

---

## When Palestine Played the Palace: Vaudeville Interprets the Balfour Declaration

*Charles A. Kennedy*

During the course of World War I European diplomats concerned themselves with international treaties and secret protocols that would determine the future of the Middle East. The interpretation of these events at the popular level fell, inter alia, to the vaudeville performers who had direct access to the American public in over two thousand theaters across the United States. In particular, the subliminal message of the songs they sang lingered in the mind long after the house lights had come up and the audiences had left.

This is a selection of songs about Palestine and the end of the Ottoman Empire that were played on the vaudeville circuits between 1912 and 1922, the years just before the Balfour Declaration and down to the Treaty of Lausanne.

### I

First, a word about vaudeville almost a century ago. It was the ethnic melting pot of live entertainment, so songs had to reflect that reality. The songs also reflected the events of the day, whether politics, inventions or sports. The Middle East comes into the mix with that perennial attraction of oriental womanhood, Cleopatra, who gets a new pedigree in vaudeville, thanks to this song popularized by Al Jolson.

---

Charles A. Kennedy  
Professor of Religion, Emeritus  
*Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University,*  
*Blacksburg, Virginia, USA*

**CLEOPATRA**

Music by Harry Tierney

Words by Alfred Bryan

©1917 Jerome H. Remick & Co.

You've heard of Cleopatra who lived down beside the Nile,  
She made a "Mark" of Anthony and won him with her  
smile.

They say she was Egyptian, but I've reason to construe  
She was Jewish and Hawaiian with a dash of Irish, too.

CHORUS: When she stroll'd with bold Mark Anthony on  
Egypt's yellow sands,  
You could see that she was Jewish by the  
motion of her hands.  
She would shake her hands and shoulders off,  
That's the way she made her "muscle tough"—  
I think she was Hawaiian from Honolulu too,  
She would dance like this to the Yaka hoola,  
hicky doo-la, Yaka hoola, hicky doo.  
Her mother's name was Cleo and her father's  
name was Pat,  
So they called her Cleopatra, Now what do  
you think of that?

She had a thousand lovers in the true Egyptian style,  
When she grew sick of one she threw him to the crocodile.  
They say she died heart-broken after many sad regrets,  
I really think she died from smoking Milo Cigarettes.

CHORUS: When she strolled with bold Mark Anthony  
etc.

---

## II

On the political scene Zionism was a growing movement in Europe and America. Here are two songs, published in 1915 and 1916, perhaps for the Zionist Convention held in Boston in June, 1915. These songs give different faces to the movement as it developed in America. "Come Home To Palestine" is essentially a march in the manner of Sousa, but with a verse that sounds closer to the Victorian choral music of John Stainer. This song is in English, but it should be noted that there were many songs written at this time for the Yiddish Theater that supported the idea of a Return to Zion.

### COME HOME TO PALESTINE

Zionist Campaign Song

Words by Samuel H. Borofsky

Music by Isaac Goldberg

©1915 Zionist Bureau for New England, Boston

Not far from old Jerusalem, Where milk and honey  
flowed,  
Not far from Israel's Temple, Where Jehovah's spirit  
glowed,  
In the Valley of the Jordan Which mem'ry holds divine,  
I hear a voice that's calling Come home to Palestine.

CHORUS: Come home to Palestine, Come home to me,  
Come home to Palestine, O'er land and sea.  
Oh, Come home to skies of blue, Come home  
if your heart is true,  
Homeward come to Palestine, I'm waiting for  
you.

Not far from ancient Zion's mount, In the olive treasure  
trove,  
Not far from Rishon LeZion With its golden orange  
groves,  
Is the garden of Tel-aviv Where the exile builds his shrine,  
I hear a voice that's calling Come home to Palestine.

CHORUS: Come home to Palestine....

The Zionist dream was tempered, however, for an American audience by taking the American dream of a cottage with a rose garden as heaven-on-earth and re-locating it to Palestine, where it would, of course, become a "palace." Building a home for Alice (not exactly a Jewish name) among the flowers is the ideal, yet the stereotypical desert sands are near-by. Missing is any mention of Palestinians, Arabs, Turks, etc. or the political realities of the day. The composer was from Keene, New Hampshire, so he had only his imagination and a set of stereotypes to work with to produce this Christian-Zionist version of life in the Holy Land.

#### I'M BUILDING A PALACE IN PALESTINE

Words and music by Richard Howard

©1916, Daly Music Publisher, Boston

My thoughts are turning over the sea To Palestine, sweet  
Alice mine  
My heart is yearning once more to be Among the flowers  
in that land of ours—  
Beautiful girl of my dreams, dear, Somehow or other it  
seems, dear.

---

CHORUS: I'm building a palace in Palestine,  
A beautiful palace for you  
(just for you, you know I love you true)  
Where we can live when we grow old,  
Where we can love till the desert sands grow  
cold,  
There in a garden of roses  
I will be faithful and true,  
That's why I'm building, sweet Alice, a beautiful  
palace  
In Palestine, sweet gal o' mine,  
For you, for you.

### III

In many of the songs about the Middle East the attraction for an American (mostly male) audience was the endless supply of lovely ladies from the harem or the cities. If making the desert bloom was not enough of an incentive for young men to go east, the women might be. Here is a story about a lady by the name of Rose (this was the year of “Abie’s Irish Rose” on Broadway), and, as you will hear, the music is very romantic. “Bells of the temple” ring [in Jerusalem?]  
—an “orientalism” that blends the Far East and the Middle East by having the ringing of church bells in a temple or a mosque. Other than the title and the first line of the chorus, there is no indication of the land of Palestine in the song: it is a straightforward example of “boy meets girl” with a total absence of any specifics about Palestine itself, no doubt because, like the builder of that palace in Palestine, the lyricist had never been there.

ROSE OF PALESTINE

Music by Harold Dixon

Words by Robert E. Harty

©1922 Dixon-Lane Music Pub. Co., Chicago

Dearest, the shades of night appear  
Bells of the temple ringing clear,  
While I sing songs of love's devotion,  
Filled with dreams of you.

CHORUS:   Rose of Palestine, Say that you'll be mine—  
          My heart's calling, ever calling,  
          I love you Thru each fleeting hour, oh, fairest  
          flow'r,  
          Come let the love-light shine In your eyes  
          divine,  
          Shades of night seem to beckon me,  
          Back to you far across the sea,  
          Rose of Palestine.

Quite a different case is Lena. In this case the information is very specific, but stereotypes continue to set the scene. The song is a put-down of a Jewish girl from the Bronx who is over-weight, but a supposedly talented musician who gets a "gig" in Palestine. There she meets an Arab named Yousoff who falls in love with her, but we never learn if she returns the favor. Since Yousoff is an Arab, he of course has a camel to ride across the desert sands.

---

PALESTEENA / LENA FROM PALESTEENA

(rep. LENA FROM PALESTEENA [Gem Standard Edition with guitar chords], 1947)

Words and music by Con Conrad and J. Russell Robinson

©1920, renewed 1947, Shapiro Bernstein

In the Bronx of New York City Lives a girl, she's not so pretty,  
Lena is her name;  
Such a clever girl is Lena, How she plays a concertina,  
Really it's a shame;  
She's such a good musician She got a swell position  
To go across the sea to entertain,  
And so they shipped poor Lena Way out to Palesteena,  
But now I hear that she don't look the same:  
They say that

CHORUS: Lena is the Queen O' Palesteena, Just because  
they like her concertina,  
She plays it day and night, She plays with all  
her might,  
She never gets it right, But how they love it,  
want more of it;  
I heard her play, once or twice, Oh! murder!  
still it was nice;  
She was fat but she got leaner Pushing on her  
concertina,  
Down old Palesteena Way.

Lena's girl friend Arabella Let her meet an Arab fella,  
She thought he was grand,  
On a camel's back a-swayin' You could hear Miss Lena  
playin'

O'er the desert sand;  
She didn't play such new ones, For all she knew were blue  
ones,  
Still Yousoff sat and listened by his tent,  
And as he tried to kiss her She heard that Arab whisper,  
"Oh! Lena, how I love your instrument."  
They say that

CHORUS: Lena is the Queen O' Palesteena, Just because  
they like her concertina,  
Each movement of her wrist, Just makes them  
shake and twist,  
They simply can't resist, Her music funny gets  
the money;  
There's nottin' sounds like it should, So rotten  
it's really good;  
All the girls there dress like Lena, Some wear  
oatmeal, some farina,  
Down old Palesteena Way.

#### IV

The Turkish War was a totally different experience for American audiences than the war in Europe. The poppies of Flanders Field masked the horrors of the trench warfare on the Western Front. But as soon as the Middle East was involved, the old stereotypes take over. The Orient is the land of sultans and harems and all it takes to cause a ruckus is to send over a different sort of Turk, one described in the Oxford English Dictionary as "anyone having qualities attributed to the Turks: a cruel, rigorous, or tyrannical man,...one who treats his wife hardly [harshly]; a bad tempered or unmanageable man;" in other words an Irishman.



---

MY TURKISH OPAL (FROM CONSTANTINOPLE)

Music by Edna Williams

Words by Arthur Gillespie

©1912 Joseph W. Stern & Co.

An Irish Turk named Pat McGuirk was sent to the Turkish war,  
So off he went with his regiment upon a Turkish shore.  
They called upon the Sultan, but the Sultan turned them down,  
So they captured all the harems in Constantinople town.  
A girl whose name was Opal danced her way into Pat's heart.  
Said he, "I'd like to steal you and then from this land depart—

CHORUS: Be my little Turkish Opal from  
Constantinople,  
I'll be your little Irish Em'rald, and we'll have  
a wedding grand.  
I'll build a little hut in clover with shamrocks  
all over,  
You'll be Missus McGuirk and a regular Turk  
in Ireland."

Pat came back on a camel's back with saddle built for two,  
Said He, "A Turk who is named McGuirk in Ireland's  
nothing new!"  
They interviewed the Sultan and she begged for her  
release,  
But he chased them and their camel out of Turkey into  
Greece.  
They're living now in Ireland just outside the town of

Cork

And last Thanksgiving Pat brought home a Turkey and a  
Stork.

CHORUS: Be my little Turkish Opal from  
Constantinople, ...

The diplomats could argue about the boundaries of the dis-  
membered Ottoman Empire at the peace conference, but for  
vaudeville audiences there was only one thing that mattered:

#### GIVE ME THE SULTAN'S HAREM

Music by Abner Silver

Words by Alex Gerber

©1919 M. Witmark & Co.

I had a dream last night that was immense,  
I dreamed that I was at the Peace Conference,  
Where England and France and Italy  
Each got her share of her indemnity.  
And after they divided up the dish,  
They asked me if there's anything that I'd wish.  
I was so shy, I thought they'd die,  
When I made this reply:

CHORUS: Give me the Harem, the old Sultan's Harem,  
That's the only thing I crave.  
The Sultan's too old, for he's past eighty-three,  
And his thousand wives need a fellow like me.  
I'll never beat them, with kindness I'll treat  
them,  
And all that I ask is a trial;  
Imagine me sitting on a carpeted floor,

---

Telling my slave to bring me wife “Ninety  
Four.”  
I’ll be so gallant, I’m chucked full of talent,  
Won’t you give that Harem to me?

The diplomats all listened to my plea,  
They wondered just what was the matter with me,  
But I kept on asking for a trial,  
I tried to show them it was worth the while.  
Just then they asked if I was qualified,  
And I replied, “You folks will be satisfied,  
I’ll prove to you, that I’ll be true,  
But here’s what you must do:”

CHORUS: Give me the Harem, the old Sultan’s Harem,  
That’s the only thing I crave,  
I’ll take off the veils that they wear on their  
face,  
The young ones I’ll keep and the old ones I’ll  
chase.  
I’ll give them freedom, on garlic I’ll feed ‘em,  
So they can grow stronger for me,  
King Solomon was four hundred years when  
he died,  
If I live till forty three I’ll be satisfied,  
I’ll be a wizard, a real Harem lizard,  
Won’t you give the Harem to me?

ENCORE!

It becomes evident in the study of these songs that a set of stereotypes was utilized to depict the situation in Palestine for

the American audience. The discrepancies between the stereotypes and the realities on the ground still affect the way in which Americans view the contemporary circumstances in Israel/Palestine.

Here is the last word in political incorrectness about the Middle East. Without fear or favor, without good sense or good taste, this song by Ray Noble lampoons male and female, Turk and Arab, Persian and Pakistani. The range of its targets is matched only by the inaccuracy of its information.

#### TURKISH DELIGHT

Music by Ray Noble

Words by Max Kester

©1937 Cinephonic Music Co., Ltd.; ©1948 Campbell-Connelly, Inc.

Once there was a Caliph and he lived in old Baghdad,  
He led a most unhappy life, Be-Gum, Be-Gosh, Be-Gad;  
He couldn't sleep a wink at night, he had two hundred  
wives  
Who had to tell him stories otherwise they lost their lives.

CHORUS: Yah-ah-ah-ah, So the [first/next] wife told her  
tale.

Once there was a tourist who took a trip to Turkey,  
He went out for adventure when the night was dark and  
murky,  
He tried to kiss a Turkish girl, but she remarked, "My  
word,  
You may be fond of Turkey, but I'm not that kind of bird."

---

Sinbad was a sailor, and you know what sailors are!  
He sailed about the seven seas, but once he went too far.  
He saw a lovely mermaid a-combing out her locks,  
The naked truth upset him and he soon was on the rocks.

King Solomon, that wise old man, he had a thousand  
wives,  
He bought a lovely tourist bus [charabanc] to take them  
all for drives,  
The tourist bus broke down one night and here's where  
trouble starts,  
His wives were waiting in a row and he'd got no spare  
parts.

The Oriental beauties, they veil their pretty faces,  
Although they aren't so careful about some other places,  
They make whoopee and aren't found out and here's the  
reason why,  
A woman in a veil can never tell a bare-faced lie.

Cleopatra was a gal who always got her man,  
She wooed a certain Emir who lived in Pakistan.  
She wore her most exotic gown, she thought it would  
convince,  
It did all right—He put it on, she hasn't seen him since.

The Sultan of Morocco has a wonderful hareem,  
With wives of every colour from chocolate to cream.  
He's only got three-sixty-five and yet it makes him groan,  
For every time leap year comes round he has to sleep  
alone.

CHORUS: Yah-ah-ah-ah, So the last wife told her tale.