



# Aqil Alshowab

10,000 VHS and Betamax tapes are the life's work of this Emirati collector

Behind the heavy gate of Aqil Alshowab's sun-faded villa lies unexpected treasure. From the outside, the Alshowab residence resembles that of any other Emirati family. It is large and enclosed by thick cement walls. Heaving bouquets of cream- and fuchsia-coloured flowers are draped over the gate, adding an extra layer of privacy. A golden plaque hanging near the entrance reads 'Aqil Alshowab', nearly swallowed by the flowers.

Alshowab opens the gate and waves you into his home. 'I apologise, everything's upside down,' he says, standing in the family living room. But the house is in pristine condition. What Alshowab is referring to is the archive of thousands of videos hidden behind a nearby wooden door.

'I believe this is the biggest personal archive in the Gulf. I'm not talking about government archives or those of the Sheikhas.' A quick online search about Alshowab's archive only brings up three to four articles, all falling short of really capturing its grandeur. Access to the archive must be taken from his wife, who's weary of visitors as the collection is currently stacked up in a makeshift storage room as they prepare to move.

Since the early 1970s, Alshowab has been

safeguarding Emirati history. A combination of his personal videos, around 10,000 VHS and Betamax recordings, hundreds of books and thousands of photos create what's become a de facto national archive. Noticing how his country was quickly changing following the oil boom, he compulsively documented every passing moment.

Bundles of photographs from the 1950s to 1970s lie in front of him. As he sifts through them, it's apparent his memory of dates and locations is almost impeccable. A photo from 1960 shows the inauguration of Dubai International Airport. A grainy black-and-white image of Dubai Creek shows how the waterway was once populated by more tiny boats in its waters than there were cars in the city's streets. Recurring portraits, taken by his father, depict the boys of the neighbourhood over the decades – sometimes tidy, other times posing playfully for a group shot. 'When a photo was to be taken, people had to get ready! Not like how it is now. Back then they only had one shot,' Alshowab says.

Until the 1980s, Alshowab and his father, who he says was the first professional photographer and photo studio owner in the UAE, sent their film and

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short movies to the UK for developing – a pricey process that took one to two months. Gripping a monochrome image of the Dubai Museum from 1971, he pauses. ‘We used to play football right here,’ he says, pointing to a vast lot of sand in front of the museum. ‘One day we heard honking cars and the police, so we went to see what was happening. Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai at the time, had come to open the museum and we went in with him. He didn’t shoo us kids away – he was like a father. If Sheikh Rashid was inside, we were inside. But in the museum, we started to laugh – the exhibition was of common items still being used in our homes.’

This experience, he says, gave him foresight into the changes coming to the UAE. ‘I thought if these items are in a museum then maybe they’ll disappear in one or two years – and they did.’ Following in his father’s footsteps, Alshowab began documenting everyday life in the UAE: weddings

of family members and strangers, folkloric dance performances and landmark events. When he wasn’t behind the camera, he obsessively recorded television on Betamax or VHS tapes. ‘I would record everything I possibly could. Everything. Non-stop. Sports matches, UAE National Day celebrations, ceremonies, films, ads, musalsalat. When the UAE opened its first four football stadiums in 1976 and the event was aired on our first colour TV station, I recorded it. The station doesn’t even have this.’

It’s examples like this that leave Alshowab shaking his head. He’s hesitant to hand over his archive, and especially fearful to share his one-off items. The only known copy of *Abr Sabeel*, the UAE’s first original film made in 1989 is among his collection. Forty-eight hours of footage document royalty and common people performing the *ma’layah*, a folk dance practiced in the UAE and Oman during the 1960s that’s now nearly extinct.

01 Alshowab is fond of describing his archive, stacked in teetering piles, as ‘upside down’

02 His Al Manara home, the repository of his vast collection, is unassuming from the outside



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عقيل الشواب







Alshowab's archive, tangled between rows of cabinets, plastic containers, cardboard boxes, baskets and shelves, is difficult to navigate. The AC is running 24/7 to maintain the cool temperature needed to preserve it. 'This is not a simple hobby,' he says, noting that round-the-clock AC means a soaring electricity bill. 'I'm suffering because all of my archives are disorganised and in one room. Also, this was our salon before so where do I host my visitors? This isn't fair to my wife, this home is her kingdom.'

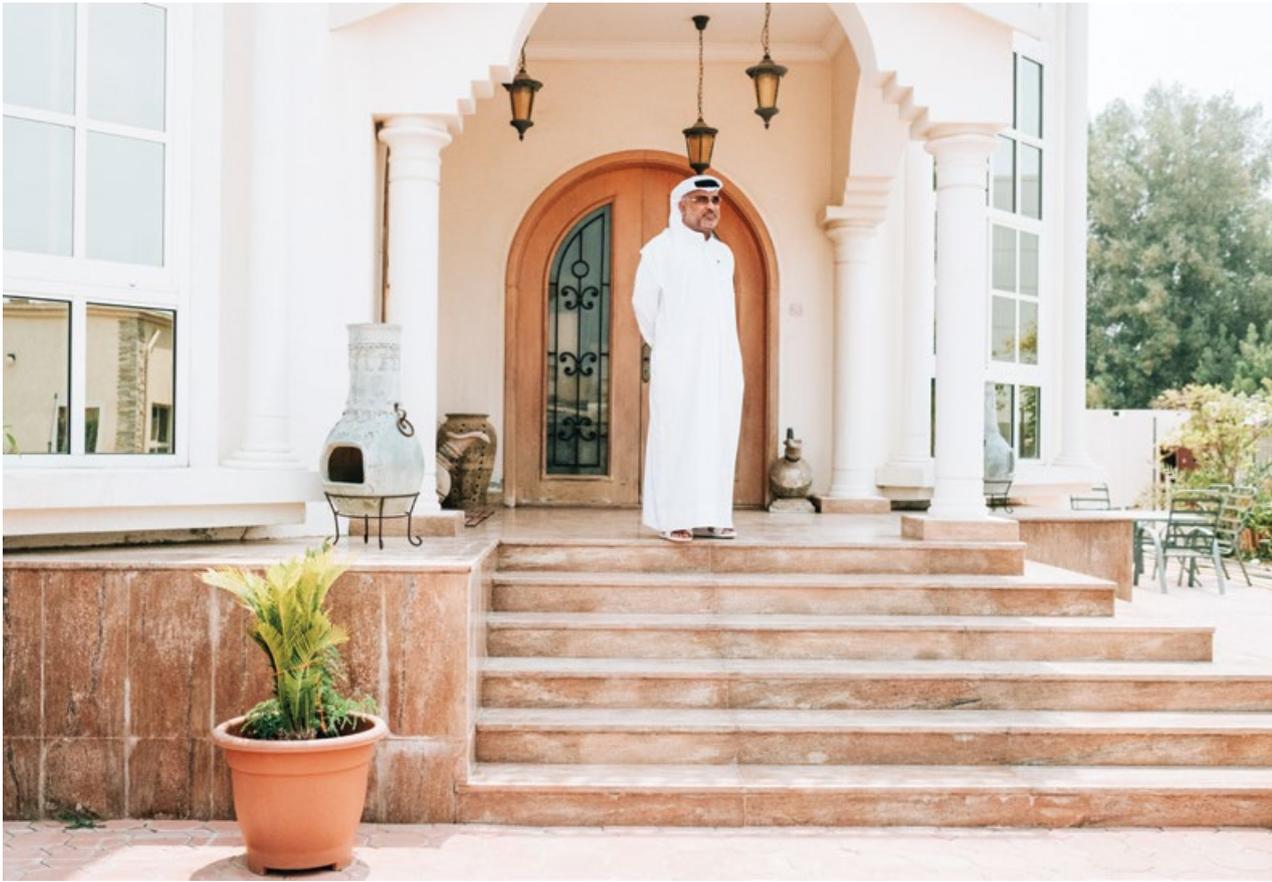
Tapes are labelled with stickers, scribbled with a title and date: Sah Al Nawm (season one), Al Wasl vs. Al Nasr (1988), Ali Baba (1944). Picking up a film labelled with the year 1986, he says, 'Recordings from '86 aren't very old for other countries, but we are still a young country. I don't think people realise the importance of this.' His books and recordings related to Dubai and the UAE are his favourites. 'Especially old Dubai – my family has been here for hundreds of years. And I love the

folklore recordings of course.' Each night before bed, he dedicates one hour to watching videos from his collection. 'Completely random,' he says when asked what he selects. 'An English film, a documentary, an old wedding party – even if I don't know who the people are. This routine makes me sleep very comfortably.'

Moving through the maze of archives, he grins at the empire he's created. 'Of course I knew it'd get this big, but I'm still recording. Now let me show you the machines I have.' One wall is dedicated to his collection of Betamax machines, more than 20 unopened VHS-to-DVD converters and 10 boomboxes. The rarity of Betamax recorders, half of which he's preserved from the 1970s and 1980s, make them especially valuable. 'Some work, some don't. I've kept all of them around – you must for spare parts. I have some upstairs in my room too, five or six.'

Alshowab began the tedious process of converting his collection to DVDs eight years ago.

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A photograph of Alshowab taken in a studio in Naif nearly 40 years ago



Because VHS and Betamax video are analogue, each hour of recorded material takes one hour to convert to DVD. To completely convert the archive seems an impossible task. How many years until it will be fully digitised? 'I'm worried about that one,' he says, smiling. 'Maybe 20 or 30 years. But I'm not in a hurry and don't have a target because this isn't a business. The most important thing is that I maintain this for future generations.'

He has personal plans for the archive, though. He's building a villa in the plot of land that opens up to his courtyard, where the entire basement will be dedicated to his collection. One of his vacant properties down the street will house part of it, too: a combined 744 square metres of space, with categorised rooms dedicated to Betamax cassettes, Gulf-related content and more. The space is necessary at the rate he's going. 'I was born with this hobby – and I will record up until the last moment of my life.'

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As well as tapes, his archive includes old photographs, postage stamps and letters