

Eddie the Sheik Kochak

## Greater Syrian Diaspora at 78 RPM: Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak

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*Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak, 1 September 1956, The Caravan. Courtesy of*

[Newspaper.com](http://Newspaper.com)

**By: Richard Breaux/Arab America Contributing Writer**

*What do you do when you find several dozen 78 rpm records all in Arabic and you can neither read, nor speak the language? You research the musicians and record labels and write about them....at least that's what Arab America contributing writer, Richard Breaux did. The result is bound to teach you something about Arab American history and heritage in the first half of the 20th Century. Arab America highlights some of the well-known and lesser-known Arab American musicians profiled on this series. This week's article features the Arab musical icon, Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak.*

**Edward Sibouy Kochakji** was born 4 June 1921 in Brooklyn, New York, to Alfred and Mary Kochakji. The family's first residence was at 184 Atlantic Avenue in the heart of the Arab American community. Alfred, Mary, Pauline, George, Joseph, and Charles Kochakji immigrated to the United States in 1908 from Aleppo, Greater Syria. Alfred worked in a local coffee house and Mary worked at home.

The Kochakji home remained a busy and vibrant place. Guests visited frequently and Mary and Pauline sang and danced around the house all the time. Although the Depression hit most Arab American families in Brooklyn and Manhattan fairly hard, Pauline bought Eddie a derbake for his twelfth birthday. The younger children, Victor and Eddie, attended Hamilton High School and Victor, but not Edward, graduated just as more Lebanese/Syrian Americans relocated from Manhattan's Little Syria to Brooklyn. Edward and Victor were US-born children, but the surviving members of the family became naturalized citizens in 1930, after Alfred's death. George and Joseph ran Kochakji Freres, the family business, and cared for their mother. Edward, like Victor, enlisted in the United States Army during World War II. Edward joined 1 July 1942 at Fort Jays Governor's Island.

**REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after February 17, 1897 and on or before December 31, 1921)**

<b>SERIAL NUMBER</b> T 1789	<b>1. NAME (Print)</b> Edward Saubhy Kochakji (First) (Middle) (Last)	<b>ORDER NUMBER</b> T 10847
<b>2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print)</b> 19 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, N.Y. (Number and street) (Town, township, village, or city) (County) (State)		
<b>3. MAILING ADDRESS</b> Same (Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If same insert word same)		
<b>4. TELEPHONE</b> Empty Main 4-5800 (Exchange) (Number)	<b>5. AGE IN YEARS</b> 20 <b>DATE OF BIRTH</b> June 4 1921 (Mo.) (Day) (Yr.)	<b>6. PLACE OF BIRTH</b> Brooklyn, N.Y. (Town or county) (State or country)
<b>7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS</b> George Kochakji, 183 Pacific St., Brooklyn, N.Y.		
<b>8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS</b> Map Kassarow, 325 Gold St., Brooklyn, N.Y.		
<b>9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS</b> Vin Electric Co., 325 Gold St., Brooklyn, N.Y. (Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)		
<b>STATEMENT OF SERVICE</b> I HEREBY VERIFY ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.		
<b>U.S.S. FORM 1</b> (Revised 1-1-42)	<b>CARD FURNISHED</b> JUN 4 1942 (Date)	<b>Edward Kochakji</b> (Registrant's signature)

World

War II registration card for Edward S. Kochakji. Courtesy of [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

Eddie “The Sheik” Kochak’s professional career began in the 1940s while he served overseas; his career took off in the 1950s at the beginning of the mahrajan and night club eras. As a part of the US Special Services, Edward entertained troops in Italy, Greece, and Egypt. Rumor has it that in the Army he received the moniker “The Sheik,” a name that remained with him for the rest of his career. Back home from World War II, Edward finished school and actively involved himself in the local YWCA. In April 1948, he and a number of other young adults from the same neighborhood appeared in the play “The Difficult Life” sponsored by the Nationalities Communities Committees.

A few years later, Edward formed his own group known as the Eddie Kochak Trio. For a time, the trio regularly played at the Raleigh Restaurant and Ballroom at 91<sup>st</sup> Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Together with Louis Hakim and David Saidy, Kochak purchased and opened The Cedars Hotel at 205 Third Avenue in Asbury Park, New Jersey. The Cedars became a prime entertainment venue for Syrian and Lebanese Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, it was here that Kochak first referred to his music as “Amer-abic.” In addition to The Cedars, Eddie performed at Asbury Park’s Green Grove Manor, another place that came to hold prominence on the East Coast nightclub, hafla, and mahrajan circuit. Even as early as 1953, Kochak was billed as a “Sensational Lebanese Song Stylist and Novelty Entertainer.”

At mahrajans and haflas, so-called “middle period” musicians performed in more traditional Arabic pop songs, Kochak, however, entertained the younger crowds with American and hybrid/crossover songs. Contemporary critics of Kochak’s music might consider his music, like that of Mohammad el-Bakkar, stereotypical or Arab kitsch because it highlighted and exaggerated Middle Eastern culture by making mostly joking references to landmarks, cities, foods, and cultural practices for laughs rather than from a sense of longing or nostalgia. Americans, Brits, and others in the West, however, increasingly exchanged ideas about the Middle East from the mysterious, exotic, home of Orientalist fantasy to one associated with fear, violence, and polarized religious fundamentalism. Musicians like Kochak and el-Bakkar turned the latter ideas on their heads.

Interestingly, mahrajans and haflas that booked Kochak as a part of the day’s or evening’s festivities listed him as part of the American versus the Arabic entertainment. One of the first times this occurred was at

the wedding reception for Lorraine Barka and William Shakal. Joe Budway and Naif Agby provided the “Arabic Entertainment” and Kochak and His Orchestra the “American Entertainment.” For the Eastern Federation of Syrian and Lebanese American Clubs Convention in October 1953, Eddie Kochak teamed up with Joe Budway and entertained at the Night Owl Party.

Remarkably, Kochak was not the livest wire at the Convention, but instead he was used to calm the crowd after a 220-pound musician named “Tiny” Nassaney and his derbake troupe carried the night with the impromptu and jovial derbake playing, reportedly leading dancers and revelers from “the Hotel New Yorker to the Manhattan Center.” Kochak was actually used to “simmer down” and “control” the more rambunctious group from Patterson, New Jersey. At the Saint Nicholas Cathedral Young Men’s Club annual hafla in November 1953, the program listed almost every major Arab American recording artist and musician as a part of the Arabic Entertainment except Eddie Kochak & His Orchestra. Along with his trio, Kochak closed out the year playing a gig for about 150 people at the Young Republican Club of Bay Ridge’s Christmas Party and brought in 1954 with the Tau Phi Fraternity of Saint Nicholas Cathedral.

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**MUSICIANS:** Fathalla Abyad, Naim Karacand, Philip Solomon,  
Joe Budway, Moussa Kalouki and Mike Hamway  
**ORIENTAL DANCING** by many beautiful girls  
**AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT**  
by **EDDIE KOCHAK & HIS ORCHESTRA**

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## الحفلة السنوية الكبرى

لجمعية شبان القديس نيقولاوس الخيرية العمومية  
بكل سرور نعلن لابناء الوطن الاكادم ان جمعية شبان القديس نيقولاوس  
الخيرية العمومية غير الطائفية والبلدية ستقيم حفلتها السنوية الكبرى مساء  
الاحد بتاريخ 15 تشرين الثاني سنة 1953 الساعة الثامنة والنصف تماما في  
قاعة سانت جورج الكبرى. وقد هيأت الجمعية كل المعدات اللازمة لجعل هذه  
الحفلة عند رضا الجمهور الذين كانوا ولا يزالون يمدونها بالمساعدة لا  
بقيامهم على حفلاتها فقط بل ايضا بوضع تحياتهم في بروجرامها الكبير وبالتبرع  
لها بالمال ليتسنى لها القيام بالواجب نحو العائلات المحتاجة من ابنا الوطن  
على السواء. فهي من المحسنين تستعطي وللأساء والموزين تساعد وتمعلي.

### مساق الحفلة

تفتح الحفلة بالشيد الاميركي - ثم يتدى الغناء العربي الى ساعة متأخرة  
من الليل اما المنشدون في هذه الحفلة فهم المنشدة فدوى مبيد والمطريان  
ابينا ايضا واعطون عبد الاحد والموسيقون هم فتح الله ايضاً • نعيم كركند •  
فيليب سليمان • جو بدوي • موسى الكالوكي • ميك حموي • وسيفر علي  
المسرح اوانس جميلان للرقص العربي •  
وقد اعدت الجمعية قاعة كبرى خصوصية للرقص الافرنجي للناشئة الجديدة  
تحت ادارة (ادي كوجاك) • فلا تدعوا هذه الحفلة توتكم واحلا وسهلا  
بالجميع •  
سمر جواز الدخول الى هذه الحفلة الفريدة ثلاثة دولارات فقط والطاولات  
موجودة فاسرعوا بطلبها تحفظ لكم •  
عن لجنة حفلة القديس نيقولاوس الخيرية  
عطاالله شاكر

The Caravan, November 1953. [Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com)



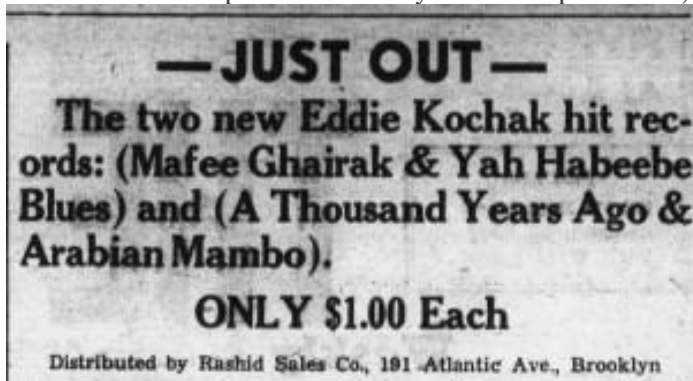
Eddie Kochak's popularity with Arab American youth during the 1950s no doubt stemmed from his being first-generation US-born. Young people who felt the cultural pull to be Syrian or Lebanese from the parents, grandparents or older siblings and Americans from their school-aged peers learned to put their peers and elders at ease by carefully balancing multiple cultural traditions. They were also more likely to speak primarily English but expressed familiarity with Arabic phrases spoken around the house or in the neighborhoods.

The heart of the Amerabic sound is a fusion of popular Middle Eastern, jazz, and Latin American rhythms. This fusion is present in most of Kochak recorded music. When he performed live, Kochak may it a point to engage the audience in a series of calls and responses, sing-alongs, and clap along. Musicians played popular Lebanese and Syria standards, but also played the occasional taqsim.



*Eddie Kochak Orchestra EK 101 "Arabian Mambo" & EK 102 "A Thousand Years Ago."* Courtesy of Richard M. Breaux collection. *Arabian Mambo*, <https://soundcloud.com/user-387335530/eddie-kochak-arabian-mambo-ek-101> *A Thousand Years Ago*, <https://soundcloud.com/user-387335530/eddie-kochak-a-thousand-years-ago-e-102>

In the winter and spring of 1955, Eddie Kochak and His Orchestra recorded and released four singles on two 78 RPM discs on the Nilephon label: EK101 "Arabian Mambo" & EK 102 "A Thousand Years Ago," EK 103 "Mafee Ghairak" & EK 104 "Ya Habeebe Blues." Albert Rashid's Rashid Sales Company distributed these records. There is no published history of the Nilephon label, but it could have been a Rashid side



project.

*Ad for Eddie Kochak's first four singles on 78 RPM. Although recorded on Nilephon the label's name is not mentioned in the ad. The distributor, Rashid Sales Co., is, however, listed. The Caravan, 25 May 1955. Courtesy of [Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com)*

At the end of the 1950s, Fred Elias, Danny Thomas, Dean Martin, Joseph Kassab, and Johnny Tetasopoulos stood among those Kochak had entertained, performed with, or both. There is one duo, however, with which Kochak remains associated. By the early-1960s, Kochak teamed up with the Iraqi-American Jewish violinist, Hakki Obadia, and the two emerged as a couple of the most well-known and recognizable Arab American musicians of the "night club era." Obadia came through the ranks of Arab American musicians playing with Mohammed el-Bakkar, Kahraman, Hanan, George and Mike Hamway,

Naim Karacand, Anton Abdelehad, and a host of other musicians in the mid to late 1950s. His booking ads ran continuously in the *Caravan* in 1959 and 1960.

Unlike many middle period Arab American musicians, Kochak's career blossomed and shot through the roof during the era that 78 RPM records gave way to 45 RPM and 33 1/3 and cassette tapes. Moreover, Kochak's "Strictly Belly Dancing" series albums between 1970 and 1979 extended his popularity beyond Arab Americans, Greek, and Armenian Americans to a much broader listenership and audience. He recorded and released approximately seven albums in the "Strictly Belly Dancing" series and several other volumes on LP under the "Strictly Ya Habibi" title. When Kochak and Badia first teamed up for "Sesame Jump" and the "Charanga Twist," a 45 RPM record on the LITE label, in December 1961, the Arab American press took note.



*Kochak & Obadia's "Sesame Jump" and "Charanga Twist" were recorded in December 1961 and released in January 1962. Photo courtesy of Richard M. Breaux collection.*

Despite their individual careers and accomplishments up to this point, the two would forever be linked together and the demand for their music on the hafla, mahrajan, and Middle-Eastern nightclub and Bellydance circuits skyrocketed. Although well-known inside and outside Arab American communities by the 1970s, Kochak and Hakki Obadia continue to occasionally back veteran singers like Kharaman during the May concert for Saint Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church annual hafla in 1976.

The Dank Haus Ballroom, a German American cultural center in Chicago's Lincoln Square, encouraged fans to come to spend "day with Eddie (The Sheik) Kochak of "Strictly Bellydancing" fame in July 1976. America's bicentennial celebrations kept Kochak and Obadia booked throughout most of the year. Hightstown Lion's Club Third Annual Middle Eastern Festival in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. Lonnie Heisman, the Middle Eastern dancer who went by the professional name Deshara, directed and emceed the event. Kochak closed out the 1970s with his band during the New Year's Eve at the Caravan Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge in Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn.



Hakki Obadia (seen here) teamed up with Eddie Kochak in 1961 and then the next decade and a half. *The Caravan* 4 June 1959. Courtesy of [Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com)

Unlike other Syrian American musicians of the so-called middle period, there was no retirement or slowing down in sight for Kochak in the 1980s. A folk dance festival at Rider College in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, booked Kochak to provide music for several of its Middle Eastern and Greek dancing troupes in May 1981. In a three-day-weekend lineup for Saint Anthony's Maronite Church annual Spring Festival Bazaar in April/May of 1982 in Wilkes-Barre, Kochak was the Sunday entertainment. He returned to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania for the 34th Annual Hafli at Saint Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church in May 1984. He became somewhat of a regular for "Middle Eastern Night" at Richies Club inside the Empress Hotel in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in October 1982 and again in for several performances in July, August, and September of 1985.

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KIBBEE	HUMUS	STROMBOLI	CLAM CHOWDER
SPINACH PIE	TABOULLEH	POTATO PANCAKES	PIEROGIES
STUFFED GRAPEVINE LEAVES	LUBEEN	PIZZA	FUNNEL CAKES
STUFFED CASINGS	SHISH-KA-BOB	HAMBURGS	HOT DOGS
STUFFED SQUASH		STEAKS & SAUSAGE SANDWICHES	
— PASTRY —		<b>PLUS LOTS MORE!</b>	
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\* PROCEEDS BENEFIT ST. ANTHONY'S MARONITE CHURCH BLD. FUND

Eddie Kochak played the last day of a three-day festival in 1982. *The Times Leader* 30 April 1982. Notice the American and Lebanese food menu. Courtesy of [Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com)

The revival of 1968 Broadway musical *Zorba* in 1983 starring Anthony Quinn included Eddie Kochak as a percussionist in its music ensemble. The performance had a 362 show run. The 1964 film and the 1968 and 1983 musical adapted its stories from the Nikos Kazantzakis novel *Zorba the Greek*.

Well into the 1990s, Eddie Kochak and Hakki Obadia played at mahrajans, concerts, and music festivals specific to Middle Eastern and global musical traditions; he also hosted sessions that introduced audiences to Middle Eastern music. Throughout 1990, 1991, and 1992, Kochak regularly served as an ambassador to Brooklyn's Arab American music scene in the city's historical society. On 24 January 1993, Kochak and Obadia played "The Passport to Brooklyn: The Magical Music of the Middle East" for the Brooklyn Historical Society.

In 2006, a musician and videographer caught a brief Kochak surprise performance at the Rakkasah East Belly Dance Festival and Kochak did not disappoint. At eighty-five, Kochak proved he could still liven up a crowd with the Ameraba style he made famous. Accompanied by musician and oudist Scott Wilson, Kochak played the derbake and engaged the crowd with the call and response style that's a hallmark of Arabic, Arab American, and non-Western musical traditions.

In the first days of 2019, the *New York Times* announced the 18 December 2018 death of ninety-seven-year-old Eddie Kochakji. The master showman and musician died in the same borough in which he was born, mostly performed, and had lived much of his life – Brooklyn, New York. Those who knew Kochak in his youth and/or his later years remain equally impressed by his energy, showmanship, and lasting legacy–Ameraba.

*Richard M. Breaux is an Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse from Oakland, California. His courses and research explore the social and cultural histories of African Americans and Arab Americans in the 20th Century.*