SIDE 1
Improvisation on Popular Themes (sibs) 18:00
recorded 7/31/77 at Quena

SIDE 2
1. Improvisation on Popular Themes (arghul) 15:00
   7/31/77 recorded at Quena
2. Improvisations on Popular Themes (mizmar sa'idli)
   recorded 7/22/77 4:00

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MUSIC OF UPPER-EGYPT
played on the rababa, mizmar,
arghul and darabuka
RECORDED AND ANNOTATED BY ALAIN WEBER

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FW 8512
MUSIC OF UPPER-EGYPT
Compiled and anotated by Alain Weber

EGYPT

Egyptian popular music, with its traditional transmitted character, reveals old musical forms which go back to the Djâhiliyya (pré-Islamic period). In fact, Arab music, before it was inspired by the rich Persian or Greek cultures, drew its dreams and rhythms from the old chant of the desert, itself for a great time determined by the moving step of the bedouin mounts. Only later on, when the Arabic world reached some stability, could it then find its true identity through a cultural influence which grew unceasingly and lead to a true synthesis of the musical styles that belonged to the different conquered countries.

Egyptian popular music, even though largely unknown in the occidental world proves to be extremely rich; there is no region without its own musicians, no village without its own music. It is present in daily life of the “fellah,” fulfilling its rôle as a popular art. Whether a peasant in his field, a boatman crossing the Nile on a “felouque” or a woman rocking her baby, Egypt sings its joys and sorrows at the mercy of time, punctuating the precious moments of life in touch with its fertile land and its great nourishing river.

Nevertheless, one must make a distinction between amateur music and the more elaborate music which, as a matter of fact, fully appropriates the monopoly of a thousand year old tradition. The oral tradition, pivot of the whole popular culture is once again impressive in its effectiveness, transmitted admirably from father to son, it hands down a living music from its inception to the present. Its fragility, alas, becomes apparent nowadays against the technological aggression.

The “âlatiyah” (musicians), all professionals grouped by family, by village or quarter of a town, spread out far beyond their own territory, recalling somewhat the wandering soul of the French “trouvéres” and “troubadours” in the XIth century.

In Upper-Egypt, that is in southern Egypt, stretching from Assiut to Aswan (New Nubia), numerous villages have been settled since the Neolithic period. These villages hug the bank of the Nile, still very closely mingled with the vestiges of a glorious ancient past. Because of its isolation and a certain rigidity among the inhabitants, this area has managed to keep its own cultural and dialectic identity. Ever since the invasion of Amr Ebn el Ass and his troops, the VIIth century A.C. brought Egypt in the cultural growth of the Arab world.

The government of Quena in the very heart of Upper-Egypt, gathers a great number of musicians that we can divide into two main groups, each one corresponding to an instrument and a particular function. The first one is with the “rababa” and singing, the second instrumental with the “mizmar.”

The latter is reserved for dances of which the most popular is the stick-dance done by men (Râqs el tahtib), the dance of the horse (Râqs el Kheil) and the dance of the “ghawazies” (young professional dancers).

However, a few exceptions do exist such as the one on this record in which the orchestra does include the main instruments of the Egyptian folklore as well as their two rôles: dances and singing. We can only approve about this initiative which without betraying the tradition, proves the spontaneity of a living folklore as well as the talent of the instrumentalists.

The instruments:

1. The “rababa”:

The term “rababab” of Persian origin, designates a fiddle with one or two strings whose morphology varies according to the different regions of the Arab world, throughout which the instrument is widespread. The Egyptian “rababa” is composed of a soundbox made of an opened coconut shell covered with a fish skin and mounted on a long tubular wooden neck, prolonged by an iron spike that goes through the shell. The two horsehair strings are held by large lateral pegs on the upper part of the handle. They are vibrated by a bow made of cane and also strung with horsehair.

2. The “mizmar”:

The “mizmar,” is a popular wind instrument related to the oboe. Its origins seem to be very old for the “aulos” and the “tibia” from the ancient Greece and Rome were also double-reed instruments. Called “zamr” or “zoummar” as well, it has the shape of a cylindrical tube ending in a conical bell, often circled with metal. It has seven holes on the upper side, one on the underside, and is tuned to the diatonic major scale. The double-reed (gach) made out of a thinned tube of cane flattened at one end, is set in a metallic tube, itself fitted in the main mouthpiece.

Three types of “mizmar” are used, each of a different length and register; the “sibs,” the smallest; the “mizmar sâ’idi” of a medium size and the “telt,” the biggest one.

3. The “arghul”:

It is a double clarinet. The tube on which the melody is played has six holes. The drone, already longer, can be lengthened by extra segments and reach up to six feet or more.

4. The “darabuka”:

It is a pottery bowl-drum with a skin.
SIDE B

1. *Improvisation on popular themes (arghul)* 15 mn
   (recorded the 7/31/77 at Quena)

With the same mastery, Saad Mustafa Soliman uses
the “arghul” as a solo instrument in a piece dedicated
to Aswan. Fawi Ahmed Mohammed (34 years old) is
proving his abilities with the “rababa” in long instrument
al pieces, where often the two instruments meet
on the unison, demonstrating a technique strengthened
since their childhood. The end is a return to the stick-
dance.

2. *Improvisation on popular themes (mizmar så’idi)*
   4 mn (recorded the 7/22/77)

The “reis” Abdin Hossein, originally from Garagos
village, plays as an exception on a solo, accompanied
by the “tabla baladi,” a double skinned drum, giving its
name to the formations of Egyptian oboe.

After the usual introduction “Ya Rabb be toba” (O,
Lord forgive me) a few themes are developed with the
“mizmar så’idi,” among them again “Ruh, ya Hamada,
rüh” and “Zaki, Zaki” (Look, mummy, Zaki is crying) . . .
picked up joyfully by a few inhabitants of Zaniya village
gathered together for the occasion.

EGYHPT

SIDE A

1. *Improvisation on popular themes with the “sībs.”*
   18 mn

SIDE B

1. *Improvisation on popular themes with the “arghul.”*
   15 mn

2. *Improvisation on popular themes with the “mizmar så’idi.”* 4 mn

Text, photos and recordings: Alain WEBER with the
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Text translated from French by Brigitte METRA.