

BOOK REVIEW

Fairouz and the Arab Diaspora: Music and Identity in the UK and Qatar

Dima Issa (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2023). Pp. 232. \$103.50 cloth. ISBN: 9780755641765

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In her seminal book, *Feeling and Form* (1954), Susanne Langer described music as a semblance of time, making time audible and its form and continuity sensible. She suggested that space was a secondary illusion of music, an appearance that served to develop the temporal realm in more than one dimension. Poetic statements, according to Langer, were there to create an illusion of things past, the semblance of events lived and felt, like an abstract and completed memory.

Together, music and poetry make songs. They enable listeners to move in time and space, and activate their memory, on the one condition that the musical consumer is an active listener and accepts the rules of the play, or the song's musical and poetic composition. If the listeners are affected by the singer's performance, the grain of the voice, and the image of the singer, we have all the elements to understand the effects a singer like Fairouz can have on her admirers.

The Lebanese artist Fairouz is one of the greatest, most prolific, and best-selling singers in the Arab world, a unique representative of Arab art and popular music at its best, and personally one of my favorite voices. Issa's book aims to understand Fairouz's impact on her Arab diaspora audience and explores the ways the singer as a symbol and enactment of Arabness affects her listeners. The book has worthwhile things to say about what listening to songs, in general, entails and, specifically, about the Arab diaspora's homeland imaginings.

Issa's book is based on fifty-nine interviews with Arabs, mostly from Lebanon and the Levant, living in either Doha or London. The author selected these individuals on the basis that they enjoyed listening to Fairouz. Langer is not part of Issa's toolbox when analyzing the listeners' relation to Fairouz. However, Issa's conversation with cultural, anthropological, and musical studies takes her in the same direction. Inspired by Bourdieu, Issa suggests that listeners are guided by an experience rooted in both *micro-habitus*, or domestic arrangements, family ties, and gender roles, and *meta-habitus*, or the "overarching consequences of the political, social, cultural, and environmental systems in which the participants reside" (p. 18). Another analytical tool deployed by the author is the concept of *mnemonic imagination*, an "active synthesis of remembering and imagining, which is essential to our understanding of the relationship between past, present and future" (p. 42). To these ideas, Issa adds the Arab notions of *ghurba*, the state of being away from one's country, and *hanīn*, the sense of nostalgia or a state of craving conjoined by being a member of a diaspora. Other key concepts are those of *iltizām*, the audience's (political) commitments to change or progress, the singer's *aura*, her visual and sound-wise appearance, and, finally, the listener's capacity to be bodily and mindfully *affected* by songs. With these tools in hand, Issa's book offers the reader a peregrination into the imaginary of diaspora listeners. We come to

know how Fairouz's music affects them and makes their minds travel in time and space with a sense of displacement. We learn about listeners' longing for a homeland and how Fairouz's songs serve as vehicles to find comfort in an Arab identity. Issa's book, in short, is about remembering as engagement mediated by Fairouz's songs.

In this sense, Issa's book will resonate with readers who are interested in understanding the imagery an icon like Fairouz can evoke in her admirers, those who wish to understand what the act of active listening to popular music does to fans, and those who wish to explore the imagined spaces of diasporic life.

Other readers may argue, though, that there is nothing surprising in the fact that a singer with a voice like Fairouz, who sings about a homeland, Jerusalem, and the villages of Lebanon, and who, moreover, became "a common meeting place" for the Lebanese during the civil war, brings forth a sense of identity, of longing and belonging, memories of the past, and of childhood (p. 34). Readers might, instead, be keen to know more about Fairouz's position as a political, sociological, and anthropological icon, and about the politics of diasporic music consumption.

However, the author has chosen to speak only with listeners who are fond of Fairouz. This approach, of course, is perfectly understandable since these fans are the most likely ones to have an extensive knowledge surrounding the singer. Nevertheless, interviewing people who are not fond of Fairouz, or who simply do not care about her music, would have added important nuances to the sociological and political understanding of the role played by Fairouz in the Arab diaspora. At the same time, Issa's analysis would have been further enriched if we had known more about the musical consumption patterns of her interviewees, and, also, how they compare Fairouz to other Pan-Arabic singers, such as Umm Kulthum or Marcel Khalifa. This angle would allow the reader to better understand what makes Fairouz "distinct" within "the field" of Arab popular singers.

Additionally, Issa's book is rich with quotes from her interlocutors, but we learn little about how the interviews proceeded and the extent to which she guided the conversations. The fact that there are fifty-nine interviewees, and around forty hours of tape recordings, indicates that some of the encounters must have been too sporadic to enable Issa linking the interviewees' musical "taste" with their everyday life experience and position in diasporic society.

The book also would have benefitted from the author's reflection about the social background of her interviewees. A list of these on the first few pages of the monograph indicates that they are from middle- or higher middle-class backgrounds. Their situation, accordingly, is far from that of the North African men living in the shanty towns of 1960s France that Abdelmalek Sayad described in *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (2004) with such insight in his exploration of the suffering of Algerian migrants in France, a study cited several times by Issa. I am not sure that Sayad would have agreed with Issa's readings of his work implying that these single Algerian men's sense of *ghurba* was comparable to that of the Qatari and London middle- and upper-class diaspora. Finally, I am not sure either about the extent to which Bourdieu would have appreciated Issa's neologisms of his habitus concept since it refers to much deeper rooted, embodied dispositions, or social compasses, than the more fluctuating everyday life worlds and transnational spaces of the diaspora described by Issa.

In conclusion, *Fairouz and the Arab Diaspora* is mostly a study about how imaginaries of diaspora music consumers can be moved in time and space and less about how their music consumption operates in social and political terms. Nevertheless, it remains a valuable contribution to the study of Arab popular culture and music consumption.