

Story of a Stamp 6: You're my life: the Om Kolthoum philatelic story

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Om Kolthoum (also Oum Kalthum or Umm Kalthoum), 1904-1975, was the Egyptian singer who mesmerized Arab audiences from the Gulf to Morocco for half a century. One of the most famous Arab singers and public personalities of the 20th century, she was born Fatima Ibrahim as-Sayed El-Beltagi in Tummay al Zahayrah, north of Cairo in Dakahlia governorate.

She began singing in her father's religious ensemble and quickly captivated audiences with her powerful voice and emotive delivery. Her career spanned the 1920s to the 1970s, during which she recorded hundreds of songs blending classical Arabic poetry, romantic ballads and patriotic anthems. Known for her unmatched vocal control and improvisational skill, she earned titles like *Kawkab el-Sharq* (Star of the Orient), Daughter of the Nile and Egypt's Fourth Pyramid.

In 1936 she made her first film, *Weddad* (Song of Hope), playing the title role. The film's success turned Misr Studios into the top film studio in Egypt.

Oum Kolthoum's monthly live radio concerts became a cultural ritual across the Arab world, with streets emptying as people gathered to listen. Her music was deeply intertwined with Egypt's national identity, especially during times of political change. Her funeral in 1975 drew over four million mourners, making it the largest public gathering in Egyptian history.



A visit to Giza, and the 1975 stamp adorning a CD case



The first stamp to honour her was a 20 mills value (SG 1251) when she died in 1975, using the spelling Om Kolthoum. More were to follow: in 2000, 25th anniversary of her death, a 20pi stamp (SG 2148) was issued, and this year, the 50th anniversary, a LE20 miniature sheet, now using the spelling Om Kulthum.

Enta Omri (You're my Life), released in March 1965, is one of Om Kolthoum's best known hits, immersing the audience in a tale of true love. Listen to it (with a contemporary photograph and translation) here. Oum Kulthum // أم كلثوم - You're My Life // أنت عمري

The Egyptian film director Marwan Hamed, best known internationally for the groundbreaking epic *The Yacoubian Building*, more recently filmed an Om Kolthoum biopic, *El Set* (The Lady).

If you're in Cairo, visit the Om Kolthoum museum on Roda Island, which is in the Monastirli Palace, dating from 1851. Among the displays are two of Om Kolthoum's glamorous trademarks, the scarf she held in her left hand during performances and a pair of diamond-studded cat-eye sunglasses. People say you can sometimes hear the ghostly voice of Om Kolthoum even when her records aren't being played!