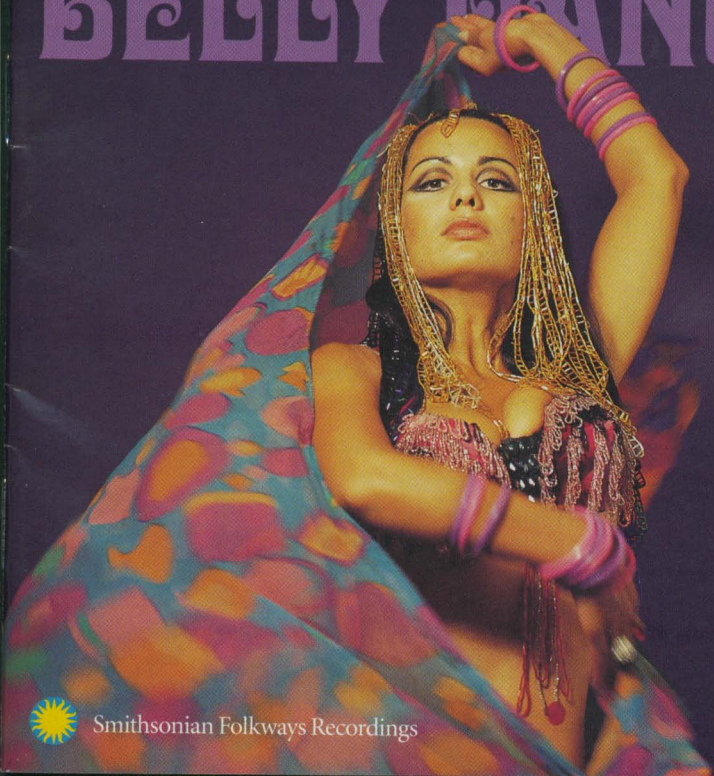


THE BEST OF **GEORGE ABDO** AND HIS **FLAMES OF ARABY ORCHESTRA**

BELLY DANCE!



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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BELLY DANCE!



Known as "The King of Belly Dance Music," George Abdo and His Flames of Araby Orchestra combine Syrian, Lebanese, Egyptian, Armenian, Greek, and Turkish musical traditions to create a uniquely American belly dance soundscape. Abdo's music is based on the repertoire, instrumentation, and performance styles of the Middle East while incorporating influences from American pop and jazz. A

prototype for worldbeat, Abdo and His Flames of Araby helped bring Middle Eastern music and belly dancing to mainstream North American audiences. Culled from his 5 best-selling albums, this compilation showcases rich vocals and lively rhythms played on violin, oboe, 'ud, qanun, darbukka, and bouzouki as well as guitar, piano, bass, and drums.

Extensive notes, photos, 15 tracks, 75 minutes.

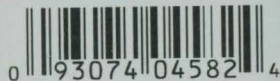
1. **YA GEMEEL** (Arabic Love Ballad)
2. **RUH TUM BI SALAMA** (Go in Peace)
3. **TA MAVRA MATIA SOU** (Your Black Eyes)
4. **RAKS ARABY** (Arabic Dance)
5. **HADOUNI, HADOUNI**
6. **ALLAH, YA LUBNAN** (God, My Beautiful Lebanon)
7. **RAKS AVEROF** (Dance at the Averof)
8. **RAKS MUSTAPHA** (Mustapha's Dance: complete belly dance routine)
9. **MIN FEEGIS** (Don't Leave Me)
10. **RAKS EL-MALEK** (Dance for the King)
11. **SAHIRRNEE** (Bewitched)
12. **NOORA YA NOORA** (Noora's Dance)
13. **O PALIATZIS** (The Junk Man)
14. **DIO CARDIAS** (Two Hearts)
15. **IMM AL-MANADILI** (The Charm of Your Scarf)



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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LC 9628



BELLY DANCE!

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. YA GAMEEL (Arabic Love Ballad) | 6:09 |
| 2. RUH TUM BI SALAMA (Go in Peace) | 4:55 |
| 3. TA MAVRA MATIA SOU (Your Black Eyes) | 5:02 |
| 4. RAKS ARABY (Arabic Dance) | 2:53 |
| 5. HADOUNI, HADOUNI | 3:45 |
| 6. ALLAH, YA LUBNAN (God, My Beautiful Lebanon) | 4:16 |
| 7. RAKS AVEROF (Dance at the Averof) | 3:26 |
| 8. RAKS MUSTAPHA (Mustapha's Dance:
complete belly dance routine) | 11:40 |
| 9. MIN FEEGIS (Don't Leave Me) | 4:20 |
| 10. RAKS EL-MALEK (Dance for the King) | 5:16 |
| 11. SAHIRRNEE (Bewitched) | 6:15 |
| 12. NOORA YA NOORA (Noora's Dance) | 5:18 |
| 13. O PALIATZIS (The Junk Man) | 4:26 |
| 14. DIO CARDIAS (Two Hearts) | 2:40 |
| 15. IMM AL-MANADILI (The Charm of Your Scarf) | 4:08 |

(All songs arranged by George Abdo)

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THE BEST OF GEORGE ABDO AND HIS FLAMES OF ARABY ORCHESTRA

Introduction by Anne K. Rasmussen



George Abdo and His Flames of Araby were part of a musical subculture that forged the experience of immigrant life with that of mainstream America. The music of Abdo and his colleagues has as its base the repertoire, instrumentation, and performance practice of the Middle East. At the same time, it resonates with the common experience of American popular music and jazz. When it was originally created and performed, it was a response to and a catalyst for a multiethnic audience of American enthusiasts and belly dancers. The combination of Syrian, Lebanese, Egyptian, Armenian, Greek, Jewish, Turkish, and American musical ingredients summoned the exotic Orient in a dramatic, dynamic, and completely modern performance. The music of Abdo and His Flames of Araby is a prototype for what we might think of today as "worldbeat."

This Smithsonian Folkways compilation is a collection of the best performances by George Abdo and His Flames of Araby. The music was originally recorded on LP record albums (later reissued on compact disc) on the Monitor Label, whose holdings were acquired by Smithsonian Folkways in 1999. The continued popularity of Abdo's recordings in North America and abroad led Smithsonian Folkways to produce a new recording, in consultation with Mr. Abdo, of the gems of his opus.

THE CONTEXT

The music of George Abdo and His Flames of Araby has to be imagined in its original context. It was just one component of an evening in a Middle Eastern supper club, a venue known for its menu of food, drink, smoke, conversation, live music, and a belly dancer, who converted the space into a *caravanserai* by circulating among the customers and soliciting their participation in a multisensory experience of escapism.

Of the Averof Restaurant, one of many such venues in which George Abdo and His Flames of Araby performed, *Patriot Ledger* columnist Paul J. Reale wrote:

Amid palm trees and in the soft light of hand-crafted brass Lebanese lanterns, the Averof delights patrons with Middle East cuisine, the likes of which are available nowhere else in the U.S., (which helps explain a guest book listing visitors from as far away as Mexico, Venezuela, France, Switzerland, etc.) The food is exquisite and matched only by the entertainment. Belly dancers undulate to the mesmerizing clang-clang of finger cymbals, and guests join hands in the traditional Middle East line dance of happiness: "the *dabkah*."

For the international guests described above, the Averof, originally located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and other places like it in Boston, New York, and cities across the country were indeed places to see and be seen. For people of Middle Eastern heritage, Middle Eastern supper clubs—or even restaurants that might only devote a night or two to Middle Eastern entertainment—represented an alternate context to the community picnic, baptism, or wedding party. Events within the Syrian-Lebanese Christian and Jewish communities, or among a congregation of Armenians, were contexts where a ritual or civic function—a wedding, an anniversary, a baptism, or a fundraiser—was a pretense for music, dance, and food. Such events—and each Middle

Eastern and Mediterranean community had its own—were attended by a network of interrelated families, often held together by their affiliation to a church or temple, or simply by their common experience and shared heritage, something scholars refer to as ethnicity. These events might begin with a sacred or civic ritual but would almost always feature music, food, dance, and socializing. The bread and butter of every immigrant professional musician, they had been occurring in the United States since the early decades of the 20th century.

People from Greater Syria (now Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine) began trickling into the country before 1900, and their numbers grew into communities before 1930 to form a significant American minority. The overwhelming majority of Arabic-speaking immigrants were Christian Arabs who had fled Ottoman rule in their homeland. There were also groups of Jewish Arabs—sometimes called Oriental Jews or Sephardim—whose settlements in New York and New Jersey were well known to professional musicians of all religions. Though some Muslim Arabs came during the first wave of immigration, it was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that America witnessed the arrival of many Middle Eastern Muslims, primarily because of a change in U.S. immigration policy and increased political turmoil and economic instability in Middle Eastern nations.

Supper clubs like the Averof, also known as nightclubs, were a commercialized and cosmopolitan outgrowth of the homemade *hantes* (Armenian picnic) or Syrian-Lebanese *haflah* (music party) of the first half of the 20th century. Nightclubs featured an eclectic band of musicians of varied Middle Eastern Heritage: even as early as 1952, when the club Zara opened in Boston, the house band might include musicians and dancers of Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Syrian, Lebanese, Egyptian, and Iraqi heritage. At age 19,

George Abdo performed at the club Zara. These performers entertained an even more diverse audience of paying customers.

Although the motivation for the variety in programming was financial and commercial, it reflected a new open-mindedness and conceptual desegregation occurring in America. The political and linguistic barriers that separated immigrant groups in the early part of the century had become irrelevant. By the 1960s, all but the most recent arrivals spoke English, and because of the compatibility of culinary and musical traditions, people of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern heritage were more similar than they were different.

When Raymond and John Bandar, co-owners of the Averof, bought the place, about 1960, the chef was Greek. As he was excellent, they kept him on and found some entertainment to match. Many of the musicians they hired were already playing together, so it was easy to find a varied musical menu to please their clientele. Abdo's appearances became a signature of the Averof, which itself was a local entertainment landmark. The restaurant's proprietors penned these notes on one of Abdo's original recordings on the Monitor label in 1976.

At the renowned Averof Restaurant and Supper Club on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge, Mass., we are proud to have Mr. Abdo perform. His stirring singing has an almost hypnotic affect on the audience and brings on many an impromptu Debkeh [sic], Belly Dance or Chifte-Telli. Indeed, Mr. Abdo's singing seems to bring out the true sensuality of the belly dancer.

Mr. Abdo's performances on stage, radio, television and nightclubs throughout the Middle East, Europe and the Americas represent a new high in artistic standards for interpreting the musical culture of the Middle East and [are] a tribute to his genius.

We are proud to join Monitor records in presenting "The King of Belly Dance Music" in his newest album, *Belly Dancing with George Abdo*.

The Middle Eastern entertainment in places like the Averof included a pastiche of Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and Jewish music. In an interview in 1989, Nadim Dlaikan, a leading Arab American musician, remembered the musical fusion that was happening on stage when he first arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s:

When I was working in the club in New York, I used to play with a Greek musician, Turkish musician, Jewish musician, Armenian musician. . . . It was fun. When I came to America, I was playing pure Arabic music. When I started to work in New York, I started to play "Miserlou," and "Hava Nagila," and all this stuff; that's what the people liked. I learned the stuff. Armenian songs, Turkish songs. . . . It was fun. To me it was an experience.

The clientele was at least as cosmopolitan as the musical repertoire. "We were famous all over," boasted Morocco, dancer and co-owner of the Club Zara, in a 1988 interview.

Whenever you came to town, you came in. People were lined up and down the street; you had to make a reservation like a week before. And we had all high-class people, lots of Americans. We had lawyers, and doctors, and senators. In fact John Kennedy used to come in.

Lebanese-American violinist Fred Elias, a regular musician at the Averof and the leader of an ensemble himself, reminisced that his repertoire consisted of the "hits from home," along with a smattering of songs for ethnic America, songs like "Danny Boy" and "Back to Sorrento."

Syrian American Eddie Kochak, another Arab American king of the belly-dance empire, went so far as to label the hybrid music that came from the nightclub stage. He called

his music "Ameraba: music with that Arabic flavor geared to the American ear." With the Iraqi American Hakki Obadia, a violinist, composer, and arranger, Kochak recorded a series of "Ameraba" records, appropriately entitled *Strictly Belly Dancing*, volumes 1–7.

George Abdo, who got his start singing rhythm and blues as a teenager, identifies his music as tailor-made for an even more American market than that of his predecessors Elias, Kochak, and Obadia. At the height of his career, Abdo performed for audiences of thousands in community festivals in Lawrence and Worcester, Massachusetts. For promoting Middle Eastern music, he was honored by Ed Koch, mayor of New York, and the Egyptian government. He performed for Middle Easterners in South America, and he made frequent trips to Cairo, where his recordings were popular. Among his fans George Abdo counts Liza Minelli and her mother, Judy Garland; Ali McGraw; Paul Newman; Elizabeth Taylor; and former President Nixon's daughter Julie.

THE DANCE

Middle Eastern music made and played in America reached the height of its popularity in the 1960s and 70s. Its appeal to diverse constituents of the American populace was possible during an era that predates the more recent events that now dominate popular images of Middle East. At the beginning of the 21st century, it is almost impossible not to think of this region in terms of the tragedy and turmoil effected by such events as the war in Lebanon, the Intifada of the 1990s (or Palestinian uprising) and its renewal in 2000, the Gulf War, a rethinking of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, the Iranian Revolution, the sanctions on Iraq, the string of peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, and the attacks of September 11th, along with the processes set in motion

in their aftermath. Before terrorism was a household word, the music of the Middle East and the package that came with it was in style. This was a time when the Middle East was cool. Stereotypes of the Middle East, in whatever ways they were constructed, were symbols that Americans embraced—at least for an evening. Coffee urns, tents, camels, carpets, spices, and date palms were things that America wanted to experience!

The projection of neo-Orientalist symbols (material culture, food, dance, music) into the American public space was a natural act of imagination on the part of the Middle Eastern immigrant community, themselves distanced from their original home by time and space. Images of an exotic orient were seen in the décor of the nightclubs or restaurants that promoted the music, and on the musicians' LP albums. In the 1950s and 60s, the Egyptian performer Mohammad el-Bakkar recorded several LP albums with immigrant musicians. The titles of his recordings—*The Magic Carpet*, *Sultan of Bagdad*, *Exotic Music of the Belly Dancer*, and *Port Said*—and especially the descriptive notes and graphics on his covers, are testimony to a genre of Orientalism that was an accepted lingua franca in the American context. Along with the sound of the music, the performance of a dancer or two, and a platter of grape leaves, a temporary experience of the exotic became available.

Ibrahim Farrah, the most important American teacher, promoter, and writer on Middle Eastern dance, described, in a 1987 interview, why belly dancers appealed to Americans. Many people had developed a taste for the orient through travel or the accumulation of household items, like carpets or brass trays. When New Yorkers ventured out for an evening, they looked for adventure, Farrah explained. The nightclub provided a package deal in which the dancer was crucial.

A lot of them liked that illusion or that fantasy that they're looking at someone

who just got off the boat. You know, a dark-haired girl . . . who's got a little bit more weight on her than is commonly seen and [who does] the voluptuous dance.

Ironically, it was not necessarily the daughters of Middle Eastern immigrants who embraced and embodied belly dancing. Although Oriental-style solo dance (called belly dancing in the U.S.), has been a part of Middle Eastern social life culture for centuries, especially among women, public professional dancing is seen as an undesirable activity. The majority of professional belly dancers were American women (of non-Middle Eastern ancestry) who took stage names like Altheia, Athena, Jamila, or Sareena. Belly dancing for amateurs was taught in dance studios, private homes, clinics, camps, and local gyms. The album cover to *Mecca East*, featuring Larry Mardirosian and musicians, advertises: "Housewives, Secretaries, Professional Dancers, Instructors—Belly Dance your way to health!" Beginning in the 1950s and peaking in the 1970s, Middle Eastern dancing appealed to women of all shapes, sizes, and races. It was perceived as an art form of cultural integrity, a form of physical conditioning, and an ultrafeminine way to move. Speculating on an explanation for the fad in exotic dance, a New York psychotherapist who reviewed Abdo's shows hit the nail on the head: "It is a socially acceptable way to be sexy as hell and get away with it!"

We can see how the original recordings on the Monitor Record Label of George Abdo and His Flames of Araby catered to dancers. Each album cover featured a photograph of a dancer in full costume, and the album *The Art of Belly Dancing* included "an instruction booklet by Vina," consisting of 26 photographs of various dance positions with descriptive text on how to practice and perfect them. The aim, it seems, was that with the record notes as an instruction booklet a beginner could soon be belly dancing her way to health at home.

For professional dancers, several of Abdo's recordings include complete "belly-dance routines," each usually an extended suite featuring two to three songs in various tempos, linked by instrumental improvisation (*taqsim*) over a melodic-rhythmic vamp and, often, a drum solo. It is important to note that "the complete routine" was not an innovation of George Abdo and His Flames of Araby; rather, belly-dance routines were a standard component of recordings by all of Abdo's colleagues mentioned above. Furthermore, organizing Arab and Turkish music into suites that last from ten minutes to a half an hour is typical of the performance practice of the Middle East, where traditional forms like the Arabic *waslah* and the Turkish *fasil* link various tempos, forms, and solo improvisations by singers and instrumentalists. Imagine how novel this music must have sounded to the average American popular-music consumer, conditioned by mass media to the three-minute song!

THE MUSIC

"Belly-dance music" as it came to be known in the American context, was forged from a centuries-old tradition brought to the United States by the first Middle Eastern immigrants to North America. Communities of immigrants nurtured their music in the United State since the arrival of the first men from Greater Syria, before 1900. The end of the Ottoman Empire drove primarily Christian immigrants out of the region in the first decades of the 20th century until the early 1920s, when the U.S. government put immigration quotas in place. During the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the community received few new immigrants, but because of the efforts of numerous artists who performed and recorded, it vigorously perpetuated its traditional and folk music.

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, the music had become updated and Americanized for

the community's postwar kids, for whom the language and the homeland were less relevant. Music for dance upstaged song and traditional instrumental music. At the same time, public cafés and restaurants discovered and recontextualized Middle Eastern music for an American clientele. It was one of many choices on a plate of musical *mezza* (Arabic appetizers) available for public consumption.

The music on this recording was selected from five of George Abdo's top-selling albums, each of which was commercially successful in an international niche market of people of Middle Eastern heritage, Middle East enthusiasts, and dancers. The contemporary public ear of the 21st century, used to near-perfect performances and crisp recordings, will discern its historical nature. In comparison to the contemporary popular music of the Middle East, both the production values and the music might sound naïve. This is because all of Abdo's music predates the modern Middle Eastern sound, whose signature is the keyboard synthesizer, and to a lesser extent, the drum machine. It lacks the bigger, louder, faster sounds made available by the contemporary marriage of musicianship and technology so prevalent in Middle Eastern pop music of today. At the same time, Abdo's music is hardly traditional. Although his musicians played mainly on acoustic instruments, they, like practically every entertainer in the United States at the time, incorporated the magic of amplification and the special effect of "reverb." They used multiple percussion instruments and electronic keyboards, guitars, and violins when available, resulting in an original fusion.

The music of the Middle Eastern nightclub is sandwiched between two eras. For veterans of the Middle Eastern American music scene—musicians who performed and recorded from the 1930s through the 1960s—the music of Abdo and his contemporaries was hardly traditional. It veered away from serious "classical" music, or even the folk

music that immigrants had brought to America; it was multiethnic, and it showcased lively tempos and dance. The era that followed the 1960s and 70s brought a return to authenticity in two ways. First, a handful of Arab immigrant musicians, most notably Ali Jihad Racy and Simon Shaheen, effected a movement of neotraditionalism in Arabic music. These two and others like them who perform "classical" repertoire on authentic acoustic instruments have influenced audiences numbering in the thousands, plus hundreds of students and concert producers and promoters. The second factor in the return to authenticity occurred in popular music. Following the relaxation of immigration quotas in the mid-1960s, thousands of new immigrants came to North America. They brought the newest songs from home and a renewed connection with the language. Thus, in contrast to the recent productions of Middle Eastern traditional music (see, for example, recordings by Shaheen, Racy, and Jazayer), and to the fabulous popular music heard at community weddings in Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York, some of music of George Abdo and His Flames of Araby and their contemporaries on the nightclub stage might sound dated.

One of the qualities that makes George Abdo and His Flames of Araby timeless, however, is the solo and ensemble playing heard on every selection of this compilation. Despite their distance from the homeland, the instrumentalists playing the *'ud* (pear-shaped, short-necked fretless lute) and the *qanun* (75-string zither) expertly expounded the idiom of Arabic, Turkish, and Greek music. The tunes are catchy, but it is the solo improvisations and the collective texture of the ensemble that make the music Middle Eastern. Abdo was an effective producer, able to bring together the extraordinary talents of diverse musicians. It is not surprising that any Middle Eastern musicians visiting Abdo's venues from abroad or out of town were ushered to the stage to sit in with George

Abdo and His Flames of Araby. Although they were playing Americanized music, key members of the Flames, particularly the soloists (for example, *qanun* players Eli Nazarian and George Basil and *'ud* players Edward Melkian and Joseph Kouyoumjian) were completely conversant in a common Middle Eastern musical discourse.

Balancing the qualities of authenticity heard in the solo improvisations are the music's numerous Americanisms: traits that clearly resulted from reinterpreting an Old World music in a New World context. Such Americanisms were no doubt results of the fact that many of the musicians themselves were second generation immigrants who had little or no experience of Middle Eastern music in the Middle East. They often recreated the titles of traditional songs or instrumental pieces: "Dance of the Averof" (track 7) is the traditional piece "Hiçaz Dolap," known throughout the Middle Eastern musical diaspora. That musicians and their audiences may not have had a deep connection with their ancestral languages may have been one of the reasons traditional pieces easily acquired new English-language titles. Songs often had bilingual lyrics, another sign Middle Eastern languages were giving way in a multicultural mix that included English. Abdo himself boasted that he could sing in several different Middle Eastern and European languages (listen to track 8: "Raks Mustapha").

Another index of Americanism is the intonation of Abdo's music. In America, where equal temperament generates the 12 halftone chromatic scale, the quartertones of Arabic music were naturally an endangered species. Some musicians rightly perceived that the distinctive quartertones of Arabic and Turkish scales "turned off" American audiences. Not only did American audiences hear few models of authentic intonation, but the mixing of Arabic, Greek, and Turkish music and musicians contributed to a confusing intonation situation.

Innovations in the rhythm section and the introduction of harmonies, particularly by instruments like the electric guitar and the keyboard, also distanced Abdo's music from a traditional Old World sound, but probably made the music, at that point in history, much more accessible to an eclectic audience. Finally, Abdo's singing, which, in the words of Averof proprietors, "brings out the true sensuality of the belly dancer," is closer to the crooning sound of a Frank Sinatra or a Tony Bennett than the intensity of the voice of the true Arab traditional singer (*mutrib*). Americanisms like these were not unique to Abdo's band, but pervaded immigrant music-making in many communities.

War, American policies of aggression and indifference, and a culture of American ignorance and fear have knocked this music off the list of top-ten trends. The supper clubs and public festivals that featured Middle Eastern and particularly Arabic entertainment were hit hard during the Gulf War of 1991, when anti-Arab sentiment was enthusiastically cultivated. The exciting culture of music and dance that flourished in the context of the Middle Eastern nightclub has never fully recovered. The immigrant communities—including people of Turkish, Arab, Armenian, Greek, and Sephardic Jewish heritage—have gone their separate ways. The new, more liberal, immigration laws of the 1960s brought in thousands of new immigrants. Over the years, these laws bolstered the population and resources of each of these American subcultures and have allowed them to become more culturally self-sufficient. The cooperation in the 1960s and 1970s between musicians who shared a somewhat similar Mediterranean or Middle Eastern background is hardly necessary today.

The music of George Abdo and His Flames of Araby is a sonic artifact of an authentic American trend. The connoisseur of world and ethnic music might stop to consider this as one context in which fusion and innovation began.

1. YA GAMEEL (Arabic Love Ballad)

George Abdo, vocals; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Joseph Kouyoumjian, 'ud; Ted Vartabed, lead violin; John Haddad, violin; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Chris Marashlian, bass guitar; Stephen Kouyoumjian, lead, clay, and bongo drums; Leon Manoogian, conga; Tom Haddad, *darabukkah*; Annette Sayegh, George Sayegh, Margo Sayegh, chorus

From *The Joy of Belly Dancing*, MCD 61764, 1975, 1990.

An all-time favorite among dancers, "Ya Gameel" is music originally made famous by the star Middle Eastern singer and 'ud player Farid al-Atrache. Abdo's version is faster and livelier than the earlier recordings, but still features the dramatic stop mid-tune that gives way to a freely melismatic improvisation by the singer.

2. RUH TUM BI SALAMA (Go in Peace)

George Abdo, vocals; George Bassil, *qanun*; Edward Melikian, 'ud; John Haddad, electric violin, viola; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Manny Petro, lead guitar; Mark Bichajian, guitar; Greg Hopkins, trumpet; Mitchell Kaltsunas, clay *darabukkah*, conga, claves; Arthur Chingris, traps, *darabukkah*, bongos, cymbals; Kasim and Amir, finger cymbals; Za-Beth, Linda Vaughn, Dorothy Ashley, Linda-Jo Pettingell, Bruce Jabbour, and Mitchell Kaltsunas, chorus

From *The Magic of Belly Dancing* MCD 61803, 1979.

A drone by the ensemble, the tension of the tremolo by the *qanun*, the wailing oboe solo,

tinted with reverb, and then the pulsing eighth notes at the outset of this piece suggest James Bond and Hollywood. Abdo, who composed and orchestrated the music, remembers that for belly dancing "this piece woke the dead!" The drum pattern *balady*, played by Mitchell Kaltsunas and Arthur Chingris, confirms that "Ruhtum bi Salama" ("Go in Peace") is a folksy Arab pop song. The vamp in the middle of the piece provides a nice background for improvisation by George Basil on *qanun* and Martin Yaffee on oboe, who trade solos in a way that is also common of jazz players of the time.

3. TA MAVRA MATIA SOU (Your Black Eyes)

George Abdo, vocals; George Bassil, *qanun*; Edward Melikian, 'ud; John Haddad, electric violin, viola; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Manny Petro, lead guitar; Mark Bichajian, guitar; Greg Hopkins, trumpet; Mitchell Kaltsunas, clay *darabukkah*, conga drum, claves; Arthur Chingris, traps, *darabukkah*, bongos, cymbals

From *The Magic of Belly Dancing* MCD 61803, 1979.

When Abdo discussed the Greek music he performed, he remembered that much of it was actually the popular music of Egyptian composer Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab with new Greek lyrics and titles. Greek performance practice, which invites harmonies, provides a companion to the more monophonic Arabic music that formed a large part of the Flames

repertoire. The rhythm here, a cross between a *habanera*, a rumba, and the rhythm *maksum*, gives way to heavy *balady* groove, again interesting to listen to, and wonderful for dancers, professional and amateur.

4. RAKS ARABY (Arabic Dance) (Instrumental)

Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Peter Koury, 'ud; Paul Der Ananian, violin; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Steve Kouyoumjian, *darabukkah*; Sarkis Sarkisian, drum; Ken Kalajian, bass guitar; Leon Manoogian, claves; Vina Haddad, finger cymbals

From *The Art of Belly Dancing* MCD 61752, 1973, 1975.

This instrumental tune could well have been learned from the 78-RPM record recorded in New York by Syrian-American violinist Naim Karakand and reissued on the recording *The Music of Arab Americans*, listed in the bibliography.

The heterophony created by the *qanun* and the 'ud is crisp and well recorded. Here, as in many renditions of the nightclub era, chords supplied by an electric guitar and a bass line suggest harmonic progression and the relationships of Western harmony. These are elements of the music that would be created and heard as modern and Western. The progression from a minor tonic to the dominant and back down stepwise represents one of the ways that traditional Middle Eastern music was

adapted to Western instruments and aesthetics. In fact, the 1920s recording by Karakand also included a chordal piano accompaniment to the solo 'ud.

5. HADOUNI, HADOUNI

George Abdo, vocals; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Peter Koury, 'ud; Paul Der Ananian, violin; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Steve Kouyoumjian, *darabukkah*; Sarkis Sarkisian, drum; Ken Kalajian, bass guitar; Leon Manoogian, claves; Vina Haddad, finger cymbals

From *The Art of Belly Dancing* MCD 61752, 1973, 1975.

The somewhat antique sound of the 'ud solo by Peter Koury reminds the ear of the constraints and timbres of sound reinforcement in the 1970s. Booming bass and reverb are an antidote to the crackling introduction for this lively *dabkah* dance tune. The *dabkah* is an Arab folk dance best known in the Levant: Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. Part of village life and celebrations, the *dabkah* became popularized in the U.S. among Arab American audiences by the Egyptian singing star Muhammad el-Bakkar, who in the late 1950s and 1960s bridged the gap between the nightclub era (of which Abdo's music was the culmination), and the early in-group events of the community. Countless members of the Arab American community have commented on this double-edged sword of dance. Although *dabkah* music

and line dancing updated the more listening-oriented urban traditional music of Arab immigrants in North America, its rise in popularity greatly disappointed many musicians and music connoisseurs, who believed that it leveled audience taste and rendered the crowd at community concerts, parties, and picnics too rowdy and rambunctious. Everybody admitted in the 1950s that the dabkah was for the young and the more Americanized second and third generation members of the community.

But *dabkah* was and is fun and rowdy! It can involve an entire banquet hall or restaurant in an endlessly winding line dance that is easy to learn and enjoy. It was a staple of Abdo's evenings at the Averof and elsewhere. His whooping and vocalizing (not necessarily an American innovation) suggest the contagious energy of the music and dance. The drum solo and accelerando toward the end of the tune make this a dramatic track for listening or for dancing.

6. ALLAH, YA LUBNAN (God, My Beautiful Lebanon)

George Abdo, vocals; George Bassil, *qanun*; Edward Melikian, 'ud; John Haddad, electric violin, viola; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Manny Petro, lead guitar; Mark Bichajian, guitar; Greg Hopkins, trumpet; Mitchell Kaltsunas, clay *darabukkah*, conga, claves; Arthur Chingris, traps,

darabukkah, bongos, cymbals; Kasim and Amir, finger cymbals

From *The Magic of Belly Dancing* MCD 61803, 1979.

"Allah, ya Lubnan" is a novelty piece that relies on a beautiful solo *taqsim* by the vocalist and instrumentalists. The Chinese gong, *qanun* solo, and unique vamp signal that this tune is hardly traditional. The violin, heard at the outset, employs a tuning commonly heard in the Middle East: two of its strings are tuned in near unison or in inexact octaves. The sound that results creates the beats that are typical of other Arab instruments like the *mijwiz*, and are reminiscent of certain kinds of Turkish Black Sea fiddle styles. The entire song is basically a chain of improvisations in the *maqam* (musical mode) called *Hijaz*, with its characteristic augmented second between the 2nd and 3rd scale degrees. The *qanun* solo by George Basil is spectacular and crystal clear. The commentary by Abdo, praising the musicians, is something that made an evening with the Flames unforgettable.

7. RAKS AVEROF (Dance at the Averof) (Instrumental)

Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Joseph Kouyoumjian, 'ud; Ted Vartabed, lead violin; John Haddad, violin; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Chris Marashlian, bass guitar; Stephen Kouyoumjian, lead, clay, *darabukkah* and bongo drums;

Leon Manoogian, conga drum; Amber, finger cymbals; Kasim, claves

From *The Joy of Belly Dancing*, MCD 61764, 1975, 1990.

This is a fairly straightforward treatment of the well-known Turkish *dolap hiçaz*. The form *dolap* (in Arabic *dulab*) often serves as an introduction to a suite and to solo improvisations, of which you hear many in this "Dance at the Averof." In the American setting, translating titles or even creating new programmatic, romantic, and often Orientalist titles as a substitute for Arabic or Turkish language titles was quite common.

8. RAKS MUSTAPHA (Mustapha's Dance: complete belly-dance routine)

George Abdo, vocals; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Joseph Kouyoumjian, 'ud; Ted Vartabed, lead violin; John Haddad, violin; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Chris Marashlian, bass guitar; Stephen Kouyoumjian, lead, clay, *darabukkah* and bongo drums; Leon Manoogian, conga drum; Amber, finger cymbals; Kasim, claves

From *The Joy of Belly Dancing*, MCD 61764, 1975, 1990.

George Abdo and His Flames of Araby are still known for their belly-dance routines. In fact, all the Middle Eastern musicians of the era, including Eddie Kochak, Hakki Obadia, and Fred Elias, recorded complete suites of belly-dance music for professional dancers. Such a suite typically included a quick introductory

piece, unaccompanied instrumental solos (*taqsim*), instrumental solos over the rhythmic melodic vamp *chifte telli*, a drum solo, and one or more concluding songs. This suite, remarkable for its mixing of French and Arabic, would still work well for any belly-dance routine. The length and variety of the suite gave the dancer the opportunity to show off all the facets of her choreography and her ability to work spontaneously with instrumental soloists, especially the drummer. The final section, a lively number, gave the dancer an opportunity to mingle among the patrons. I remember when I was a youngster at the Averof with my parents how exciting it was when the dancer came off the stage and danced through the public space, collecting tips from the crowd.

9. MIN FEEGIS (Don't Leave Me)

George Abdo, vocals; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Edward Melikian 'ud; Ted Vartabed, electric violin; George Stringos, *bouzouki*; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Mark Bichajian, guitar; Leon Manoogian, drums, bongos, timpani, *tabla*, *darabukkah*; Sarkis Sarkisian, conga; Kasim, finger cymbals; Mitchell Kaltsunas, claves

From *Belly Dancing with George Abdo* MCD 71777.

Recycling tunes is a hallmark of this genre of Middle Eastern music. We recognize the introduction to this supposedly Greek song as the beginning of the famous song "Inte

Umri," composed by Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab and made famous by the singer Umm Kulthum, also from Egypt. Here it is used as introductory material and the interlude of the Greek tune "Min Feegis," with little variation from the original.

10. RAKS EL-MALEK (Dance for the King) (Instrumental)

George Bassil, *qanun*; Edward Melikian, 'ud; John Haddad, electric violin, viola; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Manny Petro, lead guitar; Mark Bichajian, guitar; Mitchell Kaltsunas, clay *darabukkah*, conga, claves; Arthur Chingris, traps, *darabukkah*, bongos, cymbals; Kasim and Amir, finger cymbals

From *The Magic of Belly Dancing* MCD 61803, 1979.

This "Dance for the King" would surely work as part of a dance suite. Beginning with a non-metric solo on electric guitar, which leads into the electric guitar vamp on the rhythmic-melodic ostinato pattern known as *chifte telli*, the piece builds, adding layers of bass, chords, drums, and tambourine. 'Ud, violin, and *qanun* solos give a solo dancer plenty of opportunity to show off her elegant moves or provide a lovely contrast to the more lively dance numbers that make up Abdo's opus. Toward the end of the piece, the *qanun* plays harplike flourishes as crisp playing on the *darabukkah*

adds to its appeal. According to Abdo, "Raks al-Malek" was completely the result of group improvisation.

11. SAHIRRNEE (Bewitched) (Bolero)

George Abdo, vocals; George Bassil, *qanun*; Edward Melikian, 'ud; John Haddad, electric violin, viola; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Manny Petro, lead guitar; Mark Bichajian, guitar; Greg Hopkins, trumpet; Mitchell Kaltsunas, clay *darabukkah*, conga, claves; Arthur Chingris, traps, *darabukkah*, bongos, cymbals; Kasim and Amir, finger cymbals

From *The Magic of Belly Dancing* MCD 61803, 1979.

Another of the group's novelty tunes, "Sahirrnee" is sustained by a bolero-sounding groove, which alternates between a tonic and a flattened supertonic. Abdo croons to a high point and then descends to fade into the background for an interesting contrapuntal duet between two oboes, recorded and overdubbed in the studio by Martin Yaffee. This duet fades out and gives way to a brief joint solo by 'ud and electric violin. The signature of this tune is the trumpet introduction, performed by guest artist Greg Hopkins. The title works well for a dramatic cross between Zorro, Broadway, and the Casbah.

12. NOORA YA NOORA (Noora's Dance)

George Abdo, vocals; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Joseph Kouyoumjian, 'ud; Ted Vartabed, lead violin; John Haddad, violin; Martin Yaffee, oboe; Chris Marashlian, bass guitar; Stephen Kouyoumjian, lead, clay, *darabukkah*, and bongo drums; Leon Manoogian, conga drum; Amber, finger cymbals; Kasim, claves; Annette Sayegh, George Sayegh, and Margo Sayegh, chorus

From *The Joy of Belly Dancing*, MCD 61764, 1975, 1990.

This song, well known for its performance by the singer and 'ud player Farid Al-Atrash, is "covered" by Abdo and the Flames. Abdo includes a short vocal improvisation on the words "Ya Layl" (Oh Night), a typical convention of Arabic singing. A connoisseur familiar with the tune will note that in this rendition the sixth degree of the mode (*maqam Bayyati*) is a B-natural. In most recordings and performances of this tune, that note is usually a B half-flat. Whether playing a B-natural instead of a B half-flat was a common variation in the performance of the tune, or more likely a result of musical assimilation, is hard to tell. Arab modes like *Bayyati*, *Rast*, *Saba*, and *Hijaz*, which feature neutral tones or half-flats some or all of the time, were often diatonicized by immigrant musicians. They did this regularly on nightclub stages, where traditional Middle Eastern instruments (like the 'ud, violin, and *qanun*) were playing with keyboardists and

guitarists who were harmonizing a heretofore monophonic music on instruments incapable of reproducing quartertones. Ironically, electric keyboards, originally responsible for destroying the quartertones of particular modes, served later with variable-tuning synthesizers to preserve the intonation characteristic of Arab and Middle Eastern music.

13. O PALIATZIS (The Junk Man)

George Abdo, vocals; Demos Drakoulis, bouzouki; Manole Orfanides, *baglama*; Ed Melikian, 'ud; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Martin Yaffee, oboe; John Haddad, electric violin; Leon Manoogian, *darabukkah*; Mitchell Kaltsunas, claves

From *George Abdo Live at the Averof*. Courtesy of George Abdo and Raymond Bandar.

This track and the next come from the LP recording *George Abdo Live at the Averof*, an album that was sold at the restaurant and featured an exciting configuration of Abdo's Flames of Araby. Included in the ensemble's personnel are several Greek musicians not heard on other recordings, men such as Demos Drakoulis on bouzouki (long-necked fretted lute) and Manole Orfanides on *baglama*, another Greek lute.

The songs themselves are distinctive for their "uneven" rhythms, typical of Greek music. "The Junk Man" is in a 9/8 *rembetika* or *zebekiko*

rhythm and features a text, that, like *rembetika* texts, celebrates the low-lives of the under-world. The next track is a love song in the 7/8 *sirto* rhythm. These "uneven" rhythms, the fabulous bouzouki playing by Demos Drakoulis, and the Greek-language texts show George Abdo's versatility and hint at the natural collaboration and fusion that were occurring during this era of American musical life.

14. DIO CARDIAS (Two Hearts)

George Abdo, vocals; Demos Drakoulis, bouzouki; Manole Orfanides, *baglama*; Ed Melikian, 'ud; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Martin Yaffee, oboe; John Haddad, electric violin; Leon Manoogian, *darabukkah*; Mitchell Kaltsunas, claves

From *George Abdo Live at the Averof*. Courtesy of George Abdo and Raymond Bandar.

15. IMM AL-MANADILI (The Charm of Your Scarf)

George Abdo, vocals; Ed Melikian, 'ud; Eli Nazarian, *qanun*; Martin Yaffee, oboe; John Haddad, electric violin; Leon Manoogian, *darabukkah*; Mitchell Kaltsunas, claves

From *George Abdo Live at the Averof*. Courtesy of George Abdo and Raymond Bandar.

Abdo remembers this tune as a favorite of audiences, who would often dance the *dabkah* between the tables at restaurant and festival

performances. The tune begins with a great solo in the percussion section. The intense violin solo is reminiscent of the reedy instruments (*mijwiz* and *mizmar*) heard in Arabic folk music. During the solo sections, we hear Abdo encouraging his musicians and offering kudos to the dancers, recreating for us the excitement of an evening with George Abdo live at the Averof.

RESOURCES

Many of the interview texts, ethnographic data, and background information on Middle Eastern musical life in America were drawn from the author's previous research, complimented by recent interviews with George Abdo. For bibliography and further information on the musical activities of people of Armenian, Iranian, and Turkish heritage, see the article "Middle Eastern Music" by Anne K. Rasmussen (2001) in *The United States and Canada*, volume 3 of *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, and related articles in that volume, for example those on "Jewish Music" (by Mark Slobin), "Eastern European Music" and "Southeastern European (Balkan) Music" (by Mark Levy), and the articles on Middle Eastern immigrant communities in Canada. For Middle Eastern music in general, consult *The Middle East*, volume 6 of the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*.

For recordings, Rashid Sales in Brooklyn, New York, has been a consistent source of Arab and Middle Eastern music in the U.S. since the 1930s. Most early recordings by Arab and Middle Eastern immigrant musicians are out of print and hard to come by. A few reissue recordings on CD are listed in the discography. All of George Abdo's recordings are now available through Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

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DISCOGRAPHY

Note: The LP recordings mentioned in the liner notes by Eddie Kochak, Hakki Obadia, Fred Elias, and Mohammad Bakkar are out of print and have not been rereleased on compact disc.

Recordings by George Abdo

- The Art of Belly Dancing: George Abdo and His Flames of Araby Orchestra*. [1973] 1975. Monitor MCD 61752.
- Belly Dancing with George Abdo and His Flames of Araby Orchestra*. [1976] 1992. Monitor MCD 71777.
- George Abdo Live at the Averof*.
- The Joy of Belly Dancing with "The King of Belly Dance Music" George Abdo and His Flames of Araby Orchestra*. 1975 [1990]. Monitor MCD 61764.
- The Magic of Belly Dancing Featuring George Abdo "The King of Belly Dance Music."* 1979. Monitor MCD 61803.

Other Recordings of Middle Eastern Music Created in America

- Armenians on 8th Avenue*. 1996. 22-page booklet of notes, photographs, and song lyrics. Annotated by Harold G. Hagopian. Traditional Crossroads CD 4279.
- Jazayer: Remembrances: A Collection of Middle Eastern Classics*. 1997. Chente Publications CPCD 1003.
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Turath: Simon Shaheen Performs Masterworks of the Middle East. 1992. 8-page booklet of notes and photographs by Ali Jihad Racy. CMP 3006.

CREDITS

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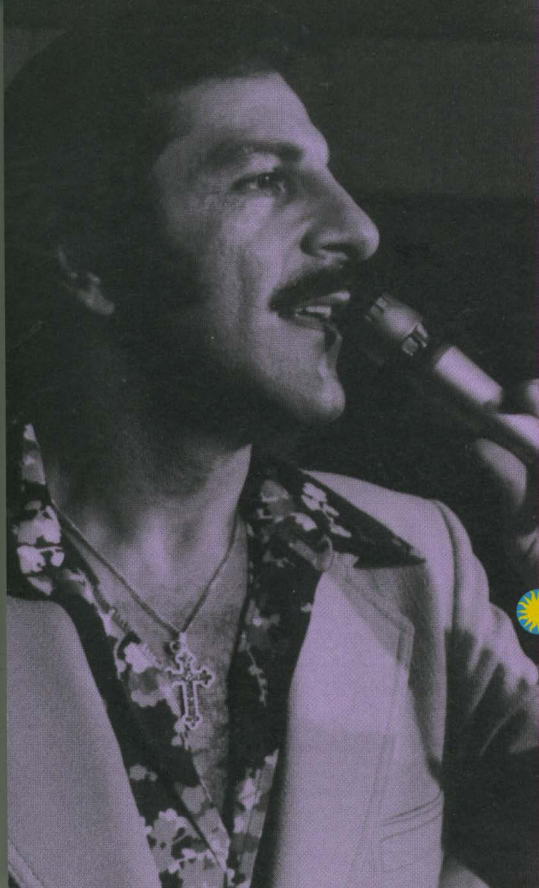
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