

The Soundtrack of Revolution from Egypt to Palestine:

An Interview with Leila Farid and Sari Andoni

Music, dance, and performance has historically served as a platform for social change across the Arab world for centuries. From Egypt to Palestine, many artists find themselves bringing their passion for advocacy with them across America, and specifically across the state of Texas as the Arab Music scene expands. Meanwhile, Arab-Americans have been inflicted by a range of outright discrimination, such as the denying of their identity and political exclusion. According to the Arab American Institute, the largest populations of Arab Texans live in Harris, Dallas and Tarrant counties– and this is rapidly expanding. However, getting exact numbers of Arab Texans is difficult, as there is no official decennial census count. Thus, music artists in Texas serve as the voice for their under-represented community, such as women, refugees, and marginalized ethno-national groups. They are our neighbors and they are representatives of Arab culture in an area that does not often hold space for Arab voices. Through music, Arab-Americans are able to find well-deserved recognition that they have long sought after.

This past October, Austin Public Library and Ars Mundi Artists International hosted Arabic Music & Coffee, a live performance of music from around the Arab world. At this event was Indimaj, an international Arab and jazz fusion ensemble. The band has decades of musical experience and consistently splits time between Austin, TX, Europe, and The Middle East. Indimaj's process of musical exploration through composition and improvisation, coupled with their thirst and passion for overseas collaborative projects, continue to inform their group sound. Founded in 2014, the band is led by the creative devices of musician Sari Andoni. Andoni has been playing music since he was six years old. He started with the piano keyboard, then learned

guitar, and then the Oud, which is what he primarily plays now. Andoni is originally from Bethlehem, Palestine, where he grew up playing in small bands in his hometown. At the time in Palestine, there was the First Intifada, which means people were calling for liberation and freedom in order to fight against occupation and oppression. During this time, the Palestinian, popular cultural landscape was changing in many different ways. With the onset of peace talks, the intifada culture of struggle, sacrifice, and austerity gradually lifted and new or repressed forms of everyday culture re-emerged (Stein).



Image Courtesy of Nico Grayson

As a teenager, Andoni joined his first group that performed in public places that served as breeding-grounds for political conversation. It was through his experience as a musician that he was first introduced to al-ughniyah al-multazimah or in arabic, الاغنية الملتزمة, which translates to “the song that is committed.” These songs are not about love, but instead, they are about social

change and liberation. They often reference a specific issue or have some kind of overt political meaning. Andoni recalls his days in Palestine stating,

“the first group I joined played these types of songs. At that time it was not really taught. At the time having freedom of expression was very suppressed. So if you put up Palestinian flag, one on hand it was tolerated at times because they didn't see smaller musicians is a big threat, but there were instances where, for example, the bandleader for the band I was in was arrested for a few months and questioned. Whenever there was any political event, they would invite us and we would play the songs.”

Andoni later moved to the US when he was 18 on a scholarship for college. His time at Brigham Young University in Utah was a large culture shock due to the certain social and religious rules his university enforced. This all changed when he finished his bachelor's and moved to Austin to pursue a career in music full time. Andoni was most inspired by artists such as Marcel Khalife, a Lebanese musician who is at the forefront of al-ughniyah al-multazimah. Marcel Khalife's job was to basically take poems from Mahmoud Darwish, A famous palestinian poet, and make them into songs. Indimaj's sound is also inspired by classical artists such as Umm Kulthum, as the group has a strong female vocal lead. Umm Kulthum was an Egyptian singer who rose to fame in the mid-to-late 1900s for her powerful singing voice and intensive training in Quranic recitation and demonstrated the political value of music in times of crisis (Lohman).

Similarly to Umm Kulthum, Indimaj mainly performs Tarab. Roughly translated to mean musical ecstasy, the word Tarab is also used as a reference to certain styles of urban, secular music, or “art music,” found throughout the Arab Near East. Tarab is a musical aesthetic associated with the early twentieth century; and an emotionally ecstatic state that is evoked

through musical practices emanating from within these genres. As a musical phenomenon, however, Tarab is a much larger subject, with no exact English translation or equivalent (LeCorgne). Andoni mentions his personal connection to Tarab and how it is able to take listeners on an emotional journey. He says,

“The way I think about it is that humans are filled with emotions and then all the music is doing is triggering that emotion. So in terms of social change, for example, when talking about revolutions in movements of liberation, people already feel anger and feel frustration, but they also have hope that there'll be change, that they'll get their freedom or liberation. Tarab in this case is like you're unlocking all of these emotions. And the lyrics, the tune, the melody, lets these people fully experience the depth of what they feel all together as one.”



Image Courtesy of Lib Guides

Musicians like Andoni prove that the most powerful and compelling aspect of music is its ability to tap into and move human emotions. Yet because of its subjective, elusive, and highly personal nature, music as an emotional experience is difficult to isolate, and therefore

analyze (LeCorgne). Thus, it must be felt person to person at an individual level, as well as a collective experience.

Andoni's dedication to music became stronger throughout his time in the US because it was one of the main ways he has been able to stay connected to his Palestinian roots. According to Andoni, the Arabic music scene expanded more in terms of audience throughout the past decade. When he first moved to Austin, in the early 2000s, many Arab-Americans faced hardships, erasure, and discrimination. There were only a few musicians in town that would play Arab Music, and it was very difficult to find people to collaborate with. In addition, he says,

“In the early 2000s I felt like the American view on Arab culture went really negative. I felt like because we play every music we are constantly having to prove that there is a nice part of the Arabic culture— this music you can listen to and maybe relate to. And I feel like being in a position as a musician it's important to try to make that connection with people like ‘Look, we're not evil, we are human.’ Listen to the music and decide for yourself.”

In 2007, Adoni became connected with the Middle Eastern ensemble at The University of Texas at Austin, a group run by Professor Sonia Seamanand. Eventually, he started teaching in the ensemble because it became a great opportunity to find community. Outside of the ensemble, Andoni began playing in different Arabic restaurants, venues, and cafes across Austin. Adoni says when he first moved to Austin and how there weren't many cafes or Arabic restaurants. However, within the last five years, there's been an explosion of Arabic venues, restaurants, hookah places, and shishas. This has also led to an explosion of places for people to experience Arabic music, as the population with middle eastern origins also increased across the city.

Throughout his career, Andoni's identity as a Palestinian has greatly impacted the discourse he has had with people concerning music as protest. He notes that, “Being from

Palestine, specifically, it's all a very sensitive subject, and I feel that nobody wants to hear about it. If I talk about it, I'm immediately shut down. But I tell them "Look, I'm talking about my people and our rights." All I'm telling them is my experience— this is what I lived through."

For decades, the Israeli government has systematically discriminated against Palestinians inside state borders. Palestinian oppression, such as removal from their homeland through the means of excessive force has imposed an imminent threat to hundreds of Palestinian lives. Andoni says that it is very difficult to communicate such a sensitive subject, but that's where music comes in to serve as a gateway to important conversation about the erasure of Palestinians. He explains that it is through more traditional folkloric style music that the sound of his people can shine through such heavy, complex discourse, saying,

"It's really hard to get people to listen, and I feel like through music, it's a lot easier to communicate. You don't have to argue, you just have to say, "this is Palestinian music" and sing loud because we continuously face erasure. And so it's very important for us, especially through the songs that are traditional and folkloric that come with the Palestinian culture, to preserve our culture and also present to the world that we exist as a people. That's where music comes in, serving as the bridge to connect those worlds."

Meanwhile, just an hour away from Austin, Texas where the Arab music scene is increasingly expanding, The University of San Antonio hosted GoLive! Arab Music and Dance Conference during October of 2022. At the conference this year was Leila Farid, leading belly dancing classes for the Attendees. Leila Farid is an American dancer who spent over 15 years in Egypt beginning in 2002, perfecting her art. To Farid, learning how to dance alongside rhythmic, improvisational Arabic music was a journey in itself. In fact, improvisation is a very important part of Arab music as a whole, and so for Farid, her dance style has had to fully encompass the

complexities of the genre. Taksim is regarded as the genre for instrumental improvisation throughout the Middle East. Over the past decade it has re-emerged as its own form and in its own right with a blending of traditional and modern styles (Warkov). Farid says,

“I think using improvisation lets you be a little bit more open to what the audience is doing and how you can connect to them. So let's say they're playing in Taksim, that's something that's improvised. I have to be able to come up with something on the spot, and building this connection to a song allows me to have more connection to the audience.”



Image Courtesy of Nico Grayson

Farid's dancing gigs in Egypt mainly took place at weddings, parties, and sometimes even highly prestigious political events. Instruments included in her set ranged from traditional to modern, including a violin, an oud, a guitar, a duff, a tabla, a synthesized keyboard, a sagat, a riq, an accordion, a cello, a violin, a kanoon, a saxophone, and a few vocalists. Through her career, Farid was able to feel immersed into Egyptian culture and understand what it meant to be

a struggling artist working under the upper class. Farid used to work under the regime of Hosni Mubarak by doing shows for the Air Force. She did weddings in the Air Force houses and in fact, was the only foreigner to ever do a wedding in the President's Club. Farid says that as the revolution developed, it was clear that there was a need for social change. When asked about the imbalance of power between the citizens and the government, Farid commented,

“all of the funds and money are concentrated in a tiny percentage of the population with a huge percentage of the population living in poverty. So, when you see that kind of imbalance, of course, there's going to be a revolution and you know, as it started through the Arab world, and then went along I supported the revolutionaries. The revolution wasn't even a choice at that time. It was something we had to do. I was right in the center. It was a very, very interesting time to be in Egypt.”

The Egyptian revolution at the time provided an uncensored space for artistic expression. Egypt has been witnessing a cultural revival especially in the arts, culture, music and film scenes over the last 10 years. From underground musicians, to the establishment of various cultural centers, to the increase in the number of independent films, Egypt's and especially Cairo's arts scene was regaining international recognition. According to Farida Makars at Oxford University, in many ways, the artists in question capitalized on the opportunities provided for them through the ‘Tahrir phenomenon’ and decided to express themselves the way they knew best. More importantly, Tahrir gave amateurs the opportunity to voice their grievances using wit, creativity, art and music.

In fact, Farid lived extremely close to Tahrir square when the protesters took over. During and after the revolution when there were protests in Cairo, Farid lived just on the other side of the University. In addition, Farid was close with a handful of Revolutionaries who she recounts

as being passionate about the well being of their community and their country. When asked to share stories about these interactions, Farid recalled speaking to revolutionary that was married to a friend of hers, asking questions at the very beginning of the occupation that had just started in Tahrir:

“I remember talking to one of the revolutionaries, who was very influential in beginning the revolution in Egypt. We asked him, “So you get Mubarak out, then what?” He's like, “it doesn't matter. We have to get him out!” We were like, “but what's the game plan?” and they were like, “To get him out. That's the most important thing” and I don't know if everyone felt that way. It was so bad under his rule that there was the sentiment of first getting him out and then figuring it out.” After this point, Morsi came in to replace Mubarak and there was a general sense of disappointment in that the fight wasn't the far reaching change that was the vision from all the blood, sweat and tears– the vision of the original revolutionaries.

In Mediterranean cultures as in many other cultures, women symbolize and demarcate the boundaries of social or ethnic groups. Their sexuality and bodies have therefore been under social control for a long time. According to the text “On Religion, Gender, Performing: Female Performers and Repentance in Egypt,” As a result of the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalist movements, the symbolic function of the female body has regained vigor in many Muslim countries. It is no wonder than that many Muslim women who transgress gender roles pertaining to sexual behavior are highly stigmatized. Egyptian singers, dancers and actresses are a case in point. Belly dancers in particular are emblematic of all behaviors that women should avoid. (Nieuwkerk). Therefore, as a bellydancer, an occupation that often lands women outside of social norms, Farid describes her experience:

“As a belly dancer, there were people who wouldn't let their kids play with my kids because I was a belly dancer. I mean, I'm doing something that's extreme by showing as much of my body as I showed, and by being in control of, you know, creating my own show and having my own band, and just being out there like that as a woman. I think it's interesting how in Egypt, belly dancing is such an expressive art form that people pay attention to it. You have these dancers who are very influential but they're influential in the way that they're so far outside of the status quo, that they can just say what they want to say, to a certain degree of course.”



Image Courtesy of Leila Farid

Farid further discussed this status quo, mentioning how it highly depends on your economic status and how every person is given parameters by the class they inhabit. Generally, upper class people who have more freedom and lower class people are bound by very strict rules. Farid related this to her experience of living within America, even though the two places are different in many ways:

“Revolution hasn't quite happened yet in America. But it's gonna have to. There's many tactics of division that happened in America that are preventing us from being on the scale of social change, like they were in Egypt, whereas, everybody from different religious and political affiliation found much more of a common ground and there wasn't all these political divides. I think it's gonna take our middle class disappearing before all our masses will stand up— when people aren't so comfortable. Americans are very into their comfort.”

Both Farid and Andoni remain hopeful for the future of both Egypt, Palestine, and America, drawing connections to the ways in which the general public tends to respond to large waves of social change. Farid explained her view-point of social change ever since moving back to the United States seven years ago: “With the BLM movement, it was the first time in my life, you know, that I had seen something similar to what was happening in Egypt, but I always said our government is set up so in a way it couldn't be overthrown to a certain degree in my life time, until the March on the Capitol for example. That was the first time that I really thought “wow, yeah, this is something big.”

Similarly, Andoni notes how the U.S government is much better at “throwing people morsels.” He notes that this tactic works for a while, but at some point the people are going to say, “I want a seat at the table.” He argues that Americans tend to be less willing, at least up until the last couple years, to actually put their action to their talk. Both Farid and Andoni agree that Americans are caught up in Western culture and living out a fantasized ideal life, thus a false solution has been sold to us under neoliberalism. “It seems there's not a strong enough push, like we're gotta get out in the streets and say this revolution is our life,” says Farid. All the while, it is through their vocalization as performers that artists such as Andoni and Farid continue to pave the way for Arab culture to shine bright amongst the difficulties that the Arab community faces.

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