

**Review<sup>1</sup>: Mark LeVine, *We'll Play till We Die: Journeys across a Decade of Revolutionary Music in the Muslim World*, Oakland 2022: University of California Press, pp. 310.**

The book, combining the form of an academic work with a musical travelogue, is a continuation of *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*, which was published in 2008, two years before the main wave of political transformation in the Arab countries started.

LeVine's volume is just the newest and one of the most interesting examples of the growing body of texts analysing the central importance of popular music in Arabic popular culture and its influence on the wider sociopolitical context of the region. LeVine makes use of his rich experience as a researcher, traveller and musician, also with experiences of playing or recording with some of the musicians mentioned in the book.

First of all, why is researching music in the Arab countries so important for Cultural Studies and widely understood Middle Eastern Studies? To put it in a straightforward way, and paraphrasing the author's own words, popular music is a crucial element of widely understood popular culture. Its creation, production, circulation, performance and consumption can be a powerful generator for social relations, can build new or empower existing communities (see: p. 252). The researcher describes his position and changes of context, showing the difference between the current situation and that when the previous book was published: "In the years since *Heavy Metal Islam's* publication, that generation moved from the subcultural margins to the countercultural centre and the revolutionary avant-garde, only to wind up largely pushed to the margins again, with too many people either crushed or pushed right out of their homelands into exile, if not into prison or even far too early graves"

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(“Author’s Note”, p. xiii). This evolution is well reflected in LeVine’s analyses that prove global acclaim of the “revolutionary artists” after 2010, but then also their marginalisation or (sometimes forced) access to the mainstream but connected to ramifications of censorship. The American researcher also convincingly describes constant cycles of politicisation and depoliticisation of Arabic popular music, with a key example of hip-hop, which started as a platform for political dissent, but then gradually evolved into a more auto-thematic *battle rap* or Americanised subgenre of trap (see: pp. 42–46, where it is developed regarding the Moroccan scene).

LeVine’s particular interest is in the variety of genres that he calls EYM (*extreme youth music*), the category into which he places metal, punk and post-punk, hip-hop, intelligent dance music (IDM) and local scenes of electronic music, as well as some examples of more mainstream-oriented *indie pop*.

LeVine concentrated on the very diversified music scenes based in six main areas: Morocco, Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, Iran and Pakistan, which corresponds with the six main chapters in the book. However, he also gives many examples from the other places, such as Tunisia (mainly to compare with the Moroccan example), Turkey and Indonesia, which are widely covered in the final part “By Way of an Epilogue.” Most of the main chapters were created (or, using LeVine’s own words, “arranged and mixed”) with the respective local musicians/activists: in the case of Egypt – two anonymous<sup>2</sup> collaborators (“a longtime Egyptian male MC and female music writer”; p. 30), Palestine – MC Sameh “SAZ” Zakout and Abed Hathout, Lebanon – Jackson Allers, a significant promoter of the local scene, Iran – the female rapper Salome MC, and Pakistan – a composer and sound designer, Haniya Aslam and metal guitarist, Mekaal Hasan. The final part was enriched by the impact of important scholars of the subject: Pierre Hecker, Nahid Siamdoust and Jeremy Wallach. Contributions were also made by other researchers, e.g. in the Palestine chapter, Nadeem Karkabi’s comments on the relative unimportance of metal and the origins of IDM and *electro shaabi*’s great development among Palestinians are valuable (pp. 103, 127).

In the Egyptian part, LeVine (with his anonymous co-writers) makes some interesting theoretical assumptions, for example on page 65 he coins the category of “avant-garde” for the Tahrir generation or the “new generation” (Modern Standard Arabic: *al-ġīl al-ġadīd* or *al-ġīl at-Tahrīr*; Egyptian Arabic: *il-gil il-gedid*), with the examples of Nubian-influenced band Black Theama, charismatic female artists: Dina El Wadidi (Dīnā al-Wadīdī), Youssra

<sup>2</sup> This anonymity can be significant and illustrate the situation of Egypt’s alternative scene after the establishing and strengthening of the Sisi regime after 2014.

El Hawary (Yusrā al-Hawārī) and Maryam Šāliḥ (Maryam Saleh), and the important role played by talented poets–authors of song lyrics (the late Mido Zohair, Rami Yehia etc.). The American writer interestingly paints different trajectories of the strongly politicised artists' development: from indie-pop stars, Cairokee, who have chosen indirect, metaphorical messages, to Ramy Essam (Rāmī 'Iṣṣām), a hero and victim of the 25 January Revolution, who left Egypt for artistic residence in the Scandinavian countries, still creating very openly anti-government songs, but at the same time putting at risk the health or even survival of his former collaborators who stayed in the country.

The part on Lebanon (*Remixed but Never Remastered*) somehow dialogues with an earlier key study by Thomas Burkhalter (Burkhalter 2014) of the Beirut scene. Some artists are analysed in both books (e.g. Yasmine Hamdan, Scrambled Eggs, metal bands such as Kimaera), and some are mentioned with a slightly different approach (the most popular rock/indie band, Mashrou' Leila). It seems that when LeVine is more concentrated on the social aspect of music and its community-building dimension, Burkhalter turned more towards individual strategies of avant-garde artists and their musical innovativeness. Despite these differences, both the American and Swiss writers meet in their observations on how a total politicisation of life in Lebanon translates into radical, avant-garde music, which is also related to the sense of hopelessness in a city shattered by wars, sectarianism and the apocalyptic August 4, 2020 explosion at the Port of Beirut. This uniqueness and desperation can be felt equally in totally different genres and styles: El Rass rapping, Mazen Kerbaj's experimental prepared trumpet playing and war-inspired sonic collages by Khaled Yassine. The common point between Burkhalter and LeVine is also the important role of transnational links in and between music scenes, which is one of the main topics of the former's book and well proved by the latter, who gives many examples of the strong bonds between Lebanese, Palestinian and Egyptian musicians, e.g. Maryam Saleh–Zeid Hamdan duo, the Alif Ensemble band or multiple contacts between Beirut and Cairene IDM artists and DJs.

Also, chapters on Iran and Pakistan offer some important material. In the first case they introduce, on a bigger scale (as is in the case of the Arab countries), the problem of relations between diaspora and local artists who try to circumvent censorship and limitations in organising live shows, and have to skilfully navigate between periods of clampdown and relative liberalisation ordered by the partially theocratic government. The Pakistani example, I think less popular in the West than the other countries mentioned in earlier chapters, is also instructive, bringing to the fore some universal issues,

such as changes on the musical market caused by the great programmes, campaigns and talent shows funded by “global beverage companies”: Pepsi, Coke and Nescafé. The influence of these processes is multifaceted: on the one hand, it homogenises the scene and makes artists dependent on the power of transnational corporations, but at the same time it opens perspectives for young alternative artists to reach a wider audience and gain new possibilities of performing live. One of the most interesting stories in the “Pakistan” chapter is about the music played in the Chitral Valley, which is inhabited by followers of an ancient form of Hinduism, so the region is very different compared to hegemonic Muslim culture of Pakistan (p. 249). LeVine cites here the history narrated by the Chitral native, Irfan Ali Haj, who said that the producers from the aforementioned popular *Coke Studio* programme tried to force a local female group to play their music, “which is naturally in 7/8 or odd meters, into a 4/4 beat” (p. 249). The effect was that young musicians couldn’t play in their normal, spontaneous, improvised mode, just because producers wanted to have the effect of “a trance, EDM type of beat. A very hipster 2018 beat” (p. 250). This story illustrates how complicated the question of tradition and innovation in non-Western music is; it is not, by any means, a straightforward relation between what is “Western influence” and “local tradition/heritage,” but rather a complex battle of styles, genres and identities, where the colonial attitude is often manifested by local native members of elites or the cultural-political mainstream.

Such paradoxes are also embodied in the situation in Indonesia, a country with a president who has been a “metalhead” (Joko Widodo, himself a very ambiguous figure), a thriving “female hijab metal” scene, and at the same time growing re-Islamisation of daily life and calls for a ban on specified musical genres formulated by conservative circles and Widodo’s opponents, who are using such arguments on a daily basis as part of a political rivalry.

In the book, LeVine attempts a balancing act between a moving and expressive travelogue, in which he strongly sympathises with his heroes/co-writers, and a more distanced scientific discourse, which is well rooted in the state-of-the-art. The language is also quite brutal and sometimes even explicit (especially in the interviews with local interlocutors), which corresponds well with the brutal voices of his favourite metal vocalists. A certain flaw, but also quite characteristic for other examples of the literature of the subject, is subjective concentration on the genres that are preferred by the author. In LeVine’s case, it is his constant fascination and preoccupation with heavy metal in its different sonic manifestations and subgenres. From my point of view, quite critical but also well acquainted with the history of

metal, the most interesting here is the feminist strand, epitomised with Massive Scar Era's history. The band, also called Mascara, formed in Alexandria but later moving to Cairo, is unique, being a mainly female (earlier all-female) alternative band including a frontwoman, singer and guitarist Cherine Amr (who sings with both a clean, melodic voice and a brutal metal, growling one) and violinist Nancy Mounir, whose characteristic playing created a sort of a cultural hybridity between death/thrash/progressive metal on one side, and Oriental melodic scales on the other. One of their highlights is the EP *Color Blind* (2018), with a very characteristic track, *Unfollow*, also praised by LeVine in his analysis. The band itself is quite subversive, especially taking into account the level of sexual harassment societally, but also inside the metal subculture. Unfortunately, Cherine Amr has left Egypt and settled in Canada in recent years.

If we touch the importance of metal for the very concept of the book, its revolutionary potential and nature is controversial. Metal is a very niche, subcultural phenomenon, and also to some extent homogenised by its use of ubiquitous English lyrics, and often repeated patterns of composing and playing riffs. So, assessing the real impact of metal in non-Western societies is very difficult. It seems that LeVine turns to the idea that a purely Western genre at the beginning has become indigenised and appropriated in a new environment. It is also consistent with decolonial theories that are widely cited and treated by LeVine as one of the main methodological inspirations.<sup>3</sup> I would be glad if, for example in the Egyptian part, there would be more references to the very interesting, multi-genre alternative music which flourishes in Egypt (e.g. the different projects of Maurice Louca). Sometimes, instrumental music can formulate equally moving social communiqué as is in the case of songs with developed and socially engaged lyrics. At the same time, we have to respect the musical choices of the author who does not hide his special emotional attachment to some genres and *milieus*.

Still, metal has a lot of features that are very informative about contemporary Arab societies. I like a lot the fragment of the book which cites Iraqi "metalhead" Faisal al-Murar saying that "Metal remains one of the best

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<sup>3</sup> LeVine tries to broadly use the so-called "Indigenous theories and methodologies" in order to "break down the dominant modernist and colonial frameworks" ("Author's Note", p. xxx). In the "Epilogue", he revisits the preliminary assumptions, trying to show how two intersecting processes occur: firstly, adoption of specific forms of music by indigenous members of the society, and secondly, gradual "indigenisation" of "foreign" genres, that become so embedded in the local reality they "reproduce without constant new input from outside" (pp. 256–257). The latter option is something bigger than hybridisation of music, because it is not just a hybrid of local and foreign influences, but rather a totally new artistic quality as Indigenous Australian "songspirals", mentioned by LeVine as an instructive example (p. 257).

metrics for measuring society's acceptance of difference" (p. 254). This is even more true if we consider the paradoxical situation which mainly female metal bands have to navigate.

Turning to the very positive and innovative sides of the volume, it offers a comparative analysis based on observations from many and very diversified places in the Arab and Islamic world. It is rather rare because books and papers have tended to concentrate on particular countries and scenes, although with exceptions to this rule, such as the earlier and closely thematically related books by Hisham Aidi (Aidi 2014) and Robin Wright (Wright 2011). Aidi's monograph especially can be treated as a point of reference, though the researcher was more interested in examples from the Muslim diaspora in Europe and North and South America showing how new, sometimes radical, discourses are produced and embedded in musical genres, also as a reaction to state policies. So, both Aidi and LeVine observe how music is becoming politicised and radicalised, but *We'll Play till We Die...* provides more purely local, Arabic-language native material.

Among the not numerous downsides of the book, I could mention some typos such as "Bansky" (p. 117) in the pseudonym of the famous street artist and activist. Not easy to understand is the mistake in the name of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who is referred in the book as Khameini (three times in short succession from page 180 to page 186) and the error is repeated in the "Index." Obviously, it is the result of accidental melting of two pivotal surnames: Khamenei and Khomeini, but such a mistake should not happen in so well-researched a study.

LeVine's book, obviously, has a scientific value and can be discussed in the academic *milieu*. But at the same time, it is not only or mainly an academic book and it is directed to a non-academic wider audience, interested in the cultural transformations of the whole Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region. From this point of view, it may also have an important impact on media discourses regarding contemporary Arab and Islamic cultures, far exceeding the scope of the purely scientific debate.

## References

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