MOHAMMAD MURSHED NAGI: A MAJOR YEMENI MUSICIAN

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The outstanding Yemeni musician of the twentieth century, Mohammad Murshed Nagi, fondly called Abu Ali, al-Murshidi or simply Murshidi, was born on 6th November 1929 in Shaikh Othman, Aden. His mother, Orla Abdi, was Somali and his father from the village of Ma’afer al-Showatjah in Hujarijah. His father had migrated from the Yemeni Imamate and settled in Aden where he worked in sea-salt manufacturing, first as a labourer later rising to become a supervisor.

Murshidi’s early years were joyful; his mother was his anchor and colourer. Her death in his final year of primary school devastated him and coloured his life for a considerable time. After learning the entire Qur’an at the madrasah of Faqih Ahmed al-Gabali, he entered Shaikh Othman’s government primary school. Here he met a number of people who were to become influential intellectuals later in life and started life-long friendships with Mohammad Saeed Muswut (who later become a founder member of the Teachers Union and the Aden Trade Union Congress, ATUC), Othman Abdo Mohammad, Saad Qaid, and sportsman Abdul Razzaq Ma’tooq. His long list of friends included poets such as Mohammad Saeed Garadah, Abdullah Hadi Subait and Lutfi Jaffer Aman, and many others in Aden’s thriving literary world, in politics and in ordinary life. His primary school teacher, Ahmed Hassan Abdul-Lateef discovered his talent and encouraged him to sing. His first public singing performance was at his primary school.

His family’s lack of funds and lack of a patron to intercede on their behalf limited the scope of his early education. After primary school he had a few brief and unsettled periods of schooling in the Keith Falconer Mission Hospital School in Shaikh Othman, St. Joseph’s Catholic School in Crater (madrasah al-badri, The Padre School) and an apprenticeship with Saleh Hassan Turki followed. Turki was a teacher, singer and an accomplished musician. His schools offered teaching of the Qur’an, as well as standard primary, middle and secondary education. Here Murshidi received a good grounding in English. However, self-education became his life-long mission. He was still only sixteen when his father followed local custom and arranged for his marriage. In 1948, aged seventeen, his first son, Ali, was born; a year later the marriage was dissolved.

To earn an income and obtain a clerkship certificate, he sought employment with Aramco in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Soon he fell ill with TB. Before the advent of streptomycin in 1950, treatment involved eighteen months recuperation in a sanatorium which he underwent in late 1948 in Shaikh Othman under Dr. E. Cochrane; he made a full recovery. Music ran in his family. His father had a good voice, and his older half-brother played the simsimiya, a hand-held four or six string lyre (see picture on page 42). Both gave him his first singing lessons. Initially he played the drum (tabla) in musical bands that were an essential component of wedding celebrations. He absorbed a great deal of the art of singing and musical techniques from the numerous singers and musicians he played with. He also listened to shellac1 records on gramophones. For a period he sang, accompanying lute players. His neighbour, Ahmed Quradi, gave him his first oud which Murshidi quickly mastered. Shortly after that he created his own band with whom he sang.

As Murshidi became better known, Idris Hanbalah, a teacher, labour union activist and archivist, recommended him as a member of the Aden Musical Club which had been established in 1948. The poet Garadah suggested that Murshidi compose his own music and presented him with his beautifully composed and evocative poem ‘be-yah waqafatun’ (It is a Pause). In 1951 Murshidi surprised and captivated the audience with his first musical composition inspired by Garadah’s ‘be-yah waqafatun’. He sang a new kind of melodious and passionate love melody that brought fresh meaning to a single moment of furtive love in Aden. It launched him as a serious composer/singer.

The arrival of Radio in Aden in 1954 instantly gave artists like Murshidi a much wider audience both in terms of numbers and of geographical

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1 Shellac is a resin used to make records during the era of 78-rpm records.
coverage. Previously, artists had performed live in confined traditional spaces in social clubs or diwans, in school or cinema theatres and mostly at weddings in makhdaras. Murshidi recognised that radio turned him from an amateur into a professional artist.

Like all artists of the day, his were labours of love spiced by intense competition to innovate and excel. However, his art did not provide a living income, so he and other artists sought various salaried posts, a few in teaching. His non-musical career included the post of secretary to Deputy Sultan Hussein bin Abdullah al-Fadlhi in 1950, and teacher and deputy head at al-Nahda al-Arabia School in Shaikh Othman. In 1956 he returned to Abyan as secretary to Sultan Abdullah Othman al-Fadlhi with whom he traveled across Europe. By now he was already an accomplished musician. While working for the Fadlul Sultan in Zinzibar, he was happy to play his lute (oud) on request in the afternoons. His individual style of playing, his sweet and distinctive voice, and the clarity of his lyrical expression defined him as a musician. In 1959, he returned to office work in British Petroleum (BP).

In 1958 Aden was predominantly Arab but was also a multicultural and multiracial melting pot. It was the time of an apogee of a cultural flowering and economic prosperity, accompanied by a fair degree of freedom of expression. I attended the premiere of his song ya-dhalem (You unjust oppressor). Taking Abdullah Hadi Subait’s lyrics he composed and delivered a rousing memorable anthem. It vividly portrayed the plight of the oppressed Yemeni people and served notice of their striving for freedom. His ya-dhalem and ya-biladi (Lutfi Aman’s ‘Oh my Country’) epitomised a new openly political attitude. Such songs challenged both the colonial and the imamate ruling systems simultaneously. In his an J in new love songs he was not alone.

The period between the 1940s and the mid-1960s saw the birth and flowering of Aden’s new cultural and political elite. Other musicians, composers and singers, Ahmed Qassim, Abdullah Hadi Subait, but especially Mohammad Mohsen Atroosh and many other artists, writers, poets and satirists also chanted to the new rhythms and freer expressions of love between men and women. They also voiced incessant calls for freedom from the imamate rule in the North and for independence in South Arabia.

Musicians and singers such as Khalil Muhammad Khali and Salem Ba Madhaf had a distinctively languid Adeni style. Ahmed Qassim and others, influenced by the Egyptians, used musical notes and introduced mixed gender choruses and new orchestral sounds and styles. Using transparent metaphors, they sang of subtle encounters between men and women beyond the traditional restrictions. They went beyond the fawjan and the Makhdirah amti took their works to a wider audience on the public stage. Murshidi consistently contributed to this cultural renaissance. He worked closely with many including perhaps the only famous local performer of monologues and satirist Foud al-Sharif. The two took their work to East Africa to connect with Arabs and Yemenis there, and Murshidi also took his band to the Gulf and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

He differed from his musical contemporaries with his deep interest in analysing the legacy of works and his efforts in reviving traditional Yemeni songs. Referring to their origins, he coined the term the ‘true colours of Yemeni song’ the Sana`ami, Lihej, Hadhrami and Yahi. He also modernised the Sana`am song beyond its narrow traditional confines and

*The term makhdirah amti cover both j ceromum. ** cvtir i to the temporary building structure erected in the three to hold the celebration.*
was the first to popularise the Tihami song. In 1959, he published his first book Aghaneena al-sha'biyyah (Our Traditional/popular Songs); a rich source on musicians and poets of the day.

He showed great respect and admiration for his talented band, orchestra and chorus who, like him, performed without written musical notes. A versatile artist, he composed and sang across a number of Arabic musical scales and styles to poems in classical Arabic as well as lyrics in various dialects. Much of the latter was allegorical. He translated old and current Yemeni hardships and projected them into the political arena and common consciousness. In a recent interview he described himself fundamentally 'as a political man whose art was not created for entertainment but to deliver political statements'.

His strongest political comment was through his anthems in the period of transition from the Imamate and colonial rule to independence. In the mid-1960s his art and fame went beyond Yemen. He visited the Gulf States and collaborated with many Gulf artists and a number of others, including Mohammad Abdo and the Lebanese singer Fahd Ballan. The latter sang Murshidi's love melody ya najm ya samir. He continued to contribute in the various and difficult post-independence upheavals and transformations in the People's Republic of South Yemen (PRSY) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Perhaps somewhat excluded in the earlier post-independence years, it was in 1980s PDRY that he became a Member of Parliament and President of the Federation of Yemeni Artists. Then, in Aden, he also licensed new musicians. In 1977 he turned into song the overtly political poem by Sultan al-Sareemi, Nasheen, which was critical of the regime in the YAR and in praise of the PDRY. But Murshidi added a final verse 'and do not believe the league of our uncle Rashwan' which was censored in the South for its thinly veiled criticism of then President Salem Rubai' Ali (Salmeen) whose politics Murshidi disliked. A few years later, he was encouraged by Ali Nasser Mohammad and colleagues to sing it for its criticism of Northern failure to care for its citizens.

Another moment of dissent was his scoring a tune to Abdul Fattah Ismail's words Taj al nahar (Day's Crown) when Ismail was being exiled to Russia. Having sung the song to Abdul Fattah when he was still in power, Murshidi recorded and distributed it discreetly when the leader was in exile, sailing close to the moment's changed political wind. In Hijariyah dialect and rich in symbolism Taj al nahar was published under Ismail's pen name dhb Yezan, after Saif bin dhu Yezan (516–574), the Himyarite king who rescued Yemen from the Ethiopians. Much of Murshidi's best social commentary during the PDRY period found expression in dialect songs such as layh ya-booy (Oh why my friend?) a symbolic question superficially expressing rejection by a romantically loved one but equally on being ignored or side-lined.

In 1983, supported by then president Ali Nasser, he organised a major and somewhat controversial Arab Conference on the Yemeni Humaini3 and Andalusian origins of Arab m-wash-ahat (a post-classical form of Arab poetry, arranged in stanzas).

From 1990 onwards, soon after Yemeni unification, he held the post of Adviser to the Minister of Culture. Between 1997 and 2003 he was a member of the House of Representatives, in Sana'a. This was a period when he was much decorated by Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the Arab Institute in Paris and, on at least two occasions, by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, first in 1982 and then in 1997.

He wrote and also gave a number of interviews about wedding celebrations or makhdarah and the intimate role these ceremonies played in the development of Yemeni music. At these events guests, concealing money in their right hand, walk a carpeted central reservation flanked by qat-chewing men comfortably socialising whilst reclining against firm cushions. Musical bands loudly entertain the guests with old and new songs. High on the platform at the farthest end of the makhdarah, the resplendent reclining groom-to-be, chewing qat too, receives his guests with a smile. Shaking right hands, the money is adroitly accepted and transferred to the collection box. The guest then joins the others to chew qat and socialise. It was one way for family, relatives, friends and members of a community to aid each other without embarrassment. Repayment would come soon enough at other makhdarahs. Today the structures are often replaced by modern weddings and entertainment halls and live music by digital reproductions.

Murshidi expounded on the significant role the makhdarah played in keeping the traditional Yemeni song alive in his substantial work al-ghinna al-yamani al-qadeem wa mash'a-beeru, (Old Yemeni Song and its Eminent Singers). Live music was central to wedding celebrations. It sometimes lasted uninterrupted for three days and nights. Demand on musicians

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3 Humaini is one of two genres of traditional Yemeni poetry, often sung with the oud and normally performed by professionals. It is characterised by being colloquial and not adhering strictly to classical rules of language and versification.
was such that none would re-sing someone else’s song. Each could use another’s score or tune but applied his own creative virtuoso variation. Such intense competition ensured the creative development of the Yemeni song. Lyricists also competed to better the others in love songs and nationalist compositions.

The post-independence political realities in southern Arabia led many to leave the area taking their musical memories. Hearing Murshidi’s recordings evoke pleasant memories of music and song reminding one of an Aden of bygone days. When researching this article, many people confirmed this orally and in some cases in writing. Murshidi’s major role as part of a large collective musical memory has helped them retain an important emotional connection with their Aden. Despite the challenges he faced, Murshidi accomplished much, especially in music and writing. His distinctive voice and range of musical works defined him to the public, brought him his best achievements and arguably led to his involvement in politics.

Murshidi also published four valuable documentary books including aghani Sha’abiah (Popular Traditional Songs), al-ghinaa al-yamani al-qadeem wa masha-beeruhi (Yemeni Song and Its Renowned Singers), and safahat min aldhibrayat (Pages of Memories). His last book oughnhat wa hikayat (Songs and Stories) was completed shortly before his death. It contains nuggets of the tales behind the songs and promises to be a valuable source for future researchers as well as of considerable interest to anyone interested in the history of Yemeni music. He also wrote a great deal on music and its art in newspapers. These need detailed collation and appropriate archiving, which his family is in the process of doing. His impact in the post-independence political arena awaits detailed analysis.

Perhaps it is fitting to end with musicologist Anderson Bakewell’s lines on Murshidi’s musical works:

As a musician he was certainly an accomplished representative of the ‘southern style’, fluid of rhythm and sweet of voice, but amongst the great names of post-1970 Yemeni musical artists, he stands out, for as well as being a fine musician and bard, he was also an author. His book al-ghinaa al-yamani al-qadeem wa masha-beeruhi is a comprehensive study of traditional Yemeni songs and features biographical material on their most accomplished practitioners of the twentieth century.

Murshidi died on 7 February 2013 from chronic heart illness and was buried the same day, thus his family avoided State official involvement. His life touched many and he will be missed by those who knew him as well as others who only knew him through his art. Allah Yarhamuh.

"Erratum: Syrian-born Fahd al-Ballan was described here erroneously as being Lebanese, many thanks to Ashraf Girgah for drawing attention to it".