musician Reem Kelani returned to the city recently to perform with refugees and exiles from all round the world in the Beating Wing Orchestra. She told Sarah Irving about writing for Chinese opera singers, the prejudices of world music and the theft of Palestinian identity

“I was just getting my fix of Lisa Simpson!” Reem Kelani apologises as she comes to the phone. This woman, who has in the past named Dot Cotton, Elmo from Sesame Street and Del Boy from Only Fool & Horses amongst her role models, is hardly the stereotype of a Palestinian world music singer.

Born in St Mary's Hospital in Manchester, Kelani recently returned to the city after being commissioned by Manchester International Festival to write music for a joint performance with the Beating Wing Orchestra. The Beating Wing is a group of musicians from Manchester's migrant and refugee communities, and brings together a Chinese opera singer, vocalists from Kurdistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran and Pakistan, and musicians from Guyana, Cameroon, Brazil and... Wales.

In a spellbinding and spine-chilling performance at Manchester Academy, Kelani's composition highlighted the styles of the various performers, combining elements of each with 19th century Manchester ballads from closer to home. As a visually striking redhead, her dynamic stage presence wove together the musical strands of the diverse orchestra.

“Initially I panicked when they said it would be with a Congolese drummer and a Chinese opera singer and so on,” says Kelani, who was approached by Community Arts Northwest after a performance at Matt & Phred's in Manchester's Northern Quarter last October.

“I was trying to compose a piece when I know nothing about Chinese opera,” she confesses. “So I was listening to this lovely girl, Haili Heaton, and she was showing me the difference between the male voice and the female voice, and I didn't even know that a singer could do a male voice and a female voice in Chinese music, and the differences between Beijing opera and Shanghai opera. And the same with all the other cultures.”

The experience was, says Kelani, “very emotional. Suddenly you're working with people for 11, 12 weeks, and you're like a family and tackling very sensitive issues. Many of them have suffered a lot in various circumstances including asylum claims. But the point was that we were all in exile and in one way or another marginalised, and that was why we bonded. When we said goodbye it reminded me of the break-up times when you've finished your last year at school.”

In addition to the emotional impact of working with a group of fellow refugees and migrants, even Kelani admits to collective stage fright.

“All of us were terrified about whether we were going to do a good job or not,” she recalls, although subsequent reviews have greeted the performance with praise. “Haili was having a panic attack before but once we got on stage, to see how she danced and sang so gracefully that night, it's one of those moments you live for.”

Hopefully, according to Kelani, members of the Beating Wing will be joining her on dates in the north of England this autumn.



Taking wing



Kelani says that being Palestinian has made it difficult to get press coverage and radio airtime

Although she acknowledges that the musicians of the Beating Wing saw her as experienced and established in the British music scene, Kelani has not had an easy road to success, most recently with her debut album, *Sprinting Gazelle*. Firstly, she had to overcome shock from her family, who imagined she would become a water engineer, not pursue a less-than-respectable career singing songs she encountered at family weddings. Then, she had to tackle entrenched attitudes in the music industry in Britain.

"There is a tendency, especially in the world music business, if you are based here, you are not seen as being as valuable or authentic as someone who is based abroad. There's an Arab saying that the neighbourhood singer doesn't enchant the locals – it's not a sinister plot by the world music industry, it's a combination of human nature and the fact that the world music scene is becoming the mainstream it tried to get away from."

As well as the discrimination she identifies against world music musicians based in the UK, Kelani also says that being Palestinian has made it difficult to get press coverage and radio airtime.

"I don't always talk about politics on stage but I have a very non-compromising message and it's all about the Palestinian narrative pre-1948. Some of the difficulties I've faced have been self-imposed because I don't separate my voice from my identity," she admits. "The world music scene is very middle-class and often naively liberal, and it wants to address politics by forgetting about them, or by putting you on stage together with Israeli musicians to play happy families. And then I'm a woman on top of that, and then there's the Arab-Muslim element. Since 9/11 people talk about Muslim issues and identity but indigenous cultural heritages are swept under the carpet. Palestinian identity is ignored, and of course 20 per cent of Palestinians are Christian."

While most people associate the problems of the Palestinian people with the violence of military occupation and the loss of their land,

Kelani says that "my identity is my music and when my identity is stolen it affects my music".

But she is equally critical of her own people and their relationship with their culture. "As the late Edward Said said, if only Palestinians would focus on facts and knowing how to state them, they would get a more powerful message across."

Rejecting both main political parties in Palestine, she continues: "The Fatah party has always argued about geography and Hamas argue about religion. The struggle for Palestine has never been about religion. It is about a cultural and identity theft of the Palestinian people. If these people continue to talk about only land and religion, more and more olive trees will be uprooted and more and more Palestinian songs will be stolen and more and more Palestinian costumes will be worn in the first class lounges of Israeli airlines. I think it's our cultural identity we need to fight with, and the annihilation of the Palestinian cultural identity is the real damage done to the Palestinians, but it's not gory enough to go on *Newsnight*."

The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* recently reported that the government has big budgets to fund tours by Israeli world music artists abroad, in order to improve the international image of Israel at a time when it has come in for criticism for its human rights record in the West Bank and Gaza and the 2006 war in Lebanon. But Palestinian culture and music is not, says Kelani, a priority of the Palestinian leadership – "it's not even on the list".

Instead, Kelani has made it her work to help preserve her people's culture and identity, recording the songs of older Palestinian women in the refugee camps in Lebanon and in her mother's town of Nazareth. "As the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish said, I defend my right to defend my right. The world has got to accept an independent Palestinian narrative, not part of what Israeli or other artists have to say. That applies all the way up, because no peace talks will ever succeed if the original sin of 1948 is not acknowledged. If the Palestinian narrative is not accepted in its own right then you can't accept co-existence, because to accept co-existence you must acknowledge both sides."

