

Ma'bad b. Wahb

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Ma'bad b. Wahb (d. c.126/743) was a singer in the Umayyad court. Raised in Medina, he was a *mawlā* (client) of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Qaṭar (or Qaṭan) who was, in turn, a *mawlā* of either al-'Āṣ b. Wābiṣa al-Makhzūmī or the caliph Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (r. 41–60/661–80). He was of mixed Arab and African descent, his father being black, and was tall and cross-eyed. He sang in Damascus at the courts of Yazīd b. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 101–5/720–4) and al-Walīd b. Yazīd (r. 125–6/743–4). He became semi-paralysed, lost his voice, and then died during the short reign of al-Walīd b. Yazīd. Sallāma al-Qass (d. 130/748), the slave singing girl of Yazīd b. 'Abd al-Malik, sang a eulogy (originally composed and taught to her by Ma'bad) while al-Walīd and his brother followed the coffin as it was exiting the palace. Ma'bad's testimony was at onetime accepted in Islamic courts but owing to his friendship with al-Walīd, a known debauchee, his testimony was later dismissed.

Before devoting his life to singing, Ma'bad was a shepherd and a merchant

selling animals for his master. Ma'bad started learning music from hearing singing voices in his dream. He went on to learn his artform from the famous early Arab singers Jamīla (d. c.101/720), Nashīṭ (fl. second half of the first/seventh century), and Sā'ib Khāthir (d. 63/683). Some of the songs composed by Sā'ib Khāthir and performed by Ma'bad were mistakenly attributed to Ma'bad.

Ma'bad was a composer and a good signer with a good voice. He was the undisputed master and leader of the musicians in Medina. Ishāq al-Mawṣilī (d. 235/850), the illustrious court musician of the early 'Abbāsid period, said "I heard from countless people in the singing profession saying that none was more knowledgeable in the art of singing than Ma'bad" (al-Iṣbahānī, 1:39). Moreover, Ishāq's father, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (d. 224/839), after beautifully singing a song by Ma'bad confessed that he could not match him, saying "By God, I did not achieve half of what Ma'bad had achieved" (al-Iṣbahānī, 10:101).

Ma'bad composed only sixty songs yet these songs exhibited a high level of compositional ability and were especially difficult to sing. He called seven of them