

Because I'm an Arab, I play jazz

words: Mira Katbamna

Reem Kelani believes her recent performances in Syria prove Arabic music and jazz have more in common than you might think



REEM KELANI

PICTURE: Saeed Taji Farouky

Performing in front of an Aleppo crowd is not for the faint-hearted. Long acknowledged as one of the most important centres for Arabic music, Aleppo's musicians are renowned for their musicianship, technical expertise and purity of sound. As a result, Aleppo audiences are fussy. Very fussy. So when the British Council invited London-based Palestinian singer and ethnomusicologist Reem Kelani to tour Syria, including a stop in Aleppo, she knew it would be quite an experience.

'Syria, and especially Aleppo, is a very serious centre of pure classical Arabic music, so before I went out I was very apprehensive, thinking, oh my god, I'm taking a jazz rhythm section — how are they going to take it?' Kelani says.

'But then of course, they were inviting me, so I just had to rise to the occasion!'

REEM KELANI DOES MORE THAN SIMPLY COLLECT AND PRESERVE PALESTINIAN MUSIC: SHE MAKES IT AS NEW

Although she often protests that she is 'just self taught', Kelani is one of the leading Arabic musicians of her generation. Born in Manchester, she was brought up in Kuwait listening to jazz standards and Arabic black and white movie soundtracks, but her identity was never in doubt. 'My mother is from Nazareth and my father from Ya'bad near Jenin,' she points out, 'so we always knew that we were Palestinian and refugees, no matter what it said on our passports.'

Nevertheless it wasn't until, aged 13, when she attended a wedding in a village outside Jenin, that Kelani got interested in Palestinian music. 'In Kuwait people would say, "Don't say you're Palestinian," but at that wedding I saw the happiness and rootedness of this bride being married from her father's house and I suddenly realised — this is what it is like to be a Palestinian. They sang songs I had never heard before, and with such passion.'

Now based in London, Kelani has been making field recordings in the refugee camps and villages of the West Bank and Lebanon since her early twenties. Using her own contacts and those of the Palestinian Women's Union, finding women who knew the old repertoire of songs was relatively straightforward compared to persuading them to sing songs still brimming with painful memories. Kelani relates how, after hearing an old lady sing, a woman in her fifties asked, 'Mamma, why did you not sing this song at my wedding?' The old lady replied, 'Because when we came to this country, we did not have shoes and we had just walked all the way from Palestine. We did not want to sing.'

However Kelani does more than simply collect and preserve Palestinian music: she makes it as new. Her jazz-laced debut album *Sprinting Gazelle*, re-presents songs from Palestine and the diaspora in a way that seems both modern and ancient, and to rave reviews. But it had never been heard in Aleppo.

To add to the pressure of her Aleppo debut, Kelani decided to make the performance a true fusion, matching three members of her British band — Patrick Illingworth (drums), Oli Hayhurst (double bass) and Zoe Rahman (piano), with three Syrian musicians, Amir Qara Jouli (violin), Basel Rajoub (saxophones) and Simon Mreach (percussion) — a collaboration which required more than just the efforts of the British Council translators.

'Three years ago, my British musicians — who are all amazing in their own right — had not done any Arabic music, so I was very worried about how the Syrian crowd and critics would respond to them — would they say my preparation was rubbish?' Kelani explains. 'And then on the other hand, I had no idea what to expect from the Syrian musicians. Most of the male Arabic musicians I've met in London have serious issues with a woman being the band leader, composer and arranger of her own work, even going so far as to ask someone else in the band rather than take instructions from me!'

However, apart from ensuring she always translated all

jokes to avoid paranoia on either side, Kelani says her fears were unfounded. 'They really exceeded all my expectations. My British musicians went down incredibly well, and the Syrians were amazing,' she says. 'Their level of musicianship is quite outstanding by any standard and they were so respectful of me as a woman. It was a culture shock!' She also says that the band gelled immediately. 'The moment they met

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and started rehearsing on stage, it just worked,' she says. 'When the British Council popped in they were shocked, because the six of them did just look like one band.'

In fact, Kelani says that in some ways, Syria felt like home. 'Because I'm a diaspora Palestinian, I've never known what it's like to have Palestine as a home,' she says, 'so the home I have in me is the surroundings, the collective, the people around me – and Syria offers that on every level.' Syria had not, however, yet seen her perform. 'What happened everywhere was that when audiences walked into the auditorium and saw saxophone and drums, there was an audible intake of breath,' Kelani says. 'Everyone was thinking, "Where's the oud?" The Arabic percussion.'

But while Damascus immediately fell in love, the Aleppo crowd demonstrated just why they have such a tough reputation. 'In Damascus, as soon as I opened my mouth and said, "Oaf" — an enigmatic sigh — I knew that we were one,' she says. 'But Aleppo was a different experience altogether. I walk on stage, I say "Oaf" — and nothing happened. Of course I was terrified, because this is Aleppo, and you don't mess with Aleppo audiences.'

By the second song, people were beginning to talk, discussing and analysing the music — something which Kelani was warned might happen, but while applause was warm, it wasn't extraordinary. Unable to do anything but continue, Kelani says the pressure didn't let up until halfway through the set. 'This old boy, clean shaven and wearing a beret and woolly jumper, the real father element of the audience, jumped up and started yelling at people. All I could think was, Oh my god, he's saying "let's leave, this is rubbish",' she says. 'But in fact he was shouting at the audience to stand up and give me a standing ovation half way through the song! They all stood up, and from that song onwards I knew I had gone through the Aleppo filter and come out the other side.'

Although she is reluctant to describe playing for Syrian audiences — who understand her lyrics and the structure of the Arabic maqams or modes — as more rewarding, she does agree that the experience is very different to performing in Europe and America. In the UK Kelani is often asked how come she is an Arab and yet she plays jazz, and her answer is always: 'Because I'm an Arab, I play jazz' — so how did the Aleppo experience make her feel about the issue?

'Sometimes I think that, reading between the lines, people are really asking you not "how come?" but "how dare you?" because I don't think people in the West understand the close

connections between Arabic music and jazz,' she explains. 'But for me the Aleppo audience really proved the point. Their sighs of satisfaction were during the songs, much like a jazz audience would applaud after a solo, nodding their heads like the old boys nodding to a sax solo. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, it might have been Aleppo, but that audience was a group of old jazzers!'

Mira Katbamna is a London-based journalist and broadcaster. She writes for *The Guardian* and *The Times* as well as a host of music magazines. She also presents the weekly world music programme *London Diaspora Live* on Resonance FM.

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