

The Great Sheikh Imam



The great Sheikh Imam - - was neither a sheikh nor an imam in the traditional sense of the word.

Although he studied Quranic recitation at an early age, he came to be known for his magnificent Classical Arabic musical composition and as a rebellious folk singer; He also rejuvenated, modernized and developed the Classical Arabic musical tradition.

Ironically, you may ask hundreds of thousands of people in the Arab World about him and they would not know him - and that is because in the Middle East, free-minded literary and artistic giants are suppressed and imprisoned instead of heralded as an example of national achievement; and that is exactly Sheikh Imam's story, along with his artistic collaborator, the great colloquial poet Ahmad Fouad Najm.

Sheikh Imam's hundreds of socially/politically critical songs stand at the apex of Arab musical evolution. These songs championed the poor, the dispossessed, the peasants and the powerless, pointed the finger at the corrupt and power-hungry, and celebrated everything from the Sun's life-giving rays to birds that bring in the new morning. Imam the musician and Najm the poet are both giants, each in his own right; but instead of being recognized for their creative genius and effort, they spent years in and out of prison.

They were frowned upon by consecutive Egyptian governments to such an extent that their recordings could only take place in people's homes or in small live concerts, never having the chance to properly record their repertoire in a studio setting in the light of day, with a few exceptions, such as on visits to Beirut. From the "technical quality" of the audio recordings, you can tell the humble setting in which they are made.



Photo above: Sheikh Imam in red tie; Tawfiq Zayyad (notable Palestinian poet, author of "Unadeekom") sitting at his left arm, Ahmad Fouad Najm sitting at left arm of Zayyad.

Sheikh Imam would simply sit and sing with Najm and other friends, recording his work on simple portable cassettes, and these would be secretly copied from person to person throughout Egypt and smuggled out to other Arab countries. About the only Arab country where one could freely listen to them was Lebanon. This is STILL the case! But there is something beautiful about the sound of these folksy "sha3bi" recordings, anyway, that the governments couldn't suppress.

Sheikh Imam is the musical predecessor of such notables as Marcel Khalife, Ahmad Kaabour, and Ziad Rahbani; he is also the direct musical successor of Sayed Darwish (1920's).

Below are Ahmad Fouad Najm's words to “Mamnou3at,” set to music by Sheikh Imam.

(listen here)

.. ممنوع من السفر
.. ممنوع من الغنا
.. ممنوع من الكلام
.. ممنوع م الاشتياق
.. ممنوع م الاستياء
.. ممنوع م الابتسام
.. وكل يوم ف حبك
.. تزيد الممنوعات
.. وكل يوم باحبك
.. أكثر من اللي فات

..
.. حبيبتى ياسـفينة
.. متشوقة وسـجينة
.. مخبر ف كل عقدة
.. ناعسكر ف كل مي
.. يمنعني لو أغير
.. عليكى أو أطيـر
.. إليكى واستجير
.. بحضنك أو أنام
.. ف جرك الوسيع
.. وقلبك الربيع
.. أعود كما الرضيع
.. بحرقة الفطام

..
.. حبيبتي يا مدينة
.. متزوقة وحزينة
.. ف كل حارة حسرة
.. وف كل قصر زينة
.. ممنوع من إني أصبح
.. بعشقتك أو أبات
.. ممنوع من المناقشة
.. ممنوع من السكات
.. وكل يوم فى حبك
.. تزيد الممنوعات
.. وكل يوم بحبك
.. أكثر من اللي فات