

Actor Gene Wilder, star of Mel Brooks movies, dies at 83

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Steampunk enthusiasts attend the first day of 'The Asylum Steampunk Festival' in Lincoln, northern England. — AFP



A picture shows Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi performing on a rooftop overlooking Gaza City. — AFP photos



Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi (center) performing during a wedding in Rafah in the southern Gaza City.



Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi (center) performing during a wedding in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.



Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi posing for pictures during a wedding in Rafah.

Internet star sings of Gaza cat and 'My Trousers'

Mobbed by fans wherever he goes, Adel Meshoukhi is the kind of singer that perhaps only Gaza could produce: An internet sensation who depends on a modest stipend from Hamas. Very few people in Gaza, the small Palestinian territory ruled by the Islamist movement Hamas, haven't heard of the young and disenchanted Meshoukhi. He has performed for 10 years as a singer and also acts in television and radio dramas.

But despite his fame among Palestinians, he earns barely anything from his art and used to work for the Hamas security services until he was accidentally shot in the leg during training three years ago. Still convalescing, he gets a partial-and sporadic income-from them. The musical comedian's most popular song is actually an ode to a cat. "Do not be afraid of me pussycat, do not run away," sings the 32-year-old in Arabic, while wandering the dark empty streets of Rafah in southern Gaza. "I'm only a human being."

The video was made with just his own cellphone and a computer, but it has been shared hundreds of thousands of times on Facebook. Young people listen to the song, called "Fear Not", and other hits repeatedly on their phones or at wedding parties. The secret of his success? His light style, which mixes jokes and irony for Gazans keen to forget politics for a few minutes. "I no longer speak of politics and war because we are all fed up, we want to have some fun," said Meshoukhi, round-faced with cropped black hair.

The singer causes a stir every time he arrives, sunglasses on his nose as ever, at crowded cafes on the Mediterranean seafloor. On the night AFP spent with him, Meshoukhi was invited to a wedding party in a refugee camp in Rafah, where he was guest of honour. "Everyone loves Adel here," grinned Ibrahim al-Nireb, brother of the groom, who repeatedly took selfies with the star who "brings smiles to people's faces". Gaza, in which 1.9 million people live behind largely closed borders with Israel and Egypt, is still in recovery from a devastating 2014 war with Israel. Around 45 percent of its workforce are unem-

ployed and two-thirds of the population depend on foreign aid. "I am a human being, I don't want to make war with anyone, I just want to live," said Meshoukhi in the house he still shares with his parents in the Rafah refugee camp. "But nobody listens to us."

Hamas employee

If he talks to cats in the song that made him famous, "it's because they at least are harmless". His lyrics are mild but often gently satirical. His latest song, "My Trousers," posted earlier this month, tells of dirty laundry but evokes the economic struggles of young people. As such, he has

become popular with the under-30s who see no future for themselves in Gaza. The Gaza Strip is a "giant prison" where people live like "sardines in a tin," said Meshoukhi. For psychiatrist Samir Zaqout, the singer's success comes from tapping into "the desperation born of social and economic pressure on young Palestinians".

This has allowed him to "achieve enormous popularity in a short time", Meshoukhi speaks from experience of struggling to make ends meet. He has no lucrative contract or flashy lifestyle-fame has not brought riches. The English graduate, divorced and childless, relies on the stipend from the department of national security. Three years after the shooting accident, he receives only half his former monthly wage. "How can you live on a salary of 1,200 shekels (\$318)?" he asked.

And that is only when the money is paid, which it is often not because of political infighting and financial shortfalls. In conservative Gaza, even moderately satirical songs can spark a backlash. Hamas authorities even accused him of "harming the military" by acting and singing in his spare time, he said. "These wild songs aim to destroy our conservative youth," posted one critic on Facebook. And he has been detained by Hamas police eight times, he said.

In a video posted on YouTube, Meshoukhi has a crack at the territory's Islamist rulers. "Hamas, leave office. It's been 10 years you've been responsible for the plight of Gazans. You sent us back 300 years," he bellows. "We have no electricity, no water, no jobs and borders are closed. Life, dreams, hopes, everything is finished!" It is precisely because "he is afraid of nothing and speaks the needs of youth" that he is so popular, said Saleh Al-Moughir, a Gazan actor. — AFP



Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi performing on a rooftop overlooking Gaza City.



Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi speaking on the phone at his home in Rafah.



Palestinian singer Adel Meshoukhi writing at his home in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.