

REEM KELANI

SEATTLE CHILDREN'S FESTIVAL GLOBAL DIVAS SHOW MAY 15TH, 2008

Some of the best music I've seen in Seattle at any venue over the last few years has been at the Seattle Children's Festival. Last night, during the 2008 version was no exception. I'm a fool for the music of Colombia and Petrona Martinez and her ensemble were stellar. Savannah Fuentes is a native daughter who's chosen the long and arduous road of becoming a flamenco dancer has all the right moves to make your heart drop. My wife pointed out to me the next morning that the cantadora was named Keiko who clapped some mean palmas. Palestinian singer Reem Kelani was a new name in my world, but the woman was so endearing I'll never forget her.

Let's face it; this is not a great time for Arab-US relations. But humans know deep inside that what their governments do don't often reflect what the citizens feel. Kelani brought that point home over and over again in a program that exposed her love of her country, the music of the Arab world and the beauty of the contributions that world has made. She's a sweet and easy sip of tea that introduces you to the village, the city, and the world she marvels at. Born in Manchester England and raised in Kuwait, Kelani has researched the music of the refugee camps of Palestine and Lebanon. She's a spokeswoman for her heritage and it was a treat to be introduced into her world that to Americans is exotic for no other reason than it's not readily available to us. Her perfect English was witty and her repartee hilarious. Once during the show she explained how she had been asked to include the other two groups for the evening's finale. She said about Spanish Flamenco "No problem, remember the Arab world ruled Spain longer than the Spaniards have". And then she added "No problem with Colombian Petrona Martinez, for me she's Mother Africa".

In some ways the music was a surprise to me containing as much of a jazz element as it does. It probably should not have, as the Palestinian neighbors in Israel have been producing some of the most exciting new jazz coming out these days. Kelani's group was comprised of trap drums manned by a Brit, an obviously classically trained pianist who played folk and conservatory both in the same phrase and an Egyptian violin player that when added up into a whole reminded me of some vagabond gypsy troupe that had spent more than a minute at the casbah and had reveled at more than one wedding that lasted for days.

It was another surprise to me that Seattle has a strong Palestinian contingent. There were fans in the audience singing along who obviously relished the chance to reunite with their homeland and during one very touching moment during the performance of a village wedding song many in the audience led a mass rush to the dance floor, where with joined hands they danced the traditional dance of the ceremony. There was so much love and joy in the room that tears were surely brought to many happy eyes.

Kelani is certainly a cheerleader for her love of Arab music and I was glad to be at her game of introducing us to the beauty of her language and music. Never once did I feel like an outsider and more than once I thought she was performing just for me. She's bringing her cards to the table in an effort for us to recognize not only the vastness of her knowledge about the music of the Arab world but also for the right for her community to live in peace with her neighbors. Music is a powerful weapon for healing and Reem Kelani is a master of seducing us gently into her thoughts and goals.

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