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The Music Scene in Tunisia and Egypt after the Arab Spring

Review

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Music in Tunisia and Egypt flourished during the Arab Spring and became the voice of the uprisings. Often made and performed by protesters on the streets, it kept spirits high. After the elections of 2011, in both Tunisia and Egypt, alternative, rock, rap and electro music kept growing, challenging the system and demanding justice. Today, these genres and their creators continue to talk about themes such as women's rights, failed domestic politics and bleak memories.

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In the Arab Spring context, Egypt and Tunisia have much in common. Both countries managed to topple their rulers, hold elections, and have their citizens vote, in the second part of 2011.¹ During the spontaneous protests from December 2010 to February 2011, the call for resistance left its own imprint in the music culture. Sending out joy and hope, this period's songs were full of optimism for the next day. The streets, in which the riots took place, were taken over by uplifting, allegro rhythms that accompanied lyrics filled with determination.

The repertoire performed on the streets was intended to arouse passionate emotions to encourage the continuation of the social uprisings.² Verses by Tunisian poet Abul Qasim al Shabbi and Egyptian poets Fouad Negm Abdel and Rahman al-Abnudi were used for chants across the region to maintain the rhythm of the revolution in the streets.³

The songs and the chants, some of which spoke about past wars, were widely known among the protesters. One example is "Patriotic Port Saied" in Egypt, which included lyrics such as: "Youth of the popular resistance defended with virtue and virility/ and fought the army of occupation/ Congratulations, O Gamal". When this song was sung by Egyptian refugees during the Israeli occupation from 1967 to 1973, "o Gamal" referred to Nasser himself, as their savior. But in the context of the Arab Spring, "o Gamal" referred to the younger generation. "Gamal" means beautiful, and beauty is to be found in youth.⁴ Other examples of songs sung by protesters in Tahrir Square were "Biladi, Biladi" ("my country, my country") and "Ahu Da Illi Sar" ("this is what happened") by Sayed Darwish, the most famous version of which was an alternative rock song by the Massar Egbari band.

A lot of new-generation musicians who were already part of the alternative music scene before the late 2010s, took on singing on the streets. These included Emel Mathlouthi, Yasser Jradi, El Général, DJ Amr Haha in Tunisia, and Ramy Essam, Eskendrella Band, and Massar Egbari in Egypt. Their decision to walk together with their compatriots while singing songs whose lyrics called for an awakening, made them beloved. With lyrics that shout out for freedom and social justice, Yasser Jradi, with his most famous song "Dima, Dima", and Emel Mathlouthi, with her song "Kelmti Horra" ("My world is free") led the protesters in Tunisia (in 2015, Mathlouthi sang this song at the Nobel Prize awards ceremony). Folk/pop singer Ramy Essam's song "Irhal" ("Leave") was also often sung in Tahrir. In his newest song "Resistance" (released in May 2021), the singer sends his revolutionary regards to Palestine.⁵

Taking advantage of the popularity that rap music has enjoyed in recent years, El Général from Tunisia made rap an instrument of the revolution. With his song "Mister President" (2011), he personally called for Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to leave office.⁶ Another Tunisian rapper, DJ Amr Haha sang "The people want to topple the regime".⁷

The revolt certainly strengthened the alternative and underground music scene, since most of these artists are still producing music influenced by social and political issues. Emel Mathlouthi, for example, with her song "Naci en Palestina" (2013) raised her fist in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle.

Ten years after the Arab Spring and since the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the region is still transforming. The cases of Egypt and Tunisia seemed to be the most hopeful ones, as Syria, Yemen, and Libya are facing brutal civil wars. However, after the promising events of 2011 and the elections, a renewed authoritarianism appeared, when politicians from the old regimes made their way into the new governments.⁸

Even in Tunisia, the so called "success story" of the Arab Spring, the new government demonstrates numerous cases of violence against civilians, every day. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly reported harassment against LGBTQ activists, among others.⁹ As for Egypt, the country is today at the brink of its worst humanitarian rights crisis in years.

Egypt is regarded as the cultural center of the Arab world. It is said, that if an artist can win the audience of Egypt they can run the whole region. Musicians are until today inspired by the achievements of January- February 2011. In the path that Ramy Essam and the Eskendrella Band opened, after 2011,

artists use traditional, folk, rock and electro sounds to pass their messages. Inspired by the lyrics and instrumental parts of the music band “Elbouma” (first launched in 2014), a whole generation of young Egyptian artists has emerged. Their sound in their new album (2021) is a mix of electronic, ambient, Shaabi (Egyptian pop) music and, in some cases, spoken words. They have written songs such as “Astek Ya Astek” (“Elastic, Oh Elastic”) or “Ya Arousa” (“Oh, Bride”) in which they sing: “Oh bride, oh bride, they put you in a wedding dress”.¹⁰ The two sisters (“Elbouma”) talk about feminism, women’s rights, child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM). Their decorative style is combining themes from modern and ancient Egyptian history.

Another well-known Egyptian band, the “Cairokee”, produces Indi rock, rap, and soul music, using traditional routes. “Ceasefire” (2017), “A Drop of White” (2020) and “Helmy Ana Studio Session” (2020) are some of their songs that have political and social themes. In the song “Drop of White”, the lyrics are very personal and emotional: “My mind and heart are always living in war/ my heart feels guilt and my mind has taken side”. In another song of theirs, they sing “Hey, Hey Square, where were you all that time” (Nov. 2011), speaking of the square itself and remembering the events that took place there.

Tunisia is sometimes regarded as the most democratic country in the Middle East after the Arab spring, although after the elections of 2011, there have been arrests that question this belief. In 2013, Klay BBJ and Weld El Kenz were accused of turning against the police. It all started with a music video which was released by rapper Weld El Kenz for the song “Cops Are Dogs”, and included a collection of shorter videos with police officers beating protesters. Weld El Kenz reported that policemen hit him in the van on the way to the police station.¹¹

In general, Tunisia’s music scene is full of rap, jazz, folk and soul sounds, and has great musicians like Anouar Brahem, Dhafer Youssef, and Sabry Mosbah. In the alternative scene, Sabry Mosbah with his album “Mes racines” (2017), talks about social issues. His song “Mansit” is maybe influenced by Egypt’s national anthem “Biladi, Biladi” (“my country, my country”): “And the time is my time, and the country is my country/ and the original is the original, and the servants are not my servants”. In another song, “Mouch Menni” (2017), he says: “They killed us, and they betrayed them/ our enemy is a situation and you can see that situation”. The people of Tunisia have learned to revolt against the oppression of their government through their struggles. It is remarkable that a country where homosexuality is illegal, is the home to the first gay radio station in the Arab world.¹²

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring and looking at the whole picture in Tunisia and Egypt of the last ten years, one observes that music and each artist’s personal resistance played a crucial role in the uprisings. Even though it is still too soon to know the full impact the Arab Spring in the Arab music scene, it is a fact that the cultural history of the region is currently studied before and after the events of 2010-2011. The biggest achievement of the Arab Spring uprisings is that now, people know that they are able to create something with their voices. In 2021 they continue to sing freely.

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