

# Questions For A PRINCESS

The Qamar Girls have been conducting a little survey. “If you had the chance,” we asked, “what would you ask a world-famous belly-dancer? Anything at all? Something you’ve always wanted to know? Or something completely random, just off the top of your head? The suggestions have been coming in – and true to our word, we’ve collected them up and put the first batch to the fabulous Princess Farhana!

**Are you ready? 3...2...1 – Let’s go!**

**How did you start out? Was there “a moment” or was it all “by accident”!**

There was definitely a “moment” and though it seemed like a happy accident at the time, in hindsight I realise that it was definitely fate.

In 1990, I was on the dance-floor at a rock club: a woman came up to me and asked if I was a belly-dancer. The question kind of took me by surprise, because I had been obsessed with belly-dancing since I was a child! I asked her why she thought I was a belly-dancer, and she said, “You move like one”.

She was a belly-dancer, and of course I went to see her – and then I was hooked. I met her friend – a fabulous male dancer, Zein Abdul Al Malik. We became friends, and he took me under his wing. He showed me Golden Age Egyptian movies, made me mix-tapes of Arabic music...and, later, got me my first dance job. He also introduced me to Zahra Zuhair, who became my first and most significant teacher.

If anyone had told me at that point that belly-dancing would take over my life, and I would become a professional, I would’ve laughed them out of the studio!

**Did belly-dancing come easily or did you have to work hard at it?**

Seriously, I worked harder for this than for anything else in my life. Writing, painting, singing, and acting just came naturally to me: even though my creativity was a gift, for years I absolutely took it for granted because it was always so easy for me.

Admittedly, I was also a “natural dancer”. Ever since I was small, it had been my dream to be a professional dancer – but after having been rejected for ballet class at about age eight (for having flat feet), with a lot of sadness, I was forced to let that dream go and concentrate on my other talents.

My entire life, I’d always enjoyed dancing – I adored it! It was my joy. I was always dancing for hours at parties and clubs, or onstage with my bands. I could move well, and lacked inhibitions. But I’d never had any dance training before belly-dancing... and when I first entered classes, in my early thirties, most of the other women were about ten years younger than me and had grown up with formal dance training. I knew nothing at all about weight placement, transitions, or ballet terms... and I soon realized that if I wanted to be a serious belly-dancer, I would need to work at an accelerated rate.

In the first few months of my dancing, I realized I was meant to do this; I knew I needed to give it my all, and that I could do this if I worked hard and learned everything I possibly could. I went from taking one class a week to three a week, and then I cleaned my teacher’s houses in exchange for private lessons (and I HATE housecleaning!), and then I would practice for, like, 2-3 hours a day

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on my own. I would watch VHS tapes of Egyptian and Lebanese dancers all night long, stopping the tape and obsessively trying to identify and replicate the movements. I listened only to Arabic music so I could become familiar with the song structure. I went to the library – because there was no internet then – and would stay entire afternoons researching belly-dance, Arabic culture, ethnic traditions, costuming. I literally lived and breathed belly-dance.

**Once you'd realised you'd started out – what made you stay?**

I kind of didn't have a choice in the matter! I was hell-bent on doing this. It was like a compulsion – I *needed* it. And it has always remained "fresh" to me. I have never, ever gotten tired of it.

**What keeps you going? What gets you out of bed in the morning?**

Belly-dancing!! Dancing in general! Learning things and sharing knowledge – I love teaching and performing. I love sharing these gifts. Oriental dance feeds my soul like nothing else.

**Do you still feel the same way about belly dancing as you did when you started? How have you changed? Or should that be "evolved"?**

Yes, I feel the same way – except that I probably even love it more, if that is possible! It never gets "old" for me; I have never suffered "belly-dance burnout".

I think, though, that now, with some "seasoning", I have achieved a subtlety I never had as a beginner; I can be more understated when necessary. Also, I have come to understand more and more that my body – or any dancer's body, for that matter – needs to be cared for and taken care of. When I was younger, I certainly took that for granted and pushed myself to the limit, physically, non-stop. Now I see that rest and preventative care is of the utmost importance.... recharging your batteries is a necessity.

**What's in a name? Where did the moniker come from? Have you always been a princess?**

Like most princesses, my royal title was bestowed upon me! Originally, I wasn't going to use a stage name: my given name (Pleasant) is so unusual I figured I didn't need a stage name.

I started out using Pleasant for dancing, but many of the audiences I was performing for were Arabic, Persian or Armenian, and they consistently mispronounced it. After the third time in a row where I'd danced at a private party and been announced as "the beautiful Birthday Present", I figured it was time to take action and get a stage name!

"Farhana" loosely means "happy girl" or "pleasant girl" in Arabic, so I started going by that, but it turned out there was a more experienced dancer, locally, who also used the name Farhana. Atlantis, the dancer who runs the annual *Bellydancer of the Universe contest*, started calling me Princess Farhana because I wore a lot of crowns and tiaras when I performed. She booked me on a show, and to distinguish me from the "other" Farhana she billed me as "Farhana, Princess of Hollywood". Like many nicknames, it stuck like glue.

**Sometimes being larger than life is a defence mechanism for shy performers and sometimes it's a by-product of the sheer pleasure of doing what you love on stage. I showed someone your DVD and they said: "Wow, she's really turned up to 11!" What's it like being 110%?**

Wow, I love the number 11 – I even have a tattoo on my right wrist, which reads "11:11". It's a sacred number, and also has a lot of personal meaning for me. I see it often: it's supposed to be a sign of synchronicity, psychic knowledge and divine order, amongst other things.

I think the 'larger than life' thing is all about a soul connection to the music and the emotions... I'm not sure. When people meet me in real life they often tell me they thought I looked a lot taller onstage. I can't even begin to tell you how many people go: "Oh! You're so short!" Even though I am average height, they thought I was much taller onstage. Now I know that my love of dancing, and the way I feel about the music kind of radiates out of me. I didn't realize that at first, or even for years. But now I know that the audience can feel it, or identify with it.

When I started, I didn't understand that. I began working as a dancer about four months into my training, which, in hindsight, was probably much too early for me, and a lot earlier than I would encourage my students to make their debut! But I was thrust into performing, and I was already comfortable with being on stage.

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In my early days as a baby dancer, I was on an unofficial “work/study program” and learning as I went along. My mind was always blown that complete strangers were hiring me to dance! I couldn’t figure out why people wanted me to dance. Trust me – my big smile was *really* what got me through my first couple of years as a belly-dancer!

**Belly dance – Is it all about hard work? Or presenting a fairy-tale? Do the history and culture grab you? Or is it just about having fun?**

The technique is hard work...but the emotional connection and understanding has to be innate or nearly so. Belly-dancing is fun, yes, but I also take it very, very seriously.

The history and culture are amazing, fascinating. Sometimes I think (for real) that there must be a past-life connection – not just with me, but also in anyone who is a serious dancer.

Belly-dancing helped me to appreciate and realise

my own creativity, and it has been a really positive influence on my physical and emotional health, all of which I took for granted for many years. When I was younger I was very self-destructive: substance abuse, bulimia, dysfunctional relationships... you name it. Belly-dance has a tremendous healing power: I'm the poster child for that!

**What's your favourite piece of music?  
What's the instrument that plays for your perfect taqsim? Whose voice makes you melt?**

If I get goose bumps when I hear a song, I NEED to dance to it. I'm always saying: "Oh! This is my favourite song!" ...To which somebody else will reply: "Oh, but you always say that!"

Some of my all-time favourite Egyptian songs: *Fakkarouni*, *We Deret Al Ayam*, *Ana Fintazarik*, *Ya M'Saharni* ... you just can't go wrong with Om Kalthoum! And *Leyla* by Farid Al Atrache is one of my all-time favourites as well. I have like 800 versions of it on my iPod! Some of my other favourite singers: Asmahan, Abdel Halim Hafez, George Wassouf, Wael Kfoury, Latifa, Hakim...

Right now I'm really seriously into an upcoming singer from Cairo, Mahmoud El Leity. His voice gives me goose-bumps. He is like a young, Egyptian version of Tom Jones, so sexy! I saw him live in Cairo last year and it was all I could do not to throw my panties at him...just kidding! I was in Cairo two years ago, at Amoun Cabaret in Mohandeseen with my friend Katia, a famous Russian dancer who lives in Cairo. Earlier that day, I had heard Mahmoud El Leity's CD for the first time and was blown away. He turned out to be singing at Amoun that night! What a coincidence. I couldn't believe it, I went crazy.

And then through some divine intervention, or maybe cause I was sitting in my seat absolutely LOSING IT, he walked off the stage and right up to me and over the music, yelled something in Arabic. Katia translated to me that he wanted me to come up onstage and dance to the next number, he would sing Om Kathoum. He took my hand and led me up to the stage and I danced while he sang *We Deret Al Ayam*. I was in heaven! I felt like a crazy teenybopper at a Beatles concert, but it was 4:00am in Cairo in a nightclub full of Saudis.

As far as taqsims go, I like dancing with every instrument when performing. I just can't pick a favourite. It depends on my mood. Also, directly because of my good friend Ozgen, I am getting really into Turkish music, chiftetellis and vintage Rom stuff especially. Turkish clarinet taqsims!!! [*Whoo! Hi, Ozzie!*]

There is a band from Seattle, Washington USA called *House of Tarab* – they are fantastic! I just did a number of shows with them, and it was terrific. They sing and play Golden Age and vintage Arabic stuff, and perform in tuxedos and fezzes: they are amazing. Love them!

**If the hafla sound system blew up and we had to form a scratch band – what would you play?**

I would probably be the singer. In my early days working at Arabic clubs, I learned the words to some Arabic songs (phonetically) and would grab the mic when I was onstage to sing a long with the band. The audience always loved it even though I'm sure I had a terrible accent!

**You have a huge list of celebrities in your portfolio – could you tell us about some of your favourite "star performances"?**

That's because, of course, I live in Hollywood! It's always fun – and usually crazy, performing for stars. Man, I have some crazy stories I could tell!

But my favourite time performing for a star was defiantly when I danced for Mick Jagger and *The Rolling Stones*.

I'd loved the Stones since I was a little kid, and in a crazy twist of fate, the night the Stones came to *Moun of Tunis*, the Los Angeles restaurant where I've worked for twenty years, I'd been talking about them with the owner, who is Tunisian. It was almost like a moment of clairvoyance. It was slow on that particular night, there was only one reservation and they had called saying they were going to be late. The owner and I were in the dressing room, discussing music, and I'd asked him if he'd ever heard the Stones in their "Marrakech" period, using North African Joujouka musicians. Finally, the owner looked at his watch, said he didn't think the party was showing up, and that I could go.

I went off to my second gig at an Egyptian club called *Al Andalus*. Just as the band was striking up with my intro, a waiter came backstage and said, "Farhana, call *Moun of*

*Tunis* as soon as your show is done, it's very important!" The whole time onstage, I wondered what would be so important, because my boss never called me at other gigs, and rarely ever even at home. This was before cell-phones, by the way.

When I called the restaurant, my boss said: "You know this sounds crazy, but Michael Jagger, he is here!"

I was dumbfounded. I asked him if he was kidding and he said: "I swear to God! Can you please come back and dance?"

I drove back to the restaurant, my hands were shaking. It really was unbelievable, because we had just been talking about the Rolling Stones – and NO WAY was I about to dance for 'Michael' Jagger! As I pulled into the parking lot I saw stretch limos and security men with walkie-talkies standing around. I was practically hyperventilating at that point! So I took a deep breath...and tried to act nonchalant as I went out to dance.

And it was like a movie scene: the Rolling Stones surrounded by beautiful blonde fashion model-type girls, tanned and dripping with gold and dressed in all white. Mick Jagger was in the middle, smiling broadly, clapping along with the song. The entire thing passed in a blur. He was really happy and polite, and he tipped me a hundred dollar bill. Somehow, and I'm not sure how, it was all over town the next day – dancers were calling me non-stop asking if it was really true. A few months later, they came back, and again everyone was really nice – but that time, I wasn't hyperventilating!

**If you could pick your ideal audience – anyone from any time and any place? Who would you choose?**

I would have loved to dance at Topkapi Palace, in The Grand Seraglio harem!

**And what if we turned the tables? Musicians talk about the "Great Gig in the Sky", and sports fans pick their "Dream Teams" – who would be on the bill in your belly-dance "Dream Cabaret"?**

Probably all the Golden Age greats: Samia Gamal, Naima Akef, Tahiya Carioca.... and then they would give me their costumes!

**Who were – or are – the biggest influences on you as a dancer?**

There are so many! Zahra Zuhair – she was

my first real teacher...and Zein Abd Al Malik – my early belly-dance mentor. He was amazing – and it's now sadly years since he passed on. Many other Americans dancers helped shape me as a baby dancer: Sahra Saeeda, Fahtiem, Aisha Ali, Delilah, and Angelika Nemeth.

Also, of course, the Egyptians I have studied with are all incredible: Raqia Hassan, Aida Nour, and Diana Tarkhan. Then there are the Egyptian super-stars like Fifi Abdou, Nagwa Fouad, Dina, Suad Hosny, Lucy, and the "Big Three" from the Golden Age: Naima Akef, Samia Gamal, Tahiya Carioca!

I have also been lucky to work with friends who continue to inspire me, like my dear friends John Compton, Ozgen, and Kajira Djoumahna.

And then there are the legendary figures, for the way they vibrate with my inner self: like Mata Hari, Ruth St. Denis, Little Egypt, Theda Bara, Isadora Duncan, Maude Allen...a life-long obsession has been with the dancers of the *Ballets Russes De Monte Carlo*; Vaslav Nijinsky in particular!

And then of course the greats of burlesque – Lili St Cyr, Tempest Storm, Gypsy Rose Lee... among many others. I am also influenced by choreographers Bob Fosse, Jack Cole, Busby Berkeley. Other influences and inspirations come from books I have read, visual artists, great composers and musicians, and lots of movies, especially vintage Hollywood musicals.

My students from all around the world always inspire me – amaze me, in fact! I feel like a proud mother when I see them growing as dancers.

**What's the best piece of belly-dance advice you've ever been given?**

Feel the music!

**If there were a belly dance Agony Aunt what question would you send to their Problem Page?**

I don't think I really have one....Seriously, people usually ask ME those sorts of questions.

**What's your best tip for dealing with dodgy customers, or unwanted male attention? Have you ever been heckled?**

In all my years, I have done a lot of work at restaurants and small clubs, and actually

through that experience have grown very good at crowd-control. I always try to deflect an unruly customer through humour...by gently embarrassing him in front of the people he came with. It usually puts him into his place. There was, though, one incident where a young, pretty drunk guy was acting up non-stop. I danced over to him, smiled sweetly and grabbed his face in my hands and then hissed through my smile:

"Listen son, let's get one thing straight. If you don't sit down and shut up, the show is stopping NOW!"

He obeyed humbly and immediately – but afterwards, in the dressing room, I thought to myself, "I called him "son"? Where the hell did THAT come from!?"

**Belly-dancing brings out the best in women / Belly dance brings out the worst in women – what's your experience?** It usually brings out the best in women...they grow emotionally, form intense bonds, nurture each other, explore their inner glamour queen, learn about other cultures, and have a lot of fun.

But yes, sometimes there is a "dark side". There can be jealousies, cattiness, and professional under-cutting, that sort of thing. My friend Bahaia, a well-known (and fantastic!) dancer from Texas, once said to me: "Sometimes I think there is a significantly higher incidence of mental illness in this profession, than in any other!" ...And I had to agree!

**Belly-dance is absolutely exploding in the West – where do you see the dance going in the next 10 or 20 years?**

It will keep growing and changing. I think the general public is definitely taking it more seriously than it used to be, and that will continue.

I would hope that older – and in some cases ancient – traditions will be kept alive: our dance is changing so rapidly. I love fusion and I am a big advocate of artistic license and experimentation, but I always get scared that the foundations and traditions will be lost!

Like any sort of performance art, or even professional sports, the bar is also continually being raised.... so that is wonderful.

I liken belly dance to yoga, or acupuncture: there's a reason it's been around for a few thousand years!

**Despite the politicians, in everyday terms, and perhaps because of the Internet more than anything else, the borders between countries are wearing pretty thin – do you think there will always be a need for student dancers to touch base with the heart of the dance by going to the Middle East?**

Definitely, if the student is serious, going to the "motherlands" of Oriental Dance will broaden your horizons, help you to understand the culture and cultural context, and really put things into perspective....not to mention the fantastic dancers you will see and the amazing music you will hear. I would definitely advocate going! The first time I went to Egypt was in 1991, and I continue to go back every year. On every trip, I learn something new.

**And there you have it – Let's hear it for the phenomenal Farhana, Princess of Hollywood! And if you think, like we do, that her passion for everything she does simply dances off the page then surely you won't be able to resist seeing her in person. The Princess comes to Leeds in July for an evening of workshops and a fantastic Arabic Dance show. Book your Qamar tickets now for the belly-dance event of the Summer!**

**And keep those questions coming! There are more Qamar interviews planned as the year progresses - and if you don't ask, you may never find out!**

