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Egyptian Fan Culture and the Afterlife of ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz

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Abstract

When the Egyptian singer ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz passed away in 1977, a group of fans began meeting at his tomb to celebrate his memory and music. Since then, their gathering has become an annual multi-day event attracting thousands of the singer’s devotees from across Egypt and the Arab world. This article explores the unique fan culture around ‘Abd al-Halim, tracing its emergence after his death and expansion into various ritual activities organized by fans. As I show, central to the affective power of Halim fandom is the sense that the singer is close and tangible. I examine how fan practices foster this feeling, but also argue that it is rooted in the music ‘Abd al-Halim made during his lifetime. Investigating Halim fandom, this article offers a new ground-level perspective of how ordinary people in the region interact with music, popular culture, and each other.

Keywords: Egypt; music; fandom; ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz; popular culture

Each year, in late March, a gathering takes place at a cemetery on the south side of Cairo. The scene is usually festive, the dirt road adorned with colorful banners bearing famous words of the man interred in one of the tombs. Under a tent outside the tomb, people share food and sing songs. Some hover around the tomb’s entrance, waiting for the right moment to squeeze through the crowds and into the packed chamber, where they whisper prayers at the resting place of one of Egypt’s most beloved figures. Those who live near the cemetery often refer to this event as a *mawlid*, or saint’s festival. However, the visitors come not for a holy man but for the mid-twentieth-century singer ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz (1929–77). The activities at his tomb are part of a popular commemoration his fans have organized every spring since his passing on March 30, 1977.

‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz (commonly known as Halim or al-‘Andalib al-Asmar, the Dark Nightingale) rose to stardom in the 1950s and became Egypt’s most prominent male performer of the second half of the century. In his day, radio stations received unrivaled numbers of requests for his songs, which became the soundtrack for important patriotic occasions as well as everyday life in Egypt: adults went to his concerts for their wedding nights; students chanted his lyrics on school fieldtrips; and tuning in to his spring concert became a tradition Egyptian families observed each year to ring in the new season.¹

Halim’s fans spanned a wide geography, reflected in the crowds at his annual celebration, where I have met people from across the Arab world and beyond. “I have to come,” said one Tunisian woman outside his tomb in 2017, “I feel like he’s waiting for me.”² A few steps away,

¹ *Al-Shabaka*, no. 963, 8 July 1974, 10; *Dubayy al-Thaqafiyya*, no. 22, March 2007, 138; Mahmud ‘Abd al-Shakkur, *Kunt Sabiyyan fi al-Sab’iniyyat* (Cairo: Dar al-Karma, 2015), 171.

² Al-Yawm al-Sabi’, “al-Hajja Wasila al-Tunisiyya fi Dhikra al-‘Andalib,” YouTube, 30 March 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27a_GrwUre0&t=7s.

a man visiting from Lebanon explained to a reporter: “Halim is eternal, always regenerating, always in our hearts.”³ Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the gate to his tomb was locked, fans came out on March 30 to tell Halim’s body through the iron bars: “We’re here so you can feel us next to you!”⁴ Some of these people grew up on the crooner’s songs in the 1960s and 70s, but even those born well after Halim’s time still feel a deep bond with him, one they renew each year at his commemoration.

How can we understand this fervent fan culture for a singer who died half a century ago? And why do people continue to feel such a visceral connection to him? This article explores Halim fandom, focusing on the festivities at his annual commemoration or *zīkrā* (classical Arabic, *dhikrā*). I examine the two main components of the *zīkrā* organized by Halim’s fans and family members: the gathering at his tomb and the gathering at his former home in Cairo’s Zamalek neighborhood after the tomb visit. I combine this discussion with an analysis of his musical performances to shed light on his popularity over time.

Fandom has received sparse attention in Middle East Studies, where research on music tends to speak vaguely of “audiences” and imagined listening “publics.” The sources scholars often use—hagiographic writing, concert reviews, recordings—provide information about singers’ lives and performances, but usually only high-altitude views of the other side of the stage (or radio, TV, etc.). As scholars of Arab cinema have similarly pointed out, we know very little about audiences as real individuals and their interactions with popular culture.⁵

To be sure, ethnomusicologists like Ali Jihad Racy showed long ago that audiences are active participants in live performances of Arab art music.⁶ Yet, performances are just one of the many musical activities in which people engage. Recent anthropological work on North African Andalusian music, for example, has yielded valuable insight into how connoisseurs of the tradition collect, edit, and hoard anthologies of song lyrics.⁷ Such material approaches are still lacking in research on popular genres in the Arab world, obscuring the many ways that people *do* music today. Scholars of American music have been attentive to activities beyond listening and shown how fans connect with singers both living (Taylor Swift) and dead (Elvis Presley) through ritual visits, home memorabilia shrines, and virtual networks.⁸ For Arab music, Laura Lohman provides a similar analysis of the contemporary memorialization of Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum (1904–75).⁹ However, her discussion focuses on museums and state-sponsored engagement with the singer’s legacy, prompting questions about how ordinary people in Egypt and the broader region participate in the making of music culture.

³ Tamanya al-Subh, “Zīham wa-‘Adad Kabir min al-Jumhur,” YouTube, 30 March 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OnKWM8amGM>.

⁴ Veto Gate, “Muhibba li-l-‘Andalib fi Dhikra Wafatihi,” YouTube, 30 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UE7pVT9Ly8I&ab_channel=VetoGate.

⁵ Ifdal Elsaket, “Cinema-going in Egypt in the long 1960s: Oral Histories of Pleasure and Leisure,” in *Cinema in the Arab World: New Histories, New Approaches*, ed. Ifdal Elsaket, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 150–76. See also Walter Armbrust, “When the Lights Go Down in Cairo: Cinema as Secular Ritual,” in *Cairo Cosmopolitan*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 415–45; Ifdal Elsaket, “Counting Kisses at the Movies: The Screen Kiss and the Cinematic Experience in Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 2 (2023): 211–37.

⁶ Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Ṭarab* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷ Jonathan Glasser, *The Lost Paradise: Andalusī Music in Urban North Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁸ Kate Galloway, “Musicking Fan Culture and Circulating the Materiality of Taylor Swift Musical Greeting Cards on YouTube,” *American Music* 38, no. 2 (2020): 240–61; Erika Doss, “Believing in Elvis, Popular Piety in Material Culture,” in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 63–86.

⁹ Laura Lohman, *Umm Kulthūm: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend, 1967–2007* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 140–49, 155–59.



Figure 1. Lutfi in his Halim room at home, holding commemorative Halim magazines sent to him by fellow fans in Egypt (Photo courtesy of Lutfi al-Naffati, Facebook, 21 April 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=857029574323552&set=pb.100000495517708.-2207520000.&type=3>).

In this regard, ‘Abd al-Halim offers a compelling case study, as his lasting popularity is closely connected to the efforts of non-state actors, such as people like Lutfi al-Naffati, a taxi driver from Tunisia and self-proclaimed “Nightingale Fanatic.” At his home, Lutfi maintains an archive of Halim books, magazines, and other fan paraphernalia. This collection complements his Halim room, a space completely covered in images of the singer where Lutfi can listen to his music (Fig. 1). As he describes Halim, “I feel like he really knows who I am and is always smiling just for me, which is part of the reason I decided to get married on the same day as his birthday.”¹⁰ After years of being a fan from afar, Lutfi visited Cairo in 2017 to attend Halim’s *zikrā* events. “I was just so thrilled,” he recalled. “I got to touch his personal belongings, to be there with his spirit—moments that will stay in my memory and soul forever.”¹¹

Spotlighting people like Lutfi and the objects, spaces, rituals, and feelings that make up their fandom, I make two main arguments: first, that Halim’s unique afterlife has been produced not primarily by state institutions, as is the case with other golden-era stars, but by fan communities and popular commemoration; and second, that fans’ close connection to this singer is intimately related to his performances during life, an aspect that has yet to be considered in discussions of contemporary Halim nostalgia.

My approach draws on periodicals and oral histories to trace Halim fandom from his death in 1977 to today, combining this with analysis of materials ranging from fan mail to graffiti. In doing so, I build on Christopher Small’s concept of “musicking,” a term he coined to signify the broad constellation of activities around musical performance.¹² Musicking has found extensive application in musicology, sociology, religion, and other

¹⁰ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 3319, 31 March 2015, 47.

¹¹ *Al-Anwar*, no. 1845, 8 April 2017, 10.

¹² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

fields, but rare treatment in Middle East Studies.¹³ The value of this concept in studying Halim fandom rests in its inclusivity, the way it accounts for listening practices but also frames music as a broad social activity, a *process of doing*. As such, it lends itself to considering the materials of the activity, how “particular forms of social relationships emerge by doing things with objects,” as Lucie Ryzova has explored in her work on photography-making in Egypt.¹⁴ In this sense, my focus on fan culture contributes to recent research in Middle East Studies that investigates the region’s history through the “social life” of everyday objects and technologies.¹⁵

“The Voice of Egypt”

‘Abd al-Halim ‘Ali Isma‘il Shabana was born June 21, 1929, in the village of al-Halawat, eighty kilometers north of Cairo. His mother died from complications at his birth and his father followed shortly thereafter from an unknown illness.¹⁶ Growing up in his uncle’s home in the nearby city of Zagazig, music became a source of stability for Halim. He listened to the radio constantly and sang in student ensembles at school, where he also learned to play oboe.¹⁷ By the time he finished secondary studies, he was intent on pursuing a music career.

In 1942, Halim moved to Cairo to study at the Arab Music Institute for three years, and then went on to specialize in oboe and Western classical music at the newly founded Higher Institute of Music Theater.¹⁸ With two institute degrees, Halim found employment as a grade-school music teacher and then as an oboe player for the house band at Egyptian Radio.¹⁹ He later passed the Radio’s examination to work as a singer, his real passion.²⁰

Halim’s time at the Radio catalyzed his professional career by putting him in the orbit of powerful administrators and, most importantly, his future mentor, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1902–91). ‘Abd al-Wahhab served on the Radio’s Listening Committee and was the foremost singer and composer of the day.²¹ He took Halim under his wing, supplying him with new compositions and recording contracts as well as industry wisdom.²² The conventional narrative, which I revisit later, is that Halim struggled to win over audiences in his early career but, by the mid-1950s, had established himself as the voice of the 1952 Revolution and a promising cinema star. The next two decades cemented his status as he churned out hundreds of hit songs and sixteen films.

Illness, however, brought Halim’s career to an early end. His health deteriorated significantly in the 1970s due to bilharzia, a parasitic disease he contracted while playing in the canals of the Nile as a child. He died in 1977 at the age of forty-seven, in a London hospital

¹³ Nick Crossley, “From Musicking to Music Worlds: On Christopher Small’s Important Innovation,” *Music Research Annual* 3 (2022): 1–24. For examples in Arab music, see Andrea Shaheen Espinosa, “On Diasporic Generation and Syrian-Argentine Musicking in Buenos Aires, Argentina,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 51 (2019): 139–65; Jonathan Shannon, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), xxii.

¹⁴ Lucie Ryzova, “Boys, Girls, and Kodaks: Peer Albums and Middle-Class Personhood in Mid-Twentieth-Century Egypt,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8, no. 2–3 (2015): 215–55.

¹⁵ Andrew Simon, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

¹⁶ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 315, 13 August 1957, 5; *al-Sinama wa-l-Nas*, no. 16, April 1980, 8–12.

¹⁷ Muhammad al-Sayyid Shusha, *al-Lahn al-Hazin* (Cairo: Dar Akhbar al-Yawm, 1956), 21.

¹⁸ *Al-Musiqā wa-l-Masrah*, no. 18 (1 August 1948), 702.

¹⁹ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 133, 16 February 1954, 26; *al-Kawakib*, no. 316, 20 August 1957, 4–5, 36; *al-Musiqā wa-l-Masrah*, no. 34, 1 December 1949, 1343; *al-Musawwar*, no. 2740, 15 April 1977, n.p.

²⁰ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 317, 27 August 1957, 11.

²¹ On ‘Abd al-Wahhab, see Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 4, 63–93.

²² *Ruz al-Yusuf*, no. 1366, 16 August 1954, 35; *al-Kawakib*, no. 318, 3 September 1957, 11.

bed. Halim left behind a vast listenership spanning multiple generations, each drawn to different aspects of his music. While he typically employed the lush orchestration of an earlier golden era of Arab music, he also relied heavily on microphone technology to amplify his voice in intimate new ways, following global trends and entrancing younger listeners.²³ This crossover appeal brought an immense fan base that, by the time he died, commonly referred to him as “the voice of Egypt,” “the symbol of an entire generation,” and “the most beloved singer in the Arab world.”²⁴

If Egyptians spoke of Umm Kulthum and other star singers in similar terms, it is also clear that such epithets accrued different meanings for Halim.²⁵ As “the voice of Egypt,” he was not just an Egyptian singer turned household name. His battle with bilharzia, a distinctly rural Egyptian disease, unfolded visibly on concert stages as he struggled through performances, a constant reminder to the public that his life and death were tethered to the Nile’s waters. Other singers did become sonic markers of certain generations, but Halim was undoubtedly the most evocative of the Nasser era. His patriotic repertoire (*waṭaniyyāt*), brassy and booming, fueled mid-century Egyptian nationalism. And while being the most “beloved” singer cannot be measured, we should not disregard the idiom of love and intimacy with which fans often describe Halim. Egyptians rarely speak of him as a vocal powerhouse (e.g., Umm Kulthum), nor do they regard him a master of modal techniques (e.g., ‘Abd al-Wahhab). His voice was “quite ordinary, a weak voice, submissive and exhausted,” explained one fan in 1976. “It is this weakness that we love so much.”²⁶ In the following sections, I examine the connection between “ordinariness” and “love” as it manifests in fan activities and fan discourse.

Halim Fandom after Halim

‘Abd al-Halim was the object of intense fan affection during his lifetime. But as I show, it was after his death that he developed a following unlike that of any other Egyptian singer before or since. To track the evolution of Halim fandom, I draw on Arabic newspapers and weekly entertainment magazines. Such sources contain valuable historical information but can also sensationalize and distort narratives, thus requiring careful excavation. Halim’s legacy, for instance, has received much nostalgic treatment from writers who use him to juxtapose the “good old days” of the Nasser era with a supposed “decline” in public taste since his death. As Hanan Hammad argues in her book on Egyptian singer Layla Murad, entertainment magazines can be highly useful in “studying public culture and the making of sociocultural norms.”²⁷ In the case of Halim, magazines can tell us as much about his fans as they can about him.

Eighteen minutes after doctors at King’s College Hospital declared Halim dead, London relayed the news to the rest of the world. In Egypt, daily life changed instantly. Radio stations cancelled scheduled programming to broadcast the Qur’an.²⁸ Business owners closed their shops, though they would have had few patrons. Most of the country was in mourning. On April 2, tens of thousands gathered in Tahrir Square to walk in a funeral procession with Halim’s casket through the streets of downtown Cairo.²⁹ Crowds were so dense at his

²³ Martin Stokes, “‘Abd al-Halim’s Microphone,” in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 55–73.

²⁴ *Al-Shabaka*, no. 621, 21 December 1967, 18–20; *Sabah al-Khayr*, no. 1062, 13 May 1976, 65; *al-Maw‘id*, no. 757, 19 May 1977, 11.

²⁵ The “voice of Egypt” was also an oft-heard honorific for Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum. See Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁶ *Al-Idha‘a wa-l-Tilfīzyun*, no. 2149, 22 May 1976, 41.

²⁷ Hanan Hammad, *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 13.

²⁸ *Ruz al-Yusuf*, no. 2547, 4 April 1977, n.p.

²⁹ *Al-Ahram*, 3 April 1977, 1.

procession that hundreds of people fainted or required hospitalization for broken bones.³⁰ While Halim had been sick for years, his death was hard to believe for many. Umayma ‘Abd al-Wahhab, a twenty-one-year-old fan, said that she “could not bear this shock, the death of the dearest person in life.”³¹ She wrote these words on a suicide note before jumping off the seventh story of Halim’s apartment building.³² Other girls threw themselves from bridges, prompting local schools to declare a state of emergency.³³

The death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970 had seen a sea of mourners marching through the streets of the capital, and a funeral procession for Umm Kulthum in 1975 had famously rivalled that of the former president. Yet, Halim’s premature death struck an especially tragic chord with the Egyptian public. On one level, he was the last of the great performers, his death bookending a golden era of Arab song that still wafts out of café radios and living-room TV sets today. On another level, his passing meant the loss of a key part of the Nasser era and all the ideals and aspirations it represented. No other singer contributed so much to the nationalist zeal of the day, the youthful optimism, pride, and sense of a unified march forward. These were sentiments that people not only heard in Halim’s lyrics but felt as they chanted along to his simple, rhythmic melodies. All of this forged a special bond between Halim and the public and helps to understand the exceptional turnout for his funeral procession.

Also unique to Halim was how his devotees quickly began organizing to preserve his memory. As the Egyptian and Arab public grappled with the trauma, a core faction of fans was uniting, most of them students in their late teens and early twenties. There was Ahmad al-Tantawi (b. 1963) from the city of Mahalla, the backbone of their fledgling community; ‘Abd al-‘Alim ‘Awn (1965–2015) from Cairo, later chair of the Halim committee; and Husayn Ramadan (b. 1969), another Cairene and founding member. They began meeting with other fans once a month at Halim’s tomb to listen to his music and every March for his *zīkrā* (anniversary). They also corresponded by mail throughout the year. As one member of the group recalled: “After the Nightingale’s passing, we started visiting his tomb, and all of us fans [*aḥibbā’*] got to know each other. We then took it upon ourselves to create a commemoration committee for him.”³⁴ From the outset, the committee was not limited to Halim enthusiasts in the capital. Al-Tantawi came from Mahalla, Mujahid ‘Ali Taha from Bani Suwayf, and Mishil Najib from Minya.³⁵ Often they gathered on weekends, when those completing their military service could travel easily.³⁶ Thus, if the fan network pivoted around Cairo as the site of Halim’s grave, it also extended outwards, linking individuals in the Delta as well as towns south of the capital.

According to Ahmad al-Tantawi, the committee—also sometimes referred to as a *jam‘iyya*, or “society”—was formed in 1980 or 1981. Details of the early days are hazy, perhaps because members did not foresee the *zīkrā* becoming a regular, large-scale event. “Unfortunately, we didn’t think about documenting the *zīkrā*,” al-Tantawi told me. “If we had recorded everything that we did, and are doing, we’d have a massive archive by now.”³⁷ Today, the group’s official name is Lajnat Takhlid Dhikra ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz. That they called themselves a “committee” (*lajna*) stemmed largely from their self-assigned

³⁰ *Al-Shabaka*, no. 1101, 11 April 1977, 16.

³¹ *Al-Ahram*, 1 April 1977, 16. According to another source, Umayma had entered Halim’s apartment while it was open to the public for mourning and jumped from the balcony; see *al-Maw‘id*, no. 751, 7 April 1977, 6.

³² Following Halim’s death, Arabic newspapers reported the names, ages, and other personal information of fans who had harmed themselves. Halim lore and hagiographic writing often make vague reference to such incidents today, but there were many documented cases.

³³ *Ruz al-Yusuf*, no. 2547, 4 April 1977, n.p.

³⁴ Al-Yawm al-Sabi‘, “Maqbarat ‘Abd al-Halim Tahmal Mufaja’a,” YouTube, 29 March 2017, <https://youtu.be/wzeZhYCUlT8>.

³⁵ *Ruz al-Yusuf*, no. 4216, 3 April 2009, 103.

³⁶ Ahmad al-Tantawi, personal communication, 13 August 2023.

³⁷ Ahmad al-Tantawi, personal communication, 15 July 2023.

task of planning the annual Halim event. A more formal group identity also took shape as they began pooling money to buy decorations and food for the commemoration and coordinating with Halim's family. Indeed, their close connection to his relatives over the years gave them a special authority as *the* fan group entrusted with preserving the singer's memory. On one occasion, the family even called upon committee members to help exhume Halim's body when his tomb required repair.

'Abd al-Halim's anniversary soon distinguished itself for its popular nature, large attendance, and two-part structure. The *zīkrā* began crystalizing as an organized fan event in the early 1980s. Halim's family aided the process, posting an announcement in *al-Ahram* (The Pyramids) newspaper each year inviting the public to gather at his tomb and home in commemoration. By his seventh death anniversary in 1984, they had proposed an order to the day's events, asking visitors to meet "in the morning at his grave in al-Basatin cemetery, and in the evening at his home, 12 Hasan Sabri Street, in Zamalek."³⁸ Al-Basatin is a maze of dirt roads and domed mausoleums on Cairo's south side, Zamalek a leafy district of chic restaurants and old mansions as well as more modest high-rises like the one that houses Halim's unit. The journey between the two sites—more than ten kilometers apart—required fans to take public or private transportation. But distance was no obstacle, and people increasingly trekked to other Halim-related sites beyond Cairo as well, such as the villa he owned in Alexandria.³⁹ More ardent fans went on tour, visiting multiple locations. In 1991, for the fourteenth *zīkrā*, members of the Commemoration Committee provided the details of their circuit in a local magazine:

March 22–30: the Commemoration Committee will visit al-Sharqiyya and the village of al-Halawat [Halim's hometown]. Then, they will host a gathering in Alexandria outside 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz's villa in the Agami neighborhood. After this, they will meet with the Nightingale's fans in Bani Suwayf. The Committee will conclude its annual activities by visiting his tomb on the morning of Saturday, March 30 and, finally, his home in Zamalek.⁴⁰

This kind of memorializing clearly differed from what other Egyptian singers received, and the public did not fail to notice this. As one journalist wrote in the mid-1990s, "the Nightingale's commemoration now dwarfs that of all others."⁴¹ But other famous singers also have their own anniversary events. For Umm Kulthum and 'Abd al-Wahhab, these usually take place at museums the Egyptian state has built to honor them. There are more grassroots tributes as well, such as those for Egyptian composer and singer Shaykh Imam (1918–95), who has a sizeable following in Tunisia that hosts regular social club gatherings to perform his music.⁴² Halim, however, is the only singer among the greats for whom fans devoutly visit his grave and other places, people, and things related to him. Undertaking a visit (*ziyāra*) remains important to Halim fandom today. It is also key to understanding the singer's distinctive afterlife. The next section, based on my own attendance at Halim anniversaries in recent years, examines the rituals and structure of visiting.

Ziyāra: Part I

What happens at the annual *zīkrā* festivities? Why do fans come and how do they interact with other fans and Halim's memory? As I suggest in this section, visiting Halim-related

³⁸ *Al-Ahram*, 29 March 1984, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ Article dated 1991, periodical archive of Usama Hasan, accessed 15 January 2023.

⁴¹ *Al-Ahram*, 1 April 1996, 16.

⁴² Al Jazeera Documentaries, "Imam Tunis," 27 September 2018, <https://doc.aljazeera.net/videos/2018/9/27/> إمام-تونس. On Shaykh Imam, see also Simon, *Media of the Masses*, ch. 5, 131–47.



Figure 2. Left: Entrance to the tomb of ‘Abd al-Halim, 2023. Right: Tomb interior and the sarcophagus of ‘Abd al-Halim, 2023 (photos courtesy of author).

sites has become ritualized, and crucial to the rituals is the notion of proximity, the sense that physical closeness to the singer, his family, and his belongings affords something special for visitors. Additionally, I show that a visit often entails performances of devotion (praying, singing, writing messages, making banners, etc.) through which fans connect with Halim.

On the morning of March 30 each year, al-Basatin cemetery begins to buzz with life. People weave their way through a maze of dirt roads until they reach a blue-and-gold façade, above its door a carved calligraphic script reads: “Tomb of the late artist ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz and his family” (Fig. 2). Fans of the singer arrive in high spirits, having looked forward to the *zīkrā* for weeks. This great anticipation comes, in part, from the media frenzy that flares up each spring to remind Egyptians that Halim season has come. As one journalist pointed out, “for the Nightingale, celebrations typically begin early, from the first of March ... Audio, visual, and print media are all in preparation not just from the start of the month but throughout the year.”⁴³ The commemoration itself has often bled across the better part of a week. Starting from several days before the *zīkrā* proper (March 30), the tomb can receive upwards of 15,000 visitors in busy years.⁴⁴

Each year, Halim’s relatives visit his tomb and spend several hours with fans in the morning. My first *zīkrā* experience in 2018 was as a guest of Zaynab al-Shinnawi, who was then the singer’s closest living relative through her mother ‘Aliyya. Because Halim never married and had no children, his siblings Isma‘il (d. 1985), Muhammad (d. 1990), and ‘Aliyya (d. 2004) were the bloodline that remained after his death. When these three passed away, their children came to embody Halim’s memory. Zaynab was nineteen when her uncle died. She knew Halim well and often attended his rehearsals and concerts, a proximity to the singer that granted her singular status in the eyes of fans. At almost every moment of our visit to the cemetery, she was surrounded by people asking to shake hands or take a picture together (Fig. 3). For them, Zaynab was a tangible contact point that made Halim present.

⁴³ *Al-Ahram*, 1 April 1996, 16.

⁴⁴ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 3476, 3 April 2018, 55.



Figure 3. Zaynab al-Shinnawi, center, arriving at Halim's tomb in 2015 (al-Yawm al-Sabi', YouTube, 30 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF2mXq8uyCk>).

The sense that Halim is at once there and not there informs the broader idiom of the *zīkrā*. All around the road outside the tomb are banners with Halim's visage and short phrases of praise: "Anniversary of Egypt's eternal Nightingale" (*dhikrā 'andalīb Miṣr al-khālīd*), "the absent one who remains present" (*al-ghā'ib al-hāqīr*), "The Nightingale is never absent" (*al-'andalīb lā yaḡhīb*). Select artifacts also grant him a tangibility in the here and now. The Commemoration Committee has amassed a collection of Halim's belongings—neckties, belts, other articles of clothing, scraps of paper he wrote on, strands of his hair—some of which they bring to the *zīkrā* and allow visitors to hold under close surveillance.⁴⁵ The importance of touch is apparent in how fans prize such objects as immediate, physical connections to Halim himself.

In front of the tomb is a large tent full of chairs offering shade for visitors to sit, talk, and eat (Fig. 4). Committee members bring trays of sweet cakes, bread rolls, dates, and other snacks to share. They also print handouts and photos to distribute as gifts to visitors. At the 2023 *zīkrā*, one member gave out copies of the singer's obituary and an award letter from 1960 granting Halim the state Medal of Arts. Many attendees bring their Halim memorabilia—magazines, rare photos, commemorative coins—for a kind of show-and-tell with other fans.

Under the tent, I have met fans from across the Arab world and diaspora. Several visitors from other countries have told me they come to Egypt every year just for the *zīkrā*. Many make arrangements well in advance to attend, even requesting time off work when the anniversary falls on a weekday. Those with stricter schedules, or who live outside Egypt, find ways to attend in spirit. Lutfi al-Naffati, the "Nightingale Fanatic" from Tunisia, has mailed large hand-drawn banners to Cairo, which committee members hang up at the cemetery for him (Fig. 5).⁴⁶ Such creative displays allow participation and connection to Halim without actually being there.

The *zīkrā* also typically sees visitors who attend for reasons unrelated to Halim. I have met young boys who live near the cemetery and come by to catch a glimpse of celebrities attending the event. There are up-and-coming singers who hover outside the tomb, waiting to introduce themselves to TV reporters. Semi-vagrant women, who cannot name a single

⁴⁵ *Ruz al-Yusuf*, no. 4216, 3 April 2009, 102–3.

⁴⁶ *Sawt al-Umma*, no. 747, 5 April 2015, n.p.



Figure 4. ‘Abd al-Halim commemoration, 2017 (photo courtesy of Usama Hasan).

Halim song, linger under the tent where free snacks circulate. There are also the spouses, children, and friends of fans who have no particular interest in Halim but come anyways. All are welcomed.

The soundscape of the *zīkrā* is a medley of disparate layers. During my first visit, I recall hearing, simultaneously, friends laughing as they reconnected after a year’s absence, Qur’anic verses floating solemnly from a portable radio, young men singing Halim songs in ecstatic unison, and a committee member reciting an elegy he composed for the singer:



Figure 5. Left: Committee members in front of one of Lutfi’s banners (Facebook, 15 January 2016, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1596962566996912&set=pb.100000495517708.-2207520000.&type=3). Right: Another home-made Lutfi banner for the 2018 *zīkrā*, hung inside Halim’s tomb (Facebook, 30 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2094157270610770&set=pb.100000495517708.-2207520000&type=3>).

“The days have passed / but we return / to find on this promised day / flowers laid / upon that glorious grave ...” These sounds reflect the distinct blend of celebratory and somber moods at the gathering.

The area outside the tomb is a site for socializing, but it is also a stage for displays of devotion to Halim, apparent in the large banners hung around the tent and road. These frequently indicate the name of the person who made and donated them, suggesting that fans assign a certain value to receiving recognition for their love of Halim. Another way that fans display their devotion is by adopting Halim’s name and adding it to their own, in a sense claiming lineage with their beloved singer. For example, Midhat Ragab, a fan from Mansura in the Nile Delta, legally changed his name to ‘Abd al-Halim Ragab in 2003. “Halim is the blood that runs in my veins,” he explained outside the tomb as he pulled a government-issued ID from his wallet during the 2019 *zīkrā*. “My greatest wish in life was to have something connecting me to him.”⁴⁷ Connecting with Halim, becoming close, is at the heart of the *zīkrā*. And for many fans, there is no better place to draw near him than inside his tomb.

The tomb itself fits roughly thirty visitors comfortably, but periods of high traffic can see twice as many. This is, in part, because the tomb houses Halim’s sarcophagus, and fans often dedicate at least a few minutes to reciting Qur’anic chapters and reflecting quietly near his remains. Since its renovation in the mid-2000s, visitors occupy only half of the tomb (the ground-level entrance area) while Halim’s sarcophagus sits on a higher level, thus creating a partition and much smaller space for the crowds. Halim’s relatives tend to sit inside and greet visitors, which adds to congestion. In addition, the committee leaves a guestbook in the tomb for visitors to sign and write messages for Halim. Thus, the space can easily reach capacity when people linger. Overcrowding also occurs outside the tomb.

According to one committee member, in certain years, when the *zīkrā* was particularly large, local police came to assist with crowd control.⁴⁸ The current Committee Chair, Sabir Yasin, told me that the largest gatherings took place in the decade after Halim’s death, between 1977 and 1990.⁴⁹ Walid al-Dashluti, who has attended since 2000, noted that the number of visitors tends to decrease each year, but that decade anniversaries (ten, twenty, etc.) often bring large crowds due to increased media coverage and public events.⁵⁰ Commemorations I attended in the last five years rarely had the intense air that committee members recalled from the “old days” of the *zīkrā*. As one regular speculated to me, “Things are different now. These days, people are busy working because of the high cost of living. But people who love Halim like us take off work so they can be [at the *zīkrā*].”⁵¹

Ziyāra: Part II

From late-afternoon, fans begin migrating to the Zamalek neighborhood, where Zaynab (in previous years) opens Halim’s former apartment to visitors, signaling the beginning of the second part of the *zīkrā*. Before stepping through the door, most visitors linger out in the hallway to take in the collage of fan graffiti scrawled across the walls in pen, pencil, crayon, and marker. Many come prepared with their own writing utensils, clearly familiar with the tradition. Every inch of wall is adorned with song lyrics, hand-drawn sketches of Halim, notes to him, usually in Egyptian colloquial Arabic (Fig. 6). The scribes include their name and visit date next to their note, often enclosing all of this in a heart shape,

⁴⁷ Al-Yawm al-Sabi’, “Ghayyart Ismi fi al-Bitaqa,” YouTube, 30 March 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XmbKWGMvTg&ab_channel=VideoYoum7%7C.

⁴⁸ Ahmad al-Tantawi, personal communication, 19 March 2023.

⁴⁹ Sabir Yasin, personal communication, 15 July 2023.

⁵⁰ Walid al-Dashluti, personal communication, 7 August 2023.

⁵¹ Khalid al-Misri, personal communication, 13 July 2023.



Figure 6. Left: Visitors write messages outside Halim's apartment in 2017 (photo courtesy of Usama Hasan). Right: Hand-drawn portrait of Halim and fan messages outside his apartment in 2018 (photo courtesy of author).

which serves the dual purpose of signifying love for Halim and, more practically, separating the thousands of inscriptions from each other.

During the 2018 *zikkā*, I noticed a section of wall to the left of the elevator with a number of messages from fans who were visited by Halim in a dream. One anonymous scribe reported having just dreamt of him two days before and addressed the singer directly: "You were relaxing in Zamalek and went to the Gezira Sports Club, where I found you and told you I loved you. Then you kissed me and started singing, and I was so happy that I ended up fainting." Another scribe furnished both a dream anecdote and interpretation:

How are you Halim? I had a dream about you again. I hope to always have dreams about you. I dreamt that I bought some rice and fish. You and I were both in the dream, and you had a child you were feeding. I looked up some dream interpretations online and found one that said this means you're at rest in your grave.

Oftentimes these wall messages are penned in an informal, conversational style, as if the author were dialoguing with Halim. They frequently include requests or wishes, marriage being a dominant theme: "I really miss you, my dear. How have you been? I'm well, thank God, but just missing one thing. I want to get married. Please, Lord, let me get married." A few feet below this message was a note with a similar supplicatory tone: "Why haven't I had another dream about you? I hope to see you like I used to [in my dreams], and please God, send me someone I can get married to." Messages like these fill the hallway outside Halim's apartment, often overlapping, producing a multi-layered, multi-colored wallpaper of text. Halim's family welcomes the graffiti and leaves it up, preserving the marks of the fans who have visited over the years.

The family has tried to preserve the interior of Halim's home as well, particularly his old office, bedroom, and a living room he used as a rehearsal space. These are iconic spots for fans, immediately recognizable from media coverage of the star. First-time visitors often stand spellbound by the space's aura and sense that the singer had once sat here or listened to his records there. They touch his things and take pictures of themselves touching his

things. This is nowhere more evident than in Halim's bedroom, which houses his most famous furnishing: the bed to which he was so often confined during his final years of illness. Fans make a special point of rubbing and kissing a dark indentation that he wore into the headboard over time. These residues of Halim, his tangible traces in the present, are the things that fans come to see and make him feel close.

As the evening goes on, crowds dwindle. The family eventually closes the doors, and members of the Commemoration Committee help vacate the final visitors and tidy up. In 2019 and 2020, Halim's family decided not to open his apartment due to the COVID-19 virus. Being effectively a large social gathering, the *zīkrā* came to a halt during the pandemic. Turnout has been much lower since then, and timing has complicated a return to pre-pandemic numbers. In 2023, the month of Ramadan began in late March, overlapping with the *zīkrā*. Considering this, Halim's family asked the committee to hold the commemoration before Ramadan, on March 19. This was, in part, to spread the calendar, but also because Halim's niece Zaynab had just passed away and the family did not plan to participate in *zīkrā* events during their first Ramadan without her. Committee members posted announcements on social media indicating the change in date. However, it was clear that many regulars did not see this. Total attendance was less than a few hundred visitors. The next few years may determine if the *zīkrā* is to fade out entirely or, perhaps, see a resurgence among those still dedicated to connecting in person with their beloved singer, and with fellow fans.

Halim's enduring proximity and tangibility are central to the connection his devotees feel to him. However, at this point it is relevant ask: Why Halim? What aspects of his life or music prompted this kind of fan adoration? One explanation is that Halim fandom is part of Egyptian society's nostalgia for mid-century media stars, a theme explored by Joel Gordon.⁵² Such stars become "sites of collective memory" for reflecting back on Nasser-era Egypt, its sense of civic pride, its spirit of hopefulness, a seemingly simpler time. Other scholars, such as Martin Stokes, have approached Halim's popularity through the lens of technology, considering how the microphone helped his "close, quiet, emotional" voice captivate the ears and hearts of listeners.⁵³ In the final section below, I posit an additional analysis that dovetails with these and builds on the preceding discussion of fandom.

Revisiting the Nightingale's Narrative

Accounts of 'Abd al-Halim's career regularly recall his initial failures on the concert stage. As the story goes, the young crooner overcame a series of performance flops, began winning over crowds and critics, and soon established himself among the pantheon of great singers. After his early struggles, he seems to follow a fluid trajectory to the top. The reality, however, is that throughout his two-decade career, Halim had many detractors in the music establishment who condemned his music with increasing zeal as the years went on. Most worrying to critics were his use of folk music "heritage" and his unique stage mannerisms.

In the 1960s, Halim's repertoire included many love songs from the movies he had starred in, as well as patriotic Nasser-era anthems. However, some of his most revered hits were folkloric remakes, what Egyptians often refer to as his *sha'biyyāt* (lit. popular songs).⁵⁴ The first of these was his 1966 rendition of "*al-Tuba*" (Never Again), which signaled a shift in musical style. It also coincided with a break in his film career in the mid-1960s.⁵⁵

⁵² Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, University of Chicago, 2002), 260–61; Joel Gordon, "The Nightingale and the Ra'is: 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Nasserist Longings," in *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, ed. Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 307–23.

⁵³ Stokes, "'Abd al-Halim's Microphone," 55–73.

⁵⁴ Muhammad al-Shafī'i, "'Abd al-Halim Hafiz," in *Kamil al-Awsaf*, ed. Muhammad al-Sayyid 'Id (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'amma li-Qusur al-Thaqafa, 1997), 192–93. See also Kamal al-Najmi in *al-Kawakib*, no. 1345, 10 May 1977, 2–4.

⁵⁵ His film *al-Khataya* (Sins) debuted in 1962, followed five years later by his popular *Ma'budat al-Jamahir* (The People's Idol) in 1967. His final film, *Abi Fawq al-Shajara* (Father's Up a Tree), came to cinemas in 1969. On these,

Halim's *sha'biyyāt* borrowed lyrics and melodies from Egyptian folk music, which he sang with new verses and modern arrangements. Local music critics and educators berated these songs in press reviews, labeling them "harmful efforts that distort the folk originals."⁵⁶ This did not, however, change the fact that radio stations were receiving "unprecedented numbers" of requests for Halim's "Sawwah" (Wanderer, 1966), "Kamil al-Awsaf" (The Perfect One, 1967), and other songs.⁵⁷ These relied on simple melodic lines and raucous rhythms that "got into people's ears," as one journalist phrased it. "Everyone feels that they can sing these songs."⁵⁸

That everyone could sing along was part of the problem for critics. They disparaged how Halim riled up audiences when he performed, prompting people to clap and join in on choruses (folk melodies and lyrics being familiar to many). As one detractor wrote in 1968, "these are merely light tunes that make you dance, stick your fingers in your mouth, and whistle."⁵⁹ Singers of the previous generation enchanted audiences with their mastery of complex modes and classical poetry. "Those who listened to Umm Kulthum, 'Abd al-Wahhab, or Farid al-Atrash could close their eyes and listen along," recalled one journalist in 1979, "but 'Abd al-Halim brought a visual element, brought movement and life to the stage."⁶⁰

If other singers could send listeners into ecstatic fits with their voices, Halim was special in stimulating audiences through gesture. Martin Stokes has shown that Halim "uses his hands, along with bodily or facial expressions, to allow the audience to make sense of the words and the music."⁶¹ His gestures were also often invitations for listeners to clap and sing along with the music. This infuriated many in the music establishment like Ratiba al-Hifni, Dean of the Arab Music Institute, who described Halim's concerts as a "chaos resembling a *zār*."⁶² Al-Hifni's comment invoked an Egyptian folk exorcism ritual to convey that Halim's concerts were backwards, unrefined, deviant. She was one of the most influential Egyptian music reformists of the second half of the century, and she saw in Halim a pied piper leading people away from the vision of an ordered society that she promoted in her state-sponsored publications and ensembles.

Both fans and faultfinders could agree that the participatory element of Halim's music shifted the status quo. As 'Abd al-Wahhab himself would later note, Halim "removed a barrier" that existed between stage and spectator. "Everyone who came before stayed within certain boundaries. . . He used his intelligence to bring people up and make them feel like friends rather than listeners."⁶³ The insights of Gordon and Stokes are particularly relevant to this sense of proximity. For if Halim's films crafted his image as the familiar everyman, and if his microphone created a sonic intimacy with listeners, his later repertoire completed the triangle by cutting the physical distance that separated the singer and his audience.

From the early 1970s, Halim's folkloric phase gave way to the final period of his musical career in which he focused on *ughniyyāt* (lit. songs). These were multi-part opuses that Halim usually debuted for Egypt's annual spring festival in a lengthy concert. Yet, even his long

see Joel Gordon, "The Slaps Felt around the Arab World: Family and National Melodrama in Two Nasser-Era Musicals," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 2 (2007): 209–28; Elsaket, "Counting Kisses."

⁵⁶ *Al-Idhā'a wa-l-Tilifīziyūn*, no. 1754, 26 October 1968, 8.

⁵⁷ *Al-Shabaka*, no. 587, 24 April 1967, 44. Other popular folk remakes in his repertoire include "Ala Hisb Widad Galbi" (As My Heart Pleases, 1966), "Gana al-Hawa" (Love Came to Us, 1968), and "Maddah al-Qamar" (Poet for the Moon, 1971).

⁵⁸ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 1341, 12 April 1977, 5.

⁵⁹ *Al-Shabaka*, no. 643, 27 May 1968, n.p.

⁶⁰ *Al-Idhā'a wa-l-Tilifīziyūn*, no. 2300, 14 April 1979, n.p.

⁶¹ Martin Stokes, "Sentimental Gesture and the Politics of 'Shape' in the Performances of Abd al-Halim Hafiz," in *Investigating Musical Performance: Theoretical Models and Intersections*, ed. Gianmario Borio, Giovanni Giuriati, Alessandro Cecchi, and Marco Lutz (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), 193.

⁶² *Al-Majalla al-Musiqiyya*, no. 31, 1 July 1976, 1.

⁶³ Sa'd 'Abd al-Wahhab, *al-Nahr al-Khalid* (Cairo: Dar Su'ad al-Sabah, 1992), 222.

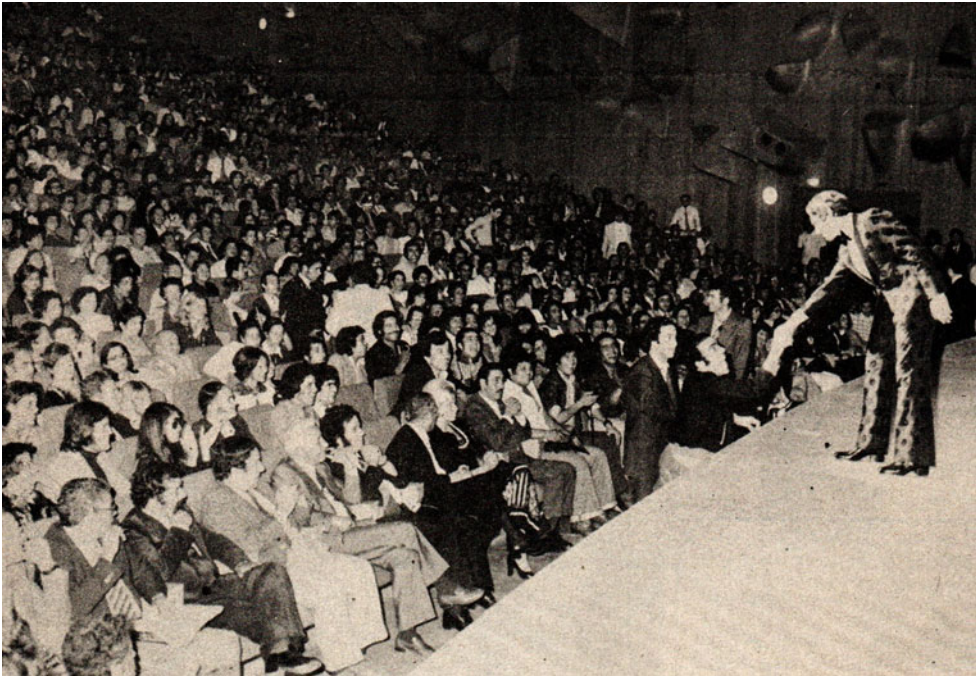


Figure 7. Halim greeting fans at a concert in Paris, 1974 (*al-Shabaka*, no. 976).

songs were approachable, simple enough that listeners memorized the lyrics and melodies by the next day. As an Egyptian admirer named Huda recounted in one fan letter to Halim, his songs were “on everyone’s tongue in the street” the morning after a performance in 1976.⁶⁴ Some listeners recorded his concerts to cassette tapes at home, and many documented them by hand: “As I watched and listened to the song on TV, I wrote the lyrics down word for word in my notebook,” declared a young enthusiast named Ahmad in another letter to Halim.⁶⁵ These acts, small and quotidian as they may be, constituted a larger sphere of fan engagement with the singer. And as I have argued, it is such fan activities—rather than large-scale state projects—that maintain Halim’s memory today.

For his spring concerts in particular, Halim presented a full evening of entertainment for families gathered around their televisions and radios. Listening to his concert turned into a spring tradition for many, the season becoming synonymous with Halim, whose charm blossomed on stage.⁶⁶ He would chat with his crowds, crack jokes, and receive their gifts (Fig. 7). In the words of one journalist, “he took away the thick, artificial walls that once separated the artist and audience.”⁶⁷ Performing songs like “*Maw‘ud*” (Promised, 1971) or “*Qari‘at al-Finjan*” (Fortune Teller, 1976), Halim’s singular quality emerged, “a radiance that dissolves the boundaries between people such that they feel connected,” as one fan described it in 1974. “This is the divine secret of ‘Abd al-Halim: the audience nearly touches him.”⁶⁸ It is these elements of touch and interactivity that carry over from Halim’s live performances into his fan culture today.

Halim’s proximity brought his music to the level of ordinary people, the many Egyptians who had no reformist aversions to a little carnivalesque on the concert stage. At the same

⁶⁴ Fan letter from Huda al-Disuqi dated 1976, ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz Family Archive.

⁶⁵ Fan letter from Ahmad al-Wakil dated 1 May 1976, ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz Family Archive.

⁶⁶ *Dubayy al-Thaqafiyya*, no. 22, (March 2007), 139.

⁶⁷ *Al-Maw‘id*, no. 756, (12 May 1977), 23.

⁶⁸ *Al-Kawakib*, no. 1191, (28 May 1974), n.p.

time, he became, in the eyes of many, quite extraordinary. With mounting health problems in the last decade of his life, the public saw each performance as a display of super-human strength. It was as if his concerts allowed him to fend off the disease he contracted in the Nile's countryside canals. While other star singers suffered from health problems, Halim's had a particularly Egyptian, and rural Egyptian, quality. As the poet Ma'mun al-Shinnawi recalled: "Abd al-Halim was a model for all Egyptians. He suffered from one of the most widespread illnesses of the countryside, Bilharzia, and this is why he became so close to people."⁶⁹ Ironically, the same illness that kept Halim off the stage and in a hospital bed also brought him "close" to his fans.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz's unique status today is rooted in popular fan culture. In the process, I showed that the key affective components of Halim fandom (proximity, familiarity, etc.) emerged during the singer's lifetime through his live performances. While this article focuses on a single singer, it is also a broader invitation for research on the afterlives of pop cultural icons in the Arab world. I have drawn on fan graffiti, memorabilia collections, and other fan sources that rarely feature in research on Arab music but are central to how people connect with this singer and each other. Scholars of the Middle East are paying increasing attention to everyday objects, from cookbooks to cassette tapes, considering not only their contents but how they enable particular kinds of identities and relationships.⁷⁰ Fandom and its material culture offer another ground-level set of sources that speak to the ways in which people of the region live and interact.

Such sources prompt consideration of diverse musicking practices and how fans listen to music, visit places, collect objects, and even dream. To see people as active participants in the making of a singer's legacy entails a wider analytical scope that accounts for audiences and the many ways they participate in musical culture. At the same time, this article has sought to hear audiences not as a mass, uniform voice but as individuals with varying backgrounds, views, and levels of fan engagement. This approach accentuates the micro-level, quotidian interactions of people with music and popular culture. It also reminds us that fandom is ordinary, ingrained in day-to-day life such that we often overlook it.

My discussion of Halim fandom suggests several questions relevant to the study of popular culture in the region. First, with regard to sources, how do we locate, access, and analyze fan materials? And what considerations are there for working with private and family archives? As more golden-era stars pass away each year (as well as their heirs and fans), so too go many sources that could add depth to our understanding of the region. Today, the tangible and intangible heritages of Egypt's most eminent singers, composers, actors, and dancers are largely preserved by their children. In some instances, the family has little interest in a dusty diary or box of correspondence from decades ago. It may be headed to the trash. But in many cases, the next generation are careful guardians.

Halim's relatives, for example, have kept in their home archive thousands of fan letters sent to the singer in his lifetime. These offer a fascinating window into the listening practices and social lives of young Egyptians in the 1960s and 70s. Working with the families of Halim's lyricists, I often find original copies of poems riddled with pencil edits and cigarette burns, illuminating the composition process. Fans too become expert preservers of pop cultural history. Their personal archives contain everything from old concert programs and newspaper snippets to rare hand-signed photographs. Many of these will never be seen by anyone other than the collector, but fans are increasingly sharing their treasures online.

⁶⁹ Ruz al-Yusuf, no. 2597, 20 March 1978, 48–49.

⁷⁰ See Anny Gaul, "'Kitchen Histories' and the Taste of Mobility in Morocco," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 6, no. 2 (2019): 36–55; Ryzova, "Boys, Girls, and Kodaks"; and Simon, *Media of the Masses*.

This prompts a second question regarding the role that new media and technology play in golden-era nostalgia.

Today, the internet has made it easier than ever to revisit pop cultural productions of the past. YouTube and other media-sharing platforms hold vast amounts of classic Arab films, vinyl records, concert performances, celebrity interviews, and more. As much as Halim's *zīkrā* hinges on in-person participation, fans now also livestream the gathering on their mobile phones, the recordings automatically saved online afterwards. For researchers, there are obvious benefits. Materials that might only exist in Cairo, Beirut, or Damascus are now accessible at the click of a mouse. This is particularly true of popular Arabic entertainment periodicals, which are often not conserved (or conserved well) in state archives but have become the obsession of certain avid collectors. One collector I know specializes in *al-Shabaka* (The Network) magazine—an arts and celebrity-gossip publication that began in the mid-1950s—and has scanned and posted hundreds of issues onto his private Facebook page (to gain access, one must correctly answer a series of trivia questions about Lebanese singer Fairuz). Such virtual archives are facilitating new fan cultures, new ways of collecting, socializing, and engaging with the past.

But what is the future of golden-era fandom? How long can this mid-century nostalgia endure? If Halim's situation is any indication, there is a downward trend in the number of people interested in the commemoration of bygone Egyptian singers. As one fan acknowledged to me, "this is only natural given that the previous generation that lived during Halim's day is aging or has already passed away."⁷¹ Yet, venues in downtown Cairo, like the Arab Music Institute and Jumhuriyya Theater, still fill up for tribute concerts featuring the old pantheon of performers of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Beyond this, recent years have seen Arab youth rediscovering the music of earlier generations as part of a broader interest in vintage/retro Arab popular culture. It is now common to find DJs sampling from the golden oldies for their next hip hop beat or dance remix.⁷² YouTube views in the millions suggest an appealing new aesthetic. At the same time, such productions work upon the potency of the past, of the old masters of Arab song, "the absent who remain present," thus offering fresh sites for research on fandom and nostalgia in the region.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Joel Gordon and the IJMES reviewers for their valuable feedback on this article. I am grateful to the American Research Center in Egypt and its support of this project over the years. A final word of appreciation goes to the family and fans of Abd al-Halim Hafiz, who have generously shared their time, stories, and pictures with me.

⁷¹ Walid al-Dashluti, personal communication, 7 August 2023.

⁷² See, for example, "Party Moseqar Remix PART 1," YouTube, 8 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZQy31Nlk5U&ab_channel=palmtherapysounds.com; "Ahwak D33pSoul Edit," YouTube, 13 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxphL6zO-R8>.

Cite this article: Nicholas Mangialardi (2024). "Egyptian Fan Culture and the Afterlife of 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 56, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743824000102>