

Music, Arab Youth and Social Resistance

Pilar Garrido Clemente. Arabist and full professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Universidad de Murcia
Pedro Rojo Pérez. Arabist and chair of the Fundación Al Fanar para el Conocimiento Árabe

Music is the ideal language for taking stock of the expression of emotions, peoples' traditions, social movements, culture and cultures, and the order and rupture of established systems. This article explores today's Arab music by travelling through the different places of the vast geography of Arabism understood in its broadest sense, which is not limited to a language but to a geographical space. Providing a list of young artists from all Arab countries would be an endless endeavour, but we can look at some of them and get a taste of the diverse musical styles, performers, meanings and successes of musicians on our musical journey.

In Arab countries and through their languages and dialects we can travel and explore social reality, as these examples reflect styles, languages and musicians that have gradually signified on some occasions, and re-signified on others, diverse social movements, i.e., specific causes, particular uprisings or universal demands, some of the moment and others chronic.

We will examine a selection of young musicians in the current panorama of Arab countries in terms of protest music, related to today's current social movements in their everyday environments, both wars (Palestine) and revolutions (Arab Springs onward), and demands for universal values (feminisms). We will focus more on independent musicians and bands within their own context rather than on bands and singers of mainstream music, marked by exaggerated elements of pop and hypersexualisation of its stars.

Once the locations have been contextualised and following the leitmotiv of demand as a leading thread, we also wish to explore certain striking features of this ambience, such as the musical language used by the artists, along with the rhythms, styles and native instruments.

Above all, in these vanguard musical creations we can see how Arab and international references mix naturally with personal musical languages. As a premise, we will see that the a priori and most protest-oriented genres, such as rap, are also co-opted by the regimes, and that other more traditional types of music, such as *tarab* or *gnawa*, can also be ground-breaking and channels of social changes. Moreover, we should bear in mind, before embarking on this journey through sound, that there is nothing purer than mixing.

Young Arab Musicians Channel Their Uprisings

We take the Arab Springs or Arab revolutions as starting and turning points in politics, social affairs and life, and, consequently, in artistic creation and, of course, musical expression.

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Words are, in themselves, a public microphone which, along with rhythm and music, become the overflowing expression of feelings, screams, cries and, hopefully, also of laughter, irony and perception. Thus, in the most uncertain stages of the uprisings, young singers heralded the occupations in the streets of Tunisia, Egypt or Syria. These singers understood and brought together the people's protests and managed to transform them into art, turning pressing social needs into music. Thus, a preeminent and initiating figure is Emel Mathlouthi (pronounced Mazluzi), who, by mixing Tunisian percussion with electronic minimalism, achieves a heart-breaking vocal register. In a very pure way, she combines the sounds of North Africa with modern electronic production and, as highlighted in the introduction, brings together musical influences as disparate as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Marcel Jalife or Sheij Imame, among others. Emel is a singer-songwriter, producer and musician. With her music created in the Tunisian streets, with great media success she led the protest song *Kelmti horra*¹ [My Word Is Free], which became an indispensable hymn of the Tunisian revolution and the Arab Springs in general. On 11 December 2015 we witnessed a unifying and moving phenomenon when thousands of Tunisians, glued to their screens, through

tears of emotion and pride, saw Emel put her heart and soul into her performance of *Kelmti horra* during the Noble Peace Prize ceremony held in Oslo, becoming the first Arab singer to perform in this setting. Emel addressed the audience with these honest and incendiary words: "We must still feel the pain of others. That is the foundation for avoiding dehumanization. That's my big point. So that's political. I just hate the word political today more than ever because it's so dirty. Art has to find a new definition to fight, to be associated with. I think that my art is always going to be committed. I feel more comfortable adding [that term] to my art than adding the term political."

As a new *modus operandi*, she released her second album through crowdfunding because no record label was willing to countenance what she said in her songs. Now she produces her own records, reflecting her musical personality based on mixing (Arab traditional roots and techno, electronic music...), and with the driving force of being very clear in the demands of her lyrics. Unfortunately, the revolution in Tunisia has not brought with it the longed-for environment of freedom favourable to her work, and Emel forms part of the diaspora of Arab artists living in Harlem, because, as she herself argues, "home is any place where you feel good, where you have been welcomed, where you can create naturally."

Very explicit in her words and uniting causes and protests, the artist argues that "there's a lot of injustice when you compare the success of El General, who's a rapper, not to myself but other women singers in Tunisia who are perhaps barely known. It seemed like El General and other men who became famous after the revolution had an easier path because the territory is always easier for men to conquer." El General was arrested by the forces of the dictator Ben Ali in the first beats of the *Jasmin*

1. Subtitled in Spanish on the YouTube channel of the Fundación Al Fanar: <https://ytube.io/3ghv>

Revolution because of his song *Rais lebled*, with direct criticisms of the *rais* (president), which would also become part of the soundtrack of the Tunisian revolution.

We continue the musical journey through Egypt, as the second pole of action in these Arab revolts where fully vanguard artists, bands and styles breed, germinate and endlessly emerge, with an authoritative commitment to and from music. An emblematic band is Cairokee, which wrote one of the essential songs when reviewing the action of the 17 days that maintained the pulse of the Egyptian people against Mubarak's dictatorial regime in 2011. Its epicentre was the occupied Tahrir Square, in the heart of Cairo. *Sut Al Huriya* [The Voice of Freedom] was created and recorded in that same place, along with a spirited video.

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This emerging band had been founded in 2003 under the name The Black Star, later called Cairokee, combining the words Cairo and karaoke, to make clear that the band sings with Cairo, together with the people. We need to keep an eye on them because, from the outset, they have produced hits with videos that exceed one hundred views on YouTube, combining popular success with powerful social action. They have formed excellent partnership with the Algerian Souad Massi and the legendary Ahmed Fouad Negm in their 2014 album *El Sekka Shemal*.

If we continue on the journey, we find Youssra (pronounced Yusra) Al Hawari, another of the outstanding voices of the Egyptian revolution. Her music is joyful and yet critical and is marked by

her inseparable accordion. Her first hit was *The Wall*,² a parody of the military power exemplified in the immense concrete walls that the authorities set up around Tahrir Square, in an impromptu attempt to prevent people from getting in. Over the years, Youssra has grown musically, and in 2012 she added other musicians to her project with whom she has performed in different parts of Egypt and the world. In late 2017, with her musical career much more established, Al Hawari became a pioneer of Egyptian women artists when she recorded an album through crowdfunding. This, as we have mentioned, is due to the lack of record labels willing to commit to uncomfortable and anti-system sentiments; and it is also a daring resource for artists to avoid being subjected to restrictions on lyrics or styles. Thus, Youssra's songs intertwine alternative folk, French *chanson*, indie rock and jazz to make up an idiosyncratic, mixed and championing artistic world.

Squares and markets are the epicentres of social and human movements. In this respect, Tahrir Square has been emblematic as a focus of action and an incubator of creation. Another relevant musician, Ramy Essam, also sang a song that became a representative chant in the very geographical and human space of Tahrir. The title is actually one of the most popular slogans of the revolution: *Aish, huriya, adala igtimaiya* [Bread, Freedom, Social Justice].

Despite the people's vigour and longing for freedom, in two years Egyptians saw the return of the dictatorship to their country headed by Marshal Sisi. Music continued to be used as a tool for action, and performers such as Ramy Essam did not give up the struggle, using art and music to condemn the government. In the case of Essam, the price for all this was to be forced to live in exile in Europe to escape prison. Other artists close to him and in the same frame of mind did not have that opportunity. The photographer and filmmaker

2. Subtitled in Spanish on the YouTube channel of the Fundación Al Fanar: <https://ytube.io/3gwh>

er Shady Habash died in Tora prison at the age of twenty-four because he directed the music video *Balaha*, in which Ramy Essam mocked President Abdel Fattah Sisi. *Balaha* (date) is the nickname that the opponents and detractors had given to the Egyptian leader in reference to an amusing character in an Egyptian comic soap opera, an arrogant mad man admitted to a mental health institution. Such irony, humour and stridency had drastic consequences in those circumstances, also showing us the boldness of the musicians we have mentioned here, loyally committed and resistant.

In the vast Arab geography, uprisings have continued to the present, such as in the case of Lebanon or Iraq with the Teshrin (October) Revolution, which occupied its own Tahrir Square until recently with singers such as October Boys and Mc Anhar. But, undoubtedly, the popular protest movement that has lasted longest since the first wave of uprisings has been the Algerian HIRAK, which every Friday brought together thousands of people demonstrating for a real change and liberalisation in the country. Notable in this environment is the rapper Raja Meziane, whose music video *Allo le système!* is devastatingly critical of a corrupt and oppressive system that has neglected the people, especially the youngest. As well as a singer, Meziane is a composer, lawyer and activist. Forced by the official pressures that halted not only her career as an artist but also as a lawyer, Raja had to migrate. Today, the artist, considered by the BBC as “the voice of the revolution” and one of the most influential women of 2019, is living in the Czech Republic.

Music, Youth and Social Denunciation

Music as a protest tool in the hands of Arab youths is not only linked to the aforementioned uprisings: day-to-day life and the fight against inequalities are issues that are very much in the minds of independent musicians,

but also of highly successful artists, such as the great modern diva, Manal. This thirty-year old woman grew up in Marrakech and, despite her early musical success, continued to study and graduated in Business Science and Finance.

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As with other performers, social media and, specifically, her experimental videos posted on YouTube enabled her to fulfil her dream of being a singer when DJ Van discovered her work. Her debut single, *Denia*, was already a real success that earned her the award for Best Female Artist in North Africa in the MTV Africa Music Awards 2015. Her next song, *Kulchi Ban*, immediately called the attention of Sony Music Middle East, and Manal signed up with this enormously prestigious and renowned international record label, becoming a pioneer among Moroccan female music creators. If we look at her art, her music style harks back very clearly to her beginnings as a rapper, with very powerful songs against the prevailing hegemonic machismo, calling for reaction and speaking up against sexual aggressions. Manal has had the courage and capacity to even talk about her own experiences in this respect, exposing and singing about her life experience. Rap has been a particularly effective genre for using music and words to call for rights, and for social protest.

Although rap has always had its own meaning as a musical style, Manal has evolved to a more melodic pop, which has not limited or decreased the level of demand for women’s rights in Morocco and, thereby, internationally. In 2022, Manal appeared in fifth place on the list of most-streamed Arab women artists on Spotify. Her music combines rap and pop, success and protest. There are musical styles that are sometimes aligned with social protest move-

ments, but the real and authoritative intention of the performers or bands itself goes further, and honesty, justice, protest or commitment can be highlighted through any music style.

Thus, 2022 was undoubtedly a great year for Manal, beginning with the launch of the music video *3ari* to commemorate 8 March. This explicit and yet beautiful plea against macho abuse has made her the first Arab singer to record in the German studio A Colors Show, as well as enjoying international success with her song, which shows heart-breaking boldness. In the introduction she states: “I believe that poverty prevents women from achieving their rights; I think that girls want respect rather than attention, and I believe that children need education rather than marriage.” As part of the exuberant 2022, she was also one of the voices selected to perform the song for the Qatar World Championship, *Light The Sky*, along with the Canadian Moroccan Nora Fatehi, the Emirati Yemeni Balqees and the Iraqi Rahma Riad. Manal is a clear example of a revolutionary voice, a pioneering performer in diverse musical fields and conquests. Today she is widely recognised for her commitment to feminism as an essential belief, and also advocating and promoting the diverse Moroccan tradition, from the Berber to the *gnawa* or the most modern Morocco, all this present in her elaborate videos: tradition and modernity, musical and social language.

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We have pointed out that a musical style does not directly result in meaningful lyrics or intentions, commitments or the personalities of its

performers, and neither does it clash with spontaneity, the streets or musical quality. However, we do not want to overlook rap as a phenomenon, which was the focus of great attention both in North Africa and in the Middle East during the aforementioned Arab popular revolts of 2010-2011. It was normalised by the international media as a living and striking style, as “the voice of the people”, and it was assimilated as something positive as it is Western³ with little consideration of the idiosyncrasy of each artist, the mixtures with native Arab styles, the aesthetic (rhymes, endings) and quality (rhythms...) of the compositions. Rap became a way of linking with each other and, to some extent, showing that we were interested in the Arab protests and neighbours in certain regions. As if it were outrageous for Arab citizens to challenge the actual political power and, through rap, connect to the Western world. As the academic Cristina Moreno Almeida explains,⁴ “the commentators hope that rap is the tool to express discontent and complaints, but this is not necessarily so in all Arabic-speaking countries. Other local music genres – especially *shaabi* [popular] music – have always played this role. [...] Thus, the emergence of rap in the region can be explained simply as that of a genre that fills a void for youths to be heard.”

It is important, on this journey through the current Arab music that supports demands and causes, to emphasise that native Arab musical genres are present with the same strength to fight as the most modern genres in the creativity of these young artists. There are more urban and rural trends, more elitist and more popular, more minority and broader... woven in a rich and elaborate warp. Moreover, language, with its diverse dialects, also plays a key role in the authenticity of Arab artistic expression.

3. Rayya El Zein, “From ‘Hip Hop Revolutionaries’ to ‘Terrorist-Thugs’: ‘Blackwashing’ between the Arab Spring and the War on Terror”, *Lateral*, vol. 5, no. 1, spring 2016.

4. Cristina Moreno Almeida, “La evolución de las distintas voces del rap en Marruecos: más allá de la cooptación y la disidencia”, *Awraq*, no. 10, 2014.

However, young Arab people are not only breaking stereotypes and innovating in the most current genres. Hind Ennaira, barely twenty-five, has broken through in Morocco with freshness and vigour in a type of genre completely monopolised by men: *gnawa* music. This style is practised from a state of contemplation through a fervently rhythmic and syncretic music, which is expressed with a dialogued chant in which a voice leads invocations – the so-called *maalem* – and a choir responds. In this case, it is a *maalem* which, to the rhythm of her *guembri* – a three-stringed bass instrument –, to which the whole ensemble of musicians and dancers move. It is significant that Hind is from Essaouira, the cradle of *gnawa* art, because it is here where she was immersed in music. Moreover, in that city she performed in the Gnawa World Music Festival for the first time, in Mulay El Hassan Square. It has had great repercussions, and

attending this ritual is a real spectacle, always led by male figures and now by Hind Ennaira, a young woman.⁵

This mixture of local cultural and musical components with international rhythms or genres defines the form of performing not only of rappers but also of several internationally-renowned DJs, such as the Palestinian Salma Abdulhadi or the mass phenomenon French-Algerian DJ Snake, who can get tens of thousands of young Europeans to dance at the Parc des Princes in Paris.

So ends this journey of music and causes, universal or individual, local and specific, all of them reflecting the best of human beings and the universe, expressed in diverse rhythms, instruments and dances, traditions and modernities, in Arabic, in its dialects or in any human language possible, such as music, which passes through and beyond, transforms and moves you, travels and gets you to travel: long live [Arab] music!

5. <https://bitly.co/Jo5D>