



# **Aleppo... Magams for Pleasure**

a film by Mohamad Malas



## Aleppo, Magams for Pleasure (Halab... Magamat al-Masra)

حلب ... مقامات المسرة

### Content

Sheik Sabri Mudallal (83 years) is the last of the Masters of Tarab reciting in Aleppo. The troupe (turath) he established is considered an oriental orchestra that maintains originality and purity, as far as singing, music processing and used instruments, are concerned.

According to Mudallal this kind of singing expresses the loyalty to the traditions of singing and the preserving of the classical school of Aleppo which is one of the main schools in oriental music. Although the education was based on religious reciting, many masters have revived and developed its basics in the beginning of this century, among them were, Sheik Ali Darwish, Omar Al Batch and Bakri Al Kurdi. Sheik Sabri Mudallal, a disciple of these masters, remains the witness and the keeper of this school. His memory and experience are a historical reference to all his predecessors.

### Credits

documentary, Syria 1999, 52 min, Arabic with English subtitles

Director & Author	Mohamad Malas
Photography	Yussef Ben Yussef
Editor	Qais Al Zubeidi
Production	Suedi Film, Abu Dhabi; AMIP, Paris – France
Executive Producer	Dunia Film, Damascus - Syria

### Film-maker Mohamad Malas

Mohamad Malas was born in 1945 in Quneitra on the Golan Heights. He is a prominent Syrian filmmaker whose films garnered him international recognition. Malas is among the first auteur filmmakers in Syrian cinema.

Malas worked as a school teacher between 1965 and 1968 before moving to Moscow to study filmmaking at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). During his time at VGIK he directed several short films. After his return to Syria Malas started working at the Syrian Television. There he produced several short films including Quneitra 74, in 1974 and al-Zhakira (The Memory) in 1975.

Along with Omar Amiralay he co-founded the Damascus Cinema Club.



Between 1980 and 1981 Malas shot the documentary, *al-Manam (The Dream)*, about the Palestinians living in the refugee camps in Lebanon during the civil war.

He directed his first feature film, *Ahlam al-Madina (Dreams of the City)*, in 1983. The autobiographical coming-of-age film received the first prize both at the Valencia and the Carthage Film Festivals.

In 1995 Malas, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of cinema, shot with Omar Amiralay Nur wa Zilal a documentary film about Nazih Shahbandar whom he described as Syria's first filmmaker. The film was banned by Syrian authorities and could only be screened one time in 1993 at the American Cultural Center in Damascus.

Malas's second feature film, *al-Lail (The Night)*, was realized in 1992. The autobiographical film is set in Quneitra in the years between 1936 and the Arab–Israeli War of 1948. It forms, along with *Ahlam al-Madina*, the first and second parts of a yet unfinished trilogy. Both films were shown at Berlinale's Forum section. *Al-Lail* received international recognition and won first prize at the 1992 Carthage Film Festival. However, the film was banned in Syria until 1996. In 2013 *Ahlam al-Madina* was among the top 10 of the "100 Greatest Arab Films List", which film professionals from the Arab World and associates of Dubai International Film Festival voted for.

Another collaboration between Malas and Omar Amiralay is the 1996 documentary film *Moudaress* about the Syrian pioneer painter Fateh Moudarres.

*Bab al-Makam (Passion)*, released in 2005, was Malas's third feature film, it won the Special Jury Award at the Marrakech International Film Festival. *Sullam Ila Dimashq (Ladder to Damascus)*, released in 2013, premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival and was screened in more than 50 festivals since.

Mohamad Malas' 1991 book "The Dream. A Diary of the Film" was translated into English and published by the American University of Cairo Press in 2016. A monograph on Mohamad Malas will be published at Palgrave MacMillan by the end of 2017.

## **About Sheikh Sabri Mudallal**

Sabri Mudallal: The Modest Sufi Passes The Torch - by Sami Asmar for Turath.org

The Syrian region of Aleppo, which has traditionally produced numerous talented singers and musicians, lost one of its best on 20 August 2006 with the death of Sabri Mudallal (other forms: Moudallal or al-Mudallal) who, for a long time, was little known outside the city limits. Born in 1918, Mudallal was an accomplished singer with wonderful warmth in his voice and personality and was considered one of the few remaining old-school artists. His uniqueness, however, goes beyond the generational difference; he was one of the few singers to capably straddle two apparently-incompatible worlds: religious chanting and secular singing. This



Shaykh of Tarab was indeed conflicted between these two worlds for a period of his career but, in typical Sufi manner, grew comfortable in harmoniously producing his fantastically beautiful style with a large following.

As a child, Sabri Mudallal's religious father took him along to the mosque and Sufi zawiya to listen to chanting and, when it was time, trusted his education to Shaykh Ahmad al-Masri whose curriculum included Qur'ānic recitation along with grammar and handwriting. Sabri's teacher quickly discovered that the child recited the holy verse with a beautiful voice so he experimented with having him chant the call to prayer at the mosque. A large crowd answered the call on that day and complimented Shaykh Ahmad on his student, so the teacher made that one of Sabri's regular duties; this turned out to be a duty Sabri would fulfilled for the rest of his life. The religious teacher later took an unusual step, broke with tradition and started teaching Sabri singing in the secular style. Plenty of love songs of the era were based on beautiful poetry in classical Arabic and, although secular, did not offend conservative societies.

Omar al-Batsh was the period's leading singer and composer in the framework of traditional Arab music. Young Sabri was introduced to al-Batsh by Shaykh Ahmad, according to one account, or by Sabri's father, according to Muhammad Qadri Dalal's book Shaykh al-Mutribeen. Sabri sang layali, vocal improvisations on the phrase ya layl ya 'ayn, which is a common method for singers to demonstrate their skills with maqam modulations. Al-Batsh recognized the talent and accepted to take Sabri as an apprentice. He taught him music theory known as the 'ulum al-maqamat as well as singing muwashshahat, poetry in the style developed in Andalusia. He also taught him to play the 'ud as well as the daff, a percussion instrument fundamental to the Sufi mystic tradition.

After a period of training, Mudallal was judged ready to face the public and his education transitioned from lessons to field work. He accompanied al-Batsh to public performances and opened for him with short songs, then longer songs, until he became the star of the shows as al-Batsh was happy to retire and manage the business. The city of Aleppo had a new star.

After WWII, the French gave Aleppo its own radio station. Omar al-Batsh arranged for Sabri to meet the station's director to apply for work. After a short audition, the director hired Mudallal on the station's staff to perform on a weekly radio program. Each singer on the staff was very motivated to perform his best every time; they knew the Aleppo listeners were very critical of anybody who did not handle their traditional music with the utmost respect. Sabri excelled especially because he was willing to learn from and collaborate with other artists such as Ali Darwish and Bakri al-Kurdi. The latter composed the song Ib'atli Gawab (Send me a Letter, lyrics by Hussam al-Khatib) which Mudallal sang and made a huge hit; it is still a staple of the region's repertoire and sung by another great Aleppo legend Sabah Fakhri. Mudallal also composed many works himself such as the religious pieces Ahmad Ya Habibi and Ilahi (later recorded on the Aleppian Music Room CD). Although he was quite the improviser, he was loyal to the composer's melody and every original detail of a wasla.



After proving himself, Sabri asked the station's director to be paid per show in addition to his fixed salary. The director claimed that only headquarters in Damascus could authorize the payment so Sabri headed to the capital with his request. At the national radio headquarters, a committee of specialists asked him to audition and he chose to sing a muwashshah and layali in maqam Rast. He got the certification he was seeking from the impressed committee but he was too modest to capitalize on that to seek stardom at a national level, although he raised his concert fees.

Sabri Mudallal's thriving career in secular music, however, encountered a hurdle when his pious father paid a surprise visit to the radio station and was shocked by the number of women working there. He objected to his son being in that environment and asked him to resign. Sabri respected his father's wishes, left his job and established a private group exclusively for religious chants. As with his previous successes, he flourished with this task as well; his group became famous and in high demand in a short period of time.

A European producer visiting Aleppo heard the group and invited them to travel to Europe. Sabri took his group to France for live performances as well as recording an album called Mu'azinnu Halab (Aleppo's Call to Prayer Chanters), in which they used the daff as the only musical instrument. That opened the door for invitations to many other countries. In 1975, Sabri added other instruments to the ensemble and further developed and fine-tuned their shows, even making it more colorful with classical local dances called Samah. He also developed his personal techniques and was said to have applied the technique of circular breathing where he would take in a breath without interrupting his singing.

His success with this group is attributed to his religious training but he probably brought some techniques of tarab from secular singing into religious chanting. It is more common to go the other way where famous artists such as Sayyied Darwish started with religious training and moved to secular music with an advantage in both proper language as well as warmer musical skills. Even Umm Kulthum and Abd al-Wahhab prided themselves on their proper pronunciation due to religious training. Sabri Mudallal, however, may be the only high-caliber singer who traveled this road both ways.

His trip to Europe was the when the world really discovered him. With new confidence he soon returned to secular singing and performed, with his trademark improvisations, to critical acclaim for a few years before retiring. But he was never like other singers; in the middle of one show, for example, he suddenly transitioned from a song into performing the adhan to the surprise and great admiration of the audience. He simply saw it befitting at the time, haunted by the Sufi mood and still blurring the line between religious and secular songs. In 1998, after over a decade in retirement, he was convinced by al-Kindi Ensemble to record the Aleppo Music Room CD along with Omar Sarmini and join them on one last tour that included the Baalbeck Festival of 2000. According to al-Kindi percussionist Adel Shams el-Din, at that age, Sabri's mastery and appreciation of the music along with the joy of performing filled his heart and soul with tarab that came through in every breath of his voice while that playful smile lit up his face.



Although he had received numerous honors including a house that was a gift from the president and a film about him by Muhammad Malas titled Aleppo, Maqamat of Joy, Mudallal felt that the recognitions came late due to his split career. Music historians were also split; some did not know how to categorize him and two books sadly omitted him from their lists of Syrian singers. Other critics considered him the genius who formed the Aleppo-unique style of religious and secular music known as qudud halibiyya. The Aleppo populace would agree, however, that Sabri Mudallal remained to the end the archetypical Sufi who blended with ease ghazal and tawshih, the love of worldly beauty with the admiration of the splendor of the divine.

source: Turath.org

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