

The rhythm of diaspora: The power of Arab American music in the (dis)Americanization

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Abstract - The article analyzes the difficulties and inefficacy of Arab American integration through music, spotlighting cultural barriers, preconceived conceptions, and the variety of Arab American musical styles. In the United States, the melting pot concept emphasizes cultural fusion and integration, but it can be detrimental to national identity. Critics contend for the importance of preserving cultural traditions and nurturing a pluralistic society that recognizes the contributions of diverse cultural groups. Arab American music has the potential to promote cultural expression, unity, and social transformation, especially among minority groups such as Arab Americans. However, the effect of Arab American music on integration remains debatable, and additional research is required to better comprehend its limitations and improvement potential. Through the Arabic mosaic of the MENA region, the Arab-American community has been dynamic and diverse, and the "Arab Wave" in World Music after 9/11 has been a topic of debate. Recognizing the perseverance and ongoing efforts of Arab-American musicians in promoting understanding, challenging stereotypes, and preserving cultural heritage can contribute to the development of a society that values the diverse contributions of Arab-Americans and promotes their integration.

Keywords: Arab American identity, American identity, MENA region, US Immigration

I. INTRODUCTION

Music has the potential to promote cultural expression, unity, and social transformation, particularly for minority communities like Arab Americans. However, the impact of Arab American music on integration remains a matter of debate. With its rich heritage and diverse influences, it can unite the Arab American community, preserve cultural identity, and combat stereotypes. However, the realization of these goals has been elusive. This article aims to explore the complexities surrounding Arab American integration through music, examining the factors that contribute to its ineffectiveness in accomplishing its integration objectives.

Cultural barriers, preconceived notions, and the diversity of Arab American musical styles present obstacles to integration. Language barriers, primarily chanted in Arabic, further hinder Arab American music's ability to reach a larger audience and effectively communicate its messages of unity. By examining case studies, expert perspectives, and anecdotal evidence, the article aims to promote a nuanced discussion about the limitations and potential for improvement. Recognizing the perseverance and ongoing efforts of Arab American musicians in promoting understanding, challenging stereotypes, and preserving cultural heritage can help create a society that values the diverse contributions of Arab Americans and fosters integration. Additionally, language barriers present an added barrier. A significant portion of the American population does not comprehend Arabic. This linguistic divide can inhibit Arab American music's ability to reach a larger audience and effectively communicate its messages of unity and shared experiences. For this reason, many Arab American musicians face obstacles in contributing to integration through their art. By evaluating these factors critically, we hope to promote a nuanced discussion about their limitations and potential for improvement.

Before tackling Arab American music's role in shaping Arab American identity, it is important to understand that the American nation is a country of diverse cultures. The notion of the United States as a melting pot is engrained in the nation's history and cultural identity. It reflects the belief that America is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious society in which individuals from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds integrate to create a unique and unified whole. Zangwill's 1908 drama, "The Melting Pot," celebrated the integration of various immigrant groups into American society. The concept of America as a melting pot emphasizes the fusion and integration of various cultures, with individuals contributing their distinct heritage while acquiring aspects of the American identity. This concept has been both praised and criticized over the years, with ongoing debates about the extent of cultural assimilation and the significance of preserving diverse cultural traditions. Nonetheless, the melting pot metaphor remains a potent representation of America's diversity and the potential for unity through cultural exchange and integration.

However, bringing attention to the melting pot concept in the United States can be detrimental to the national identity. The prioritization of assimilation and a homogenized identity can result in the eradication of cultural diversity and the marginalization of minority groups (Huntington, 2004). The pressure to conform to a single, dominant cultural norm can restrict individual expression and discourage the commemoration of distinct cultural traditions (Rodriguez, 1991). This can lead to identity conflicts and feelings of exclusion for individuals and communities that do not conform to the prevailing conception of American identity. Critics argue for the significance of preserving cultural traditions and fostering a pluralistic society that values the contributions of various cultural groups (Lipman, 2010). Unfortunately, this is what gave more courage to immigrants in the US to celebrate their heritage instead of their Americanness. The US becomes just a matter of legality and jurisdiction, such: born in the US, having a US passport, and staying in the US legally, which puts the US in danger of losing the taste of

nationhood. With the several border restrictions on Arab American Immigrants in the US, Arab Americans became more attached to their cultural heritage, as is evidenced in their music.

Before 9/11, in the late nineteenth century, Middle Eastern music appeared in the United States for the first time. As the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876 and the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1896 showcased musical traditions from around the globe, Egyptian music and belly dancers were presented¹. Although these dancers and their instrumental accompanists were frequently described as grating or abrasive by casual listeners, they did inspire the public with certain notions of these distant practices. According to Thorman (2023)², traditional and contemporary Arabic music have made significant contributions to the music scene in the United States. Arab music flourished in large-scale ceremonial music concerts and weekend-long gatherings along the East Coast from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s, often as philanthropic events sponsored by the immigrant community. During the same time period, prominent U.S. record labels began marketing to ethnic communities in America by releasing Arab music.

Arab Americans had established their own record labels within the industry by the 1940s (Ibid.). Arabic folk music for dance and other genres of popular Arabic music surpassed the traditional "classical" repertoire by the 1960s. Wedding bands (zaffa bands) and private corporate events continue to be a significant source of income for Arab musicians performing a diversity of musical genres from various regions of the Arab World (ibid.). Even though more is known about the music of the second generation of Arab immigrants to the United States, this does not diminish the significance of the earlier years. Not only do the earliest recordings of Arab Americans reflect an important epoch in the history of the United States, but they also contain some of the earliest commercial recordings. Canary Records (2021)³, the online record store, intended to honor some of the lesser-known contributions of musicians who were a part of the first wave, particularly the flurry of commercial recording that occurred after World War I.

Early American music mainly celebrated the unity of Arab American communities to preserve their cultural identity, their nostalgia for their home countries, and the prison of the American Nation. These themes were expressed in the remarkable instrumental music of Alexander Maloof⁴. The Syrian American musician composed remarkable instrumental music, such as *Syrian Band-Kadive March*, *A Trip to Syria*, and *Amerika Ya Hilwa* (America the Sweet). The instrumental tracks were even preserved in the Arab American National Museum and posted on its official website⁵. Although there are no lyrics, the orchestral compositions highlighted the homesickness and the desire to integrate into the American nation. Equivalent to the orchestra, Arab American musicians were influenced by *Tarab*, which is known as *Oriental* music. In his article, 'Emotion, Performance, and Temporality in Arab Music: Reflections on Tarab', Shannon (2019) defines it as.

Tarab is a difficult term to translate, for it connotes a number of concepts. In Arabic, tarab refers linguistically to a state of heightened emotionality, often translated as "rapture," "ecstasy," or "enchantment" but can also indicate sadness as well as joy. Tarab also describes a style of music and musical performance in which such emotional states are evoked and aroused in performers and audiences. Finally, tarab constitutes a general term

¹ In his article "Representation of the Middle East at the American World Fair 1876-1904" The United States and The Middle East: Cultural Encounters", Eric Davis mentioned that Middle Eastern music was presented at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial and the 1896 World's Fair in St. Louis.

² Thorman Marc is a professor in the Music Department at Brooklyn College.

³ Canary Records is an online record company that celebrates different American- ethnicities and genres of music.

⁴ The composer was born in Syria, and immigrated to the US. He settled in the Syrian community in Brooklyn where he started his musical career.

⁵ The instrumental tracks were posted on the page of the Arab American National Museum to revive the old Arab American Music. <https://arabamerican.pastperfectonline.com/byperson?keyword=Malooof%2C+Alexander>

in Arab aesthetics that describes a type of aesthetic bliss or rapture with respect to an art object: one may, for example, experience tarab when hearing a poem or even when regarding a painting, as well as through listening to music, though usually tarab is restricted to acts of listening.

It is also referred to as *al-turath*⁶, which means heritage, as a reference to the traditional heritage music, or old Arabic music, in contrast to the new Arabic music. These early recordings presented numerous characteristics of the music introduced by the first generation of immigrants, such as an emphasis on the human vocal and heterophonic textures, in which multiple instruments improvise variations on a primary melody⁷. The oud, the violin, the end-blown flute known as the nay, the plucked zither known as the qanun, the Takht, and numerous frame percussion instruments, such as the goblet-shaped drum known as the darbuka, were common instruments. Arabic instrumentals were a major tool in recording Arab American music. One of the most prominent examples of using *Takht*, *Jūz al-ḥamām* recording. Performed by Zakiyyah Akūb and published by Columbia Graphophone Company, Harvard Library also preserved the track to celebrate old Arabic music.

Unlike the old Arab American music that was orchestral, *Tarab*-ic to the ear, and *Turath*-ic with musical culture, new Arab American Music co-opted the themes in a different manner by adapting the American genre of music and focusing on its literature⁸. The latter also focused on the struggle to integrate into American society to be part of the American community. Indeed, the first Arab American composers and performers in the US were predominantly Middle Eastern, especially from Syrian, and Egypt. However, after the Second World War, North African music was highly listened to. Algerian *Rai*⁹ music was the first music from the Arab world to be heard in the global music arena. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of *rai* releases appeared on the US market (Swedenburg, 2004/2023).

The *rai*'s hybrid sound combines North African vocals and rhythms with Western instruments such as the electric guitar, percussion machine, and synthesizer. These composite textures, which are continuously emphasized in world music promotion, have indeed penetrated the American market for *rai*. The distinctive Arabic vocals sound exotically foreign, whereas the guitars, synthesizer, disco, funk, and rock influences make *Rai* sounds just familiar enough not to be intimidatingly foreign. As this music was mainly created to express love, freedom, despair, and social pressures, it was considered close enough to express the feelings of Arab American Immigrants who seek freedom in the US. Once it was spread in the US, Algerian music introduced the beginning of the rebellion of Arab American musicians against *Tarab music*, especially by the second and third generations of Arab Americans. There was no folksiness, calmness, or spirituality anymore.

The new Arabic Music is more linguistically hybrid and characterized by an aggressively experimental and syncretizing aesthetic. In each instance, communities imbue music with ideologies and concepts of authenticity, identity, and significance. This demonstrates the significance of sound and the complexity of contemporary debates regarding what Arab America is and should be. In her article about teaching Arab Music, the ethnomusicologist Rasmussen (1996)¹⁰ mentioned that in the past decade, political factors have been the main reason for Arabic

⁶ *Al-turath*, التراث : The words mean "heritage in Fusha (اللغة العربية الفصحى الحديثة) = Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)

⁷ LOEB Music Library of Harvard: <https://blogs.harvard.edu/loebmusic/2022/02/24/celebrating-the-recorded-music-of-the-early-arab-american-diaspora/>

⁸ The literature of music refers to the lyrics.

⁹ *Rai*, Arabic Translation- رأي: It is the name of the Folf Algerian music. It addresses topics such as love, freedom, despair, and social pressures as a means of expressing social reality without taboos or censorship.

¹⁰ Anne K. Rasmussen is an educator and ethnomusicologist from the United States. Her research concentrates extensively on Arab music in the United States and Islamic ritual and performance.

music to be re-territorialized in the US. In the past two decades, the Arab-American community has been dynamic, diversified through the Arabic mosaic of the MENA region, and energized to fight back against any entity harming their culture, heritage, or home country.

This idea first surfaced in the wake of the US-supported conflict between Palestine and Israel, the war in Iraq, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In other words, Arab American singers chanted their ancestor's cultural pride, which brought The Arab communities even closer to each other. It is essential here to put "*community*" in the plural, as we are not referring to just one country but to the whole MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). In his article *The "Arab Wave" in World Music after 9/11*, the anthropologist Swedenburg (2023) mentioned that some U.S. cultural entrepreneurs responded by forsaking the promotion of Middle Eastern culture or by concealing its origins, while others have taken advantage of the renewed interest in all things Middle Eastern in a more blatant manner (Anthropologica, 46).

To point out the racial ancestry, the Syrian American rapper Mona Hayder chanted in her song *Barbarian* about her pride in being a Barbarian and her awareness of people being scared of her leaving civilization for those who think that they are civilized ("Mona Haydar - Barbarian [Official Music Video]"). She also pointed to the freedom of her body from any colonizer by singing "This nose decolonized, this hair decolonized, this skin decolonized, this body decolonized, this mind decolonized" (ibid.). The song describes a fundamental and extensive personal transformation. It implies a journey of self-discovery and liberation from internalized oppressive structures and ideologies, often the result of historical colonial practices such as the interference of America in the 2011 Civil War in Syria.

This decolonization process is not merely political or sociological, but also psychological and individual. When Mona Hayder asserted the colonialism of her body, she rejected detrimental stereotypes and prejudices that had been imposed on her physical being. She respects the diversity of human bodies as a whole, refusing to conform to Eurocentric or other external standards of beauty or health. Indeed, mentioning the decolonization of the mind implies profound intellectual and emotional freedom. It indicated that she has dissected the narratives and ideologies they were taught critically, challenging their validity and discarding those that served to marginalize or oppress her. In order to form a more holistic, inclusive understanding of the world, she has sought out alternative sources of knowledge, often those suppressed or ignored by the white mainstream. Such knowledge is Islam, which was highly criticized after 9/11.

The singer even represented Muslim culture in her song *Hijabi*¹¹. Hayder stated her song with the stereotypical question that people usually ask Muslim women who wear the scarf, such as what is the color of their hair, if the scarf is too tight or makes them sweat ("Mona Haydar - Hijabi (Wrap My Hijab)"). The singer combined her fashionable Arabic Muslim style, with the American terms used for fashion. Unlike the American fashion that is known for revealing different parts of the body, the singer mentioned that she "still swag my(her) hijabi (hijab)". (ibid). In recent years, Muslim women in the United States have displayed a greater degree of pride in their hijab-wearing. The hijab, traditionally regarded as a symbol of seclusion and religious devotion, has taken on additional meanings and significance for Muslim women living in a multicultural and diverse society such as the United States. This pride derives from a sense of empowerment, identity, and the desire to combat Islam-related caricatures and misconceptions. In the United States, Muslim women who don't the hijab with pride frequently demonstrate a strong sense of agency. They view the hijab as a tool for reclaiming their own narrative, redefining beauty standards, and challenging societal norms that prioritize external appearances.

¹¹ Hijabi (حجابي): is borrowed from the Arabic language that means my Hijab (حجاب). It refers to the scarf that women wrap on their head to cover their hair

By wearing the hijab, they assert their autonomy and exercise their right to express their religious and cultural identity in public (Ahmed, 2019). The act of concealing their hair becomes an embodiment of their beliefs and values, which contributes to a heightened sense of self-worth and confidence. A distinct Muslim-American identity also contributes to the prestige associated with donning the hijab. By visibly expressing their religious identity, Muslim women in the United States which contributes to the visibility and recognition of the diverse American Muslim community. The hijab is a visual signifier of their membership in a particular faith community, nurturing a sense of belonging and solidarity (Fernandez, 2020). This pride in hijab-wearing helps Muslim women navigate their dual identities as both Muslims and Americans, contributing to the rich tapestry of religious and cultural diversity in the United States. Additionally, the pride in donning a hijab in the United States extends beyond personal conviction and identity. It represents a form of resistance to Islamophobia and misconceptions about Islam and Muslim women. By confidently adorning the hijab, Muslim women challenge stereotypes, dispel preconceived notions, and invite dialogue that fosters acceptance and understanding (Shafiq, 2019). This pride is ingrained in the desire to educate others about the hijab, dispel misconceptions, and cultivate interfaith and intercultural understanding. In fact, Mona went further beyond the Arab Muslim American identity; she addressed Muslims all around the world by mentioning Pakittanies, Bunjabies, Indonesians, and other Western countries such as Canada.

Old Arab American music may have brought the Arab communities together to express the pride of being an Arab, but the new Arab music expressed more the struggle to be an American. To return to the same singer, Mona Hayder, pointed out being rejected by the American community and being considered only as a terrorist.

They don't want to see me as American
See me on your TV as a terrorist
All I wanna do is have some fun by the beach, man
But here come ICE and that travel ban [...]
Why they gotta treat me like I'm alien?
Why they actin like I'm not American?
Why they so obsessed with what I'm wearing, man?
Got me sweating under their surveillance. ("Mona Haydar: American [Official Music Video]")

Through the literature of her music, the Arab American singer frequently felt marginalized in the United States and even treated as an *Alien*. Discrimination, stereotyping, and xenophobia contributed to her feeling of exclusion. Arab Americans may experience prejudice and discrimination based on their ethnic origin, religion, or cultural practices, which can result in social, economic, and political marginalization (Jamal, 2020). Negative depictions of Arabs in the media and popular culture perpetuate stereotypes, reinforcing an atmosphere of mistrust and misunderstanding (Shryock, 2017). To cultivate a more equitable society, greater awareness, inclusion, and anti-discrimination efforts, are required to address the difficulties Arab Americans confront: such is the role of Hayder to directly address these topics.

Unfortunately, many studies tackled Arab American music historically and thematically, but they did not mention how far Arab American music can contribute to the vanishing of American identity. Regardless of its cultural origins, music can serve as a potent medium for cultural exchange, appreciation, and comprehension. Arab American musicians frequently incorporate elements of their heritage into their music, which not only enriches the American musical landscape but also fosters diversity and intercultural dialogue (Aman, 2014). Arab American musicians contribute to the cultural mosaic of the United States through their music, demonstrating the interdependence and coexistence of diverse identities within American society. Arab American music can promote a broader understanding of American culture as an

inclusive and pluralistic entity (Gross, 2018), as opposed to diminishing American civic identity. In his book "Who Are We?

II. CONCLUSION

In the "Challenges to America's National Identity", the renowned political scientist Huntington examined the concept of identity in the United States. He conveyed concern regarding the erosion of traditional American identity and its effect on national cohesion. He argued that the essence of American identity was rooted in Anglo-Protestant values and institutions, and that these foundations were being eroded by multiple factors, including widespread immigration. This article does not point to limiting Arab immigration, but it points to Arab American musicians, and Arab American in general being considerate of their American identity. It is true that historical events and the political interventions of the US in the MENA region may touch Arab Americans' emotions towards their home countries. Aside, the choice of immigration also implies the choice of respecting the US and following the mainstream regardless of one's background. It is important to recognize that America is originally a civic country that pledged to uphold liberal principles. Huntington's solution to preserve the American identity might come across as more aggressive on the part of Arab Americans. In fact, the aggressive music of Mona Hayder is the result of President Trump's Travel Ban plan. The plan itself presents the obstacle of assimilation process and the non-maintenance of American values.

Through the old and Modern music, Arab American described their nostalgia to their countries. They also expressed their pride of coming from an Arab origin and expressed freely their feeling of being discriminated against. Despite the fact that the unity of Arab American community through music gathered a beautiful mosaic from MENA region, it fell short of expectations to maintain the liberal American identity. It is essential to recognize the perseverance and ongoing efforts of Arab American musicians in promoting understanding, challenging stereotypes, and preserving cultural heritage. By investigating the obstacles and limitations they confront, we can identify opportunities for collaboration, dialogue, and advocacy to create a society that values the diverse contributions of Arab Americans, however, this should not go beyond forgetting that they are Americans regardless to their origins.

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