

Kayla Aburida
Geog 3195
Dr. Marie Price
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Be Transported to Oum el Dounia with Abdel Halim Hafez

Known as the “dark-skinned nightingale”, Abdel Halim Hafez is one of the most influential singers of the Arab world, reaching his peak of stardom in the 50s, 60s, and 70s due to his influence in Egyptian cinema and the 1952 Egyptian revolution (Enterprise, 2020). He was famously known for instilling emotion in his songs, like Ahwak (I Adore You), Betloomoni Leh (Why Do You Blame Me) and Maw’ood (Promised). Hafez is also a beacon of Egyptian pride and nationalism with songs like Lahn al-Wafaa (Melody of Loyalty) and Al-Sadd al-‘Aali (The High Dam). Though he passed decades ago, Egyptians for successive generations still listen to his music and feel transported to Oum el Dounia (the mother of the earth- a way to describe Egypt).

Abdel Hafez’s music can be heard on the streets around Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, and Giza, in taxis, at markets, being whistled by someone passing by, and at your tata’s (grandmother’s) or eamuu’s (uncle’s) house. His music has become a background noise through the bustling intersections of Oum el Dounia, so much so that when listening to his music, you automatically think about Egypt. To those who've grown up in or had a connection to Egypt, you know Hafez is inexplicably linked to the country. In this Essay, I will reconcile how Abdel Halim Hafez has allowed for cultural connection and pride, place-making through music, and the ability for cultural mobility no matter where you are when listening to him.

Throughout my own experiences and stories heard from my family, I’ve learned that Abdel Halim Hafez created cultural connections and Egyptian pride through his music. In the Winter of 2022, I was

visiting family when I first heard Abdel Hafez Halim at my Eamuu's apartment in Alexandria, who is a man entranced in art and music aside from his professional life. He had it playing from an old-school sonophone that barely worked. Even though Hafez's voice was cracked coming out of the bent bronze, I felt the emotional pull of his music. Sweet, romantic, emotional, and incredibly beautiful. My eamuu told me about when he was a kid that Hafez was linked to the politics of Egypt in President Gamal Abdel Nasser's (the leader of the 1952 revolution) rule until he died in the 70s (Hussain, 2018). In fact, some political figures recognized that Hafez could sway the population's views through his music, and it is said throughout the country that he would sing based on certain people's political agenda. Some political songs that were symbolic of the times were Fouq al-Shouq (On the Thorns), Ala Ad al-Shouq (As Much as the Passion), Hekayet Shaab (The Story of a Nation) and Thawretna al-Masriyya (Our Egyptian Revolution). All these songs encouraged the 1952 revolution and brought pride to the people of Egypt in parallel.

Hafez's music will always bring Egyptians within the country and the diaspora back to their roots, facilitating the concept of place-making through music. Since his music is incredibly linked to the country, people feel he is a beacon of Arab and Egyptian identity. Though he doesn't only touch on his home country, Halim also sings uplifting music dedicated to countries like Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Palestine. On the anniversary of his death, thousands of people make the pilgrimage to the cemetery where he rests in Cairo (Britannica, 2024). He has formed an unbreakable link to Arab identity for past generations and generations to come. When it comes to place-making, Abdel Halim doesn't solely facilitate place-making with Egypt, but the entire Arab world. Murphy in his chapter on Place, once described the making of place as not something that is always physical but an "emotional and intuitive" space, which one can relate to places where you feel a strong cultural connection (Murphy, 2018). Just as I've heard Hafez's music while being in Egypt, when I hear it outside the country it creates a sense of place and belonging within my culture no matter where I am. For example, I was with a friend who is also from Egypt, and a song by Abdel Halim started playing, instantly it created a sense of understanding and place. I could have closed my eyes and imagined myself walking through the streets of Alexandria.

Place-making also does not only facilitate a physical relation to a place, but sometimes it creates a sense of community. In that instance with my friend, I felt a sense of comradeship in our Egyptian Identity. It created this meta-physical place where we celebrated our culture, falling into conversations about what Abdel Halim Hafez meant to us and the broader context of Oum el Dounia.

Just as the banjo might be indicative of Kentucky bluegrass music, the Arab world has particular scales and instruments that are representative of the region which can create a sense of mobility of . Unlike Western music, Hafez and many Arab singers use the Maqam scale, which means “the source”, it is a system of scales that create a particular melodic framework that is traditionally used by Arab artists (Maqam world, NA). Moreover, Hafez typically uses Shaba- a “key” which is meant to capture a sense of longing or nostalgia- or Bayati- a “key” that conveys a sense of romantic or melancholic emotion (Pressbooks, NA), (Maqam world, NA). Regardless of which Maqam key, this scale is iconographic of the Arab world, and instantly connects listeners. The Arab diaspora community can be anywhere in the world and feel the mobility of their culture and heritage through music just by hearing the Maqam scale like in Hafez’s music being connected to their country of origin or the broader Arab world. Additionally, Hafez uses the Oud, a characteristically Arab instrument, which is much like a guitar. The oud is large-bellied, short, with a curved neck, and strung with 19 or 21 boards in the form of a circle (Salamuzik, 2021). Like other instruments that are popular in Egyptian music, Hafez also uses the Tabla (drums), and the Qanun (Pressbooks, NA). These instruments can transport listeners to the Middle East just by playing a song with sounds that are characteristic of the region. For those who might be less mobile, music is a conduit for a sense of mobility. Immobility might be due to status, visas, money, etc., and getting to a city/country/ region isn’t always a reality. Through listening to music as a sense of mobility in culture and belonging, you facilitate that need to go to the place you feel connected to. In this case, Abdel Hafez’s music is a home away from home to Egyptian and or Arab people who are not able to go back to the place that is important to them.

Moreover, Abdel Halim Hafez's characteristically Egyptian/ Arab music is the perfect example of how music works to facilitate cultural connection and belonging, place-making, and mobility. Once called the Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra of the Arab world (New York Times, 1977), Hafez has influenced people with his romantic and nationalistic music for past generations and generations to come. Though Abdel isn't the only artist whose music relates to these geographical concepts, music and artists themselves are influenced by places that are important to them, and that is why so often people connect to a place through music. Hafez's music no matter where you are from will almost always transport listeners to Oum el Dounia, and likely will for decades to come.

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