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Viral Voices: Revolutionary Song, Social Media, and Youth Culture in the Arab Spring

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Abstract: Focusing on three popular "anthems" of the Arab Revolutions ("Rais Lebled" by El Général, "#Jan25 Egypt" by Omar Offendum, and "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar" by "Ibrahim Qashoush") this article critically assesses the ways in which song has come to serve as a force for instigating socio-political and cultural change in the contemporary Arab World, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. The appeal and efficacy of these songs of the "Arab Spring," as well as their characterization as "revolutionary," are understood in aesthetic and technological terms. Hence, the article untangles a complex of interconnected, musically-related themes and issues at the core of the discourse on the recent uprisings; namely, those of self-expression and the power of the Arab youth "voice," those of transitional dissemination via social media and information and communication technology, and those of documentation and representation through music, specifically through the genre of rap. Analysis of the songs and the themes surrounding them demonstrates substantive advancements in contemporary Arab musical, social, and political life, but also exposes serious shortcomings, naïve misconceptions, and willful exaggerations.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Revolutionary Song Aesthetics, Social Media, Cultural Politics

Prelude: On "Revolutions"

The word "revolution" is a peculiar one. In a literal sense, it means a turning back on oneself, implying a return or a recurrence, or perhaps even a

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repetition. In socio-political terms it also refers to the contrary: a sudden and total change, an overthrow.

The series of uprisings that spread across North Africa and West Asia in recent years exemplify the many definitions of this word, even as they appear to resist any absolute labeling. Seemingly overnight and without precedent, though there were important regional antecedents,[2] citizens, especially young people, of nearly every Arab country turned on their own governments (two successive ones so far in the case of Egypt) demanding political change. Taken collectively, the many forms of revolutionary activity—organized protests, spontaneous riots, outright warfare—and their varied outcomes have become popularly known as the "Arab Spring,"[3] but, importantly, a host of other aliases persist: "The Arab Revolutions," "The Arab Uprisings," "The Arab Awakening," "The Jasmine Revolution."

In between such generics and poetics, causal titles have also become prevalent. Because of the role that information and communication technology, the Internet, and social media played in these events, for example, the movement has also been called "A Broadcast Revolution," "A Facebook Revolution," "A Twitter Revolution," and "A YouTube Revolution." Meanwhile, several observers noting the efficacy of music within these media, as well as on the streets, have suggested that this was in fact a "music-driven revolution" (Osborne, 2011).

This plurality of designations, as well as the many plays on them that proliferate in the blogosphere and the news media,[4] strike me as rather befitting the Arabic poetic and lyrical tradition, which makes heavy use of allusion, metaphor, and polysemy. It is for these reasons of creative expressivity as well as because of its use by some artists that I refer in this essay to the revolutions as the "Arab Spring," although I recognize the many obvious deficiencies of the term. I am interested in how such notions as

[2] The series of protests following the 2009 presidential elections in Iran, for instance, were among the more immediate precursors.

[3] The term itself is reused, alluding to both the Spring of Nations in 1848 and the Prague Spring of 1968.

[4] Common tropes that I have encountered while researching this topic include puns on such keywords as spring, fire, revolt/revolution, tweet, and rock (music).

spring, youth, rebirth, and song, all forms of potent energy, are enmeshed. I am not interested, however, in making reductionist or categorical claims about socio-political processes that will likely take decades to unfold. It is hard, for instance, to deny that music was central to the revolutions, but as an ethnomusicologist I would say that while music may have "driven" the Arab Spring, it did so in concert with various other social, economic, political, and technological agents.

The main thrust of this article is in fact to demonstrate this point of how music, as a significant component in a complex of other factors, was involved in transforming the Arab world in recent years. Given the vast scope, however, I can hardly hope to be comprehensive here; several generations of ethnographic and interdisciplinary study will have to be carried out before we might more fully understand the various roles that music has and has not had. My discussion by necessity focuses more narrowly on what exactly has been so "revolutionary" about the artists and songs that have emerged as the "voices" and "anthems" of the Arab Spring. Combining approaches from ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and media studies, I aim to explain what it is about the performers, the songs, the videos, and the distribution methods that have not only rendered them "new" (or at least unusual), but also efficacious in inciting revolution.

To this end, the essay is grounded in analyses of the musical, aesthetic, technological, and social features of three key examples, each of which having much to reveal about the culture of the Arab world at large at this point in time. In concentrating on specific songs, I have found it appropriate to model this essay on the traditional multi-movement musical suite form of the region in which vocal works alternate with instrumental improvisations and interludes.[5] Thus, the main body of this article consists of three analytical sections called "etudes," each focusing on one song, interspersed with three subsequent expository sections called "intraludes,"[6] each

[5] This is variously known across the region as *nuba*/*nawba* (Morocco), *ma'luf* (Tunisia), *waslah* (Egypt, Syria), *fasıl* (Turkey), and so on. Though differing in the number and type of movements by region, the principle of alternation is similar.

[6] I have rejected the word "interlude" because it connotes a break or rupture that is usually lighthearted in nature; my intention is to convey the opposite.

of which elaborates on the interconnectivities between music and the themes or facets of revolution raised in the preceding song.

The three themes I chart out in this paper are thus: 1) expression and the voice, 2) media technology and trans-nationalism, and 3) genre and documentation. Via these themes, I highlight how musicians, both amateur and professional, as well as fans and activists in cyberspace and on the front lines have used the tools of the Digital Revolution and new online and social media platforms to spread revolutionary new popular idioms like rap and hip-hop, among others, across a sounds-cape that has otherwise remained staunchly traditional. Analyzing the examples from Tunisia, Syria, and elsewhere, I demonstrate not only how these styles have crystallized the arguments of the Arab Spring around specific discourses, but also contend that the use of these genres and modes of transmission betrays a generational struggle for hegemony endemic in the region, as its enormous youth population now begins to come of age. Ultimately, these examples challenge not only the political and social status quo, but also how we should hear and understand the music of the modern Middle East.

Etude No. 1: "Rais Lebled"

In societies awaiting mahdis and messiahs, deliverance is often embodied in individuals and singular events. Although smoldering for years, even decades, the flames of the Arab Spring are popularly believed to have been sparked in Tunisia with the self-immolation of the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. Shouting, "How do you expect me to make a living?" as he lit himself on fire, the 26-year-old echoed the desperation of his generation, and he immediately became an icon for protesters outraged over his plight and the record unemployment, corruption, and suppression of free speech that had come to mark the long regime of President Zine el-Abdine Ben Ali. As the demonstrators amassed in the 10,000s across Tunisia in the following weeks, they sang verses from the song "Rais Lebled" ("Head of State") by the 20-year-old Sfax rapper Hamada Ben Amor, better known by the stage name El Général.

If Bouazizi had become the icon of an oppressed populous, over half of which under the age of 30, El Général was its spokesman because he, as

Andy Morgan (2011) puts it, "had the guts to speak out." For nearly two years, El Général had been using rap to voice out against the corrupt and oppressive state apparatus. Having been officially censored, barred from performing publicly, and prohibited from releasing recordings, he nevertheless gained a following in Tunisia and the rest of the Arab world through Facebook and YouTube, the only other outlets available to him. His arrest a week after Bouazizi's death for producing a song praising the protest movement further fueled the uprising, as his fans, the foot soldiers of the incipient revolution, took to the streets demanding his release. By the time he was set free a few days later "Rais Lebled" had emerged as the "battle hymn" of the Tunisian Revolution and would soon be heard in Cairo's Tahrir Square, in Bahrain, and beyond (Ghosh, 2011).

The song that would help remove not only Ben Ali, but also Egypt's Hosni Mubarak from office in only a few months was first posted as a video on El Général's Facebook page on November 7, 2010 to mark the 23rd anniversary of Ben Ali's assumption of the presidency of Tunisia. By August 2013, the song had been reposted on YouTube by other users dozens of times, collectively garnering nearly a million official view counts. The version posted by the Italian bassist, composer, and documentary filmmaker Michelangelo Severgnini, with over 300,000 views, is one of the most popular, probably because it includes English subtitles and a title card providing some contextual information, proclaiming, "He is the voice of the Tunisian people, we [presumably the community of online activists] are their megaphone."

The four-minute video proper opens with a short black-and-white clip taken from Tunisian state television in which Ben Ali asks an apparently frightened child, "Why are you worried? Would you tell me something? Don't be afraid!" A forceful d-sharp minor chord on keyboard then brings in a wobbly, grainy image that comes into more focus as the chord reverberates and decays. We see El Général leaning against a wall and smoking, "hiding his face," as one anonymous blogger observes, in shadows "like Hal Halbrook's Deep Throat in *All the President's Men*" (Revolutionary Arab Rap, 2011). As he finishes his cigarette, he walks down a wet, dreary alley into a rather spartan recording space, adorned only with some faint Arabic graffiti on the wall.

The video switches to color when he begins rapping, but on the whole it is static throughout. The camera focuses only on him in front of a large microphone with a pop filter.[7] The visual monotony is broken occasionally when he gestures to the text to emphasize its meaning, when written Arabic and French words are displayed as he sings them, or when visual distortion effects are added at cadences. Although we see him from various angles—sometimes in full or three-quarter right profile, other times head on from a low angle to augment his presence—his eyes and face remain obscured throughout by his baseball cap. At the end, we see him walk away into the shadows before the screen flickers and we are presented with a colorful, beeping test pattern bearing his name.

Evidently, our focus is meant to be squarely on the lyrics, which are structured into two long verses, each followed by the shorter chorus. They explore such themes as suffering, the failures of the state, patriarchy, and the desire to speak out. The song itself is not musically very remarkable, its most characteristic feature being a slow, downward oscillating ostinato pattern (A#-d#-A#-B-G#-A#-F#-D#) that repeats continuously throughout in the backdrop. This, along with the minor key and the bleak visuals, all suggests despair and stagnation, and work to contrast with and emphasize the urgency of the text, which is delivered at a considerably rapid pace in blunt colloquial Tunisian Arabic. Cleverly, El Général not only implores Ben Ali directly through the frequent repetition of the title phrase *rais lebled* to bring an end to the country's corruption, but also, by distorting the original *rais el-bled*, implicates him in the corruption.

Perhaps invoking the long history of successful military coups d'état in the region, Ben Amor "the general" contrasts himself against Ben Ali the president by way of the discourse of the body politic, referring to himself as "the voice of the country" ("sout lebled")[8] and proclaiming in the chorus, "I am speaking in the name of the people who are suffering." Thus, the notion of "voicing out" pervades in the lyrics of the song, as these excerpts from the two verses readily indicate:

[7] The microphone is inaccurately described by Wright (2011: 116) as "old-fashioned."

[8] He would later reuse this phrase for the name of his own recording company in 2012 and again in 2013 as the title of a song.

Would you tell me something? Don't be afraid!

…I am speaking in my name and of all the people
…Their voice was not heard
…See the police with batons, *tak-a-tak*
They don't care since there is no one telling them to stop
… These are words that make your eyes weep as a father
… This is a message from one of your children who is telling you of his suffering…

Mr. President, you told me to speak without fear
… So I decided to send this message
…Where is the right of expression? They are just words
…I know that there are many words in the hearts of the people, but they don't come out
If there were not this injustice, I would not be here to say these things[9]

When the video of the song went viral over social media, fans from all over the world were quick to endorse its message and its creator, as well as the revolution at large, as remarks taken from the commentary section of the video on YouTube illustrate. Aesthetically, the song was lavished with "respect" (maimoor1, from Pakistan) and "props" (LPdeHipHopJuice, from Canada), and deemed worthy to be "registered in the history of music" (merrycrisis, from Greece), while El Général was personally praised not only as the epitome of "talent" (anythinggoesjoe) but also for his "courage" (miSstrixielicious, from the Philippines). He was labeled a "Hero!!!" (kielerpower, from Russia) who should "Keep defying tyranny!" (Jesse McGee, from the USA) and his martyrdom soon became assumed (Velomere, from USA). "Allah loves this rapper," declared the user named ganvolp, "He must as he speaks for justice, for the powerless children of the one God." The international news media eventually picked up on the online discourse surrounding Ben Amor and went on to reify him and Arabic language rap as the voices of the Arab Spring; *Time* Magazine, for instance, called him "the bard of the North African revolutionary wave" (Walt, 2011).

[9] The translation presented here is adapted from Severgnini's well-known version posted on YouTube, modified slightly to better match idiomatic English.

Intralude No. 1: Expression and the Voice

Although the trumpet is credited with having brought down the walls of Jericho, the drums are said to whip up the citizenry to war, and the guitar was claimed be Woodie Guthrie to be a machine that kills fascists, in the history of the world's most notable socio-cultural and political revolutions, it is the sound of vocal music that has evidently played the more dramatic and remarkable of roles. From the operas that first tested out Enlightenment concepts of freedom and democracy on the stages of Revolutionary France (McClellan, 2004) to the folksongs of Víctor Jara that united the Chilean masses against foreign intervention (Jara, 1983) and the Eurovision song that signaled the start of Portugal's bloodless coup in 1974 (Raykoff, 2007: 5), song has served as an extraordinarily powerful catalyst for both peaceful and violent change.

Thus, scholars of music have long observed and documented the prominent and frequently essential role that vocal music plays in inspiring and enacting socio-cultural transformation in societies around the world, attributing to vocal performance a multitude of key revolutionary powers. The potency of the voice lies not only in its inherent ability to transmit words, though this too is important. Through the act of singing, one can not only give voice to an ideology, but physically embody and enact it as well. Collective vocal music making even goes so far as to forge temporarily communities in which self-rule can be implemented and new political structures can be made manifest. Song, therefore, can function as propaganda, championing particular political platforms and constructing idealized conceptions of self as well as demonic representations of the opposition (see Daughtry, 2003, for example). It can also draw individuals together and prompt a populace into action. In short, musical form can become social and political form, and a turn of a melodic phrase can become a turn in history.

Musicians in North Africa and West and Central Asia have long cultivated numerous genres of purely instrumental music—*taqasims* (free meter improvisations), *bashrafs*/*peşrevs* (preludes), and so on—, but the region's musical culture has, for some two millennia, been grounded in an aesthetic that privileges the voice and the word above all else. This aesthetic of the

word, rooted in the notion of the truth of Revelation and associated with the generative powers of God, has meant that the most beloved traditional genres, like the *qasidah* (ode) and *muwashshah*, are predicated on elaborate poetry, and that even the most generic of pop songs will have a point to make, usually through some subtle turn of phrase or implied meaning. Given all this, it should not have come as a surprise that the waves of dissent that recently surged across the Arab world would have been launched through rap, the complex verbal art form bred in economic despair and adopted as a countercultural tool by urban youth everywhere, including in the Middle East, where as much as 60% of the population is under the age of 30 and where unemployment among this demographic is the highest in the world.

The tremors of the Arab Spring—that complex of youth, rage, and rap that Bobby Ghosh (2011) refers to as a "youth quake"—should have been predicted. Owing to the volatile landscape of the Middle East since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the political dimensions of song, in general, in the region had for some time been the subjects of intense scholarly scrutiny, at least. The focus, however, was largely on traditional and classical forms performed by elder (or even dead) masters; it was only more recently that the popular styles being consumed by the largely forgotten, but increasingly politicized youth have begun to receive closer attention (i.e., Oliver and Steinberg, 2002; McDonald, 2006; Nooshin, 2005, 2009). The intense censorship imposed by many regimes on these forms, especially those bearing strong Western influence like rap, was undoubtedly the biggest reason why the soundtrack of the Arab Spring came as such a shock, especially outside the Arab world. State repression had driven artists so far underground, as El Général's video suggests, that many simply did not know they existed.

The severity of the repression caused artists to seek out venues, largely online, where they could communicate more openly, at least when the sites were not blocked. The rap songs that were shared through such outlets were very much unlike the songs that pervaded the national airwaves, and not just in musical idiom, but, more importantly, in sentiment; they were angry, aggressive, and direct. They were also somewhat dissimilar from songs of dissent that had come before, whether inside or outside the Arab world. Protest songs are not so often directly opposed to individual and state poli-

ties as might be assumed. There is implicit danger of censorship, imprisonment, and even death, if one sings too candidly. Moreover, artists frequently aspire to opacity in order to claim poetic, musical, and intellectual superiority over their opponents. Thus, what made Arab Spring songs like "Rais Lebled" so revolutionary, especially in countries like Tunisia where the right to free speech had long been severely limited, was not so much that they were stylistically new, but that they provided and promoted a means of expression that was culturally and politically unprecedented. Empowered now to speak their minds in linguistic and musical vocabularies that were more immediately their own, many other artists quickly sprang up from the underground, their voices and messages of insurrection spreading like a contagion.

Etude No. 2: "#Jan25 Egypt"

The success of El Général and the activists in Tunisia came as an enormous surprise not only internationally, but also within the Arab world itself; few, especially in Tunisia, could have imagined that Ben Ali's 23-year-long autocracy could have been deposed in less than a month. The shockwaves rippled across the region via the various news and social media outlets, inspiring similar protests in Algeria, Jordan, Oman, and, on January 25, 2011, in Egypt, the most populous Arab country, where young people under age 30, comprising two-thirds of the nation, suffered an unemployment rate of 90% and the oppressive policies of a president who had been in power before most of them were even born. Suddenly in Egypt and seemingly everywhere else, a slew of rappers like El Général emerged as prominent national figures to produce new songs for fans and hordes of protesters alike in need of their own anthems of revolution. In Egypt, there were the Arabian Knightz and Deeb, Libya had Ibn Thabit and Khaled M, while Syria had Omar Offendum.[10]

Born Omar Chakaki in Saudi Arabia to Syrian parents, Offendum was

[10] Criticized for not producing a song in support of the Syrian uprising when it began in March 2011, Offendum explained in an interview for *Rolling Stone* that he waited until the one year anniversary to release "#Syria" for fear of reprisals against family members still living in the country (see Andersen, 2012).

raised in Washington DC and currently lives in Los Angeles. He grew up listening to the songs of popular Egyptian artists like Mohammed Abdel Wahab and Abdel Halim Hafez alongside reggae, soul, and hip-hop, but he only began to experiment with rapping when he was a student at the University of Virginia. Having perceived the intersections between the oralities of Arabic poetry and hip-hop early on, he devised his stage name as a play on the Turkish honorific *effendim*. Intellectually driven, he counts such diaspora Arab authors as Edward Said and Khalil Gibran as his influences, and learned to speak Arabic, in part, from studying classic poetry, which he translates into English in order to build cultural bridges and combat misconceptions generated and perpetuated by the media.

Worried that the American public was becoming fatigued with the incessant media coverage and complexity of the Arab Spring, Offendum wrote the song "#Jan25 Egypt" in part to remind those who felt that Egypt had nothing to do with them that their tax dollars directly supported Hosni Mubarak's regime. Unable to go to Egypt himself, he also wrote the song as an act of solidary with the protesters, much like El Général did with his "Ode to the Arab Spring" when he was unable to accept invitations to perform in Tahrir Square because he did not have a passport. In order to emphasize these aims of transnational support and interconnection, Offendum worked in collaboration with four other Muslim hip-hop artists from the US and Canada who, like him, straddle multiple cultures; namely, Ayah, a Jordanian-born Palestinian hip-hop and R&B singer who was raised in Saudi Arabia, Canada, the UAE, and the USA; The Narcicyst (b. Yassin Alsalmank), a Iraqi-Canadian rapper and journalist born in Dubai; and two African-American Muslim rappers, Freeway (b. Leslie Pridgen), whose manager is Egyptian, and Amir Sulaiman.

"#Jan25 Egypt," in addition to exploring these two motifs, is also fixated on the theme of the media. The title is taken from the names of some of the main feeds trending at the time on Twitter, one of the primary sources of spreading news in Egypt that was not directly controlled by the state. The video, meanwhile, is a "mashup" of footage drawn primarily from Aljazeera.

After a quotation from Gandhi, the song, which consists of four verses, each separated by a sung chorus, begins with Offendum rapping over a

moderately paced backbeat and an agitated eighth-note figure played by synthesized strings.

I heard them say

The revolution won't be televised[11]
Aljazeera proved them wrong
Twitter has them paralyzed
Eighty million strong
And ain't no longer gonna be terrorized
Organized – Mobilized – Vocalized
…

Free to gather and protest
For their God-given rights
For a Freedom of the Press
…

Ayah, a self-described nomad and computer geek, then sings the chorus:

Time to push, and we ain't falling back now
Time to fight, because we are all we have now
Do you hear?
Calling out for back up
Try to keep a look out for better days

Posted on YouTube on February 7, 2011 by producer Sami Matar, himself a Jordanian-American, the video had amassed nearly 300,000 views and over 2500 likes by August 2013. The audio track was also made available for free download from Soundcloud, an audio distribution platform based in Berlin. Meanwhile, links to the Twitter accounts of all the artists performing in the song were listed on the YouTube page.

Intralude No. 2: Media Technology and Transnationalism

In addition to also invoking the themes of voice and expressivity, Omar Offendum's "#Jan25 Egypt" very clearly illustrates the importance of mass

[11] This line references the song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1970) by Gil Scott-Heron.

media technology and trans-nationalism to this revolution, twin tropes reported on within the media itself to an almost narcissistic, auto-fetishistic extent. In some ways, however, these dimensions of the Arab Spring have been overemphasized, even as the full extent of what they mean has been underestimated, especially when considered within the context of the musical, technological, and political developments that took place in the region in the preceding century.

The Arab world, despite enduring orientalist depictions as timeless and unchanging, embraced media technologies very early on with great enthusiasm, most notably within the areas of music and mass entertainment. As the main production hub, Egypt dominated radio, film, and television throughout the 20th century, although other important centers flourished in Lebanon and elsewhere, and there was considerable exchange across the ever-porous borders of the region. Music was essential to all of these platforms and effective in spreading pan-Arab sentiment to countries across the two continents that shared linguist, cultural, and religious affinities.

Importantly, as Armbrust (2002: 233-234) argues, music was also vital in shaping how the media formats themselves were used and developed, the technology constantly adapting to the needs of performers and the desires of listeners. Indeed, Arab artists and audiences could hardly be described as passive users of media technologies; radios in many cafés and souks, for example, are turned up to the loudest volume possible and would undoubtedly go higher if the machines were capable. In this age of mediation, as people increasingly did not perform music themselves and turned to professionals as surrogates, manipulating and engaging with the technology became the means by which music could be made to be participatory once again. This became even more imperative in times when the state held direct control over what was broadcast.

Thus, it was only with the advent of digital music technologies and social media that Arabs could finally consume the lengthy songs of artists like Abdel Wahab or Umm Kulthum in the ways they wanted: immediately, intimately, and repeatedly, not as disembodied voices over megaphones or on cassette tapes, or as untouchable icons on a distant film or television screen. Only inches away and with the click of a mouse, voices on platforms like

YouTube could be heard at will, liked (or unliked), shared, commented upon, and responded to. Such autonomy and degrees of participation would have important implications for the Arab Spring, as would the transnational networks that these media sites engendered. In repressive media climates like those in Egypt and Tunisia, social media facilitated the creation and propagation of virtual communities in which genres and subcultures that were marginalized or even suppressed could be aesthetically validated. These networks fostered support, both intra-regionally and internationally, for artists and fans who felt alone and isolated, support that was sorely lacking from existing official state and financial apparatuses.

On the surface, rap music would seem to make an unlikely and impractical medium for a group of protesters, unleashed from the underground, to chant in the streets. The complexity of the lyrics delivered at rapid speeds and the technical production process requiring significant technical expertise do not make it the most participatory of genres. Yet rappers like Offendum, El Général, and Libya's Asim Ibn Thabit, although they gave voice to deep-seated rage and opened up new modes for expressing it, did not serve as surrogates for the masses and, despite being declared heroes and martyrs, they by and large shied away from assuming mantles of authority; in short, they did not so much speak *for* the disaffected, as *with* them. Ibn Thabit, for example, relied on the full array of information and communication technologies available to him to call upon the Libyan youth to get out of the Internet cafés, rally for insurrection, and take action,[12] maintaining an active website and blogging in Arabic and Amazigh, as well as using Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, podcasting, and webcasting.

The role that these tools have had in the uprisings should not be underplayed, as they are integral features not only of the musical medium, but also of the youth culture that consumes it. That said, it is important to remember that not everyone could afford or had access to these technologies, and that governments frequently blocked the Internet and mobile phone connections. Nevertheless, those who had the means and drive were usually

[12] Reportedly, insurgents in Libya, for example, listened to the song "Calling the Libyan Youth" to pump themselves up before they went out into the streets.

able to creatively circumvent official restrictions and still disseminate their messages. Moreover, when sites did go down and web-communities were disrupted, word would spread instantly around the world. Thus, services like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, while important within particular countries, were absolutely critical for transmitting information and music across the region and beyond.

Etude No. 3: "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar"

Reportedly a fireman by profession,[13] the man called "Ibrahim Qashoush" is better remembered as the amateur poet and singer from the town of Hama who, rather than put out fires, instead stoked the flames of the uprising against the government of President Bashar al-Assad during the early months of Syria's long civil war. Not much is known definitively about Qashoush beyond reports of his death, assuming his body was correctly identified (see Shadid, 2011; Mroue, 2011), and a few videos posted on YouTube. Dubbed the "Nightingale of the Revolution" in the news releases, he had gained notoriety, so the story goes, for his caustic performances of the song "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar" ("Get Out Bashar")[14] at demonstrations held in June 2011. He became a martyr to the cause when he was found dead in the al-Assi (Orontes) River on July 4, his vocal cords cut out from his throat.

The brutality of this fatal laryngectomy, clearly visible on a YouTube posting, however, neither silenced "Qashoush" nor doused the embers of the Arab Spring as it blazed into the summer of 2011; Qashoush, whoever he really was, and the song attributed to him quickly became the rallying cries for the opposition, which otherwise had little cohesion, and they lived on as memes, invoked and reiterated countless times on the Internet and on the streets of every city in Syria. Young children under the age of 14, who make up over a third of the population, sang "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar" at rallies and memorials in the town of al-Tabaqa and elsewhere, while footage of protesters singing the song at a demonstration in Hama on June 27, first broadcast on the Damascus television channel Shaam News Network

[13] The person in question is identified as a cement layer by Shadid (2011).

[14] According to Shadid (2011), "no one in Hama seems to agree on who wrote the song."

(SNN), went viral on YouTube, garnering millions of views through scores of reposts.[15] "They cut his throat to try to stop his chant [from] spreading," proclaims freedomforeveryone20 on one of the more popular reposts on YouTube, "Please spread this [video] to prove them wrong and show their violence will never defeat us."

Freedomforeveryone20's video, titled "Syrian Revolutionary Dabke" and posted on YouTube the day before Qashoush was killed, features English translations and has been watched over a quarter of a million times, according to the view count, making it the most popular non-Arab language repost of the June 27 performance. There is, however, not so much to see in the grainy, low-resolution footage shot at nighttime. A large crowd, perhaps numbering in the hundreds, can be made out clapping in a square, waving flags and holding cameras and mobile phones in the air, but, despite the title, there appears to be no *dabke*, the traditional line dance of the Levant. As the camera sweeps across the audience from above repeatedly—documenting, searching—it unfortunately blurs the scene further; reminiscent of the "Rais Lebled" video, no one can really be seen clearly, and while we can hear the raspy voice of the singer through the occasional microphone squeak, we cannot see the stage, and there is no sign of Qashoush.

More of a chant than a "song" *per se*, "Yalla Erhal Ya Bahar" is a quick-paced, forthright refutation of al-Assad's regime comprising of many two- and three-line verses, each followed by the titular single-line chorus, which is performed in a twice-repeated call-and-response format between the singer and the crowd, as this extract shows:

Verse:
Bashar, you're a liar
To hell with you and your speech
Freedom is at the door
Chorus:
[Call:] Get out Bashar!
[Response:] Get out Bashar!
[Call:] Get out Bashar!

[15] The video for Omar Offendum's "#Syria" ends with a brief edited segment from this footage.

[Response:] Get out Bashar![16]

Each verse, with the repeated chorus, is usually reiterated immediately, meaning that performances of the song are replete with repetition. Some of the more provocative verses eliciting greater reaction from the audience, such as the two below, are repeated yet again later on.

Bashar, you're an ass
And so are all those who support you

We will remove Bashar with our strength
Syria wants Freedom

Although the lyrics are delivered unrelenting at a brisk speed, they are straightforward and set syllabically, mainly to only two pitches that alternate on the downbeats. These characteristics, along with the heavy amount of repetition, make it easy to clap along to and learn, ensuring audience participation. The slightly more elaborate figure that makes up the call, meanwhile, signals the arrival of the chorus to the crowd and facilitates the collective response. Percussion, most likely a drum set with a high-hat (apparently added later), can be heard faintly in the background of the video playing a galloping rhythm that matches with the vocals, simultaneously symbolizing and further reinforcing the spirit of group cohesion.

The participatory, repetitive, and memetic[17] dimensions of "Yalla Erhal Ya Bahar" were quickly picked up on and encapsulated in another video, posted on YouTube on July 9, 2011 by freedomtosyria2. Sampling the audio from the SNN footage, it sets fragments of the original chant from the June 27 performance to an electronic dance music backdrop. The remix begins with a sample, taken from the end of the original audio track, of the crowd shouting "Syria." Looped incessantly at first, it is then intercut with segments of the chorus and of some of the verses as a fast-paced techno dance track is layered underneath. The microphone squawks in portions of

[16] The translation is adapted from the one given in freedomforeveryone20's version of the video posted on YouTube.

[17] In her discussion of viral and memetic videos, Shifman (2012: 4) defines memetic as "the act of participation through *mimesis*."

the master track are integrated with stylistic distortion effects, while the driving Arabic chanting eventually becomes perceived as rapping.

In addition to such manipulation of the musical source data, the video is also memetically playful in its reuse of images gleaned from the Internet to replace the original grainy footage of the Hama protesters. The visuals include an image of a gun, captioned in Arabic as "The best way to deal with Bashar," a political cartoon, and a picture of demonstrators brandishing their shoes at a poster with a large red x over the face of Bashar al-Assad. One of the most popular of all the viral videos of the ongoing Syrian Civil War, this version has accumulated over half a million views and nearly 1,000 comments, while the numerous reposts shared between online users have amassed 10,000s of views.

Intralude No. 3: Genre and Documentation

The case of Ibrahim Qashoush and "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar" raises two further important, interconnected issues regarding the revolutionary anthems of the Arab Spring, those of genre and documentation. The song, although rendered in a syllabic, semi-spoken manner reminiscent of rap, is indeed not rap, and its centrality to the cause of the Syrian rebels reveals that hip-hop has by no means been the only soundtrack of the Arab Spring, despite its characterization as a "rap revolution" in the international press. Meanwhile, the uncertainty over who "Qashoush" was echoes an oft-heard caveat in news coverage of the Arab Spring relying heavily on social media for primary source material: "CNN is unable to independently verify the authenticity of the video."

Without downplaying the significance of recent Arab rap, it is important to highlight that rock and heavy metal, among other genres, have had even longer histories of social and political dissent in the region. Mark LeVine (2008), for instance, has documented the intricate interrelationships that heavy metal has had over the past two decades with Islam, youth culture, and social media across the Muslim world, a social confluence that likely had as much to do with stimulating the acts of protest that took place in Tahrir Square and beyond as did rap, rage, and repression. Rap and hip-hop, however, have dominated the discourse on the revolutionary music of the

Arab Spring to the effect of relegating other artists and styles to the sidelines, even when these others—namely guitarists like Masoud Bwisir in Libya and Ramy Essam in Egypt—have had more direct and active involvement in the actual events on the frontlines. Their stories and the roles of their songs are frequently conflated with those of rap artists in news reports.

The focus on rap and hip-hop seems to me to relate to the deep associations of this genre with newness and youth culture. The interest in the new, the youthful, and on springtime is a recurring motif in these revolutions seeking to overthrow regimes that are decades old. Although hip-hop has a history of more than 30 years as a counter-hegemonic force in the West and around the world, it is perceived as new to the Arab world, in part because of the way that traditional forms of popular music—like the *ughniya* of Umm Kulthum in Egypt or Arabic pop in the Levant—dominated the national airwaves, leaving little space for more globalized or Westernized forms. Thus, the Arab Spring is somewhat unusual in the history of revolutionary song in that the repertory—compared to, say, the songs of Víctor Jara, which derived their power from folklore—is essentially foreign in style, albeit retaining important local linguist features.

Mischaracterizations, conflations, and tropes aside, the Arab Spring has generally been perceived to be a highly musical affair, especially from outside the region. A battery of bloggers, activists, journalists, and commentators—followed more recently by scholars as well as the World Music industry[18]—have made the songs of the Arab Spring among the most and best contemporaneously documented of any revolutionary movement in history; one blog, to simplify things, even gives a Top Five list (see Anon, 2011). Internet-based technologies that put songs, videos, and performers within instant reach and minimize the problem of translation have made it easy to report on the musical aspects of the uprisings from a distance. Meanwhile concerted efforts have also been made from within to document the songs of the Arab Spring; El Général and Omar Offendum, among many other artists, as well as innumerable fan/protesters have been quick to give inter-

[18] See, for example, the compiliation CD *Rough Guide to Arabic Revolution* released by World Music Network in March, 2013.

views, write blogs, and comment on videos on YouTube, inscribing their own history themselves not only in song, but also in video and print.

The fixation on music, I think, is predicated, in part, on at least two underlying factors. Firstly, the international press, when it had paid any attention to music in the Muslim world, had mainly only reported on it being suppressed or banned in countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and, more recently, in northern Nigeria and northern Mali, leaving the mistaken impression that the whole region was deprived of music. The outbreak of artists performing Western style pop genres was therefore a pleasant surprise that became easy fodder for the 24-hour news cycle rapacious for anything novel. The underlying subtext that now "they" can finally make music too, played well into preexisting orientalist conceptions of the region. Secondly, the calls for democracy and freedom in these songs align very closely with Western conceptions of music as an inherently free form of human behavior, with song in particular being understood as an embodiment of personal liberty and self-expression. Music, briefly put, is an inherent good in Western culture and, again, now "they" have it too.

Tellingly, there has been no real alternative discourse to the naïveté of the prevailing narrative about the poor youth (alternatively un- or over-educated) overcoming adversity and obscurity to sing down a dictator depicted as evil incarnate. Little coverage has been given, for example, to the fact that El Général has called for the imposition of shari'a law in Tunisia, or that his song "Allahu Akbar," labeled "jihad rap" by one YouTube commentator, is staunchly militant, anti-Jewish, and pro-Saddam Hussein; professing solidarity with coreligionists, he sings of how he would cross the border to become a martyr, if he could. Obviously, such cases do not conform to Western or international conceptions of heroism, and put the revolutions, or at least how they have been portrayed so far, in jeopardy.

Postlude: (In)Conclusions

At the time of this writing, the civil war continued to rage in Syria, Tunisia seemed primed for a second revolution, and a massive military crackdown on supporters of the freely elected, but recently deposed Mohamed Morsi appeared to undermine the Arab Spring in Egypt altogether. Given all the

uncertainty, it is hard to draw too many definite conclusions, but, whether or not the Arab Spring will be able to bring any sustained social and political change, it seems that it has at least radically transformed the musical world of the Middle East, as the various themes of this essay have endeavored to illustrate.

The public sounds-capes of many countries in the region have been, at least for the time being, utterly reconstituted; once banned styles like rap and hip-hop can now be prominently heard on national airwaves.[19] More significantly, they now also proliferate relatively unfettered not only virtually via social media, but offline as well in concerts, clubs, and political demonstrations. Counter-hegemonic at their core and locally field-tested, these styles have increased the arsenal of verbal weapons available for effective socio-political dissent; their continued cultivation, even if they are forced back underground, will only sharpen their edge.

Besides stimulating genre diversification, the revolutionary songs of the Arab Spring have also expanded the aesthetic possibilities of Arab music beyond traditional conventions. Faisal Al Yafai (2011) might as well have been describing the rhetorical style of earlier Arab pop when comparing the "the flowery, nuanced language of opposition politics–with its careful caveats, its obligatory praise, and its elliptical critiques" to the "direct and uncompromising" language of revolutionary Arab rap. This openness in the lyrics of post- (mid-?) Arab Spring revolutionary song is only one of many new features that have now been absorbed as aesthetically integral to an enormous cross-section of the Arab population, that comprising youth. Their songs are straightforward, yet still poetic, rely more on vocal timbre to establish moods than on ornate melismas, and are delivered within the median tessitura of the natural spoken voice, than crooned in a high-range like the eminent Abdel Halim Hafez might have done.

Put succinctly, the youth of the Arab world have found *their* voice(s) and have been emboldened to use them as freely on the streets as on the information superhighway. The Arab political sound world is now theirs, and

[19] Gana (2013: 222), for example, claims that more than a hundred new "wannabe" rappers have emerged in Tunisia since "Rais Lebled."

they will continue to define and redefine it for years to come. Through their songs, they have made their presence known and their voices have been heard around the globe, spreading the incendiary message of revolution to Wall Street and beyond, as the metaphor goes, like a wildfire or a virus.

Özet: Bu makale, Arap Devrimlerinin üç popüler marşına (El Général'den "Rais Lebled", Omar Offendum'dan "#Jan25Egypt" ve Ibrahim Qashoush'dan "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar") odaklanarak marşların çağdaş Arap Dünyasındaki –özellikle Tunus, Mısır ve Suriye'de-sosyo-politik ve kültürel değişimi körükleyen bir güç olarak ne şekillerde hizmet ettiklerini eleştirel bir şekilde analiz edecektir. Arap Baharı'nın bu şarkılarının etkinliği ve onların devrimci olarak karakterize edilmesi estetik ve teknolojik bağlamlarda anlaşılabilir. Bu nedenle makale son isyanlara ilişkin söylemin özündeki müzikle ilgili konu ve temalardaki karşılıklı bağlantılılığın karmaşık yapısını çözümlemeye girişmektedir. Şarkılar ve temaların analizi çağdaş Arap müziği, sosyal ve politik yaşamındaki önemli ilerlemeleri ortaya koyacaktır, fakat ayrıca ciddi sorunları naif yanlış anlamaları ve gönüllü abartmaları da göz önüne alacaktır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Arap Baharı, Devrimci Şarkı Estetikleri, Sosyal Medya, Kültürel Politikalar.

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