

Music and the Arab Spring

The occupied Palestinian territories have not taken part in the waves of unrest that marked the Arab Spring in other parts of the Middle East. Nonetheless, DAM's music, produced several years ago, provides one window into the feelings of frustration that many Arabs—Palestinian and otherwise—have felt even before the Arab spring. In fact, it is this emotional state that I think many American students find difficult to understand: what does it feel like to live in an oppressive political system that seems like it will never change? Post-Arab spring songs, by contrast, express some of the ebullience and pride that came with proving that change, indeed, was possible.

Resources:

Videos

- “‘Rock the Casbah’ Author: Hip-Hop Has Been the Rhythm of the Arab Spring.”
<http://video.pbs.org/video/2064921024/>
Journalist Robin Wright, the author of *Rock the Casbah*, a book about popular culture and the Arab spring, discusses her perspective on PBS. In the interview, she describe the Arab Spring as a powerful movement to “take back” the meaning of *jihad*. She also discusses El Général’s role in Tunisia and profiles a female Egyptian activist.
→A great introduction to the topic of hip-hop and the Arab Spring.
- “How Rap Fueled the Arab Spring.”
<http://www.hulu.com/watch/278634/editors-picks-how-rap-fueled-the-arab-spring>
A very optimistic video about the role of hip-hop, featuring interviews with Omar Offendum, Boge (Tunisia), rappers explore what gave rap its power during the Arab Spring. They credit rap with being the voice of the people. Also provides some counter-examples.
→Good overview of hip-hop’s revolutionary potential across the Arab world.

Music:

- Rais Lebled (President of the Country) by El General with English subtitles: http://wn.com/Rayes_Le_Bled_El_General_music_video_with_english_subtitles
lyrics alone here <http://daniellesayz.com/2011/03/el-general-the-voice-of-tunisia/> (also a translation below)

This song, with angry lyrics directed at former president Ben Ali of Tunisia, has been called “the soundtrack of the revolution” in Tunisia. Rapper El Général released it less than two months before the unrest that eventually ousted Ben Ali, and many Tunisian protestors sang the song as they demonstrated. Later, the song became popular in Egypt when the country had its own demonstrations.

- Tounes Bledna (Tunisia, Our Country) by El Général
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ve0DdaIvcUo&safety_mode=true&persist_safety_mode=1.

→Tunisia, Our Country is the song that eventually brought police to El Général’s door after he released it in the midst of the protests that rocked the country.

- Sout al Horeya (Voice of Freedom)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8
Lyrics in English with transliteration of the Arabic are here:
<http://sate3.blogspot.com/2011/02/voice-of-freedom-loud-and-clear-from.html>.

→This Egyptian pop song also expresses the pride of the Arab Spring

- Inkilab (Revolution) by DAM – Lyrics
<http://www.damrap.com/lyrics/english/ihda2/Inkilab.html> and music
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeLzb6oMAsM>
- Mali Huriye, (I Don’t Have Freedom) by DAM – Lyrics
http://www.damrap.com/lyrics/english/ihda2/Mali_Huriye.html and music
<http://www.youtube.com/user/TheDammusic#p/u/14/yRiOe9HWruk>



Articles:

- “Rapping the Revolution.” *Foreign Policy*.
http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/22/rapping_the_revolution
→Contains an excellent background to rap in the Arab world, as well as an in-depth interview with El Général.
- Syrian rappers satirize the Syrian government
<http://blogs.aljazeera.net/liveblog/syria-jul-2-2011-1747>
- *Time*: “El Général and the Rap Anthem of the Middle East Revolution.”
<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2049456,00.html>
→Another article focused on El Général, also featuring an interview.
- “Rap Songs of the Arab Spring.” *NPR*.
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2011/06/09/137067390/the-rap-songs-of-the-arab-spring>
- “Hip hop and the Arab Spring.”
<http://wagingnonviolence.org/2011/07/hip-hop-and-the-arab-spring/>
- “Youth, Media, and the Art of Protest in North Africa.” *Jaddaliya*.
<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1976/youth-media-and-the-art-of-protest-in-north-africa>

Discussion Questions:

1. What reasons do the various rappers and analysts see behind rap’s influence in the Arab spring? Do you agree?
 - What other reasons might there be?
 - Do you think that rap was really as influential as people are saying— would the Arab spring have happened *without* music like rap there to help people express themselves?
2. Listen to some of the popular songs from the Arab spring, then read the lyrics.
 - Do you think their power lies in their lyrics, their rhythm, or some combination of the two?
 - Could the same lyrics have been as powerful if they weren’t put to the rhythms of hip hop or rap, but some other form of music like rock or even traditional Arabic music?



3. In the interview with *Foreign Policy* [link above], El Général says:
“A lot of the music that comes from here, from the region, is pop. It's all the same and it isn't art. They're making harmful actions to arts, actually. There's no engagement. And music without engagement isn't art.”
 - What do you think of this statement—does music have to have a message in order to be considered art?
 - Do you think El Général would consider the music you listen to art?
 - How else could you define “art”?
 - Other people say that art should transcend politics. What do you think?

4. What are some similarities between the situation of the Palestinian people and the situation of Arab people living under dictatorships? What are some differences?
 - Read the lyrics to “Revolution” and “I Don’t Have Freedom.” What do you see in these songs that could describe the situation of other Arabs living under oppressive governments?
 - Listen to “President of the Country”. What similar themes and images do you see?
 - What parts of the songs are more general and might apply to people living outside of the Middle East?
 - Is there anything that speaks to you personally?

5. Compare and contrast the lyrics of the DAM songs with the lyrics of the songs by Hani Adel and El Général.
 - What similar images can you find?
 - What differences do you see?
 - Focus especially on “Voice of Freedom” and “I don’t have freedom”. What images are associated with freedom and what images are associated with a lack of freedom?
 - If you were writing your own hip hop music, what images would you use to talk about freedom? To talk about lack of freedom?

6. What do you know about the stature of a president or king in the Middle East? (For background, read this story [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6385849.stm>] about an Egyptian blogger

who was jailed for insulting president Hosni Mubarak.) In that light, what is revolutionary about El Général's song, "President of the Country"? How do you think it must have felt for Tunisians when President Ben Ali fled in the face of their protests?

7. El Général says:

"see the police with batons, takatak they don't care / since there is no one telling him to stop / even the law of the constitution, put it in water and drink it." ["Put it in water and drink it" is a common euphemism in Arabic used to refer to something that's so worthless, you may as well dissolve it and get rid of it because it won't make any difference.]

DAM raps: "We've been like this more than 50 years / Living as prisoners behind the bars of paragraphs / Of agreements that change nothing."

- What do these lyrics tell you about the relationship between legal agreements and the people who live under them in the Middle East? [See also: In the interview with *Time* cited above, El Général says,

"The corruption was so pervasive. You went into the street and saw police disrespecting citizens. You went to court and could be discharged from a case, because you could pay a judge, but poor people got put in jail. If you're a small trader, you were exploited by big sharks with connections to the president. My parents both have good jobs, and we aren't poor, but I saw injustice for so many of my friends."]

- Compare this to your situation. Do you feel that the laws and rules that govern your life are arbitrary and meaningless? Are they enforced? How do you feel when you see a rule or a law not being enforced, or being applied unequally to different people? Can you imagine what that would feel like on the scale of an entire country?
8. In "Revolution," DAM sings: "It takes a revolution to find a solution." Two Middle Eastern countries so far—Tunisia and Egypt—have undergone what looks so far like a genuine popular revolution.
- What do you know about these revolutions?
 - What is a revolution?



- In “Revolution,” how does DAM describe the revolution that they want to see?
 - Have the popular movements in Egypt and Tunisia achieved the things that DAM mentions?
 - In the interview with Foreign Policy [link above], El Général reflects on the legacy of the Tunisian uprising:
 - “The Tunisian revolution can be explained in one sentence: Ben Ali left. But did anyone else? There's a shadow government. We don't know who these people are running the country now. [...] Nothing has changed. All young people are jobless. The only changes now? OK, they opened YouTube and some pornographic sites (laughs). [...] We need a new revolution. We will protest again, we will take to the streets if we do not see change. There's no magic button to press and start a new revolution, but it's a national issue.”
- What do you think of his words? Are the things he’s looking for in a revolution different than the things DAM describe?
- Do you think that popular movements can deliver all of the things that both DAM and El Général are looking for?

Inkilab—Dedication

By DAM

It takes revolution to find a solution

Wars are begun by the victorious
They plan the war and rewrite history
We are all soldiers in a game of chess
The King makes all our moves
I, a soldier will get rid of him
But alone I can't change this Hell to Heaven

It takes revolution to find a solution

This situation reminds me of Apartheid and Nelson Mandela
Didn't he say Gandhi flowers don't always work
So to all the people of love and peace
How can we have co-existence when we don't even exist

It takes revolution to find a solution

You broke my legs but I'm still walking
You closed my eyes but I can still see
I see therefore I fear my destiny
I see therefore I feel danger and the fear it causes

It takes revolution to find a solution

Fighting for your rights
Will always be met with confrontation
Never fear as this will only strengthen the fight
It nourishes the rebel tree
Come sit up in this tree and you will see
A freedom that will carry us over mountains
But many more mountains will await us

It takes revolution to find a solution

To change the situation we need a revolution
The refugee camps need a revolution
To fight racism we need a revolution
In our city we need a revolution
To fight this propaganda we need a revolution
To fight this propaganda we need to burn Hollywood



Mali Huriye - I Don't Have Freedom By Dam

Tamer:

We've been like this more than 50 years
Living as prisoners behind the bars of paragraphs
Of agreements that change nothing
We haven't seen any light, and if we peek between the bars
We see a blue sky and white clouds
In the center a star reminds me that I'm limited
But no, I'm strong, staying optimistic
You won't limit my hope by a wall of separation
And if this barrier comes between me and my land
I'll still be connected to Palestine
Like an embryo to the umbilical cord
My feet are the roots of the olive tree
Keep on prospering, fathering and renewing branches
Every branch
Grown for peace
Every branch
Under the pressure of occupation
Refusing to give up
So why don't I have freedom?
Because I refuse to live in slavery

Chorus:

Everywhere I go I see borders, imprisoning humanity
Why can't I be free like other children in this world?
Everywhere I go I see borders, imprisoning humanity
Why can't I be free like other children in this world?

Mahmoud:

We searched for peace between Generals
Until we all became war children
Asking for freedom from prisons that want us
With closed and blind eyes
Our eyes staring at the free children
Always keep on rolling to a better life
Our leaders only flavor their speeches
Opening their mouths but shutting out hope
We use power because of our weakness
So life will treat us gently
We saw that we don't rule our own destiny



So we tried to grasp it in our hands and it died
All we asked for was a breath
And what did we sacrifice for it?
Also a breath
So you tell me
Why can't I be free like other children in this world?
(chorus)

Suhell:
I don't want to live on my knees
I'd rather not die at all
I still see the Occupation
Reaching his hand
Not for peace, not for equality
Not to mend things between us
But to suffocate me
Here's another massacre
And a wall that's separating me myself and I
The U.S. has made it their 51st state
Cleaning the Middle East of its Indians
Hitting us then blaming us
But all the biggest armies in the world
Are weak against the hope of the children

(chorus)

Little girl reading a poem:
We want an angry generation
To plough the sky, to blow up history
To blow up our thoughts
We want a new generation
That does not forgive mistakes
That does not bend
We want a generation of giants

Rays el Bled, President of the Country

By El General

[http://wn.com/Rays Le Bled El General music video with english subtitles](http://wn.com/Rays_Le_Bled_El_General_music_video_with_english_subtitles)

Why are you worried?
Would you tell me something? Don't be afraid!
Mr. President, today I am speaking in name of myself and of all the people
who are suffering in 2011, there are still people dying of hunger
who want to work to survive, but their voice was not heard.
Go out into the street and see, people have become like animals
See the police with batons, takatak [the sound of batons hitting people],
they don't care
since there is no one telling them to stop
even the law of the constitution, put it in water and drink it.
Every day I hear of a new lawsuit
Where the poor were set up
Although they know s/he's a decent person
I see snakes (powerful men) everywhere biting our women
Would you accept that if they did the same to your daughter?
What I say is unfortunate,
Since you're a father
And you would not want any harm to come to your children
So take this message as one from one of your children
who is telling of his suffering,
of people living like dogs
half of the people living in humiliation
and drinking from a cup of misery

Chorus:
Mr. President your people are dead
people are eating from garbage
Look at what is happening in your country
misery everywhere and people have no where to sleep
Today I speak fearlessly on behalf of the people
Crushed by the weight of injustice

Mr President, you told me to speak without fear
I spoke, but I know what to expect—slaps!
I see too much injustice that's why I chose to speak



Yet many warned me it would end in my death
How long must the Tunisian people live in dreams?
Where's freedom of speech?
I've only seen the name! They are just words ...
You're calling "Tunisia the green!"
But president, look!
Tunisia became a desert, divided into 2
They streal in front of everyone
No need to name them
You know who these people are! [video shows police officers breaking into
people's homes]
Money was pledged for projects and infrastructure
schools, hospitals, buildings, houses
But the sons of bitches with people's money
They fill their bellies
They seal, they plunder, even a chair doesn't escape them
The peope had much to say
But their voices are not heard
if there was not this injustice I would not be here to say these things

Chorus

Sout el Huria

Voice of Freedom

I went down and said I'm not coming back
I wrote with my blood in every street
We brought our voice to everyone who was not hearing us
All barriers were shattered
Our weapon was our dream
Tomorrow was clear before us
We've been waiting for so long
We were searching, unable to find our place
In every street of my homeland .. the voice of freedom is calling
We raised our head up high in the sky
Hunger was no longer our concern
The most important thing was our right
And to write our history with our blood
If you were one of us
Stop rambling and telling us
To leave and abandon our dream
And stop saying the word "I"
In every street of my homeland .. the voice of freedom is calling
In every street of my homeland .. the voice of freedom is calling
Tan Egyptian hands of distinction
Extended out amidst the roar .. shattering the frames
The marvelous youth went out .. and turned the autumn [of Egypt] into
spring
They brought about the miracle .. they brought the murdered back to life
Kill me .. By killing me you won't get your regime back
With my blood, I destine my homelands to a second life
Is this my blood or is it spring .. Both are green in color
Do I smile of my happiness or my sorrows
In every street of my homeland .. the voice of freedom is calling
In every street of my homeland .. the voice of freedom is calling
In every street of my homeland .. the voice of freedom is calling