

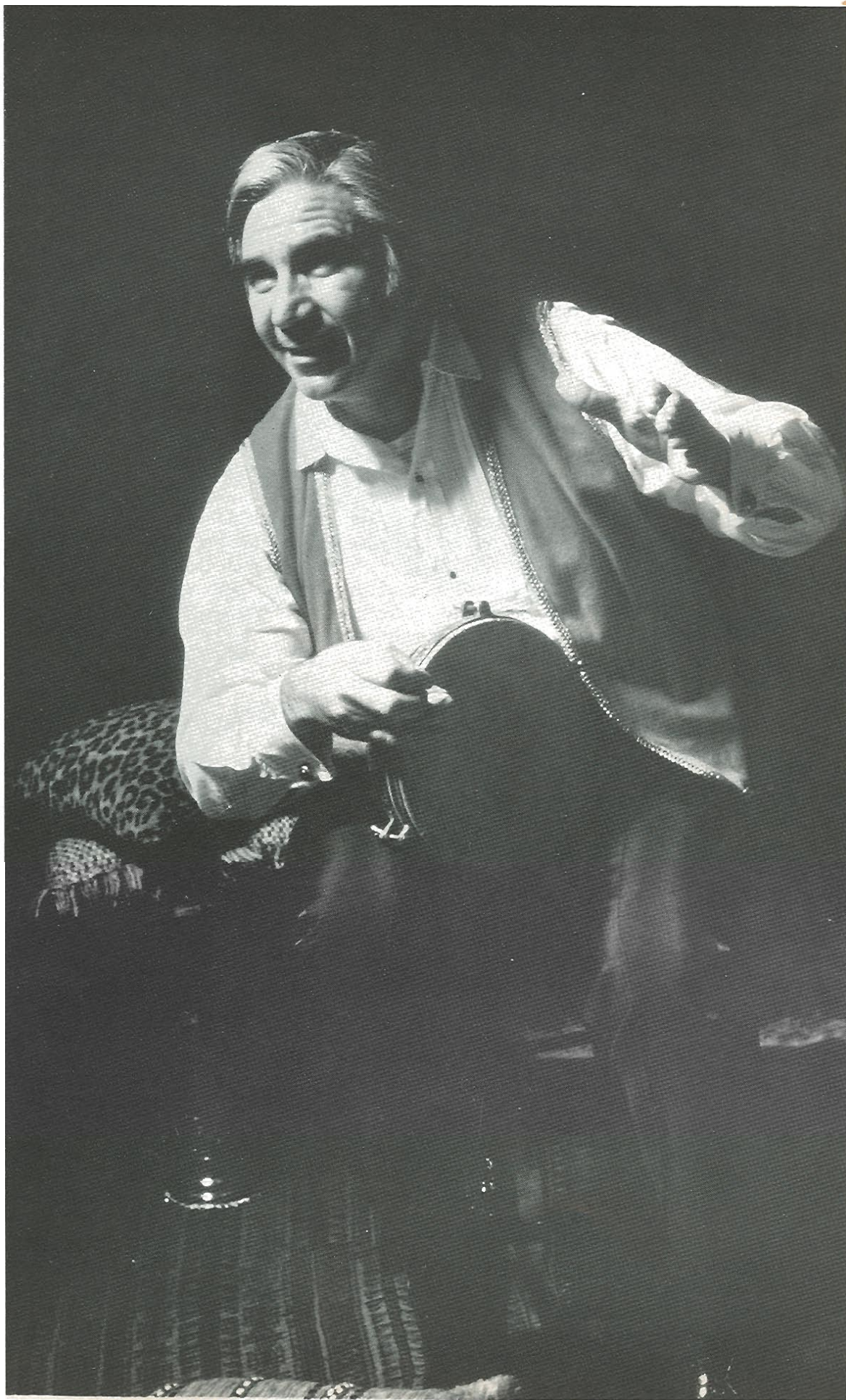
ARABESQUÉ

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Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak -

The Human Side



A radiant Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak, warming up the drakeki and his audience.

There probably isn't one Middle Eastern entertainer in this country who hasn't heard of Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak, musician, singer and talent agent. Eddie's delightful personality has made him one of the most entertaining and positive features in the Middle Eastern music and dance business. "I was born to make people happy," Eddie "The Sheik" says about himself, and, as Eddie's friends and followers know, an evening spent with him, professionally or socially, leaves them with enduring memories of his hilarious comedy routines, his mimicry, and original song poetry. But his personality, alone, does not account for his enormous success. You must add to this his countless appearances at hotels, nightclubs and special engagements, concerts at Lincoln Center and Town Hall in New York City, appearances on the "City of Hope" Telethons with Dean Martin and Danny Thomas, and his recordings and musical collaborations too numerous to list here. In the end you have one of the most famous personalities in Middle Eastern music in America, and one who is greatly responsible for popularizing this music.

Eddie Soubhi (Ibn Farjallah) Kochakji was born in Brooklyn, in the Arabic section of the city. His parents came to this country from Aleppo, Syria, and Eddie was one of six children (five brothers and one sister). Eddie's musical abilities were evident at an early age. At the age of eight, he used to beat the pots and pans in his mother's kitchen in rhythm. "Our house was a party seven days a week," says Eddie. Finally, at the age of 10, Eddie received his first derbaki, and he was hooked. He began playing at all the neighborhood functions, and eventually, he went on to study percussion for eight years under the tutelage of the great Henry Adler.

A stint in the U. S. Army did not thwart Eddie's natural gift for entertaining. He toured with the Special Services, doing USO shows in Europe and the Middle East. It was in the service that Eddie got his nickname, "The Sheik", from his Sergeant, who couldn't pronounce "Kochakji." This title has been his trademark ever since then.

Eddie Kochak can be credited with reviving in America the native folk dance of the Middle East, the Dabke. He modernized and played these Dabkes at many festive affairs, delighting Americans of all nationalities. Eventually, Arab-Americans began to demonstrate different versions of the Dabke at the church haflahs, each one showing the steps of his native village and town. The dance soon became an essential feature at every appearance Eddie made.

Eddie's major contribution to America in this respect is his unique "Amer-Abic" sound of the Middle East. Together with noted violinist and composer, Hakki Obadia from Baghdad, Iraq, he created the American-Arabic sound — authentic Middle Eastern melodies and rhythms, modified and adapted to the American ear. It is this sound that dominates his albums, STRICTLY

BELLY DANCING, Nos. one, two and three, which are so popular in the U. S. today.

Eddie Kochak is the Middle East Representative of the Musician's Union Local No. 802 in New York City, in charge of the Arabic, Israeli, Greek, Armenian and Persian sectors. "Somehow, when they come to this country, they get my name and they know I will help them," says Eddie. "The Sheik" has indeed aided many of our well-known Middle Eastern musicians, including Hakki Obadia, Mazin Hamdan, Charles Hallal and Hanna Mirhige. The list of dancers he has supported when they first came to New York is also sizeable. Among them are Ibrahim Farrah, Jemela Omar, Soraya Melik, Dahlena and Yasmina.

I recall my first encounter with Eddie "The Sheik" nine years ago. At that time I was making my debut as an oriental dancer. My first dancing job was in Albany, New York, along with Eddie Kochak, the late oudist, Jack Ghanaim and one other dancer, Belinda. It was a four-hour drive to Albany. I was so nervous — petrified — about performing for the first time, but I tried to hide it. We sang Arabic songs and laughed (mostly at Eddie's jokes) all the way upstate. That night in the dressing room, I had butterflies in my stomach. When I was announced, I entered, trying to come on like a seasoned "pro." But after the first two steps, I forgot the whole routine and repeated those same two steps for twenty minutes. Finally it was over, and I realized that I had to take a bow — something I hadn't learned in dancing class! I somehow fumbled my way through it and ran offstage, exhausted and crying. The thought of having to reappear for a second show was the most horrifying thought at that moment. Eddie came backstage and laughed about the episode in good humor, and the next day I found a sign in my room saying that there would be "bowing lessons" at five o'clock sharp. It was a combination of Eddie's jovial personality and his supportive drumming that got me through the rest of the week.

Since that time, I have worked with Eddie on countless occasions and have seen him perform at various functions. Whether it be a Jewish wedding, an Armenian or Turkish dance, a Greek party or a Persian New Year, Eddie is versatile and commanding. He never ceases to amaze me; he continues to be the major source of entertainment at all Middle Eastern affairs. He is also adept at American music and almost any other form of ethnic entertainment you can think of. He can do a thrilling rendition of the "Tarentella" or "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" as easily as he can sing the Arabic, "A La Dai Ouna".

Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak's innate ability to entertain, his warmth, and his feeling for Middle Eastern music have made him one of America's top personalities in the oriental dance world and popular with people in all walks of life.

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