

Crooning Glory

With blue-sky dreams of becoming an international sensation, singer Matt Mardini is carving out a place for himself in Montreal by way of Syria

By Ashley Joseph | Tue, April 11, 1:25 PM

Music Culture

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Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, Charles Aznavour—these aren't the influences you'd expect from a Syrian-born and raised singer, but it's the kind of music that [Matt Mardini](#) has always wanted to belt. The 39-year-old crooner—who [sings in English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Italian and Armenian](#)—got his start performing at Aleppo's finest clubs, followed by a stint singing at the Sheraton Damascus, before the country turned into a proxy war for world powers. Four years ago, he made the move to Montreal, leaving his homeland behind and making a go at the musical career he's always craved.

Earlier this year, Mardini was tapped to be the opening entertainment at a boxing gala at Montreal's Bell Centre, where he took the stage to sing "Eye of the Tiger" and "Sex Bomb". A far cry from "Come Fly With Me", "Volare" or "I Did It My Way", perhaps, but Mardini welcomed the opportunity with equal enthusiasm—a trait that's certainly not hindering his success. We caught up with Mardini—who's currently working on a demo and singing weekly at [Les Trois Tilleuls](#)—to hear more about his journey.

ON PERFORMING AT THE BELL CENTRE: "It was one of the milestones of my career. It was there that I started to have confidence—it gave me a real push. It was totally by chance—I was performing at a Christmas party last year and the manager of [Eye of the Tiger](#) management was there. He told me they manage boxers and it happened that they had a big gala boxing event on the 28th of January and he wanted me to be the main singer. I sang in front of the biggest audience in my life—almost 20,000."

ON BUILDING A CAREER IN MONTREAL: "In principle, it's the same all over the world—if you want to start anything, you have to work hard on it. The difference is here I'm starting from scratch. In Syria, I was kind of well known—that opens a lot of doors. But in Damascus, I was also a singer who sings English and French in a country where people speak Arabic, so the future is not that bright. I always had a dream that I want to be an international singer. I never thought about immigration but when the war started and I moved to Canada, I started to really focus on my music career."

ON LEAVING SYRIA: The bombing [in Damascus] on December 23, 2011 was just beside the Sheraton, where I lived. During the eight years when I sang there, it was my home. Moving from Damascus to Montreal was like being reborn. It's more than just immigration. The first few months were a calibration but after one year I started to feel the connection. I not only believe it—I live it and I can feel it. This is my country. That is thanks to Canadian people and especially [the people] in Montreal. From day one, everyone opened their arms to receive me."

ON IMMIGRATING TO CANADA: "One of the first things I read was about former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien who said Canada is the best country in the world. Now, I can tell you he is right—especially for an immigrant. I personally know young families who came to Canada from Syria and stayed with families they didn't know, who hosted them for a year. What Canada has done is really a high humanitarian act and showcases the real face of Canadians. I came as an immigrant but my parents came here as refugees. I was able to arrange their papers so that they could escape from Aleppo. What matters, and what I always say to my friends—to immigrants and to refugees—it's my duty to leave a good footprint in this country."

ON FINDING A TASTE OF HOME: "Oh, there are a lot of great Syrian restaurants in Montreal. Friends of mine recently opened a restaurant called [Beroya](#) and another friend opened [Zenobia](#)—they do a really great job with Syrian cuisine. There's also [Alep](#)—definitely a lot of places to have real Syrian food, which I love."

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Photos courtesy of Matt Mardini

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