

Qantara.de – Dialogue with the Islamic World

The Arab Music Channel 4Shbab

Music for the Young That Is Pleasing to God

4Shbab, the first commercial Islamic music channel in the Arab world, has set itself the task of providing young people with information and entertainment that are in line with Islamic values. Amira El Ahl visited the broadcaster in Cairo to find out more

The man on the screen is young, handsome and lives in a large modern house with a garden. He smiles when his son comes running towards him. In the background and slightly out of focus, the mother of the child can be seen cooking and cleaning.

She smiles serenely, completing the picture of perfect family happiness. Although she is chastely dressed and wears a veil, she quickly disappears from view. After all, women rarely make an appearance in the videos that are shown on the young people's music channel 4Shbab. When they do, they appear as modestly dressed extras in the background. That's as far as it goes.

And there is no question of them singing – a practice that is forbidden by the strict edicts of Wahabi Islam.

Virtuous messages relayed by satellite

The modest music video is running on the plasma screen that hangs in the office of the Egyptian man behind 4Shbab (which translates as "for young people"). Since broadcasting began at the end of December 2008, Ahmed Abu Heiba's music channel can be received by satellite all over the world.

Abu Heiba is religious, but by no means either fanatical or an extremist. He wears a short-sleeved shirt and jeans and shakes hands with his female guests – something that Muslims who adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam would never do. The only outward sign that Abu Heiba takes his religion very seriously is his "Zebiba", a dark bump caused by rubbing the forehead on a prayer mat.

In Egypt in particular, this bump, the result of regular prayer, is considered a sign of deep religiousness. Abu Heiba's office, which is situated in the Mohandessin district in central Cairo, is modern. 4Shbab runs non-stop on the plasma screen on the wall.

Music television in line with Islamic principles

"I wanted to create a music channel with Islamic appeal," explains the 41-year-old. The aim is to bring young people closer to religion in an entertaining manner, through hip-hop, rap and pop music. "We don't want to preach, and most song texts are not religious," he adds.

Abu Heiba's goal in setting up 4Shbab was to bring young people back on the right path, entice them away from channels like Rotana, Melody and Mesika, which he feels are corrupting Arab youths. These channels show music videos that are no less explicit than those shown on western music television.

Stars like Nancy Agram and Haifa Wahby sing of love and wear revealing outfits, red lipstick, short skirts and crop tops with plunging necklines. Here too, just like on MTV or the German music channel Viva, "sex sells".

In order to advertise his music channel with an Islamic touch, Ahmed Abu Heiba, who has five children, made a documentary about the major music channels, which are extremely popular in the Arab world. "I collected the most provocative videos. Everyone can see that they are unacceptable and are not compatible with the Islamic systems of values," he says.

Women: a rarity on 4Shbab

He toured the Arab world, showing his documentary everywhere he went, and found financial backers on the Arab peninsula. The money for the project comes from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; the programmes are

produced in Bahrain.

These links undoubtedly have a lot to do with the fact that women rarely make an appearance on 4Shbab. The investors from the Gulf would like the channel to remain "free of women". Despite the fact that the *Dar al-Ifta*, the supreme authority for issuing Islamic rulings in the Muslim world, has issued a fatwa permitting women to sing, these backers consider it offensive. And when it comes to 4Shbab, they have the last word.

"Women are allowed to sing as long as the song and the way the woman sings it do not encourage seduction." Such religious rulings are, however, not binding.

But Ahmed Abu Heiba now finds himself between a rock and a hard place: if his channel is to survive, he has to do more than just satisfy his backers, he also has to defend himself against religious fanatics who are dead set not only against his music channel, but also against music itself. Despite all these obstacles, he wants to go on producing videos and programmes that appeal to young Arabs and entice them away from the corrupting influence of other music channels.

Stiff competition

But that could be difficult. There are about 800 satellite television channels, more than 55 of which are dedicated to music. Despite the general tendency towards more religiousness, channels like Rotana and Melody have millions of viewers. What's more, although Ahmed Abu Heiba has invested heavily in a marketing campaign, 4Shbab is virtually unknown in Egypt.

The 14 year-old Karim and his friends watch the music videos of Arab stars almost every day, but they have never heard of Abu Heiba's channel. "Who wants to watch music videos with no women in them?" asks Karim, laughing.

Even Fatma has never heard of 4Shbab, although one might be forgiven for expecting her to know more about it than the boys. Fatma is a young teacher; she is also devout, wears the veil and is firmly convinced that women should not sing. She regularly surfs the net, is well-read and interested in what goes on in the world, but she has never heard of 4Shbab. "The idea is good," she says, adding that she intends to find out more about it on the Internet.

4Shbab not only broadcasts music videos, but also talk shows. Abu Heiba has a live television show every Sunday evening during which he talks about the lives of young Muslims abroad.

Lively TV debates after the Sherbini murder

During a trip to London, Abu Heiba interviewed young women who spoke to him about his experiences as Muslims who wear headscarves in Europe. Recently, one of his shows focussed exclusively on the murder of a young Egyptian woman, Marwa al-Sherbini, in a Dresden court room in early July.

He spoke to a German man about Islam in Europe and received countless live calls from women. All of them complained of discrimination in Europe. "We are not allowed to wear the headscarf in Europe!" many of them claimed.

The claims made by the German guest that everyone in Germany is allowed to practice their religion freely had no effect. Again and again, references were made to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who spoke out against the Niqab, the veil that covers the face.

"Do not offend moral sensitivities"

"More than 70 per cent of our viewers are women," says Ahmed Abu Haiba. They like the fact that women rarely make an appearance on the channel. "It means that they can leave the television running in the background when the children are at home," he explains. He goes on to say that the channel is family-friendly because it is not objectionable and does not offend moral sensitivities.

The viewer's darling is undoubtedly the English singer Sami Youssef, who has become a huge star.

There are not very many Islamic singers, which is why Ahmed Abu Heiba is always searching for new talent. The only way that 4Shbab has a chance of getting a foothold on the fiercely competitive music television market and making a profit is to come up with a steady stream of new faces and formats.

Amira El Ahl

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Amr Khaled

["I Want to Move Arabic Yputh!"](#)

The Egyptian-born preacher Amr Khaled motivates and galvanises Arabic youth. One of his theses is that Muslims who live in Western societies must also respect the values of those societies. Mona Naggar reports

Muslims in Germany

[Pop and Politics of Which the Prophet Would Approve](#)

The most varied aspects of the Islamic community were on view for all to behold at the Inssan Festival in Berlin. Even the Muslim pop star Sami Yusuf and former MTV presenter and Muslim convert Kristiane Backer were there. Ariana Mirza took a stroll around the festival grounds

Islamic Pop Music in Turkey

[Combining Rock Music with an Islamic Message](#)

In Turkey today, traditional Islamic music is giving way to the hard rock sound of "Yesil Pop". But along with the normal rock beat and guitar rifts, comes not a message of sex and drugs, but rather praising God. Dorian Jones reports

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