



*Belly Dance*

*New England*

## **The Bash at Basha**

by Amina Delal\*

I'm still smiling when I recall the special event I attended a couple Saturdays past (March 19). It was so much fun. The full moon was smiling down on the Basha Café where it was Lebanon in Cambridge. Could have been Zahle, in fact, the hometown of the featured entertainer (and my favorite regional singer), Mr. George Chamoun.

I realize that the majority of you don't even recognize the name (unless you're a student of Katia's). He doesn't often make public appearances these days, so it was a special treat. But if I told you he was Tony "Drum Attack" Chamoun's dad, would that give you some context? Well, he is indeed the grand patriarch of a beautiful family for whom Tony has played since he was a teen.

Both the Chamoun boys loom large in my memories of the best of times at The Middle East, where Central Square raqqed into the wee hours, as the music (and smoke) flooded out the door and down the block. It was there along with the other clubs, haflis, weddings, and parties where Tony cut his teeth under his father's careful tutelage. Well, how else was he going to become such a smoking drummer? It was his famous father who showed him the ropes and enjoyed considerable celebrity while doing so.

I was there, too, and remember so many nights when we had waaaay too much fun. The sound boomed and the stage, the whole place, would shake with the stamping of those strapping Lebanese lads in the dabke line, squished up shoulder-to-shoulder with not an inch to spare. And in the middle was George, cranking out the hits, his beads in hand, with his marvelous black handlebar moustache, his mawal ringing, he began, "Oaf, foe, foe...". It was great and he was the big star. These were the exciting nights of my belly dance days of yore, making for golden memories that one remembers through a haze of smoke and exhausted contentment.

Never a bit aloof for his fame, George was besieged by admirers whom he always acknowledged. It was like you see in those movie clips where the singer enters, graciously greeting the crowd, shaking hands and toasting them as someone hands him a drink. And, yes, we did tip back an aperitif or two, making for a few nights when I didn't exactly remember getting home.

He was a charmingly bad influence too. "Here, Amina, have an arak. It's good for the throat."

"But George," I'd say, "I dance, I don't sing."

"Oh, that's okay. It's still good for the throat."

And so it was, too, at Basha, where the evening's festivities included drinks, a yummy dinner, the shows, and then dabke 'till you drop. After the meal they brought out the narghiles and, (no, you di'int) yes we did indulge in some of that as well. For when in Beirut do as the Beirutis do. I know, you're thinking "eieuuuuuu" and certainly it's not for everyone. But it was totally in the right time,

place, and spirit. So there we were, puffing away on the hubbly-bubbly. It made me dizzy but I found it enjoyable (although I looked very scary on Sunday).

The opening singer was a young man named Albert Agha. He was new to me, but he resonated well with the crowd and had all the girls up dancing in their Latina-tight, extra-short cocktail dresses with lots of big fabulous shining hair and chandelier earrings, carefully balancing on those outrageously high heels (I don't know how they do that). And they stayed up there his entire set singing along, having a great time. I'd have liked to dance too but there wasn't the space to even squeeze in.



*Tony and George Chamoun. Photograph by Michael Baxter.*

It was like old times, the kind that many budding bellies don't get a chance to experience and really should to get the bigger picture of the genre as celebrated by the people from the old country. Because it is different when one attends an event outside our dance community. And partying with the people from the bona fide culture is the best way to put it all in perspective. Even if you do not plan to perform in a nightclub, you will better appreciate the music when you see a live band, the singers, and how an eager crowd responds. And if you feel like an outsider, don't worry about it, just go anyway.

You may feel like a tourist at the onset, but once you're settled in you'll see that they're too busy having fun to pay much attention to the likes of you. And they do know how to have a good time, so why not join them?

This kind of scene used to be the norm, but these in days of minimalism in live entertainment, having a bigger band with two singers becomes an event. You are selling yourself short if you don't experience this at least once, especially when there is singer featured. The vocalist is the undisputed star in Middle-Eastern entertainment and receives most all of the crowd's acclaim. Even movie stars want to be singers and often play them in films.

So Albert was the warm-up act and by the time George came on, the audience was ready to cheer and did. There he was appearing quite unchanged for the years, elegantly dressed and in excellent voice. The club resonated with his mawal, "Oaf, foe, foe..." and the room exploded with resounding ovation. He sang all the songs I learned from his renditions of them. And although this audience was largely too young to remember G.C. in his heyday, the response remained the same. The man's still got it. His charisma and his rich vocal prowess excited the crowd all the same. Because when you're good, you're good. And he was. I didn't have to listen through the filter of my memories. His music was as fresh as ever and we had a blast all anew.

Nights like this still do happen and we, in New England, are so lucky to even have ongoing live Middle-Eastern entertainment. Dancers in other parts of the country would love to be able to go out and hear the music whether or not they were featuring a dance performance.

As a dance enthusiast why wouldn't you want to avail yourself of such an opportunity? Especially if you aspire to become a pro, this needs to be part of your education. After all, this is going to be your scene. Fortunately it is still out there and you can get that schooling firsthand the way we did. That way you'll get a sense of how it works and will have much less to worry about when you're ready to be the dancer.

And even if you aren't headed in that direction and prefer to embrace the more avant-garde branches of belly-based dance genres (what I like to call the outer fringe), wouldn't you at least like to see from whence it all has come? It's not *I Dream of Jeannie* nor is it like any other manifestation contrived in Hollywood (although that's why we wear two-piece costumes).

Go out and see for yourself even if the venue doesn't feature a dancer. Hear the music (as they play it, not like the CD), see the shows, observe the crowd, and how they express themselves in their enjoyment. What happens in the nightclub is absolutely different from a recital or other dance-community function. This is a very important distinction to make and you'll see what I mean when you experience partying with people from countries where belly dance is part of their culture.

It's why I couldn't wait to see George sing again. For me merely being in that environment is life-affirming. Plus I get to relish my past and now have a happy new occasion to cherish. So for however long you wish to have Middle-Eastern dance (or its cousin) in your life, I encourage you to participate in as much as you can while you're at it. It's adventures like these that made for the happy memories I keep close to my heart.

Now it is your turn. You won't have fond remembrances if you don't make your own. Go out and have a good time. If you're shy, organize a posse. Make it a class field trip. If your teacher won't go with you, contact me and I will. Even if you feel like you're in a foreign country, make the journey.

There are a number of Boston area venues featuring live music regularly on varying nights of the week. You can even plan a little tour to sample how different they are because each setting has its own flavor that's a little different per the band's ethnicity and repertoire. Off the top of my head I can name the following (and I'm not even in the loop):

The Athenian Corner  
207 Market Street  
Lowell, MA  
978.458.5052

Live band and dancers featured Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Easy, breezy, and never sleazy, this is a welcoming, family-run place where, even if you go alone, you'll feel at home. Nice menu, not terribly pricey, full bar and English is the primary language spoken.

Basha Café  
26 New Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
617.245.0440

Music Wednesday through Saturday. Visit a different country with each night's offering, usually featuring a dancer. Usually the food is good and the drinks likewise. Quaff a narghile on the terrace on a warm summer night.

Byblos  
678 Washington Street  
Norwood, MA 02062  
781.762.8998  
781.278.0000

Live music with a dancer on Fridays, sometimes Saturdays as well (call to make sure). Wonderful dinners. Try their falafel; it is superior. They have a nice wine list and very good service. If you find other places too loud, they keep a lid on it at what we refer to as "The Beeb".

The Red Fez  
1222 Washington Street  
Boston, MA  
617.338.6060

Live band on Fridays with dancer on Saturdays. Big bar, nice food, and cocktails. Look for good directions online with some parking available in the rear.

Sahara Restaurant  
143 Highland Avenue  
Worcester, MA 01609  
508.798.2181

Featuring the Ed Melikian Ensemble the second Saturday of each month. There is no dancer but you won't miss her, as the music is superb. The crowd loves it even though it is not ethnic but a big mix of all ages - from cute college boys to Meg, this darling Armenian lady in her 80s - comes every month

and dances all night. Go for the music and hizzy your ass off. It is well worth the journey and you'll probably see me there. The Sahara doesn't maintain a website but you can get the gist of things from a page Eddie maintains on a social web site.

NARA Hookah Lounge  
248 Atwells Avenue  
Providence, RI 02903  
401.273.NARA(6272)

Nara is a hookah (narghile) lounge in Providence where they feature music on Sundays and Wednesdays. There is nothing listed about dancers. My suggestion is to call and inquire. Myself, I haven't had the pleasure of visiting but it looks beautiful from the photos online. **Caveat Emptor:** One might think this a "no-brainer" but I'm going to say it anyway: This is not the place to go if you're allergic or suffer from smoke. It is what they are all about, so venture elsewhere if this is a problem for you.

So you can get started from here. Don't stint yourself in the real-world experience department. Even if you hate it, you can say you've been there twice (the first and the last time) but you ventured forth and I'm proud of you!

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