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The Sound of Culture, The Structure of Tradition

Musicians' Work in Arab Detroit

Anne Rasmussen

WITH THEIR LOUD sound systems and lively dance tunes, Arab American musicians bring to community gatherings an all-encompassing sonic environment that replaces the host culture with the home culture. Night after night, performance after performance, they supply "the language of Diaspora" (Clifford 1994). While I have framed musicians as "curators of culture" and their activity as "art," they have continuously referred to the same as "work" (Rasmussen 1989, 1991). Their work, as they have told me time and again, is audience driven, and they are surprisingly compliant with the sometimes abrupt demands of their clientele. Although this way of performing cannot be reduced to a simple formula, several patterns are apparent in the careers of Arab American musicians that help explain why they tend to discuss their "art" as "work,"¹ and these patterns have been in place for much of the twentieth century.

In this essay, I offer a historical synopsis of the rise of musical professionalism and the development of music patronage in the Arab American community. I then profile the ways in which professional musicians supply the "sounds of culture" by discussing prevalent lyrical themes and musical styles and the ways in which these are transmitted in live performance and through transnational media networks. Finally, I explore the ways in which musicians, particularly those of Arab Detroit, involve their audience and community in the "structure of tradition" by presenting examples of their work in the context of wedding celebrations.

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Arab American Musicians and Musical Patronage

During my original field research, I came to know a group of professional musicians who played a dominant role in establishing the musical life of Arab America (Rasmussen 1991).² These musicians, who are now elderly or deceased, were part of a community made up largely of Syrian and Lebanese Maronite, Melkite, or Orthodox Christians. They immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, before immigration quotas, enacted in 1923, slowed Arab immigration to a trickle. By the 1950s and 1960s the immigrant population and their American-born offspring were relatively stable and assimilated. With the eradication of strict immigration quotas in 1965, a new wave of large-scale immigration from the Arab World began. Today, at the end of the 1990s, the flow of human traffic and the exchange of media between the Arab countries and the United States is no longer a one-way (or even two-way) street. Instead, it is a continuous, transnational movement comparable to a rotary highway with multiple exits. This shift in the nature of culture flow is having a tremendous impact on the climate in which Detroit's Arab musicians work.

During the early years of the twentieth century, the musical amateur was responsible for informal music making in the newly formed Arab immigrant community. By the mid-1940s, however, it was more common for a professional contingent of touring musicians to entertain during formal events. The shift in status from amateur to professional came to define two important groups: (1) musicians who could be hired for their services; and (2) patrons who would organize events, hire musicians, and generate audiences. Due to the bittersweet nature of musical values in Arab culture—where singers and dancers are cherished and stigmatized, often at the same time—the evolution of the professional musician and the public performance was not always easy or natural.

One performer's wife told me that when her husband began to sing professionally, around 1930, audiences were sensitive to the difference between a common entertainer and a polished, professional artist. She emphasized her husband's concern for being involved in properly organized and respectable performances. Evoking similar themes, Virginia Soloman, wife of a noted Lebanese American violinist active from the 1940s through the 1970s, recalled that community members were critical of her marriage to a musician: "In some instances Arabic male musicians, they didn't have too good of a reputation, you know. In those days the prototype musician was

fast type of living and drugs and all that and some of the people here, they thought: 'You know you're marrying a little below when you're marrying a musician.' What a great mistake that was on their part, yes it was, because there was never anything like that. My husband was a perfect gentleman" (personal communication, 1987). In spite of traditional attitudes about entertainers, musicians began to fashion full and part-time careers with their artistic abilities. They performed at large community parties, called *haflat*, arranged by philanthropic Arab American organizations with the goal of fund-raising for the community. When Arab musicians assumed the role of "professional entertainer," they also, by way of organizing the musical life of their era, became artistic and social leaders, commanding positions of respect within the community. As Americans, their self-image may have been bolstered (or tarnished) by their status as popular entertainers. As Arabs, they were no doubt encouraged by the rising-star system in the Middle East epitomized by such figures as Umm Kulthum, Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab, and others who performed live in concert settings, made numerous recordings, and assumed principal roles in the burgeoning motion picture industry in Egypt.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, musical professionalism was further institutionalized among Arab Americans by a contingent of commercially oriented musicians from the nightclub scene who performed in *public for profit*. Today, these professionals include musicians who work both in nightclubs and for community weddings and private parties. Some are second- and third-generation offspring of early immigrants, while others arrived and continue to arrive in the post-1965 wave of Arab immigrants. Older musicians can look back across a landscape of musical history that encompasses both the early era of professionalism, when philanthropic, community sponsored *haflat* were the order of the day, and more recent times, when family-based partying and celebration are at a premium. They echo one another in their descriptions of how their work as musicians has changed over time. They often claim that their artistic license was lost as contexts for musical performance began to diversify, and especially when modern, eclectic styles and audience dancing came into vogue. Musicians sometimes speak of their patrons and audiences with ambivalence and derision. One respected musician, composer, and music teacher explained that it was a musician's job to play everything, to please people, be they Iraqi, Lebanese, or Egyptian. He explained that every three or four months he played for an audience "who liked to listen to music." The rest of the time, he said, "we play for the dance, for the *dabkah*." Judging from comments like these,



Fig. 41. Sana Kadaj mesmerizes the crowd at a Detroit nightclub in the 1950s. Courtesy of the ACCESS Museum of Arab Culture.



Fig. 42. Detroit crooner Amer Kadaj sings for a party at Club La Macarena, 1955. Courtesy of the ACCESS Museum of Arab Culture.

it would seem that Arab musicians define themselves as “workers” providing a service, doing a job.

Whether their performance is considered “art” or “work,” musicians in Arab Detroit are highly valued as culture brokers. They bring to community events a bouquet of sounds associated with homeland (place), tradition (history), and ethnicity (origin), and this sonic patchwork allows Arab Americans to experience their collective past and present in distinctive ways. The musician’s “job description,” if you will, also includes the delicate skills of the ritual specialist. In addition to playing music, musicians structure time and space by directing audience participation at weddings, engagement parties, baptisms and circumcisions, high school and college graduation parties, and a host of other celebratory events.

The Sound of Culture

With the lyrics of their songs and the styles of their music, performers crystallize community sentiment. Sorrow and separation have been common themes of Arabic songs performed and recorded throughout the century, as exemplified by titles such as “The Hoot of the Steamship,” “The Return of the Immigrants,” and the following song, “Standing on the Seashore,” recorded by the Lebanese-born, New York singer, Hanan Harouni.³ During our conversations, Hanan remarked that whether she sang this song for Arab audiences in the United States, Canada, South America, or Lebanon, there was *never* a dry eye in the house.

“Waqef ‘ala Shat al Baher” (“Standing on the Seashore”), composed by Zaghulul al-Damnour, was originally recorded as a 78 rpm on the Arab American Cleopatra label (819 A&B) with Arab American musicians Joe Bedway on ‘ud, Yacoub Ghannim playing *qanun*, and Hakki Obadia and Naim Karakand on violins. The lyrics, which Hanan and I translated together at her home in Brooklyn, New York, read approximately as follows:

From the minute I stood on the sand
 They could tell I was a stranger
 Now that I am alone, I do not sleep; the stars spend the night
 with me
 And I’m so afraid to go back without my loved one
 Whether I go back or ahead, danger awaits



Every hour apart [away from my country] is longer than a
year

We were together, but now the heart, from parting, burns
and what is between us is only paper and ink



I curse the first boat [that ever took the emigrants] to sink
Every time my old country comes to mind
I wish it would sink



My eyes cannot see any sailboats
The only thing I see is the fog coming from afar
The fog comes down to take from my eyes the tears
that fall, with every hour, like driving rain

Themes of separation, unrequited love, and longing for reunification are certainly not unique to the poetic discourse of immigrants. In Middle Eastern poetry, particularly Sufi verse, separation from and reunion with a lover, or God, has been a literary trope for centuries. "Standing on the Sea Shore," however, sings specifically to the immigrant experience. This song's portrayal of distance and ambivalent longings for the homeland is summarized by the song's lyric "whether I go back [to the old country] or ahead [to the New World] danger awaits." These words comprise an explicit narrative of place that, if not shared by all immigrants, can at least be imagined. The mere mention of a village or city name or simply the physical features of the homeland can also serve as powerful symbols of collective experience. "The music event," Stokes reminds us, "from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity (1994, 3; see also Rasmussen 1997a, 75).

When on stage, Arab singers encourage audience members to identify their village or city of origin so that songs may be chosen and lyrics tailored appropriately. Contemporary singers are challenged by the tall order of keeping songs from several Arab countries and regions in their repertoire to please their mixed and sometimes very demanding audiences. I am reminded of a winter evening in January 1991 that I spent in a Cleveland nightclub, where a few musicians from Detroit were playing. At one point, a man on the dance floor

requested a song about Basra, Iraq. The events of the impending Gulf War dominated the news. As the song unfolded, people danced. Then the host of the club approached the singer mid-song with a request from another patron. Using a piece of tape, he stuck a one-hundred-dollar bill on the singer's microphone and conveyed the patron's request for a song from Lebanon. The musicians quickly complied, aborting the first song and beginning another extolling the virtues of Lebanon. Having myself performed for several years as a jazz singer and pianist in venues where the "customer is always right," I cringed at the demanding and ostentatious display of artistic control made by the customers in the club. Yet I marveled at the musicians' ability to switch gears mid-song and deliver the product requested by the most powerful—and obviously the highest paying—patron in the establishment.

The power of music to convey notions of place and time lies not only in its lyrical content, but also, and perhaps more comprehensively, in its style. Most second- and third-generation Arab Americans, for example, do not understand the Arabic lyrics or regional dialect of songs; they respond to musical sounds. Genre, instrumentation, form, rhythm, mode, melody, and intonation are immediately suggestive of history, modernity, region, religion, emotion, and context. Whether fabricated on the synthesizer or offered on traditional instruments, musical style can stand for ethnicity and identity in very specific ways. For example, the opening phrases of a traditional improvisation, or *taqasim*, on the *'ud*, an eleven-string fretless lute—perhaps the oldest and most widespread of Arab instruments—can evoke the weight and staying power of *turath*, or traditional art music. The sound of the *nay*—the plaintive, breathy, bamboo flute—or the *mijwiz*—the double piped, reedy wind instrument Levantine folk musicians use for *dabkah*—might bring to mind images of village life and rural landscapes. Audiences recognize and enthusiastically react to certain musical modes (*maqamat*), which are characterized by specific scales and intonations heard only in Arab music; they also are alert to rhythmic patterns used for regional dances.

In searching for the signature sound of Arab Detroit, it is important to recognize the musical influence of the Lebanese, who have created a kind of musical hegemony in the Midwest. The unique contribution of Lebanese music to Arab America is the urbanized folk music-and-dance complex of nonmetric improvised poetry and lively, robust music for the *dabkah*, a traditional line dance. The appeal of rural folk music and dance genres among even the wealthiest and most sophisticated Arab Americans is testimony, perhaps, to

the power of the sounds and symbols of village society to convey a sense of rootedness that is not yet corrupted by war or possessed by capitalism.

Lebanese musical discourse is part and parcel of a larger language shared by Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Egyptians. This music shares a set of rhythmic patterns, musical modes, traditional instruments (*'ud*, *nay*, *qanun*, violin, *daff*, and *darabukkah*), and the powerful sound of the synthesizer, an instrument programmed to reproduce the particular scales, rhythms, and instrumental colors of Arab music. While Lebanese musical styles have been at the forefront in Arab Detroit, there are two other schools that are quite distinct from this central Arab idiom: the Iraqi Chaldean and the Yemeni. Each has different rhythms, distinctive repertoires, various instruments, and unlike dialects of Arabic. Furthermore, Iraqi music features many songs in Aramaic, a different language altogether. It should be noted that, even today, North African music is not a significant part of the Detroit soundscape. Although cassettes of North African singers are available, and some of their songs are "covered" during local performances, world beat genres such as *Rai*—which can be heard on Detroit's public radio station, WDET—are hardly known in Arab Detroit.

Musicians are aware of the emotional tools available to them—text, style, rhythm, mode, intonation, and instrumentation—and how these elicit powerful responses of nostalgia, pride, homesickness, remembrance, and imagination for individual listeners. A shared history of separation, or "deterritorialization," may invest music with a sense of yearning for the homeland even among Arab Americans whose families have been in the United States for generations. "Deterritorialization," writes Appadurai (1990, 11–12), "creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios and travel agencies, who thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland. Naturally, these invented homelands, that constitute the mediascapes of deterritorialized groups, can often become sufficiently fantastic and one-sided that they provide the material for new ideoscapes in which ethnic conflicts can begin to erupt." Although political rivalries (such as those demonstrated in the nightclub in Cleveland) may be an emergent quality of live performance, songs that *collect* the community, highlighting positive or humorous aspects of Arab America, are equally abundant. There is no place in America, and perhaps no place in the world, that better approximates the ideological notion of the "Arab World United" than Detroit and its adjacent suburb, Dearborn. While Yemeni, Palestinian, Lebanese,

and Iraqi populations remain relatively endogamous in their private and professional lives, they *do* come into contact through various public institutions in Detroit and Dearborn, most notably the school system. Annual events like the Arab World Festival, during which the community attempts to represent itself as a whole, also put the people of Arab Detroit in touch with each other.

It is not uncommon at such events to honor notions of unity and diversity in song by adapting the lyrics of popular tunes to recognize the many homelands of the Arab Detroit audience. For example, one singer, a popular performer at the Arab World Festival, altered the lyrics of "Ya Saree Saree Layl," a Jordanian song about the happiness of the wedding night, to welcome each subset of the Arab community. Different sections of the crowd cheered and waved in the hot afternoon sun of downtown Detroit as they heard the singer belt out the name of their country and its capital city.

Lubnan baladna, wa Beirut 'asimitna
 Filistiin baladna, wa
 I-Quds 'asimitna
 Al-Urdun baladna, wa 'Amaan 'asimitna
 Al-Yaman baladna, wa Sana'a 'asimitna
 'Iraq baladna, wa Baghdad 'asimitna

Lebanon is our country, and Beirut is our capital
 Palestine is our country, and Jerusalem is our capital
 Jordan is our country, and Amman is our capital
 Yemen is our country, and Sana'a is our capital
 Iraq is our country, and Baghdad is our capital

To exemplify the flip side of deterritorialization, I bring your attention to a case of musical *reterritorialization* in Arab Detroit, as executed by Rana and Naim Homaidan, musicians who work together and reside in Dearborn. In Dearborn the Homaidans are surrounded by friends and extended family; their social life in the New World is similar in many ways to that which they knew in "the old country."

"Dearborn is almost more Lebanese than Lebanon," Rana explained to me. To illustrate her satisfaction with American life, Rana stressed her pleasure in being able to "bring up my daughter with good education in a safe place." In the summer of 1995, when the couple was asked to perform at a Dearborn street festival, Rana's husband and partner, Naim, composed a peppy song to mark the

event. The music was in the most Western sounding of modes, *maqam Ajam*, which is similar to the major scale; the lyrics, a combination of Arabic and English, run as follows:

Dearborn, Dearborn, Dearborn, we love you
Dearborn, Dearborn, Dearborn, our heart with you
Inti al-yom biladna [Today you are our homeland]
Narabbi fiik awladna [In you we raise our children]
God bless you.
Dearborn! Dearborn!
God bless you.
Allah yahmiiki, Ya Dearborn, [God protects you, O Dearborn!]
Allah khaliiki, Ya Dearborn [God keep you, O Dearborn!]

Josef, a family friend, offered his own interpretation of this and another verse.

Dearborn you are now our country.
We raise our kids in Dearborn so this is like our home
We protect you with our hearts.
You are our whole days.
We are happy because you made us happy.
We left our old country a long time ago.

"You know, *most* of the Arabs are here," Josef went on to explain. "There are 120,000 Arabs in Dearborn only."

Melody, Rana and Naim's fifteen-year-old daughter, joined the discussion.

"Yeah!" she said. "In my classroom, the teacher calls 'Ali and fifteen kids stand up. We have to give them all [the 'Alis] special nicknames!"

Through the words and melodies of their songs, Arab musicians in Detroit invent for their audience new ways to share familiar notions of home and homeland. Whether they make reference to the faraway land of their ancestors, the contemporary Arab world diaspora, or the new Arab America, musicians cater to audience demand with their special combinations of lyrical content and musical form.⁴

Transmission: Music and Media among Arab Americans

How do musicians learn and perpetuate these sounds of culture? When they are summoned by their community to supply the musical

"language of Diaspora," what keeps their language contemporary, yet rooted in tradition? It is primarily through the transnational flow of music media that immigrant musicians connect audiences to the homeland by keeping their music fresh and up-to-date.⁵

Anderson (1983) argues that the advent of "print capitalism" in the fifteenth century served to connect and collect people into the "imagined communities" we now call nation-states. Novels and newspapers, he suggests, accommodated the modern phenomenon of nationalism because they linked people conceptually by providing them with news and events that could be shared among compatriots who shared little else. Certainly, novels and newspapers can facilitate an "image of communion" for diaspora communities struggling to maintain links with the homeland. I would suggest, however, that for much of the twentieth century, the global spread of Arab sounds has been equally (if not more) important in collapsing distance and shaping notions of nation, culture, and identity in Arab Detroit.

Arab Americans have always used media technology—from the 78 rpm in the early 1900s, to the CD today—to import sounds from the Old World and redistribute them in the New. Professional musicians "straight off the boat," like Moses Cohen, Naim Karakand, and Constantine Souse, recorded their repertoire for *Victor* and *His Masters Voice* during the early 1920s. In the 1940s musicians and producers created their own record companies: Maksoud, Ma'arouf, Star of the East, and Cleopatra. Today, singers market their cassettes, videos, and compact discs in their own neighborhoods and throughout the Arab diaspora. Through their work in the music business, these professionals made and continue to make aesthetic choices for their communities. Throughout the century, Arab American musicians have kept the Old World and the New contemporaneous by learning the latest hits from home and performing them for their de- and reterritorialized audiences.

Using whatever technological means available, musicians have been engaged in maintaining what Clifford (employing Said's musical metaphor) has referred to as "contrapuntal modernity." "Diasporist discourses," writes Clifford (1994, 311), "reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity." Here I offer only one example of the myriad ways in which musicians act as middlemen in the transnational flow of culture. George Musally, a Rhode Island keyboard player I have known for many years, revealed his particular version of "contrapuntal modernity" during a conversation we had in

1995. George told me that in addition to the authentic and syncretic sounds available on his keyboard, he copies various patches from synthesizer players who visit from abroad.

"I just bring a formatted disc to the *haflah* [party]," he said, "and ask if I can copy their string or horn sound. They [the Lebanese musicians] do it a little better over there."

Like George, the young keyboard players of Arab Detroit strive to sound like their homeland brothers, often by using the exact model of instrument imported from the Middle East. For young Arab American musicians, it is the precise imitation of a Lebanese keyboard player through the medium of the computer disc, or an Egyptian band through use of the same synthesizer imported from Kuwait—rather than, say, learning to play a traditional instrument such as the *'ud*—that satisfies their desire for an authentic sound from the homeland.

The Structure of Tradition

The work of musicians involves more than bringing the right songs and musical styles to an event. They also manage time and space in the celebration of festivals and rituals. Here I will foreground the structural aspects of three festive rituals, all of them weddings held in Arab Detroit. While weddings are the quintessential performance event among Arab Americans, musicians commonly manage the "acting out" of tradition in many other ritual contexts, from office parties to circumcision rites.

The Wedding Prototype

In Detroit, Arab weddings are rich intersections of food, music, religion, ritual, dance, socializing, and business exchange. The wedding is a social gesture of unmatched importance in the community. As hosts, the families of bride and groom do their best to accommodate and impress their guests. The guests in turn play their part as enthusiastic participants. Both families and guests depend on the musicians they hire to produce a ritual that divides the evening into multiple segments, organizes the celebrants spatially, and directs their activities. Discrete beads of meaningful action are strung together with music, connecting one part of the ceremony to the next and lending coherent grace to an evening that should (if all goes well) proceed from the subdued to the exuberant. Furthermore, by organizing procession and dance, musicians ensure the personal



Fig. 43. An energetic *dabkah* line at a community celebration, 1995. Photograph by Millard Berry.

involvement of every celebrant present. During a wedding, or any music event for that matter, passive vocabularies become active and “cultural narratives become personal narratives” that can then be used to construct and activate a sense of community (Bruner 1984, 6).

The summer wedding season is busy in Detroit. Although every wedding is unique, Arab American weddings share numerous features. In addition to bride, groom, family, and friends, the “cast” of an Arab American wedding includes an essential crew from the local Arab wedding industry, including:

1. One or two bands of 3–8 people, one of which may also provide a disc jockey
2. A dancer or two hired just for the *zaffah* procession, or for the *zaffah* and a “show” later in the evening
3. Photographers and videographers (1–7 in number)
4. Caterers and servers
5. Bridal clothing experts from local boutiques
6. Florists (who also provide balloons and rent special chairs called *samdi* for the bride and groom to sit on)



Fig. 44. Abdul Karim Badr, master of the 'ud, takes a break during rehearsal, 1994. Photograph by Millard Berry.

7. Printers (for invitations/matchbooks, etc.)
8. Banquet Halls and Caterers

Various people from within the party may fulfill other roles such as:

1. Master of ceremonies—announcer of events and dances
2. Poet—someone who has composed a special poem for the bride and groom

Members of the “wedding industry” follow the wedding party from start to finish. The videographers and photographers, for example, stage and capture every important moment, from the time the bride is “taken from the house,” to the cutting of the cake, to the departure of limousines. Unlike an ethnographic videographer, who might just turn the camera on and let it roll, professional wedding video people can often be seen telling the participants where to go, how to stand, and what to do next. When I visited Nazih Video, one of

several companies specializing in making videos of weddings, they explained, without hesitation, all the important elements that must be in a video.

1. The bride alone with her parents in their house
2. The groom's house
3. The limousine going to the bride's house to fetch her
4. The wedding party at a park posing for photographs
5. The parents at the hall welcoming the guests in a receiving line
6. The entrance of the bride and groom
7. The *zaffah* procession
8. Dancing
9. Dinner
10. The cutting of the cake
11. Dancing
12. *Dabkah* dancing at the end of the wedding
13. Optional *zaffah* at the end of the wedding

The wedding videos produced by these professional videographers circulate widely among family and friends and are even sent to family members in the "old country." One woman told me that she knew all her family in Lebanon (and vice versa) because they saw each other regularly on the party videos they exchanged.⁶

The Zaffah

An essential component of the wedding party, the *zaffah* is a procession during which the bride and groom are literally danced into the public space of the community.⁷ Combining ritual, music, and dance, the *zaffah* shows off all the key players in a wedding. A family might have a very good idea of how they want to do the *zaffah*, but for all *zaffahs*, the wedding party is dependent on the musicians and dancers to organize the crowd outside the hall and bring the family in with the pomp and circumstance required. Singer Rana explained her role in the *zaffah*:

Weddings? Oh, God . . . thousands. I meet the bride beforehand or I talk to her on the phone. I tell her what I want to do [for the *zaffah*] . . . and they accept it. They like my show. Some brides, they feel happy, they are close [to me]. Some are scared. I sing from my heart. This is my job, my work. If they are not happy, I make

them happy. This is really from our heart, me and Naim, not just for money. We make it like our wedding, or like my daughter's wedding.

Rana imitates the announcement that brings her and Naim into the wedding hall, "'And now will the beautiful bride and groom enter; they're going to do the *zaffah* with Rana and Naim' I begin to sing a *mawwal*. First come the family and the men, then the father of the bride, then the bridesmaids." Rana and Naim's *zaffah* is a sight to behold. She and Naim work with remote mikes, somehow communicating tempos and transitions through the dense crowd to the rest of the band members who remain on stage. As Rana escorts the couple down a sinuous, imaginary path, she sings, claps, and dances with the handsome (but naturally shy) couple. Naim performs crowd management while playing 'ud standing up. Money is tossed into the air, collected, and counted. Once there is a critical mass on the dance floor and all key players of the wedding party are dancing, Rana and Naim "work the tables," greeting in song the guests who did not make it to the front. Perhaps twenty or twenty-five minutes after the onset of the procession, Rana has woven her way through all the tables, and the majority of the celebrants are clapping, crowding around the path of the *zaffah* toward the dance floor. Videographers capture it all. Rana and Naim then join the newlyweds on a special, tiered stage where they sit on thronelike chairs with their "court" of about a dozen young bridesmaids. Rana and Naim wave to the crowd before they leave the couple alone, the center of attention. The musicians exit by the same path taken to bring in the bride and groom. There is a break in the action, but their work for the evening is hardly over.

Throughout a wedding party, musicians facilitate kin group dancing by offering special songs for the bride's family, the groom's family, all the male friends of the groom, a special ladies' dance, and so on. In some traditions, musicians are required to present a structured sequence of dances during which each family group present at the wedding is announced and called up in turn.⁸ As they express their joy publicly through dance, these discrete groups of family or friends throw money into the air, which, once collected, serves as the young couple's "start-up package." The band may also provide a commercially recorded American slow song for a "bridal dance" (usually the only American tune of the evening) and perhaps recordings of American music for the cutting of the cake. Segmented

ritual activity eventually gives way to *dabkah* dancing for the entire crowd. If present, special musicians, such as players of the *tabl baladi*, the *mazhar*, and the *mizmar*, will parade through the crowd, infecting it with the spirit of celebration. These instruments, the large double-headed bass drum (the *tabl baladi*), the loud and large tambourine (the *mazhar*), and the sharp, loud double reed oboe (the *mizmar*) have been associated with weddings and celebration since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. And today, if the real thing isn't available, the sounds of these drums and aerophones will be approximated on the synthesizer.

The Work of Musicians

Like the hundreds of Iraqi-owned party stores in Detroit, or the ribbon of Lebanese gas stations that winds through Dearborn, music is yet another Arab American "ethnic occupation." Family groups are as common in the music business as in any other. Musical ensembles are comprised of brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, nephews and uncles, fathers and sons. Musicians are part of a service industry that is essential to the lifeblood of this huge community, and for the most part they see their work as just that: work. As contractors or curators of Arab culture, Arab musicians are in a position comparable to Arab immigrant women, who bear more of the anti-assimilation burden than men when it comes to rearing children and running a household in the ways of the old country (Cainkar 1994). The desire to "keep our culture alive" provides a strong patronage system for musicians, whose skills as "ritual specialists" and cultural caterers are very much in demand. While it is healthy patronage that supports so many musicians, the thriving culture industry of Arab Detroit also functions as a deterrent to musicians who might otherwise engage in American popular music, Western art music, or other crossover and fusion projects.

Rana's altruistic attitude toward her work may be the exception; many musicians seem to regard their wedding duties as a tedious and boring job, especially when they play the same songs night after night on summer weekends. One musician who is often hired just to play *mizmar* for the *zaffah* procession summed up his role by saying: "It's an easy gig; they just want it to look good for the video—they just want to make a nice video." One smiling *tabl* player confided to me: "It's all show."

While our academic grandmothers and grandfathers were concerned with documenting authentic, original musical cultures, contemporary scholars of expressive culture, especially those working at home in the United States, are challenged with interpreting how cultural authenticity is identified, selected, reworked, and interpreted in new environments, with new technologies, in musical ways. Appadurai, in his provocative discussion of the global cultural economy, suggests that "the world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life" (1990, 4). My research suggests that the role of imagination in social life is nothing new and that music, whether recorded or live, continues to inspire Arab Americans in their creation of culture in the diaspora.

Memory and imagination are fueled by musical style, textual references, and regional repertoires. Listening to Arab music invites a multisensory reception because of the association of recorded music with live performance and, by extension, because of the "creative tension," the physical/verbal interaction, between performers and audiences at live music events (Nelson 1985, xvi). An evening at an Arab wedding party is by anyone's account, insider or outsider, an overwhelming experience. The wedding party is a social ritual, a rite of intensification. As the music and dance unfold, intimate cultural languages abound in particular kinds of hand clapping, the twirling of worry beads, the bodily and vocal gestures that indicate musical appreciation, the trilling of tongues (*zagharit*), and the rhythmic shouts of men as they dance and fraternize. This is a time and a space that not only reflects but also projects Arab, and more specifically Arab American, culture.

Scholars, myself included, are intrigued by expressive culture in diaspora communities. I am only now beginning to sort out the relationship between the Arab musician's work and how it is experienced by individuals, perceived by scholars, and represented in academic writings and everyday lives. Clifford refers to the "language of Diaspora" as something invoked by displaced communities who "feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home" (1994, 311). When does Arab music and culture stop being romantically imagined and magically invoked and begin to be an indigenous feature of American culture, or of the American workplace? When, in my ethnographic writing, will Arab Detroit's music scene receive the residence permit that polka music has in Wisconsin, salsa in New York, or conjunto in Texas? Certainly many Arab immigrants yearn for return—a recognized feature of diaspora life—but no matter how many do return, there will remain a thriving and burgeoning

Arab America that cannot abandon the unique cultural, social, and economic institutions it has created. And every weekend in Detroit, musicians will continue their work, serving their audiences a multi-course, tailor-made menu of expressive culture from the homeland.

NOTES

1. I analyze early Arab American musicians' practices and their special ways of working in an earlier article (Rasmussen 1989). See Abu-Lughod (1993) for a provocative discussion of how ethnographers make systems of knowledge and culture out of the pastiche of their collected experiences.
2. I began fieldwork in the Detroit area in 1988 and have returned nearly every year out of professional interest and social obligation. I am deeply indebted to the musicians whose work, with permission, I represent here.
3. These translated titles are from 78 rpm discs from Arab American family collections.
4. I deal extensively with musical style in my dissertation (Rasmussen 1991) and other publications (Rasmussen 1992, 1996).
5. Sound media—records, radio, and television—may actually be a more effective medium for the transmission of the Arabic language. The transfer of Arabic through print media can be problematic, especially for second- and third-generation Arab Americans. Although they sometimes learn Arabic at home, if they do not receive formal instruction in Arabic, they will probably not learn to read and write standard Arabic (in Arabic script). In fact, one of the early Arab American newspapers published during the first half of the twentieth century experimented with a format in which spoken Arabic was transliterated into the English alphabet, which Arabs born and educated in America could read.
6. At Christian weddings, a church service, usually held in the morning or afternoon, is also part of the event. The videographers will attend this service. Sometimes, an engagement party is thrown some weeks or months before the wedding. It too is videotaped and photographed, with music, food, and dance.
7. See Kent (1989) for a dancer's account of *zaffah* processions in Egypt and in the Los Angeles Arab American community.
8. In some Arab countries, the singer/announcer is known as *sayyah*, literally "shouter." It is his job to announce every guest who arrives and the gifts they bring to the wedding. I am indebted to Dwight Reynolds for pointing out this connection.

GLOSSARY

INSTRUMENTS

darabukkah: also called *tabli* or *derbekkee*; ceramic, vase-shaped drum, one head
mazhar: large heavy tambourine with heavy jingles, of Egyptian origin, always used for weddings. The song "*Duq il-Mazahir*" (Play the mazhars) is played at all weddings

mijwiz: single-reed double-piped "clarinet" associated with folk music

mizmar: double-reed "oboe" associated with folk music

nay: reed flute; to play all modes, several sizes are used

qanun: trapezoid-shaped zither with seventy-two strings in triple courses.

Strings are tuned with pegs; tuning is refined with levers called *mandals* or *urabs*

riqq: also called *daff*; tambourine of ten–eleven inches with heavy brass cymbals

tabl baladi: literally, "country drum." A double-headed drum played on one head with a beater and on the other with a thin willow branch or stick. One head is thicker than the other, giving the drum two distinct pitches. The drum is suspended from the neck of the player, who is free to roam around the floor and play directly to the dancers. Often paired with the *mizmar*, the dynamic performance style of *tabl* players gives dancers a tremendous jolt of energy

'ud: fretless lute with rounded belly, bent neck, and eleven strings, five of them in double courses

violin: same as a Western violin or fiddle. Tuned bottom to top: G-D- g-d-

OTHER TERMS

dabkah: line dance of rural origin. Variations exist throughout Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. Iraqis also do line dances distinct from the Levantine style in rhythm, feel, and step

haflah: formal music party

mawwal: vocal song or introduction, rendered nonmetrically by the singer

raqs ('arabi): dance known in the United States as belly dancing. It also might be referred to as *raqs al-sharqi*, or Oriental dance. A nonprofessional form of this style of dancing occurs at nearly every wedding and party. People dance alone (i.e., not touching or in a line) with their hands held shoulder-height or higher. Curvy arm, hand, and hip gestures are typical of the style. People dance in couples or groups. It is common for groups of women to dance together or for men to dance together. *Dabkah* (line) dancing and *raqs 'arabi* often occur together (during the same musical performance) although there are distinct musical styles appropriate for each. Little children, especially girls, can usually be seen learning to dance in this style at weddings and parties

- zaffah*: procession during which the bride and groom are danced into the public space of the wedding party
- zagharit* (in English, *ululation*; in Arabic, *zagh'louta*): A high trilling sound performed mostly by women but also sometimes by men as an expression of joy. Synthesizer players often have a sample of *zagharit*—thus you now hear this very human sound both live and “canned” at weddings and parties

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