



Artist of the Month

# Rim Banna

A Unique Musician and Human  
Being Who Will Be Hugely Missed

By Suhail Khoury

It was a cloudy, grayish winter morning when I drove up to Nazareth in December of 2002 with Erik Hillestad, the famous Norwegian producer, to introduce him for the first time to Rim. I called her a few days earlier to tell her about Erik and to ask her if she would be willing to meet him. "Those foreigners," she said, "they come here with ulterior motives. I do not know what they want from me, and I do not like it." Rim was, of course, referring to the loads of foreign producers who usually come with big luring budgets to produce Israeli/Palestinian artistic collaborations under the so-called "peace-building" projects. Rim, as many Palestinians, saw this as a way to whitewash Israel's crimes and atrocities in front of the world, and was in no way willing to take part in any of it, regardless of the huge financial benefits that such endeavors could have brought her. I had to argue with her for about 10 to 15 minutes to convince her that this was a different kind of "foreigner" and that the mere fact that he was coming to record lullabies from the countries that President Bush had labeled the axis of evil said a lot about him and his project. Reluctantly she accepted. When we arrived, Erik wanted to record Rim's voice on a portable recording device that he had brought with him, so they went into another room to do that. When they came out of the short recording session, Erik was in tears, so moved by the power of Rim's voice. This was the impression Rim and her crystal-quality voice had on people. And this was the start of a prosperous musical relationship between Rim and Erik that resulted in numerous CD productions, the latest – *Voice of Resistance* – to be released this coming April, and tens of concerts worldwide.

I still remember the first time I met Rim, which was at Walid Abdulsalam's house in Ramallah in the late 1980s. She had come with her mother Zuhaira just after returning from Russia (Soviet Union at the time), where she had finished her musical studies. She sang for us with no accompaniment and was delightful. Later, in 1992, I invited Rim to perform at the first festival I organized which was the Birzeit Arts Festival. From that early start, she sang her own songs and made a huge impression on her audience. This resulted in a long-term musical relationship between us, as she became part of the programming of most of the festivals that I was involved in, including the Palestine International Festival, the Jerusalem Festival, and the Jasmin Festival.

Some criticized Rim because she did not sing in the Arabic traditional way, but this was what was unique about her. She sang in her own way, a style not like any other, inimitably distinctive. Rim's beautiful voice and the melodious songs she composed herself were not the only factors behind her success. She captivated audiences with her great charisma and stage presence, her beautiful smile, traditional dresses, and the dazzling silver accessories for which she was famous. The cherry that topped the cream on Rim's uniqueness was her unfaltering political fortitude that was expressed through her songs – the stand she took

against all kinds of injustice, whether in Palestine or anywhere else in the world. Like her voice, Rim's political views were always crystal clear. Being from Nazareth, she could have enjoyed the financial and logistical support of various Israeli cultural bodies. Rim, however, never went down that path. She always stood by her people and their struggles for freedom, and refused any kind of relationship with the occupiers. She was an inspiring figure to all her followers, who were in the millions all over the world. She was a phenomenal person, a very humble artist, and a down-to-earth singer who had become an icon of Palestinian resistance songs.

A week before Rim died, Rania, my wife, and I decided to visit her. As we stood by her hospital bed hardly daring to initiate conversation since she was so very frail, dozing off from time to time, it became apparent that this was our final goodbye. We later remembered her lovely home full of beautiful plants and exquisite scents of herbal teas and healthy vegetarian cuisine that she always offered when we visited. Nevertheless, and in an attempt to raise her spirits, we made it a point to say that we were waiting for her to release her new CD at the Jerusalem Festival next August. She looked at us with her beautiful distinctive smile and said, "Yes, of course." It seemed then that it was our spirits that needed salvation not hers, as Rim's morale was as powerful as ever.

One week later, on the morning of Saturday, March 24, 2018, we received the sad news that Rim had finally lost the long battle with cancer. As we prepared to leave Jerusalem for Nazareth, I asked Rania if she knew whether Rim was Christian or Muslim, just so I would know what type of funeral ceremony to expect. Christian, I think, she answered. Reflecting on that, I realized that after thirty years of knowing Rim, not knowing her religion was yet another aspect of her uniqueness. She was simply a wonderful human being whom everyone loved.