



YEMENI music exists on a continuum. Yemen appears to be one of the few colonized countries whose music, documented during the initial recording boom of the 20th century, seems almost totally impervious to western influence, despite the southern part of the country being occupied by the British up until the mid-60s. In the south, Aden was a major port, one of the biggest in the world at its peak, and boasted a large expat community. The comedian Eddie Izzard was born there, and one can still stay in a hotel purported to have housed the poet Rimbaud during one of his sojourns. But, compared to other Arabic countries such as Egypt or Lebanon, there was no societal shift that engendered musical modernisation, experimentation, or an advance in recording or production techniques.

I first travelled there in November 2010, planning to spend my spare time seeing if there was any semblance of old vinyl. Recorded music becomes a prism through which we can view aspects of a country's history, as well as its place in the world. Everyone's heard of Yemen, (particularly in the last 12 months where events have put it on the map for all the wrong reasons), but few are aware of its realities or cultural nuances.

As an outsider, having something as specific as records to look for gets you into conversations and scenarios which would probably not present themselves in ordinary circumstances. There were no record shops in Sana'a (the capital) as such, and, as they are largely considered 'artifacts', most were turned up in the old city's numerous antique shops. I was aided in this by a young man named Salim, who, along with his friends, helped me find much of the material collected here.

Although Yemen is one of the oldest human settlements in the Near East, it also reflects its place as part of the wider region. Whilst the qambus, a stringed lute unique to Yemen, was one of the main accompaniments to the sung poetry (*homayni*) featured on this compilation, it was ultimately superseded by the widely used oud, or 'ud, which has its origins in Iran and Iraq. The softer, subtler predecessor petered out in the early 20th century, though the poetry it accompanied remains largely unchanged.

The brunt of these discs feature the oud in different settings, underpinned by percussion, always with the voice as the prominent 'instrument'. Indeed, whilst the usage of instrumentation has come

and gone in Yemeni music over the centuries, (occasionally banned outright in some regions by ruling imams), it is the focus on poetry and the voice that carry the music, even today. As these records were all found in Sana'a, not surprisingly they are stylistically dominated by what is known as *Shi'ar Al-Ghina'a Al-Sana'ani*, or "Sana'ani Lyric Poetry."

In addition, other music I came across pointed to different facets of the country's history. Remnants of Yemen's brief part within Cold War machinations occasionally meant I turned up Romanian folk records, Polish jazz, Russian language courses and Soviet propaganda discs with titles like **My Boundless Motherland!** Less explicable was a copy of James Brown's **The Popcorn!** Whatever the reason, it was a pleasure spinning this for Salim and his friends, none of whom had apparently encountered the Godfather of Soul.

In keeping with other poetry of the region and beyond, love and relationships are the predominant themes in these songs. Even translated into English, the music contained on this disc transcends its national boundaries and speaks of the multifarious levels regarding relationships between two people. On the surface this may seem surprising, such is the huge social segregation of men and women in the country, as well as the generally conservative mores of society as a whole. That said, compared to their Saudi neighbors, women can vote and drive, plus the current round of protests, which, at the time of writing, have yet to bring the three decade dictatorship of Ali Abdullah Saleh completely to an end, were spearheaded by female



activist Tawakul Karman. Spend enough time in Yemen and you can definitely start to feel cooed in its unique bubble—things are most definitely not all they seem.

Haya Abu-Saif (Welcome Saif's Father) ^{B1} is a yearning ballad, floating above subtle oud playing and bubbling percussion. Sung by Amna Hizam, she states she wishes to be like a ring on the finger of her lover, claiming that she will be always with him. She adds that she is even ready to give him her heart or eyes. That said, the love she has must remain a secret. The majority of the love spoken of in these songs appears clandestine in nature. Similarly, **Hom Bel Hawa Ya Nas Waloni** ^{B2}, sung and written by Raja Ali, talks about a beloved who is away from her lover. She states that she is ready to go abroad after him and will stand by his door till he answers her. A metal rattle provides a hip-shaking shuffle, as the oud player strums out intricate rhythms.

The modern history of Yemen is a push and pull between the waning Ottoman Empire, The British, particularly The British East India Company, (whose troops determined an invasion and take over of Aden in the 1830s), and then different tribal and regional alliances, ultimately kept within the wily perimeters of Saleh's dictatorship. It's difficult to ascertain how the music industry functioned during this period, but these records were produced sometime between the mid 60s and early 70s, and were almost all manufactured in either Greece or Pakistan. Many Ethiopian and Eritrean (just a few miles to the west, across the Red Sea) singles were also often manufactured in Greece around the same period, so it was presumably the most economically viable option at that point. Some almost have the feel of field recordings. Whilst some tracks are split over two sides, on occasion sides A and B of the single can contain different takes of the same song. A couple of labels state they were recorded outside of Yemen, specifically Jeddah. There are Yemeni emigres all over the Gulf, the most famous being the Bin-Ladens, and the popularity of Yemeni music reaches well beyond its borders.



It's also unclear who was buying these discs, which were almost all 45rpm singles, not LPs. Outside of the radio, music was mostly consumed at home, often as entertainment to accompany chewing qat, a shiny green leaved plant that acts as a mild stimulant when chewed over a period of time. The music collected here reflects this also: there is nothing that might warrant them being played anywhere for dancing, and there were no of bars or clubs - not that dancing isn't popular in Yemen.

One afternoon I ran into a wedding procession. The music was blasted through the streets through an old metal tannoy. In addition to the noise of the crowd, a radio microphone was picking up the burr and whine of what looked like a bamboo flute strapped to the player's chin, whilst a percussionist pounded away on a metallic hand drum. Then there was the dancing: the odd twirl, dervish-like; the *Jambiya* (traditional Yemeni curved knife) blades flashing in the sunshine, once, in fact, almost lacerating the cheek of a careless passerby. As the rhythm thundered, the dancers dropped, dipped and circled as the crowd whooped in approval. All the while, the drummer played and the crowd clapped.





Finally a group of women arrived, faces and bodies hidden in a sheen of black, save for smiling eyes. They hollered and shrieked the same shrill ululating calls you might hear in the music of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Tanzania, uttered as the music reached its happy crescendo. For me, it's a small cultural semblance that the Arabian Peninsula had once sat snugly in the Horn of Africa's crescent **Mozawag (A Married Person)** ^{B3}, best captures this experience. Taking musical influence from the areas of Lahaj and Yafa, the main vocal is underpinned by handclaps, joyous whoops and

exhortations of the female backing singers as the oud provides both rhythm and melody. Lyrically, the tune discusses a scenario between husband and wife—the man has invited friends for dinner, even going to the market to buy food, but the wife refuses to cook as she does not feel well enough! This would most likely have been sung as part of wedding celebrations. Another song that delves into male and female relationships is the sensual **Mushtaq (I'm Yearning)** ^{A3}. It's the only male/female duet I came across, and is striking for its intimacy. A couple sing of the desire and longing they have for each other, with the male singer stating that his female partner represents his whole life. A descending blues-like riff sits atop a 4/4 rhythm marked out by handclaps, as the two singers trade lyrics about their relationship.

Although Yemen is part of the Arab Peninsula, parts of the country are in fact nearer to the East African coast than Saudi Arabia and Oman, its immediate neighbors. Port cities such as Mokha on the Red Sea coast were key trading posts. Developed under the Ottomans, Mokha became famous for its

coffee, although it has nothing in common with the European concoction of the same name. Yemeni coffee shares the same apocryphal origins as Ethiopia (although Yemenis dispute they cultivated it first), and although tea holds dominance, the local beans produce one of the most satisfying and flavorsome shots of caffeine I've had anywhere.

As a result of this geographical proximity, immigration is a subject close to the less salubrious side of life in the country. People regularly make the perilous journey across the Red Sea from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and elsewhere to try and get into Saudi Arabia for work, via Yemen. There are a number of intermarriages, and some East African families have managed to settle here, but for the most part people of African descent are on society's margins. One song from Taiz, situated near the port of Mokha, touches on aspects of this experience.

Bellah Alek Wa Mosafer ^{A4} roughly translates as **Hey You, Passenger!** The singer, Ayob Absi, is well known in Yemen and across the region. Lyrically, it is in fact another love song, but it concerns a loved one who is refusing to respond to letters, and is generally remaining elusive. It goes on to request any 'passenger' going to the country where she is to convey his *salaam* to her, and ask her how long she intends to stay away. An uneven rhythm is backed by male and female choruses, representing the different poles of the song.

It is of course my own conjecture, but some of the bluesy oud melodies and solos can exude as much melancholy as anything from the Mississippi Delta. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the subject matter of unrequited love that is a regular theme to these poems. **Rae Al-Gamel (The Owner of Beauty)** ^{A2} by Ahmed Al Sonaidar bemoans his state as he tells of his infatuation. He begs the woman in question to show kindness—the only reason he feels like this is because of

her everlasting beauty! It might be down to the distortion afforded the oud due to a slightly rough recording, but the overall effect produces a more aggressive tone as the singer plucks and sings out his grievances in this fantastic solo performance.

Surprisingly, considering its central role in day-to-day life and its consumption during music recitals, *qat* doesn't appear to be eulogized in verse. Our opener **Ya Mun Dakhal Bahr Al-Hawa (Hey, Who Enters the Sea of Passion?)** ^{A1} is a solo vocal performance accompanied only by the *sahn suhasi*, a copper tray balanced on finger tips, that produces delicate rhythms when struck. Here, the recording lends it an almost industrial flavour. This unique Yemeni instrument would often accompany the *qambus* during a recital, usually in a *mafraj*, a low seated cushioned area typical to most Yemeni houses. The *mafraj* is also the optimum place for a *qat* chewing session.

It should be said that *qat* chewing is almost inherently a social ritual. People will chat and chew for hours with friends and family. It is an arbiter of disputes, and a settler of disagreements. It is also, shockingly, a consumer of 80% of the country's water, in a place where water is increasingly scarce. It potentially sows Yemen's own demise, and in reality, in terms of the real cost, it would probably be cheaper to import than continue to grow there. In the surrounding fields of one of Yemen's landmarks, *Dara Haga*, (the old king's palace built aston



ishingly on top of a large rock), what had once been the preserve of fruit and vegetable plots, is now replaced entirely by *qat* trees.

More symptom than cause, in a country facing tribal conflicts, a major political crisis, and dwindling oil supplies, it isn't such a surprise that the majority of the population relies on this panacea to deal with day to day realities.

With its rich cultural history, Yemen has a natural place in the world that transcends its current turmoil. It's a hope that this collection will bring to a wider audience some lesser known facets of its musical traditions.

Chris Menist
Bangkok 2011



SIDE A

1. **Ya Mun Dakhal Bahr Al-Hawa** (Hey, Who Enters The Sea of Passion?)
Fatimah Al-Zaelaeyah
Sout Alfonsoon Alshabyah SFS 100
2. **Rae Al-Gamel** (The Owner Of Beauty)
Ahmed Al Sonaidar
Gannat Alhan GNAL 1502
3. **Mushtaq** (I'm Yearning)
Bolbol Al-Hejaz and Soni Ahmad
Zouhour Al Hegaz SZH 6
4. **Bellah Alek Wa Mosafer** (Hey You, Passenger!)
Ayob Absi
Sout Al Wahdah SAW 4
5. **Marhaban Ahlan** (Hello, Welcome)
Mohammed Ben Mohammed Ba-Soweid
Sout Balgeez FX/2274/A/

SIDE B

1. **Haya Abu-Saif** (Welcome Saif's Father)
Amna Hizam
Tawziat Al-Fan Al-Arabi TFA 58
2. **Hom Bel Hawa Ya Nas Walaoni** (They Made Me Fond Of Love)
Raja Ali
Adlanphone 1536
3. **Wahed Mozawag** (A Married Person)
Mohammed Hamood Al-Awami
Sharikat Angham Al Faniah SRIF 16
4. **Amsi Sameer Al-Nojoom** (Night Stars Watcher)
Ahmad Al-Harazi
Alrayan Records RYA 347-A

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Chris Menist is a writer, DJ, and musician. You can read more about Yemen, Yemeni vinyl as well as other record collecting info on his Original Press blog: www.originalpress365.wordpress.com

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