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Other Futures: Promises of the Alternative in Lebanese Popular Music

by

Nour El Rayes

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

and the Designated Emphasis

in

New Media

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Jocelyne Guilbault, Chair
Professor Benjamin Brinner
Professor Abigail De Kosnik
Professor Anneka Lenssen

Spring 2022

Abstract

Other Futures: Promises of the Alternative in Lebanese Popular Music
by
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Doctor of Philosophy in Music
with a Designated Emphasis in New Media
University of California, Berkeley
Professor Jocelyne Guilbault, Chair

This dissertation examines constructions of the "alternative" in popular music in Lebanon. In order to understand the stakes of the "alternative" in the practices that accrue this designation, this study examines what musicians' sound, performances, and discourses are conceived as *alternative to.* More than a generic designation, I argue, the "alternative" constitutes a site of social coherence in which sound articulates situated experiences of the present in order to construct, disrupt, and animate modalities of representing and imagining futures for Lebanon and its people. Critically, in this dissertation, I ask how sound might participate in a process of worlding, how it mediates and articulates fears and hopes about the future, and how it can be mobilized as a speculative tool.

The first part of this dissertation explores local articulations of the "alternative" in music. Chapter one traces its histories through the stories told by key figures during interviews. Focusing on four moments of possibility in which alternative music's soundworlds took life, the chapter argues that these soundworlds developed around shared aspirations for the future after the end of the civil wars in 1990. The second chapter examines the role of established alternative musical institutions like Red Bull and Tunefork Studios in bringing about and standardizing a new aesthetics and rhetoric of alternative music. The chapter shows how musical and ideological orientations mediate access to resources such as funding or recording, and affect artists' mobility and their music's circulation. The second part of this dissertation builds on the first by looking at how these local iterations of the alternative create material and ideological spaces of optimistic futurity. Chapter three investigates the ways in which musicians engage and index Lebanese and Arabic musical pasts. It argues that by reinscribing themselves into previously exclusionary narratives, musicians challenge dominant chronopolitics, and situate themselves within genealogies of music from which they have been excluded. The final chapter considers the ways that alternative music was and remains integral to larger futures projects for Lebanon. The chapter focuses on two speculative musical projects that were inspired by the architecture and history Beirut. It considers how sound has become a mechanism for recuperating the lived past of the civil wars and a speculative tool for imagining the possibilities for a present in which post-wars reconstruction prioritized social reconciliation over financial gain.

Each of the dissertation's chapters identify and explore different ways in which alternative music participates in larger projects of imagining and working to realize futures that are not defined by ongoing violence or precarity. By coming to an understanding of a musical genre in radically local terms rather than simply in relation to globally circulating iterations, I argue that it becomes possible to think about the social and political work that sound does past resistance or escapism.

Each chapter explores how this future-work is framed by a shared disposition that I call *belligerent optimism*, an irreverent but hopeful musical and ideological orientation. I argue that this orientation is crucial to re-framing the scope of inquiry on music in Lebanon, making space to ask questions about hope and possibility without romanticizing or dwelling on past and future suffering. Rather than acts of resilience, a framework of belligerent optimism understands the practices of daily life in Lebanon as stubborn attempts at building a life in spite of seemingly impossible political and economic conditions, and casts musicians and their audiences as agents rather than victims.

For Arroujeh

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Introduction: Orienting the Alternative

Lebanon's recent history has been a cautionary tale of political corruption and civic neglect. In the last two years, the country's currency has experienced a 281% inflation and its poverty rate has doubled, up from 42% in 2019 to 82% in 2021. Country-wide rolling blackouts leave some households without power for up to 22 hours per day, while 54% of the population lives without electricity altogether. The country's capital, Beirut, was left physically devastated in August 2020, when 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate ignited in a warehouse at the Beirut Port. The ensuing blast—the largest non-nuclear explosion in recorded history—killed 281 people, injured 6,000, displaced over 300,000 families, and rendered half of the city's medical centers nonfunctional. The chemicals at the center of the tragedy had been sitting, neglected, in the same deteriorating conditions since 2013.While local and international efforts to investigate the causes of the blast have been systematically shut down by the Lebanese government, documents from the years leading up to the event have clarified that the Lebanese government did, indeed, know about the ammonium nitrate, but chose instead to ignore it.

Disaster is not new to Lebanon, or to international perceptions of it. For much of the 1970s and 80s, the world watched as "the Paris of the Middle East" devolved into 15 years of civil wars. So prominent was the image of Lebanon as a warzone that in the United States, beer pong—a game in which one bombards cups of alcohol with ping-pong balls—came to be known in the nightly news as "Beirut," each splash of booze evoking the bombs that rained down on the capital. For much of my early life, though, I was not aware that I lived in what others might call a disaster zone. I was born right at the end of the civil wars, and my experience of Lebanon didn't begin to resonate with its image in the West until the late 1990s, when, as a 7- or 8-year-old, I woke in the night to the sonic boom of Israeli jets breaking the sound barrier. Even then, hearing the echoes of their missiles hitting our power stations, I failed to realize the extent to which my city still reeled from 15 years of protracted conflict. In the throes of what I still think of as a normal childhood, it didn't occur to me that my mother's irritating need to know my exact whereabouts at all times was informed by her own wartime upbringing, in which people regularly left the house to run banal errands and never returned. When my grandmother harassed my brother and me for details about our plans, I did not think of her 18-year-old son leaving the house for the last time, of how she had to identify his mangled remains after he stepped on a landmine while out with friends.

None of it registered until February 14, 2005. I vividly remember sitting in my school's cafeteria, selling tickets to the middle school valentine's dance, when the bomb went off. The cafeteria had recently been renovated, new glass walls put up around what used to be an open eating area. I remember watching those freshly installed panes of glass wobble and begin to pop out of their frames before the sound passed and they righted themselves. Teachers ushered us into classrooms and the school locked down. Cellular reception was out, so all we could do was wait nervously, speculating. I remember one theory, almost charmingly naïve in retrospect, that the giant helium balloon downtown had exploded. When my cousin came to pick me up, I found out that what we'd heard and felt had been the detonation of one ton of TNT beneath the car of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. It had happened about 2.5km (1.5 miles) from our school.

The 17 years since the Hariri assassination have been filled with a progressively more absurd and horrifying series of events. The rest of 2005 and most of 2006 were marked by a string of further car bomb assassinations and a growing tide of protest against the Syrian forces

that had occupied Lebanon since the 1980s, resulting in the weekly recurrence of what my friends and I wryly called "war days"—our Lebanese analogue to the snow days we saw on American TV. In the summer of 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and we watched Israeli jets destroy Southern Lebanon and raze parts of Beirut in retaliation. In May 2008, when Sunni and Shiite militias again turned the fighting inwards, we slept in the hallways at night and stayed low to the ground during the day to shield ourselves from stray bullets and shelling. When I left Lebanon for college in 2009, I thought that the worst might be behind us, but in retrospect the violence and upheaval of the early 2000s was just a mise en scene for the conflict and collapse of the 2010s and early 2020s.

I left Lebanon at the age of 18, and I thought that I would never look back. Like many in my generation, I was what I call "raised for export." I was taught from an early age that there were no viable futures for me in Lebanon, and that leaving was the only way to ensure some semblance of a better life. At school, my classmates and I spoke English, learning Arabic and French as additional languages. In high school, we were allowed to drop Arabic altogether, and instead dedicated our time to English and French. While we lived in a country whose primary language was Arabic, we conducted our lives in English. When we reached for ideas, they expressed themselves in English, not Arabic; when we connected with one another, experienced love, or hope, or joy, or frustration, we experienced them in English. We all spoke Arabic in certain parts of our lives—at home, on the street, in stores—but Arabic was an addendum, an afterthought, a thing that was taken for granted and therefore almost completely elided. In class, if we joked in Arabic to one another, our American teachers scolded us. Completely forgetting himself, a particularly jingoistic teacher once yelled "this is America, speak English," at my brother and his friends. I continue to find new ways to problematize this particular outburst, but looking back at it today I find it uniquely evocative of the context in which we were being raised (for export). In my final years of high school, I enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program, which called for the inclusion of a world literature element in our English literature classes. Over the course of my senior year, my friends and I read Arabic-language novels in translation. The irony of Lebanese students studying Arabic literature in translation under the umbrella of "world literature" was lost on my foreign teachers.

At schools similar to mine across the country, my generation was being raised in carefully cultivated and rigidly enforced microcosms of France and the United States. More than being taught that there was no future at home, our educations shaped us in ways that sometimes actively foreclosed the possibility of staying. Having developed our senses of self in other languages, we felt linguistically and culturally alien to Lebanon. And so we left. Most of the people whose voices animate this dissertation grew up like me. Many of them grew up with French instead of English, and some went to France instead of the United States. Our stories intersect with one another at this point of departure, when instead of assimilating seamlessly into the Euro-American cultures we were brought up in, we found ourselves indelibly marked as other.

In this dissertation, I examine the ways that people like me have tried to navigate these feelings of linguistic and cultural in-between-ness by imagining and investing in futures for Lebanon in which there is a place for us. This project is driven by more than simply an intellectual curiosity or musical interest. My investment in this research is intrinsically and inevitably personal. The thirty or so years that bound this project are coterminous with my own life. I write about socio-political events that I experienced firsthand, through frameworks inspired by my memories, feelings, and thoughts about them. The people whose music and

stories fill the pages of this dissertation are people of my generation and social class. Many of them are friends, and one of them—Hamed Sinno—is family; the cousin who picked me up from school on that fateful day in 2005. These attachments and experiences inform the questions that I ask or refuse to ask, they—implicitly or explicitly—structure the way I think, conduct, and understand my research as an academic. I write in order to make sense of my own past, my own feelings and orientations towards Lebanon. I also write to make sense of how this past has been shaped by Lebanon's fraught relationship with its own histories and struggles for self-determination, and how naming and contending head on with these questions might open up space for other, better, futures.

So what does "alternative music" have to do with any of it?

In Beirut, there are myriad terms that describe the music I refer to as alternative. Terms like "underground," "independent," "indie," and "DIY" are also in circulation, and choice of terms often reveals much about one's age and musical affiliation.[1] Still, "alternative" is the most widely used term, and to the extent that there can be dominant coalitions within Lebanon's alternative music world, the term "alternative" is preferred by these dominant coalitions and by virtue of this has become the dominant accepted category for local independent music in the multi-lingual national press.[2] More importantly, however, I use the term alternative because the term implicitly suggests a mode of relation. The term "alternative" immediately begs the question "to what?" What is Lebanon's alternative music alternative *to*? How is this articulated, sounded, sensed, and to what ends? Rather than gesturing towards an economic or industry configuration, or suggesting a Euro-American framework for the articulation of genre, I argue that the alternative in music calls for consideration of the ideas, sounds, constructs, practices, in relation to which it defines itself. Here, "alternative" is less of a generic designation than it is a musical, social, and ideological orientation. This study explores the shifting space of possibility that is evoked by the term "alternative."

In globally circulating news and in much popular music scholarship, "alternative music" usually describes a Euro-American genre that originated in college towns in the 1980s and was

[1] While conducting fieldwork, I found that there particular terms were associated with specific artists and their spheres of influence. For example, Zeid Hamdan, one of the progenitors of alternative music in Lebanon and co-owner of MOOZ Records, told me that he was fond of the terms "underground" and "DIY." In conversation with Hamdan, I came to understand that this preference was as much a nostalgic one as it was an ideological one. Hamdan spoke wistfully of the early days of his career, when resources (equipment, performance venues, recording spaces) were scarce and local musicians worked with one-another in a "DIY (do it yourself)" fashion. While perhaps Lebanon's local independent musics were "underground" in these early days, they are today very much "on the ground," as Beirut and Beyond International Music Festival organizer Amani Semaan expressed it to me. I have noticed that the musicians who work or align themselves with Hamdan and his studio often tended towards these terms over others in circulation. In contrast to Hamdan, many local organizers and promoters, like Beirut Jam Sessions co-founder Anthony Semaan and former Fete de la Musique director Michele Paulikevitch, tended to use the term "independent," which I understood largely as a tactic for legibility within the international music circuits within which they work. None of these individuals felt misrepresented or confused by my use of the term "alternative music," and all of them used it interchangeably with the other terms in question. I came to the term "alternative" through local news stories about such music, musicians like Mashrou' Leila and Postcards' interviews and stage talk, and major producer and DJ Ziad Nawfal's 2009 book *Untitled Tracks*. While the term is widely used and accepted, for those who know and understand the terrain of alternative music in Lebanon, the term gestures towards Nawfal and his business partner Fadi Tabbal, musician, recordist, and owner of Tunefork Records, arguably the gravitational center of Lebanon's contemporary alternative music world.

[2] For example, Arabic language newspapers commonly use the term "badila," which directly translates to "alternative."

adopted as a genre by major record labels in the 1990s.[3] With roots in post-punk's anti-establishment ethos, alternative music usually gestures to an economic or industry configuration or set of relationships rather than a specific sound. Authors writing about alternative music have described it as a highly contextually contingent category (Kruse 2003, Straw 1991) that is animated by a DIY or democratizing ethos (Guerra 2016, Garland 2012, Hibbett 2005). This ethos, we are told, is manifest in an anti-establishment stance towards music production and distribution (Newman 2009, Fonarow 2006, Moore 2005, Hesmondhalgh 1999, Kruse 1993). Posited in these ways, alternative music emerges as an approach to making music that foregrounds and articulates a local character (Luvaas 2009, Porcello 2005, Kruse 1993, 2003, 2010). Despite such a broad definition, scholarship on alternative music has approached it as a predominantly Western construct that is emulated or appropriated by non-Western musicians. Here, "alternative" is a Euro-American master-category that becomes territorialized in ways that reveal fraught ideas of locality (Guerra 2016, Garland 2012, 2014, Burkhalter 2013, Karkabi 2013, Regev, 2011, 2013, Luvaas 2009, 2013). In this dissertation, I write against such framings of non-Euro-American alternative music as inherently derivative by instead approaching alternative music in Lebanon as a profoundly situated practice with its own histories, genealogies, and stakes.

Lebanese popular music sits at an interdisciplinary nexus of troubling scholarly tendencies. In popular music studies, it is too often subsumed by a logic that provincializes and flattens non-Euro-American popular musics as iterations of globally circulating musical practices with similar problematics. In anthropology, history, and Middle East studies, Lebanon joins most of the developing world as the object of analyses framed primarily through the lenses of violence and suffering. Local musicians are represented as voices of social and political resistance whose music either contributes to this political endeavor or provides much needed escape from the bleak conditions of life, implicitly positioning this work in relation to past and future suffering. My work contravenes these sensationalist and reductive tendencies by grounding its theoretical scaffolding in lived experience, building a decolonial framework through which to consider aesthetic categories in radically local terms.

In Lebanon, the label "alternative music" describes a practice that emerged in the years immediately after the end of the 1975-1990 civil wars. Many young people, the majority of whose families had spent the war years abroad, had returned to Lebanon in search of a sense of belonging in a country from which they had been estranged. Bands like Soapkills and Scrambled Eggs are often cited as foundational to alternative music at the time, and have continued to mark contemporary alternative music world in Lebanon. Although there are clear progenitors of contemporary alternative music in Lebanon, it is difficult to characterize sonically. Rather than being aligned with a particular genre or aesthetic, alternative music today points to a collection of Beirut-based musicians whose chief commonalities are age and social class. These musicians were all born towards the end of the civil wars and come from predominantly middle and upper-middle class families. Although they were educated largely at English- or French-language schools, a notable number of these artists sing or write music in the Lebanese-Arabic dialect. They are, furthermore, connected by a demonstrated commitment to recording, producing, and circulating music through local networks and spaces that are independent from the Middle East's dominant popular music industry.

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[3] A good example of this is DGC Records whose catalog included Nirvana's *Nevermind.* DCG Records was a subsidiary label of Geffen Records that was distributed by Warner Brothers Records until it was acquired by MCA Music Entertainment Group in 1991.

Although the label "alternative" has been used to describe music and musicians from elsewhere in the Middle East—most notably Jordan and Egypt—alternative music in Lebanon differs markedly from these practices. Notably, alternative music in Lebanon predates established scenes in Jordan and Egypt's, which have emerged largely since the widespread social upheavals of the Arab Spring in 2011. Moreover, alternative music in Lebanon is not organized around the ethos of political resistance and anti-establishmentarianism in the same ways that Jordanian or Egyptian counterparts have been. Rather, the Lebanese musical practices labeled "alternative" have been affiliated with particular local institutions and record labels for over two decades. Increasingly, alternative music has been accepted by local festivals and musical venues as a relevant and marketable musical practice. Practitioners of alternative music, particularly members of seminal bands from the late 1990s and early 2000s, have themselves founded record labels and music festivals or venues dedicated to the promotion of musicians from across the Levant.

This dissertation insists on centering and taking seriously the work of local cultural practitioners whose work does not pertain to violence or resistance. It draws primarily from a recent current of Lebanese scholarship on the political and social utility of contemporary art. Lebanese art critics and theorists such as Chad Elias (2015) and Walid Sadek (2011) have framed studies of art and artists in Lebanon since the 1990s as engaging "dominant chronopolitics," that is, the entanglement of temporalities and political orientation or decision-making (Elias, 2015). Inspired by the writings of fellow theorist Jalal Toufic (2009), Sadek argues that the instability of Lebanon's present is caused in large part by the forcible severing of Lebanese history from real life experience in the present through dominant political rhetoric and academic framing (2011). The governmental policy of "amnesia" surrounding the realities and atrocities of the civil wars have, he argues, left the country unable to move on from this event, and its people suspended in an unstable present. Without being able to contend with the past, the argument goes, imagining and moving towards a future becomes difficult, if not impossible. The work of the artist, Sadek claims, is to search for a "habitable chronotope," a way of framing Lebanese spatio-temporalities that is commensurate with lived experience. In Sadek's formulation, a "habitable chronotope" promises to challenge the hegemony of conceptions of temporality—like the erasure of the civil wars and their attendant problems for the present—that continue to exert force over ways of being in and experiencing Lebanon's present.

I argue that the "alternative" in music is fundamental to the project of repairing the relationship of time and space in Lebanon. At stake in this search for a "habitable chronotope" is the ability to redress the foreclosure of Lebanon's futures by foresounding alternative possibilities for imagining and enacting futurities. Musicians, organizers, and producers do this kind of future-work by sonically indexing historical and musical pasts and articulating lived experiences of the present that are not oriented towards and around war. Their investments of time and resources in establishing local musical infrastructures and economies reveal the work that they do towards imagining an implicitly non-violent future in which such investments can yield cultural, social, and financial returns.

Taking back the future

By and large, academic research on Lebanon has been concerned with ongoing political and sectarian unrest (Hermez 2017, Mackey 2006, 2009, S. Makdissi 2004, Khalaf 2002, U. Makdissi 2000), the crisis of Lebanese national identity (Kassir 2006, Salem 2003, Phares 1995, Salibi 1988, Barakat 1973), memorialization of the civil wars (Volk 2010, Haughbole 2005,

2007), and the reconfiguration and experiences of urban space (Monroe 2016, Hayek 2015, S. Makdissi 2006, cooke 2002, Nagel 2002, Sawalha 2010, Khalaf 1993, 2006). The dominant chronopolitics of this work—the ways that it mediates the politics of temporal positioning—capitalize on narratives of social and cultural rupture between Lebanon's pre-civil-wars "golden age" and its unstable present, in which the country seems to teeter precariously at the edge of sectarian chaos. In these narratives, Lebanon is a neoliberal party destination haunted by the 1975-1991 wars, from which its culture is unable to move on; its futurity is foreclosed by dominant understandings of a present in which lived experiences and historical narratives are at odds. These chronopolitics and the representational paradigms to which they give rise frame contemporary cultural practices like music as either escapist or activist, implicitly denying the possibility of Lebanese futures that are not structured in relation to open-ended violence.

This study engages a growing body of scholarship in anthropology, art history, Middle East studies, and queer theory that considers futurity as its primary problematic.[4] Building on the decolonial critiques of anthropologists from the global South like David Scott (1999, 2004) and Arjun Appadurai (2013, 2015), I am committed to moving away from the problematics that have otherwise framed Euro-American scholarship on Lebanon since its postcolonial moment. Whereas the country has symbolically and materially oriented itself within the terms of internationally circulating cliches promising "a phoenix rising from the ashes," or "the Paris of the Middle East," I labor in my work to recuperate life lived otherwise.

In his 1999 monograph *Refashioning Futures*, Jamaican anthropologist David Scott asks: "how...and with what conceptual resources, do we begin to extract a new yield, a new horizon of possibilities, from within the moral and epistemic contours of our postcolonial present?" (3) Scott's question follows from the assertion that the field of postcolonial studies continues to orient itself around hegemonic questions and colonial epistemologies. When we have tried to think about how to move forward after the colonial moment, Scott asserts, we tend towards attempts to "humbl[e]…certain hegemonic regimes of Truth" when we should today be laboring to think and work past the epistemologies handed down to us by colonial power (4). In other words, Scott argues that we must critically question what we tend to take for granted as a priori problematics in order to assess their continued relevance and utility. What is necessary now, he asserts, is to cultivate a strategic practice of criticism that turns its eye away from searching for the right answers to the wrong questions towards asking what questions, projects, or concerns, are worth asking and investing in.

Crucially, thinking about criticism as strategic practice also entails thinking about criticism's concerns as historical and situated. This means that they are not fixed, not relevant for the longue-durée. Thus while some questions still have interesting answers, the conditions may have changed such that they are coherent but largely academic rather than critical. Scott's notion of "problem space" is useful language for discussing the object of strategic criticism. Defined as "ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological stakes) hangs" (2004:4), the notion of problem space has been central to articulating this dissertation's ideological and ethical commitments. This dissertation's framework and methodologies are chiefly informed by Scott's decolonial politics. I approach the problem-space of alternative music in Lebanon through Scott's framework of criticism as a

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[4] See, for example, Amin, 2022; Appadurai, 2004, 2013, 2015; Bear, 2015; Bear and Birla, 2015; Birla, 2015; Cross, 2015; Collins, 2008; Edelman, 2004; Elias, 2015, 2018; Grosz, 1999; Hannerz, 2016; Hermez, 2017; Knight and Bryant, 2019; Lagerkvist, 2010; Lee, 1999; Munoz, 2009; Puri, 2015; Sadek, 2011; Schielke, 2015; Scott, 1999, 2004, 2014; Urry, 2016.

strategic practice, which cautions against taking on a priori concerns—in this case war and protracted violence—without asking why and to what ends, and instead emphasizes the reevaluation of existing problematics in order ask what questions or concerns are worth investigating.

Arjun Appadurai's recent writings on hope, futurity, dreaming, and aspiration (2004, 2013, 2015) have been crucial in defining a conceptual vocabulary for articulating the process and the stakes of my own practice of strategic critique. In Appadurai's work, insights into and about the future are inextricable from the concepts of imagination and aspiration. Writing in response to the tendency of social scientific studies to diminish its significance, Appadurai stresses the importance of culture in the process of imagining or aspiring towards the future. In his 2004 essay "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition," he urges readers to see that "it is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as those about the past, are embedded and nurtured" (2004:59). His later writings further articulate the stakes:

> the capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity, in the sense that it takes its force within local systems of value, meaning, communication, and dissent. Its form is recognizably universal, but its force is distinctly local and cannot be separated from language, social values, histories, and institutional norms, which tend to be highly specific (2013:290).

Moreover, he argues, "cultural systems", as amalgamations of histories, practices, and norms, rather than simply "logics of reproduction," are significant in that they "frame the good life as a landscape of discernible ends and of practical paths to the achievement of these ends" (2013:292). In other words, Appadurai here argues that cultural systems are central to the ways that better futures are imagined as achievable and aspired towards. I find this of particular significance, as Appadurai's claim locates sites of futurity beyond normative loci like religion or political discourse.

In his 2004 essay, Appadurai argues that the capacity to aspire—the luxury of imagining a future—is not distributed equally. For him, this capacity to aspire is the purview of the rich and mobile rather that the poor or disenfranchised. The capacity to aspire, he argues, is a social and collective capacity as well as a navigational one—it has bearings on orientations as well as mobility and movement. This is certainly true in Lebanon. In many ways alternative music is able to operate as a site of futurity specifically because it is a largely middle-class practice. Its practitioners and audiences have social and often geographical mobility. I see this dissertation, however, as contending with the fact that Lebanese people's capacity to aspire is beholden in large part to larger suggestive and imaginative powers: the press, academia, and international political imaginaries. By attending to ways of imagining and aspiring towards futures that are belligerently unconcerned with violence or precarity, I attempt to return aspiration to those, us, for whom these futures have the highest stakes.

I bring this critical perspective to ethnographic writing on Middle Eastern futurities. Where authors such as Sami Hermez (2017) and Samuli Shielke (2015) have approached the practices of daily life as meaningful sites of inquiry, their work emphasizes larger concerns about violence and safety in the context of the quotidian. This dissertation departs from this approach by considering the ways in which musicians invest in and imagine futures which *aren't defined by the anticipation of violence or precarity*.

But what about sound?

It would be rhetorically convenient if alternative music in Lebanon was loud, jarring, or deeply avant-garde. In many ways, it is easier to think about music as responding to violence if the music itself feels or sounds violent. But it isn't. In fact, the music that makes up this dissertation's focus is almost completely unremarkable to the casual or un-situated listener. However, I argue that this seeming mundanity is a vital part of the music's futurity. It is aspirational, not reactive. In many ways it is making a future by striving to distance itself from the violence which dominates the past and which has become the chief mode of relation to the present as well as the defining framework through which to imagine the future. To think about a striving for what queer theorist Jose Muñoz would call the "then and there" of Lebanese futurity (2009) does not simply implicate a transformation or collapsing of spatio-temporalities, it also necessarily implicates other places entirely. Alternative music is made by a milieu of people whose futures are normatively defined by the pursuit of a "then and there" that is not just temporally oriented away from past and future violence, but also physically, geographically oriented away from Lebanon. Those of us raised for export are not expected to believe that we can—let alone to want to—make lives for ourselves in Lebanon. The music that frames this dissertation's arguments is, I argue, a speculative tool; a site for the imagination and enactment of alternative futurities in which there might be a different, better, more viable future at home.[5]

Understanding music as a site of future-making is significant in that it reveals not only the stakes but also the stakeholders in these futures. Music-making is entangled in social, political, cultural, aesthetic, economic, and personal webs of (im)possibility that are shaped by the multiple interests and investments of all of those peoples, institutions, and corporate entities who are involved in it. For example, thinking about how alternative music imagines and anticipates alternative futures can also tell us something about what the stakes might be for the Lebanese government, who issue permits for events, or censor songs, or for the Ministry of Culture, who invent and display a cultural history. Alternative music can also reveal the stakes for a host of corporations and music industry actors, like Absolut Vodka and Red Bull, and international music festivals of varying sizes like the Baalbak International Festival or the Beirut and Beyond International Music Festival. Finally, alternative's orientations towards the future reveals the investments and desires of fans and artists in/about these futures. Framed this way, the industry and economically-oriented frameworks and methodologies dominant within popular music studies in general, and the study of alternative music in particular become elements of alternative music's futurity.

Understanding Genre

The term "alternative music" is often understood to refer to a particular, bounded, globally coherent genre of music. In this study, however, I utilize the notion of genre to dismantle and write against these universalizing tendencies. In his book *Genre in Popular Music,* audience and media scholar Fabian Holt argues that genre is a product of the multiple meanings and interests

[5] It bears noting that I am thinking of music's futurity in a manner that is wholly distinct from theorists like Jacques Attali, whose central assertion was that music is prophetic (1977). For Attali, music is prophetic in that it anticipates through its means of production, what will be the dominant economic logic of the next era. While this is a compelling claim, I reject the classical Marxist approach to culture as simply a reflection or epiphenomenon of the economic base. I also refuse to construct a linear narrative of musical and economic progress. Thus, my work eschews Attali's economic determinism and teleological construction of a narrative of economic progress.

generated by interactions among texts, audience responses and expectations, production and industry contexts. More specifically, he defines genre as "a type of category that refers to a particular kind of music within a distinctive cultural web of production, circulation, and signification" (2007, 2). Holt's conception of genre as constructed in relation to musical practice and experience is particularly exciting, as it creates space for understandings of genre that are not simply economic or pertaining to industry.

More than simply a mode of classification or institutional framework, I argue that attending to local and individual or community definitions of genre can reveal the ways in which musicians and audiences make sense of themselves in relation to one another and to larger aesthetic and ideological forces through music. By saying this, I do not mean to completely ignore or elide music industries and institutions. As sites of music production and modes of distribution, musical institutions like record labels continue to be fundamental to understanding how a genre's musical conventions become codified. My understanding of the relationship between the cultures that surround musical genres and the industries that produce them echoes popular music scholar Keith Negus' assertion that "an industry produces culture, and culture produces an industry" (1999:14). Echoing Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), Negus argues that genres articulate complex systems of cooperation, with an attendant set of conventions, and reflect the ways that labor is strictly organized and divided in accordance with the needs and self-imposed logics of the art world to which each genre belongs.

In conversation with Holt and Negus, as well as with a wealth of scholarship on the significance of fandom and fan consumption to understandings of media texts,[6] I understand alternative music as constructed mutually by musicians, fans, and institutions. I argue that thinking genre as a multi-directional, relational, and ongoing process of definition and negotiation calls for a methodology that draws on the local and particular. It furthermore draws attention to the ways that discursively defining genres—by naming, for example—is selective and exclusive in enabling and silencing forms of communication, control, and specialization into markets, canons, and discourses.

Particularly in studies of non-Euro-American musical practices, Holt's assertion that genre must be thought of both in terms of a relationship to local and global practices, industries, and discourses, and Negus' insistence on thinking of placing industries within a constellation of other cultural forces is transformative. Still, Negus and Holt mobilize locality and specificity of context as a way of making sense of globally circulating musical categories. In Lebanon, the default assumption about alternative music echoes Holt's definition of a "genre scene," in that alternative music is often understood as being related intrinsically to a global genre culture. Effectively, this understanding of alternative music as oriented towards the global (the non-Lebanese) alienates the practice and its audiences and makers from a sense of local belonging. Lebanese alternative music, then, is defined less by seeking outward affirmation or connection than it is by reaching inward and claiming home/a space in it. I argue that through sound, rhetoric, marketing, institution-building, and performance, those involved with Lebanon's alternative music world actively work to realize a different version of home that has space for them.

Studying Music in the Middle East

[6] See, for instance, Jenkins, 1992; Booth, 2017; De Kosnik, 2012; and Thornton, 1996.

While there is a wealth of scholarship on the topic of music in the Middle East, very little has closely examined alternative musics. Instead, an overwhelming majority privileges either Arabic music (Shannon 2006, Racy 2003, Al-Himsi 1994, Danielson 1991, El-Shawan 1980, Sahab 1980, Rizq 1936)—a normative term used to describe a body of music, musicians, and musical practices prevalent in Egypt and the Levant from the early 20th century to the mid 1970s—or mass-mediated popular music produced by regional media conglomerates like Rotana (Gilman 2014, Frishkopf 2010). Most writings articulate a belief that music is able to speak to (and for) people's experiences of particular times and places, and share a concern about the growing inability of popular music to address real and pressing issues. Alternative music almost never figures into such discussions about music's entanglement with the social and political forces at play in the Middle East's contemporary cultural moment. I contend however, that alternative music is inextricable to such conversations.

Research on music in Lebanon has concerned itself largely with issues of nationalism or folklore (Stone 2008, Habib 2005, Muruwah 1998, Racy 1985), religion or sectarianism (Hood 2006, Racy 1986a), and innovation and change within the paradigm of Arabic music (Racy 1986b). With the exception of the ethnographic work of Burkhalter (2013) and El Kadi (2010, 2015), little has been written about Lebanese contemporary popular musics. Burkhalter's work focuses on the roles that Lebanese alternative musicians occupy within global musical networks, whereas El Kadi attends to how Lebanese musicians use free improvisation as a tool for political critique. In both cases, the authors approach genre and style as Western imports to Lebanon. Their focus on binaries, such as local/global and war/peace, does not account for the social and political work done through the definition and performance of alternative music in terms that are radically tethered to the locale of Lebanon. Moreover, situating musicians ideologically and economically within global, transnational networks elides considerations of these musicians' entanglements within local and regional political and economic spheres. My work insists on re-orienting approaches to contemporary music in Lebanon, and taking seriously local musicians' work of creation, selection, and distinction.

In 2009, Producer, DJ, and record-label owner Ziad Nawfal edited a book of essays in collaboration with photographer Tanya Traboulsi, whose photographs of Lebanese alternative musicians on stage and during performances brings a sense of immediacy and breathes life into entries by local academics and musicians. Nawfal himself writes one of the book's opening essays, recounting the history of alternative music in Lebanon through his own involvement with it. More recently, ethnomusicologist Chris Nickell (2020) has expanded the purview of existing studies on Lebanon's alternative music by considering the ways that male musicians mobilize and perform masculinity as a mode of navigating and surviving a complex web of music industry pressures and Lebanese sociopolitics. Nickell's study is a groundbreaking account of alternative music in Lebanon, which pays close attention to the ways that this musical world has evolved in relation to its musicians' socioeconomic class, gender and racial identities, and orientations towards the international music scene.

Belligerent Optimism: a framework and a methodology

In the humanities and social sciences, studies have tended towards either harrowing tales of neoliberal collapse, or more hopeful examinations of happiness and flourishing. Reflecting on these opposing currents of what she calls "dark anthropology" and "anthropologies of the good," Sherry Ortner (2016:60) asks: "What is the point of opposing neoliberalism if we cannot imagine better ways of living and better futures? How can we be both realistic about the ugly realities of the world today and hopeful about the possibilities of changing them?" This dissertation attempts to address this seeming incongruity between the bleak outlook of frameworks that center

exploitation and inequality, and approaches that are overwhelmingly optimistic in their refusal to consider darker analytics. In Lebanon, the anthropological approaches that Ortner describes are often two sides of the same coin. Where dark anthropologies center ongoing violence and precarity, anthropologies of the good celebrate cultural and political resistance, mobilizing this resistance as evidence of the resilience of the Lebanese people. In both cases, war and suffering are the de facto frameworks through which Lebanon and its peoples are understood. Music, in particular, has been a focal point for journalism and academic research that might be aligned with Ortner's anthropologies of the good. In these contexts, local musicians are represented as voices of social and political resistance, implicitly positioning their work in relation to suffering.

A natural complement to Ortner's dark anthropologies, and perhaps a framework that has animated many works to that effect, is the late Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism." Berlant argues that under late capitalism, attachments to the possibility of attaining a "good life" and the optimistic fantasies that sustain these attachments have become obstacles to our own flourishing. For Berlant, this peculiarly neoliberal political subjectivity is cruel because of the structural conditions of uncertainty and precarity that produce it, and because of the subsequent impossibility of achieving the mobility, security, and equality to which we aspire. This is a compelling argument that begs similar questions to the ones that Ortner brought up. Although Berlant is explicitly concerned with optimism on the meta-levels of affect and attachment rather than the more everyday experience or emotion, her work is too often read in these micro-contexts. While structural critiques about the systemic abuses enabled by rhetorics of optimism or a "better life" are critical to academic inquiry, understanding this doesn't erase the utility of hope in daily life. How can we recuperate hope without losing sight of its cruelty?

One answer to this question, I argue, is what I call belligerent optimism. At once a framework for structural critique and a tactic of everyday life, I define belligerent optimism as a disposition of cynicism and sarcasm that is stubbornly insistent on hopefulness rather than conformity or melancholy. In many ways, belligerent optimism is a fact of life in Lebanon rather than a cultivated ideological orientation. When the alternative is (sometimes literally) to lay down and die, one has no choice but to find a way to live. While this might be (and has been) characterized as resilience, I argue that it is instead a means of surviving with your eyes wide open. In Lebanon, resilience is an anticipatory disposition, a mode of futurity that continues to center violence. It celebrates survival of past violence as evidence of the ability to withstand it in the present or future. As a Lebanese person and an ethnographer, I see resilience as a fundamentally frustrating and reductive way of framing life. In contrast, belligerent optimism decenters violence. It is a mode of optimism that recognizes its inherent cruelties but insists on doing whatever it takes to live. It is a guerilla tactic of future-making.

To paraphrase Jose Munoz on hope, I'm here making a distinction between a mode of optimism that simply keeps one in place within an emotional situation predicated on control (which is Berlant's cruel optimism) and a practice of optimism that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced (2009:278). If, as Robin James suggests, melancholy is a way of intervening in or resisting neoliberalism and a potent foil to a culture of resilience, then I propose belligerence as its more vocal other. Where James' melancholy is a refusal, a method of weighing down or grinding the system to a halt, belligerent optimism is a confrontation, an implicitly future-oriented mode of complaint. In a blog post that informed her very recent book, *Complaint!* Sara Ahmed argues that to complain is to pave the way for something, and

> to pave the way is to make something possible, even though it might be hard to say, hard to know what will happen. Perhaps that paving can become pavement; you try to create a

> different ground in the present by insisting that the present is not enough. This is not a bright hope, agentic, forward, and thrusting. This is a hope that is closer to the ground; slow, below…Complaining can be [aspirational]…it can be what you have to do to breath. Sometimes you complain in order to survive. This does not mean that you get through…not getting through does not mean not getting somewhere. If you have to create a record of what you do not want to reproduce, that record exists for you…Participating in a complaint can thus be a *politicizing process* in a similar way to participating in a protest: you get a real sense of the scale of a problem when you try to address [it].[7]

Framed as a way of creating a record, a mode of affecting change or of access, a mechanism of learning about how the system works, a way to live with yourself and to address what's wrong rather than simply to cope, Ahmed's understanding of complaint is perhaps most in line with my definition of belligerent optimism.

This study is framed in large part by my interlocutors' and my own belligerence and stubbornness about the crucial need for optimism in considering possible futures for Lebanon. In my work, belligerent optimism emerges from a place of ongoing frustration and exhaustion with conversations that center resilience or resistance and therefore flatten cultural production and human experience into past and future suffering. Through the framework of "belligerent optimism," I investigate the ways that artists work to re-orient the problem-space of critical inquiry to ask what the future might hold or how it might unfold through this belligerence. Belligerent optimism also denotes a methodological approach. For many of my interlocutors, it has shaped compositional practices, performance styles, and tactics for self-representation in interviews and promotional material. In my research, belligerent optimism as a framework and a disposition has led me in search of what, after photographer and theorist Allan Sekula, might be called a "shadow archive" of optimistic futurity.[8] This shadow archive has taken form by bringing popular music into conversation with nationalist mythologies, dominant heritage regimes, and socio-political discourses on Lebanon's past and future violence. In the context of Lebanon, where narratives and representations of war have abounded, this repurposing of the term "belligerence" is itself a tactic for critique.

Orienting myself in "the field"

"Do you want to ask why we sing in English?," asked Julia Sabra, fifteen minutes into our conversation. I was struck by both the question itself and the resignation with which Sabra had asked it. A singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, and sound-engineer, Sabra's perspective felt integral to my research on alternative music in Lebanon, but her choice of language wasn't among the list of conversation topics I'd brainstormed prior to our meeting. "I don't," I replied. "Ok," she said cautiously, "you can." "Do you want me to ask?" I countered. Sabra considered it for a moment: "No, but you can…Because it's something that I think about all the time," she admits:

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[7] Ahmed's larger blog post can be accessed at: https://feministkilljoys.com/2019/07/22/why-complain/.

[8] Writing on photographic portraiture in 1986, Sekula posited that socio-political hierarchies within which cultural objects exist are rendered more visible and palpable when such objects are gathered together into an archive. The "shadow archive,' Sekula argues, describes that which is missing, omitted, and excluded from such archives, implicitly clarifying the social relations that position these gathered objects in relation to one another and within their larger socio-political terrain.

> the more we travel, the more we get asked about it by reporters who are like "you're from Lebanon, but you sing in English?" and it's like, "oh, you wear clothes?" Some interviewer in a German village was like, "but you look like the people here in Germany"…it's confusing for me because I think in English, so I write in English, but should I be making an effort to think in Arabic? But also what kind of fucked up language is Arabic, where you have this written, Latin style Arabic which is gorgeous but untouchable, and the Lebanese that we speak is nothing. I feel like, should I be the one to start creating this new language for pop music? or should I just do what I feel? I don't know, it's all these weird questions in my head, and it drives me insane.

While the question had surprised me, Sabra's assumption that I, a Berkeley-trained academic, would problematize and confront her about her use of English-language lyrics, made sense. I too, thought about language all the time, because like Sabra, my relationship to both English and Arabic was defined by anxieties about my sense of self and belonging.

In his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks,* Martinican anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon observes that "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization…A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (17-18). Fanon's writing succinctly captures the root of the linguistic anxiety that most of my generation's experience: we think, live, and express ourselves in English or French and not Arabic, and by virtue of that feel alien to and alienated from the culture and world carried by our "native" language. Although I rarely broached the subject, the question of being "Lebanese enough" came up in almost all of the conversations I had with musicians, producers, promoters, and organizers in Lebanon's alternative music world. Like Sabra, many expressed confusion, discomfort, and anxiety about their music's representative capacity. If they were in some ways the arbiters of Lebanese-ness in sound, were they somehow failing their communities by making music that was not unambiguously "Arab"? I bring this up in a section on my own positionality to highlight the stakes of my own and my interlocutors' orientations.[9]

This dissertation reflects a need to see myself and others like me represented in conversations about Lebanon. It is a challenge, and attempt—borne of hope and frustration—to begin to push against the reductive and limited frameworks of understanding and writing and sounding Lebanon into being. I have at times been reluctant to admit the personal stakes of my work out of fear of being dismissed for lacking "critical distance." For a long time, being a "native ethnographer" suggested a lack of objectivity, an inability to see "truth" through the colored lens of native experience and attachment. This perceived need for distance (whether or not it has actually been imposed on me is irrelevant) has for a long time obstructed my understanding of myself as a writer and ethnographer. Faced with comments from colleagues expressing worry about being "too much of a fan" of the music I study, I feared having transgressed by rejecting the distinction between "researcher" and "subject," the "us" and "them"

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[9] It is worth mentioning that my sense of what it meant to speak Arabic, like many of my interlocutors, is fossilized within a rigid identitarian formulation. We *do* speak Arabic. We speak it all the time. But when we speak Arabic, we do so in a manner characterized by constant code-switching. Our thoughts come out in a pastiche of English, Arabic, and French, sometimes all within one sentence. We are convinced, however, the we don't speak "real" Arabic because we have been told as much. "Real" Arabic, we have been taught, is the purview of "real" Arabs—people who did not grow up with our middle-class mobility, or those who belong to Muslim/Arabist identity groups, to name a few.

that has implicitly structured ethnographic methodologies and writing for most of the history of the practice. However, like many of the popular music scholars and media theorists that I have been in (actual or imagined) conversation with,[10] *I am a fan*.

The work that I do is propelled by deep emotional, personal, political, and intellectual attachments to the people and places that I study. My project is informed by my own lived experiences and concerns. It is about my country, my city, my friends, and our place in the world. My investment in talking about and listening to music, in audiences, in futurity, comes from a desire and perceived need to ask new questions, to reframe conversations that no longer have any real bearing on lived experiences, to write and sound new worlds into being, or at least to recognize the work that other people are doing in this regard. I am *both* "us" and "them," at once a researcher and a subject of research; my training and the very fact of writing this dissertation means that I am always already one of "us," an academic, a researcher, an ethnographer trained and aligned with the Euro-American academy, but my upbringing, my life experiences, the way that I move through the world, also align me with "them."

I have approached this project as an exercise in working with and through these feelings of in-betweenness. Where some might strive to write from whatever distance they deem necessary to see with a critical eye, I understand writing critically as an effort to bridge the distance between the seemingly incongruous spaces I occupy. By sitting with the intimacy of my attachment to Lebanon, I seek to demonstrate that it is not just possible to be critical from my vantage point, but that there can be no critical scholarship that is not situated or that does not contend with its situatedness. What, after all, could be more critical than putting oneself on the line, recognizing that the stakes are personal, and fighting for them?

Methodology

Writing ethnography at/about home

It is difficult to think about writing about Lebanon. As a Lebanese person, I have had to work through and sometimes fight against my own feelings about home in order to put words onto a page. I imagine, though, that Lebanon might be difficult to write about for anyone. Writing about Lebanon means attempting to navigate decades of shifting inter-and-intra-national political alliances, the waxing and waning of sectarian factions, intentionally obfuscated political discourse, the movement of displaced peoples into, out of, and around the country, and the entanglement of these things with culture and daily life. This is made all the more complicated by the country's inability (and unwillingness) to contend with the atrocities of its 1975-1990 civil wars, which are often summarily dismissed as a "hiatus between the "days of glory" and the future" (cooke, 2002:409). What any ethnographer of Lebanon—native or otherwise—is faced with, then is a crisis of representation born of the tension between a need to forget the civil wars, and an urgent need to remember so that history might not repeat itself. In this context, writing about Lebanon feels like a Herculean task which requires first untangling a gordian knot of history, memory, temporality, and political discourse. "In contemporary Beirut," notes literary critic Saree Makdissi,

[10] A very incomplete sampling of these voices includes: Middleton, 1999-2000; DeKosnik, 2012, 2016; Negus, 1994; Reynolds, 1998; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Hills, 2002; Thornton, 1996, Scott, 1999. I have also felt particularly inspired and emboldened by the work of Trinidadian ethnomusicologist Jiselle Rouet, who writes rigorously and fearlessly through her personal attachment to the Trinidadian musical world that she studies (2019).

> time itself has not quite stopped, but certainly the discordant, uneven, unfinished, rough present looms larger than either an increasingly remote past or the prospect of a brighter future, both of which seem to be fading away, leaving Beirut stranded, cut off from the past and the future…increasingly, a flat and depthless present is all that seems to be available: when there is not much sense of the past, and little prospect of the future, as discrete entities, past and future become extensions of a present from which there seems to be no escape (2006:204/5).

How, then, might one even begin to write about Lebanon's futures? How might I write when there is no clear beginning and no clear end to the stories that I am trying to tell? What does it look like to hold space for the complexity of life in Lebanon while also claiming some semblance of scholarly authority about it? Later in the essay referenced above, Makdissi, who was himself raised in Lebanon, suggests that "it is not impossible to narrate the war, the past, the future, or the present, but such narrative will demand new forms, new structures, and new devices." The difficulty here, notes Makdissi, "is not simply to come up with new forms to represent an ever-shifting reality, but to try to invent a new way of thinking the movement, the ebb and flow, of time and of history itself" (2006:207).

I have resolved to take up Makdissi's call to imagine new ways of thinking about and representing Lebanon by pursuing what anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod calls an "ethnography of the particular." For Abu Lughod, writing an ethnography of the particular works to subvert totalizing tendencies of anthropological writing about culture by "telling stories about particular individuals in time and place" (1991:162). As someone who is personally implicated in the setting and subject of my research, writing through the lens of the particular allows me to sit with and explore the intimacies of my connection to Lebanon. Attention to the particular for me (and for Abu Lughod) includes attending to the banal and everyday as sites in which larger social, political and cultural questions or trends take on meaning.

What I am advocating for might also be described as a return to thick description, in which, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz observed, one attends to "particular attempts by particular peoples to place these things [nationalism, violence, ethnicity, etc..] in some sort of comprehensible meaningful frame" (1973:30). Thick description, Geertz argued, necessitated an ethnographer's attunements to

> a multiplicity of conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [they] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render (1973:10).

I am compelled by Geertz's insistence on sitting with the relative messiness of "microscopic (21)" ethnographic practice in which "ethnographic findings are not privileged, just particular," and in which "small facts speak to large issues "(23). Taking a cue from Abu Lughod's desire to articulate a feminist ethnographic practice,[11] I understand doing thick, particular ethnography as first and foremost a practice of sitting with my own situated subject position and its attendant situated knowledge. As feminist theorist Donna Haraway has argued, "situated knowledges are…the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions—of views from somewhere" (1988:590). I read Haraway as giving further form to Abu Lughod's shift towards particularity, Geertz's microscopic ethnography, by "arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not

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[11] See, for example, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin* Society (2000 [1986]), "Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?" (1990), "Writing Against Culture" (1991), "Locating Ethnography," (2000).

universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (589). An ethnography conducted through Haraway's framework is conducted first and foremost "from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (ibid).

I cannot promise objectivity and critical distance, nor do I have a desire to do so. Instead, what I offer is partial, incomplete, sometimes contradictory, but crucially grounded, a situated ethnography of the particular.

Ethnographic Approach

Ethnographic interviews, observations about concert and rehearsal attendance, close listening, transcription, social media and music video analysis, and archival work all have helped to clarify how alternative music is understood by its practitioners, and how it is positioned in relation to larger musical, economic, and discursive structures. My research took place primarily in Beirut, Lebanon, from October 2018 to July 2019. While the vast majority of research conducted for this dissertation took place in Beirut, my observations and involvement with Lebanon's alternative music world continued through virtual concert attendance, participation in discussions on social media like Facebook and Instagram, and interviews conducted over Zoom when I was unable to return to Lebanon during the global COVID-19 pandemic. I have also drawn extensively from my life and experiences in Beirut before my investment in alternative music was anything more than that of an enthusiastic friend and fan. This long-term involvement with alternative music in Lebanon has provided a depth of knowledge and experience which allowed me to make observations and describe events that happened long before I arrived in Beirut to do formal research. Approaching the alternative in music as an orientation rather than as a genre or style suggested for me a methodological approach, in addition to a framework.

Interviews enabled me to understand music's role in shaping and articulating ideas about Lebanon and its future. Through formal and informal interviews with musicians, managers, event and venue promoters and organizers, producers, and fans, I explored the ways in which the notion of alternative music has been conceived and positioned in the country. In particular, I sought out relationships with musicians and bands whose careers and music range widely in terms of longevity, popularity, circulation, and reach. The performers who were central to this study include members of bands like Mashrou' Leila, which enjoys wide local, regional, and international reach; Postcards, which has enjoyed growing local, regional, and international acclaim; and KOZO, who perform and circulate in more limited local circles. I also interviewed central figures and producers like Zeid Hamdan, Fadi Tabbal, and Ziad Nawfal, who have been active participants in the alternative music worlds since the 1990s. Such a diversity of experiences and orientations was essential to a nuanced understanding of how alternative music is understood by those who make it.

Many of my interlocutors were people who were around my age, and whose middle-to-upper-middle-class upbringings resembled my own. As a result of this, I often felt an immediate kinship with the musicians I talked to, and our conversations easily took on an air of familiarity and trust—we spoke like old friends, through a shared vocabulary of life experience and ideas about the future. Ironically, I found it hardest to interview the musicians with whom I already had close relationships. It was particularly difficult to interview Hamed Sinno, lead singer and songwriter of Mashrou' Leila. Hamed and I grew up together. He lived upstairs, in the same building that our family owns, and has been a life-long friend, confidante, and partner in crime.

He was the first person I came out to, the one I engaged in heated theoretical debates and meandering conversations about philosophy or cultural theory, the big-brother figure who took me out for adventures in the middle of the night. While I had a wealth of personal knowledge and experience with him, I put off any sort of formal interview with Hamed until the very last minute. Asking him to assume the role of "Hamed Sinno of Mashrou' Leila" in a formal interview felt like a violation of our relationship. While he was forthcoming and generous with his thoughts, the conversation we had "on the record" felt strange and awkward, a place in which I felt the tension of my intimacy with "the field" most acutely.

When I arrived in Beirut, I hoped to be able to speak with representatives from corporate record labels such as Rotana and EMI Arabia, in order to better understanding how labels and markets construct and position alternative music. These conversations didn't happen, however, as I quickly realized that those involved with alternative music in Lebanon were not concerned with, and did not orient themselves in relation to pan-Arab mass mediated popular musics. I also intended to speak to representatives of transnational corporations like Red Bull, who have been major sponsors of alternative music in Lebanon. The perspectives of these representatives felt crucial to assess the ways in which particular sonic or political orientations mediate access to funding and sales, or affect artists' mobility and their music's circulation. Despite the sustained efforts of several musicians close to Red Bull's local representatives, I was systematically denied access to or time with them, as they "like the artists to speak for themselves." I gained valuable insight about Red Bull's priorities and operations from musicians, producers and organizers who had worked with them.

As one of the primary means for the circulation and consumption of Lebanese alternative music, live performances were invaluable for answering the question of how it has been defined and delineated through performance. At concerts, I took photos and videos, and made recordings primarily of stage-talk or moments in which performers directly addressed the audience. These records allowed me to attend to audience reception and composition, particularly with respect to demographics, size, class and status markers, and ethno-linguistic backgrounds. My archive of concert recordings also allowed me to revisit and discuss moments of interest during interviews with the performers themselves, and much later, as I began to transcribe my experiences in the field into more structured prose.

In addition to live performances, I examine the ways in which the bands and musics are characterized as "alternative." More particularly, by taking into account the makeup and self-presentations of the bands themselves, I address questions about the politicization of style, and the mobilization of particular political and social orientations in the construction of this "alternative". Additionally, critically analyzing elements such as lyrics, performance practices, musical style, and orchestration was useful to learning how and to what extent these elements influenced public opinion, and mediated circulation and access to funding and sales. Musical analysis was also essential to situating alternative music sonically and aesthetically in relation to existing musical practices such as classical Arabic Music and pan-Arab mass-mediated popular music.

Given the dependence of Lebanese alternative music on online modes of circulation such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and social media, I spent time attending to the types, frequency, and the nature of online modes of alternative music's fostering of sociality and circulation. I l paid attention specifically to official and unofficial, as well as formal and informal discourses and representations that circulate on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and the user comments of YouTube and SoundCloud. An important aspect of this approach included charting

interactions across platforms and media in order to better understand alternative music's role in (re)mediating discourses about Lebanon, its history and politics, and its contemporary musics. In addition to marketing/publicity and fan-generated media, I attend to music videos—circulated largely through YouTube—as artefacts which reveal much about musicians' social, political, and aesthetic orientations, as well as fans' expectations and levels of engagement.

I contextualized my discussion and understanding of the work that alternative music is doing by considering its relation to mid-20th century practices of local and regional music making through historical sound sources and periodicals. In particular, I studied in detail the work of artists like Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers, who, I claim, form the historical precedents for contemporary musical practice. Although my study insists on un-tethering narratives of Lebanon from the civil war, I contend that it is important to understand Lebanon's past in order to understand the efforts of alternative movements to imagine a future.

What music "makes audible"

As an ethnomusicologist, I conduct my study first and foremost through sound. Following from ethnomusicologist Jocelyne Guilbault, I strive to asks what music makes audible. As Guilbault argues in in her 2005 article, "Audible Entanglements: Nation and Diasporas in Trinidad's Calypso Music Scene, "soundings…perform actions—they foreground entanglements, produce identities, express ideas and emotions with tangible effects" (43). In other words, sound is never innocent. It is always already audibly entangled with "social relations, cultural expressions, and political formations" (2005:41). What this calls for is a practice of situated listening, by which I mean a commitment to hearing music in radically spatially, culturally, and temporally localized terms. Inspired in part by T. Carlis Roberts' notion of "sono-racial triangulation," I approach listening to alternative music as a practice of echolocation in which sound is not just embedded within larger discourses about history, memory, or belonging, but is also a crucial tool in navigating and orienting oneself within these discourses on a personal, communal, and structural level.

Chapter Outlines

Part I of this dissertation explores local articulations of the "alternative" in music. Through interviews, story-telling, participant observation, and concert attendance, the chapters in the first part construct social, institutional, and affective histories of alternative music in Lebanon.

Chapter one, *Soundworlds and Soundworlding*, traces alternative music's histories through the stories told by key figures during interviews. Focusing on three moments of possibility in which alternative music's soundworlds took life, the chapter argues that these soundworlds developed around shared aspirations for the future after the end of the civil wars in 1990. In it, I theorize soundworlds as sonic articulations of both an art world (Becker, 1982) and the phenomenological process of "worlding" (Heidegger, 1962; Stewart, 2011). This sound-worlding, an analogue to Heideggerian "worlding" best summed up by anthropologist Kathleen Stewart as "an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds (2011:445)," calls for an attunement to the resonances of daily life. The stories that this chapter tells are about attunements, about the ways that "rhythms and labors of living become encrusted and generative" (2011:446). Specifically, the history I trace in this chapter focuses on moments that claimed the possibility to imagine ways of being, sounding, and feeling Lebanon's present and futures. I do so by focusing on kernel moments over the last 30 years that gained critical momentum and then dissipated, by

addressing their intensities and deflations in relation to larger social, economic, and political conditions. In line with Guilbault, the stories I am following are "grounded in biography, agency, desires, tensions, and disappointments…[they are] about the music that is performed and consumed in musical bonding. But…also about the sociality that is generated through such a practice (year, 103)." Beginning in the late 1990s and ending with at around 2015, the chapter is divided into three parts, each of which represents spaces, sounds, and people around which an alternative music soundworld meaningfully cohered.

Chapter two, *The Cost of Admission: Mobility, Constraints, Possibilities,* examines the role of established alternative musical institutions like Red Bull and Tunefork Studios in bringing about and standardizing a new aesthetics and rhetoric of alternative music. Although alternative music in Lebanon remains an informal and porous network of individual actors and spaces, there does exist something analogous to "making it," achieved through access to particular spaces or affiliations with particular people and mediated by aesthetic and social gatekeepers. Expanding on the idea of "buying-in" to a particular ethos or market structure as kernel to a genre's sound and definition, I focus on what I call the "cost of admission." The term "cost of admission" conventionally refers to the cover or ticket fee that is paid to gain access to particular spaces of music-making; it also gestures to the economic frameworks that have shaped studies and understandings of genre formations and aesthetics. What is lost in such frameworks are non-monetary factors that render such exchanges possible. In addition to marketability and sales, admission to particular sites of production, performance, and circulation are often determined by artists' social, ideological, and aesthetic orientations. I argue that these orientations, as much as financial or monetary factors, mediate access to vital people, places, and opportunities for personal and career growth, and therefore also comprise the cost of admission.

Part II of this dissertation builds on the first by looking at how these local iterations of the alternative create material and ideological spaces of optimistic futurity. The chapters in this section turn an eye towards Lebanon's 20th century histories in order to explore the relationships of contemporary alternative music to social, political, and musical pasts.

Chapter three, *(Re)Mediations: The Politics of Historical and Musical Positioning,* examines the work of artists whose music indexes these cultural and political pasts. I argue that references to, and indexing of authorized musical practices such as Arabic music and *fulklur* operate towards two separate but entangled ends: to position alternative music in relation to local and global circulating musical practices, and to (re)mediate understandings of the trajectory of Lebanon's history and politics in attempts to imagine and evoke a habitable chronotope for Lebanon. This chapter explores how this indexing does the work of bridging the past with the present, in order to construct or imagine a future in which the sounds, practices, and values of Lebanon's past—thought to have been lost to the political and cultural violence of the civil wars and the subsequent decades of officially endorsed amnesia—are relevant and accessible. By "resurrecting" (Toufic, 2009) and re-mediating referents from various musical pasts, I argue, musicians are drawing historical, sonic, and cultural through lines, thus establishing and claiming a localized, sounded repertoire of performance practice. This repertoire drawn largely from Arab and Lebanese musical pasts, is itself entangled in the histories and politics of mid-to-late-20th century independence and nationalist movements, all of which come to bear on the discourses of authenticity, creativity and emplacement in contemporary alternative music in Lebanon.

Finally, chapter four, *Speculative Soundscapes: Utopia Between the Visible and the Audible,* explores the future work that alternative music has done, in order to better articulate the ways that it was and remains integral to larger future projects for Lebanon. It examines two

musical projects that were inspired by the history of Beirut's built environment, looking at the relationship between architecture and futurity. The first is post-rock band KOZO's 2019 album *Tokyo Metabolist Project*, a speculative project inspired by post-WWII Japanese architecture, which asks what Lebanon might have been like if post-civil-wars reconstruction efforts had prioritized human rehabilitation over financial gain. The second is Mayssa Jallad's solo project, *Marja'*, a fusion of her music with her training as an architect. Drawing from her graduate work which attempted to reconstruct the architectural history of civil-wars-era Beirut, Jallad's project contends with her own generation's alienation from the city and its history at the hands of governmentally endorsed reconstruction projects in the post-civil-wars era.

I conclude with thoughts on the role of optimism in Lebanon after the 2020 Beirut Port explosion and in the wake of the country's ongoing collapse. While it would be easy to look at Lebanon and see in it the failure of revolutionary idealism and the cruelty of optimism and hope, I contend—belligerently, insistently, selfishly—that in banal acts of living, of making a life in a place where it feels like there is nothing worth living for, grow the seeds of other, perhaps better, futures.

1. Alternative Music in Lebanon: Soundworlds and Soundworlding

Most histories of alternative music in Lebanon start either in the early 2000s, or in the mid-to-late 1990s, with the influx of young Lebanese people eager to return home after the end of the civil wars. It is true that many of the major players in Lebanon's alternative music world were part of this wave of repatriation. Existing histories frame this generation's return as a moment that set off a chain of events that enabled the establishment and rise of the alternative world that exists today. The story as it is told is hinged on the premise that expats came back to a cultural wasteland, a narrative that is widely replicated across the performing arts, and perhaps best documented with respect to post-civil-wars visual arts.[12]

This is an attractive story: the war ends and a youthful wave of energy returns to breathe new life into the ruins of a once-vibrant art world. While there is truth to this dominant narrative about the origins of Lebanon's contemporary alternative music world, its celebration of postwar cultural revitalization problematically frames the music and musicians who operate under this designation only in relation to the human catastrophe of Lebanon's civil wars. In doing so, it precludes hearing and understanding contemporary alternative music as existing within a local history of musical practice, positioning it instead as a foreign import that is out of place within Lebanon's cultural history. While the reality of the civil wars and their aftermath cannot be overstated, the persistent centrality of this history within academic and journalistic accounts obscures stories that do not revolve solely around past and future violence.

Rather than a revisionist history, the chapter proposes a new approach to framing and recounting the history of Lebanon's alternative music. Existing narratives aim to be exhaustive, and in doing so tend to be teleological, either attributing alternative music's evolution disproportionately to larger sociopolitical contexts or eschewing sociopolitical context and focusing instead on interpersonal and industry dynamics and their long-term effects. This chapter departs from these practices by focusing on particular moments that my interlocutors highlight as being significant turning points for alternative music. Accordingly, the stories that I tell in the following pages are narrated largely by my interlocutors, and are framed by their stories rather than only my own understanding of what happened. In this way, this chapter is indebted to the work of ethnographers like Jocelyne Guilbault, whose book *Roy Cape: A Life on the Calypso and Soca Bandstand* experiments with storytelling by "address[ing] subjectivities and voices, histories, and events in many ways—through dialogues, polyphonic interventions, and testimonies" (2014: 10).

Scene, Community, Art World, Soundworld

Frameworks for studying independent or alternative music often center "scenefication" or "genrefication." These frameworks are so ubiquitous that a study on indie or alternative music seems wrong without the attendant term, "scene." Indeed, Will Straw's 1991 article, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change," was a pivotal moment for both popular music studies and for the specific study of indie/alternative music. In it, he proposes a reframing of approaches to

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[12] There is a pervasive narrative in writing on Lebanon's visual art world in the 1990s, which frames artists who returned to Lebanon after the civil wars as pioneers whose art bears witness to the material and cultural destruction of the wars. While cultural life in Lebanon was severely affected by the wars, vibrant art, musical, and theatrical worlds grew and continued to exist throughout their 15 years. For more on visual arts in Beirut since the 1990s, see Elias (2018), Mejcher-Atassi (2013), Sadek (2011), Cooke (2002) and Rogers (2002).

popular music studies, in response to what was at the time a growing concern about the role of economic and institutional globalization in the fragmentation and disruption of cultural practices. Straw suggests that a more productive framework might be to consider how migration and global circulation create new ways of understanding music. "Scenes," which Straw defines as "cultural space[s] in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" (373) are integral to Straw's attempt at re-framing approaches to the study of popular music. Here, a local scene is a situated articulation of globally circulating discursive practices. Theorizing musical categories through the language of "scenes" un-moors them from geographically and temporally specific associations, offering a much-needed alternative to approaches to music as geo-spatially and aesthetically entrenched.

Despite his crucial intervention, Straw's framework does not account for the effect of uneven distribution of power and resources (both locally and internationally) on the construction, institutionalization, and circulation of musical categories. More urgently, in attempting to make space for global articulations of a particular music scene, Straw's formulation abstracts musical genres, idioms, and paradigms from the particular contexts in which they emerged. Many of the musical categories theorized through the framework of "scene" (whether by Straw or by scholars who have written on scenes since his article's publication) carry markers of place and time in ways that are often ignored. These master-categories of genre, such as "indie" or "EDM," in turn become unmarked, removed from their particular histories and the specificities of place in which they first or most notably developed. Instead their ethos, aesthetics, and particular institutional organizations become referents for global articulations. Elements that were a product of place and time have thus become de facto definitions of a genre or subculture, against which all others are measured. The issue here is that the vast majority of dominant genre categories in circulation today originated in Euro-American contexts, and have therefore become defined globally by their Euro-American iterations. Following from this, non-Euro-American practices that appear under the same genre designation, or which bear aesthetic or ideological similarities to these unmarked master categories are evaluated as being always already indebted to or derivative of their Euro-American counterparts.

Framing situated, non-Euro-American practices as riffs on this unmarked original narrows the scope of inquiry, begging questions of comparison and difference from master-genres and imposing the concerns and constraints encountered by initial iterations of these genre categories onto scenes across the world. While it foregrounds the interactions of communities of people on multiple geographic scales, the notion of "scene" is itself unconcerned with the lifeworlds surrounding these musical practices. Rather, Straw's formulation reduces musical practitioners and audiences to passive receptors of circulating Euro-American trends.

Howard Becker's "Art World" offers a framework that can address many of the omissions in Straw's formulation. Defined as "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for (2004 [1982], xxiv)," an "art world" is a useful way of organizing and understanding the ways in which individual actors, larger groups of people, and established institutions animate what might be called a "scene." Moreover, as a framework for analysis, "art world" calls attention to systems of production and distribution driven by cooperative activity within localized networks that develop over long periods of time. While the notion of "scenes" has become native to discourse on popular musics, I argue that "art world" is

better suited to a study of alternative music in Lebanon, which is less about a coherently bounded genre or style than it is a situated network of collaboration.

In his book *Playing Across a Divide*, ethnomusicologist Ben Brinner brings considerations of art worlds and scenes into conversation with one another, reflecting on its utility in analyzing a situated musical network. While Brinner uses the term "scene" throughout the book as a more colloquial umbrella term, his study mobilizes Becker's formulation as a way of framing and interpreting the networks of cooperative music making that his book brings to light. Brinner's study usefully models the utility of Becker's "art world" for interpreting the organization and interrelations of clusters and nodes within the network of musicians and practitioners with whom he works. More significantly, in recognition of the problematic tendency to center an art work within the study of an art world, Brinner suggests that "the network of people and institutions involved in making…music and the *performance processes that constitute this emergent musical practice* are far more central to the definition of this field of cultural production than any particular work created in it" (Brinner, 2009: 202, emphasis mine). In emphasizing process over particular objects, Brinner's intervention offers a way of utilizing Becker's concept without reinscribing a tendency to value solely the artist and their work and flattening the labor and contributions of those whose labor is conventionally understood as technical and secondary rather than creative and crucial to shaping the final product.

Although the notion of "art world," nuanced by Brinner's contributions, provides a useful foundation for framing my own research on a musical world, it remains difficult to apply Becker's framework to the musical contexts in which I work. In trying to demystify art and artists, Becker overlooked the immersive, sensory, affective, or gripping nature of making and experiencing art. Specifically, what is lost in Becker's attempt to write against conventional approaches to art is the role of investments that go beyond the purely economic or transactional in the labor which supports the creation of such art and in its consumption. Rather than just collaboration, convention, or process, I argue that art worlds are also animated by emotional and interpersonal attachment, and that they produce more than just art: they gather and build worlds. In other words, I am suggesting that an art world's "world" is more than just a gesture to social organization, and that it might also be read as a reference to the assertion that art worlds participate in a worlding, and constitute life-worlds in their own right. Following from this, I propose that an art work that coheres around sound specifically might be termed a soundworld, which participates in its own process of worlding. In addition to medium specificity, replacing the umbrella term "art" with "sound" calls for a shift away from a language and framework of the visual, towards the sonic.

Ethnomusicologist Michael Frishkopf has made important strides towards theorizing "soundworlds." Drawing primarily from the work of phenomenologists like Heidegger, Habermas, and Schutz, Frishkopf theorizes "soundworld" as "affectively charged sonic-social intersubjectivity, [a] lived social world of empathetic understanding, intuitive communication, and shared values, as developed, expressed, and reproduced in the social experiences of pre-linguistic sound" (2009:10). [13] While not explicitly a response to Becker's *Art Worlds*,

[13] Frishkopf stressing the pre-linguistic because Habermas and Schutz famously disagreed on definitions of lifeworld, in which the role of communication was central in different ways. Language has been central to conventional definitions of "lifeworld," and here Frishkopf is thinking through music as pre-linguistic or non-linguistic. In a footnote, he clarifies that "by "pre-linguistic" I do not mean to exclude linguistic sound, but rather to consider such sound primarily as sounds, not as discourse, I.e. Consider such sound in its phonetic, timbral, tonal, and rhythmic aspects" (footnote 12, p.27).

Frishkopf's "soundworld" does meaningful work towards articulating a more nuanced approach to the study of music as a network of shared convention, practice, and emotion. Specifically, Frishkopf's formulation foregrounds the affective dimensions of social formations centered around or mediated through musical activity. Unlike language, Frishkopf argues, a life-world built around sound is pervasive (in that it cannot usually be selectively silenced) while evading the active awareness of the individuals it gathers. Moreover, the particular ability of sound to carry situated affective associations makes soundworlds particularly potent pathways for cultural localization (2009:11). Theorizing from and through sound, Frishkopf articulates a framework for understanding the socialities that cohere around music-making in radically local terms, even when, as is the case with Frishkopf's case study, these emplaced soundworlds have migrated or become more global. More than this, the notion of soundworld suggests that cultural objects create place and gather networks of people around themselves and suggests a way of understanding, expressing, and being, that coheres in/in response to/around particular moments, people, events, sounds, experiences.

This chapter argues that alternative music in Lebanon constitutes a soundworld. It recounts a history of alternative music in which music constitutes a site of social coherence that supersedes conventional identity categories like social class or religion. This sound-worlding, an analogue to Heideggerian "worlding" best summed up by anthropologist Kathleen Stewart as "an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds" (2011:445), calls for an attunement to the resonances of daily life. Where sociological, political science, and anthropological studies frame their understandings of Lebanon around structural factors like sectarianism or historical trends like ethno-religious violence, alternative music, as a soundworld, is a potent point of entry because it renders sensible the totally banal and the everyday. In Lebanon, experiences of ongoing violence or precarity and uncertainty constitute only a part of the every day, and yet an overwhelming majority of scholarship and journalism on the country and its cultural production centers them. Listening to alternative music as a soundworlding, as attuned to the resonances of everyday life, is a critical move towards a more complex representation of the country and life in it.

The relationships that I have drawn between the theorists assembled in preamble to this chapter can perhaps most succinctly be articulated through recent work by ethnomusicologist Jocelyne Guilbault. In "The Politics of Musical Bonding," Guilbault proposes the term "musical bonding," to refer to "a processual example of worlding." Guilbault defines the term as

> At once a verb and an affect. [Musical bonding] is about establishing and nurturing relationships - relationships or affinities with particular individuals or groups and with certain soundings, for the aesthetics they convey, the ethical values they enact, the political positioning they stand for, or the ideas they communicate (2017: 101).

As a framework and an analytic, "musical bonding" offers a way of approaching sound and people's feelings about and relationships to it as inextricable from the larger social, political, and economic matrices with which it is inextricably entangled. Implicit in Guilbault's formulation is the idea that music is not innocent. Rather, it "by definition put[s] into motion a particular assemblage of imaginary and material worlds" (102). By insisting that sound must be considered within its particular historical, social, intellectual, or musical contexts, Guilbault persistently centers local experiences, beliefs, and knowledge as vital modes of disciplining or guiding the ethnographic eye and ear.

Following from Guilbault, the stories that this chapter tells are about attunements, about the ways that "rhythms and labors of living become encrusted and generative" (Stewart, 2011:446). Specifically, the history I trace in this chapter focuses on moments that claimed the possibility to imagine ways of being, sounding, and feeling Lebanon's present and futures. I do so by focusing on kernel moments over the last 30 years that gained critical momentum and then dissipated, by addressing their intensities and deflations in relation to larger social, economic, and political conditions. In line with Guilbault, the stories I am following are "grounded in biography, agency, desires, tensions, and disappointments…[they are] about the music that is performed and consumed in musical bonding. But…also about the sociality that is generated through such a practice (103)." Beginning in the late 1990s and ending with at around 2015, the chapter is divided into three parts, each of which represents spaces, sounds, and people around which an alternative music soundworld meaningfully cohered.

1. "It was like falling snow that melts away. We were just the one that stuck."

Serge Yared, singer and lyricist of the Incompetents and occasional alternative music historian, refers to alternative music in Lebanon's beginnings as the "pioneer phase." The first wave of alternative music in Lebanon developed against the backdrop of widescale post-civil-wars recovery and reconstruction efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the violence of the 1975-1990 civil wars had ended, a governmental policy of "no victor no vanquished" legitimized wartime political factions and failed to effectively end the cronyism, clientelism, and sectarian conflict that fueled the wars. For many Lebanese people who had endured the worst years of the wars or who had returned from abroad with the hope of building a new, better Lebanon, it quickly became clear that a brighter future had been cast in the shadows of the entrenched political order. The worlds of art, theater, dance, and music became primary sites for coming to terms with the realities of the wars and life after them, and reimagining possible futures in a post-conflict Lebanon.

There are almost as many takes on the foundational moments for Beirut's contemporary alternative music scene as there are people to ask about it. Some cite a constellation of bars and restaurants in which aspiring young bands like Lombrix, Zeid Hamdan's first musical project, performed. For others, the pivotal moment was the signing of the rock band, Blend, to EMI Arabia. Most journalistic accounts begin with Soapkills, Zeid and Yasmine Hamdan's trip-hop inspired Arab-electro outfit. Those who were there—a generation of musicians, producers, and organizers who have become the infrastructural pillars of Lebanon's alternative music today—often agree that alternative music first congealed around CD Theque, Lebanon's first alternative music store, and its owner, Tony Sfeir.

"A Common Haleh (state of being)"

I meet Sfeir in the garden of his flagship guesthouse Beyt, in Beirut's Mar Mkhail neighborhood. When I get there, slightly late and out of breath, he is reclined in a wooden rocking chair, drinking coffee out of one of the recycled glass cups that have come into vogue around Beirut's farmers markets and boutique sellers. He has aged only slightly from the pictures that I frantically looked up before I arrived—his shock of white hair is a little longer, and he sports a short beard. Mostly he looks more relaxed than any of the photos I've found from the last days of CD Theque, in his blue linen shirt, patterned scarf, and loose green pants.

He asks me about my project, and I ramble off at him for a moment. He stops to consider, then asks how he can help me. I tell him about how CD Theque (and by extension him, as a

figure) was central in enabling and establishing the growth of Lebanon's alternative scene. Without this space, in which almost all of the older members of Beirut's alternative world got their start, as well as Incognito and the mentorship of Sfeir, there may not have been such a scene. He humbly rejects the idea that he was central to this, and insists that he "like Miles Davis," knew how to pick the right people, who were knowledgeable and willing to put in the time and the work.

He begins to tell me about how it all got started: "we weren't the first," he says, "in the 1990s there were many attempts, we were just the one that stuck." He likens others' attempts to organize local musics to snow that has fallen but doesn't stick. CD Theque, he tells me, was simply an attempt that didn't melt on contact, and which allowed further snowfall to stick and accumulate into something "that you could ski on, eventually." The store started out in the town of Ajaltoun, slightly North of Beirut, as the passion project of a 19 year old Sfeir. "It was a place that college kids came to when they didn't want to go to school," he explains to me. In 1995/6, as the store began to grow, relocated CD Theque to its iconic location in Beirut's Achrafieh neighborhood, a part of the city that had suffered comparatively less damage than the areas known as "West Beirut" during the civil wars, and which became fertile ground for new businesses and creative endeavors. "At the time, what I gave people, that we didn't have, was space," reflects Sfeir, "there were no public spaces. Cafe culture wasn't a thing yet, there were no bars with happy hours that you could sit at and talk. CD Theque was a place for people to go and have conversations about music."

Many of the people who gravitated towards CD Theque, young musicians with a thirst for a community of like-minded enthusiasts, were hired on as staff at Sfeir's relocated and newly expanded business. "It was a great place to hang out," Serge Yared tells me, "and we all had a history working there. Whether it was Ziad [Nawfal], or Fadi Tabbal, myself, Ziad Moukarzel, Raed, from Praed the band. We all worked there, and we all had a section that we were in charge of. So Raed had Jazz, Bashir Sfeir had classical music, Ziad had the alternative, etc… it was amazing…[and it] allowed artists who did some home recordings to sell their CDs."

While Sfeir was successful in realizing his desire to "form a musical empire,"[14] the process was driven more by ambition than by studied expertise. Although the role of the civil wars in the genesis of Lebanon's alternative music is often over-determined, their longevity and violence meant that entrepreneurs like Sfeir were working in a vacuum left in the wars' wake. "We had nothing to model ourselves off of, and we had to learn how to do it all," Sfeir tells me. "We had to learn the difference between a studio, and a label…that you can bring engineers into a studio…and it wasn't until 5 years into it that we learned about the publisher, which owns the songs and lyrics, and [that this] should have come first!" In many ways, Sfeir and CD Theque represent the first large-scale attempts at organizing, professionalizing, and building institutions to support alternative music in Lebanon. At the time, though, alternative music as a category was largely unformed, and the boundaries between worlds of art, music, and theater were porous—as many visual artists and filmmakers were also musicians, theater and music borrowed and exchanged ideas, spaces, creators. Sfeir tells me that these different scenes were connected by a common "haleh," a shared state or zeitgeist. "If we were in the 70s I would call it *thaqafa*,"[15] he tells me, "but we're not in the 70s. It isn't that intellectual. It doesn't come from one university, etc..." he muses. For many of the young musicians whose careers were launched through CD

[14] Author's interview with Ziad Nawfal

[15] The term "thaqafa" literally translates to "culture," but Sfeir is here referring to a more consciously cultivated intellectual and artistic culture.

Theque, this shared "haleh," described a way of being Lebanese during a moment when national character was actively being remade. In the afterword to her memoir *Beirut Fragments*, Palestinian writer Jean Said Makdisi describes this shared "haleh" having crystalized around a failed futurity:

> During the war, our eyes were always fixed on what we were sure would be the halcyon days of the future after it ended. Let the war end, we thought, and all would be well. We would emerge from the abyss into the light. Historical quarrels and divisions would mutate into a harmonious and productive unity based on justice. In this version of the future, I think, we felt somehow that the best of the past would be preserved, the worst purged by our travails. We had paid a heavy price for the evils of the past, and we deserved a better future. But the future is now, and it is a hard reality, shorn of these illusions. There was to be no reward, after all, for the suffering (256-257).

These shared experiences of loss, of return, of renewal, and the material conditions of (im)possibility were at the heart of the vast soundworlds of what would become alternative music.

Bands like Soapkills and Scrambled Eggs, in particular, have become emblematic of the wide spectrum of sound and experience that made up Beirut's post-civil-wars life. Where Soapkills' melancholy trip-hop and Scrambled Eggs's brazen post-punk experimentalism are conventionally heard as markers of a generational hopelessness or malaise in the face of a bleak future, I argue that their music makes audible a growing current of belligerent optimism—an irreverent and cynical musical and ideological orientation which meets sensationalist narratives of past and future violence with a stubborn, optimistic insistence on exploring the possibility of other futures.

Soapkills

A group named Soapkills, a trip-hop[16] duo formed by Zeid Hamdan and Yasmine Hamdan is without a doubt the most successful band of the era.[17] For many academics and journalists, Soapkills' sparse soundscapes, sequenced beats, intensely reverbed guitar lines, and haunting vocals are exemplary of Lebanon's post-civil-wars melancholy. "But also, teenagers are melancholic," remarks Zeid Hamdan,

> at that moment we were teenagers and the city was a teenager. There isn't really this dimension that the historians try to give, you know? It's true that we're affected by our environment, for sure…Yasmine and I were like a couple, and we used to sing ourselves things, write lyrics to each other…And when we would write nice songs and then perform them, there would be a form of joy…And the war, and Beirut, this was just a playground. It was not at all affecting us, it was just—we wanted to have fun in this shitty environment, and music was a good way to do it.

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[16] Trip-hop is a 1990s genre of electronic music from the United Kingdom, which was pioneered by bands like Massive Attach and Portishead. The term refers to an abstract, experimental, and downtempo marriage of hip-hop and electronica which developed in Bristol as an adjunct to rave culture. Trip-hop is often heavily sample-based, characterized by looped and sequenced short instrumental phrases and a heavy bass line. While the genre is largely instrumental, trip-hop vocals are often characterized as contemplative and melancholic. For more on trip-hop, see Reynolds (1998), Hesmondalgh and Melville (2001), Webb (2004) and Wragg (2016).

[17] Although the duo share a last name, they are not related.

Perhaps the most salient example of the ways that dominant discourses about war and melancholy have shaped interpretations of bands like Soapkills is the discourse surrounding the band's name. Newspaper articles, academic essays, and thought pieces alike have interpreted the band's name to the period in which Soapkills started making music. "Soapkills," readers were told, referred to the violence and renewal of the late 90s and was a commentary on the way that built space was being sanitized, scrubbed clean of the marks of the wars' violence. And yet when I ask Zeid Hamdan about the band's strange name, his story is considerably more banal. "The war was maybe a pretext," Hamdan explains,

> The name Soapkills, we didn't have a meaning for it really, but we said "ok, let's use the situation". Like, the city being wiped out, the systematic destruction of everything that is war, you know? Cleaning up…you know? We tried to find a clever answer to what Soapkills was. But, it was just a song. I had written a song where I—it was called "Murder in Slow Motion." I played it in the New Government later, but our manager he heard "soap kills soap kills murder in slow motion," and he said, "oh, why don't you call your band Soapkills?"

As a band, though, Soapkills was still a part of this moment in the late 90s. It was a youthful, intentionally naïve way of working through the conditions the duo found themselves in after recently returned from a childhood spent abroad. And it was an effort to reconnect, to figure out what it meant to be Lebanese after having grown up elsewhere. It was imaginative, aspirational, generative. It captured a desire to make sense of things from the outside, an effort to recuperate what was lost—a childhood, a home, and a connection to this place and its culture. More than teenage melancholy, Soapkills' music sounds out a yearning for sense, and it built around it a soundworld that cohered around this yearning. A soundworld that spoke to those who were there and had returned alike, united by the promise of connection and of finding a place in a Lebanon that was still becoming. It was animated by the promise of being a part/a co-creator of the future that was actively forming all around them.

Figure 1.15. Soapkills, Zeid Hamdan (left) and Yasmine Hamdan (right) (Official band photo, from https://soundcloud.com/soapkills-official).

The band's first EP, *Lost*, is emblematic of the confused, searching, teenage melancholy Hamdan described. Released in 1998, the EP featured four tracks featuring English-language lyrics set to an eclectic array of musical styles. The EP's title track, "Lost," features syncopated guitar and trap set lines supported by derbakkeh and riqq rhythms punctuated by short, Arab inflected violin phrase. Despite being known today for her immense talent as a singer, Yasmine Hamdan's vocals on "Lost" are recitative-like, characterized by a sharp, choppy declamation set to the syncopated rhythm of the guitar and drums. Where the instruments on the track are wet with reverb,

Hamdan's voice is notably dry, devoid of effects, as though to anchor listeners within the song's otherwise vast and meandering soundscape. "I am lost," she sings,

> in gold, the color of my death/I have lost my soul/I have revealed my quest/black is the fight that will destroy them all/let's walk on the beach/there is no sea at all/the place is hard to reach/many of you will fall/you will find a way/to open the forbidden way/blood will fill the sand/black is the color of our land (Soapkills, "Lost").

In sharp contrast to the folkloric songs celebrating revival and national unity that populated Beirut's airwaves in the mid 1990s, "Lost" plunges listeners into a space of sonic and lyrical ambiguity. And yet the track, whose sound and lyrics are characteristic of Soapkills' later music, launched the band into local fame. The EP sold more than 1000 copies in its first run, and was a mainstay on the pirated music market. Reminiscing on the EP's success during the late 1990s, writer and activist Jad Baaklini described hearing *Lost* for the first time as "stumbling on a manifesto."[18] Rather than a call to action or explicit statement of ideology, *Lost* captured an emergent feeling that resonated with a generation of young Lebanese listeners. Through their haunting lyrics and sparse soundscapes, they built and gave voice to a lifeworld that was at once melancholic and optimistic, that witnessed and honored the sense of loss described above by Jean Said Makdisi and met this loss with grim determination rather than hopelessness.

The musical style that Soapkills launched, foresounding what I call a "belligerent optimism," continued to resonate through Soapkills' later, more famous work. Where *Lost* was written entirely in English, the band's first full album, *Bater* (2000), featured a mix of songs written in Arabic, French, and English. The album also marked the debut of what DJ, promoter, and Ruptured Records owner Ziad Nawfal describes as the band's "explosive cocktail of traditional Arabic music and electro,"[19] that is, marked sonically and formally by what would become Zeid Hamdan's iconic Roland MC-303 Groovebox sound. As a musical project, *Bater* bears the sonic traces of CD Theque and its unique place at the center of the independent art, theater, and music world in Beirut. In the course of my conversations with Tony Sfeir and Zeid Hamdan, both men cited Soapkills' first album as emblematic of an emergent art world. The various artists and musicians who worked with and hung out at CD Theque were vital to Soapkills' growth. Through CD Theque and the creative networks that grew around it, the Hamdans were able to collaborate with filmmakers like Ghassan Salhab, Joana Hadjithomas, and Khalil Joreige, whose films Zeid continues to soundtrack. CD Theque was also ground zero for a collaboration between Soapkills and playwright, director, and flutist Rabih Mroue and artist and trumpeter Walid Sadek whose proficiency with the Arabic language and involvement in Beirut's growing free jazz scene were integral to *Bater's* sound.

The album's first track and most successful single, "Leh Zaalen (Why Are You Upset)," walks the line between belligerence, nihilism, and melancholy demarcated by earlier Soapkills tracks like "Lost." The track opens with an acoustic guitar, joined soon after by percussion, bass, and the lush fullness of a string section drone, establishing a strong tonal center around a D major chord rising to a crescendo before the abrupt entry of Yasmine Hamdan's vocal line. "Why are you upset? Why?/I'm not upset/Why are you scared? Why?/I'm not scared," she sings,

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[18] "The Golden Years of Lebanese Indie-Pop: A Look Back at the Best of Soapkills," published April 27, 2015, https://www.beirut.com/l/40403

[19] Ziad Nawfal, "Review//Lebanon's Alteranative Music Scene//Version 1," written for Prime Jordan Magazine and reproduced on Ruptured Music, August 24, 2007, https://rupturedonline.com/2007/08/24/lebanons-alternative-music-scene/

destabilizing the song's sense of D major tonality by beginning her vocal phrase on a C natural atop a syncopated bass line on D. The song's shift into D minor is later reinforced by a repetitive, arpeggiated motif on Am7 and Dm6. A slight echo on Hamdan's vocals and the panning of the arpeggiated piano motif from left to right are dizzying and destabilizing, adding an element of special discomfort to the unsettling misdirect in tonality. And yet despite the sonic confusion created through the song's production and arrangement, I hear this track as being playful and defiantly self-aware.

Like her English language performances, Hamdan's vocals remain intentionally flat and unaffected, but in Arabic the occasional awkwardness of her French-accented English gives way to more confident declamation. The song's subject is equally confident in the ways that she taunts and challenges an unidentified masculine interlocutor. The "you" referenced in the song's lyrics is written in the masculine, and in the chorus, joined by Zeid Hamdan's falsetto, Yasmine asks "why? Why? You're a man/oh, what a man."[20] Here, the lyrics take advantage of the slippage between the Arabic phrase "w'leh (and why?)," and the colloquialism "wleh," a form of address that is vaguely analogous to the English language "punk," in its lack of formality and implication of disrespect or superiority. The line, like the rest of the song's lyrics, is both a direct challenge and a criticism, framing the song's subject, who isn't upset, scared, tired, and who hasn't fled or cried, as a stubborn protagonist intent on facing whatever unspoken odds even as her voice and the sonic space it occupies are mechanical and empty of affect.

In the final two minutes of the four-minute track, the song is interrupted by a brief 'oud sample, followed by the gradual return of each of the song's backing tracks. Hearing the introductory guitar line, the syncopated bass, and the arpeggiated piano motif lend a more formal coherence to the song, even as the track is once again re-oriented by the introduction of first the 'oud sample and then a recurring string sample whose production suggests a mid-20th century recording. This is followed by a mizmar-like buzzing interjection from Sadek's trumpet.[21] The samples seem to suggest a musical past, and the 'oud, specifically suggests an Arabic musical past. Indeed, the song is legible as much through the framework of Arabic music theory as it is through a Western analytical language. For example, the harmonic minor mode in which the song is set can be heard as the *ajnas* (tetrachords) nahawand (DEFG) and kurd (AB♭CD), a combination often seen in the descending notes of maqam nahawand. The temporal discontinuity of the track is further suggested by the fading in and out of buzzing, beeping, and pulsating synthesizer sequences. In this latter half of the track, Hamdan's voice is farther back in the mix but still omnipresent as her voice is panned from left to right, with lyrics directing her male interlocutor to do things like "leave it, cook it, run it over, kick it, spit it out, swallow it."

The band released two albums after *Bater—Cheftak* (2002) and *Enta Fen* (2005)—each of which drew and experimented more clearly with Arabic musical sound and convention. Like *Bater, Cheftak (I Saw You)* and *Enta Fen (Where Are You?)* featured songs that were lighthearted in sound but heavy in meaning, that stubbornly insisted that nothing mattered while belligerently and defiantly claiming the power to get through it. Soapkills' music continued to be simultaneously grounded in the disquiet of the present while combing through sonic artifacts from elsewhere (both temporally and geographically). Perhaps their most famous song, "Herzan

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[20] Translated by author. The Arabic lyrics are:
و ليه... وليه مناك رجال و ليه مناك رجال و ليه مناك رجال و ليه شو ها الرجال و لاه

[21] The mizmar is a double reed instrument conventionally associated with rural and folk contexts, and often denotes Bedouin or desert contexts.

(It Matters)," from the bands last album, most succinctly exemplifies this. The track begins with a sequenced melodic line underneath the sound of a radio tuning, static, flanged drones that fade in and out, buzzing, and beeping, which crescendo to a noisy climax that is cut off, after which enters Hamdan's voice. "Nothing is important, don't be sad, for whom?" she sings. Her voice has been compressed and filtered to emulate the sound of an old radio transmission, "millions died, tomorrow 2 million people will be born, where to?" The casually nihilistic lyrics are jarring in contrast to Hamdan's uncharacteristically bouncy, whimsical voice, and the reggae backing track. "Nothing is important, don't pull your hair out, keep looking forward, don't look back, your turn is coming up, I'm sure," she continues before the reggae and vocals are interrupted by the noisy, sci-fi-esque sounding opening theme.

These lyrics are made up largely of common platitudes, a reference to a dominant attitude of fatalism, repressive coping, and macabre optimism in the realms of both politics and daily life. In the post-civil-wars moment this attitude took on new valences as a reflection of a governmentally sanctioned policy of amnesia about the wars and their events. In this wider sociopolitical context, Soapkills' lyrics highlight the tensions between officially endorsed affective regimes, the ways that they coopted socially dominant approaches to dealing with the adversity of Lebanon's recent history, and the fact that the government's project of erasing the civil wars from popular discourse was successful only in driving this discourse from public forums into the privacy of homes and families. The album was also made during what was arguably the greatest moment of political unrest since the civil wars. Public critique of Lebanon's ongoing occupation by Syria[22] was reaching a fever pitch that reached a climax on February 14th 2005, with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik El Hariri. Political responses to Hariri's assassination were swift; the event is widely seen as the catalyst for what became known as Lebanon's "Cedar Revolution," or "Freedom Intifada"—the civil unrest that called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and the disarmament of their primary allies, Hezballah.[23]

"Herzan's" manipulation of space and time—its gestures to geographical and temporal elsewheres—is all the more potent when considered alongside the larger social and political contexts in which it was written and released. For many Lebanese people, 2005 was a moment imbued with possibility. Hariri's assassination and the political movements that followed it disrupted the country's political status quo, and in doing so presented an opportunity to collectively imagine what Lebanon's future might look like.[24] On either end of the political

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[22] The Syrian occupation of Lebanon began in 1976 and lasted until 2005. Syrian troops entered Lebanon in the early years of the 1975-1990 wars, first in partnership with militias who opposed the presence and power of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon. It was later legitimized by an Arab League decision to sanction the presence of Arab peacekeeping forces in Lebanon. While Syrian forces remained involved under the auspices of the Arab League, they became a de facto militia of their own, and were active participants in the violence of the late 1970s and 1980s. When the fighting ended in the early 1990s, a Syrian-backed government rose to power, and the two countries signed treaties of cooperation and mutual aid which ensured Syria's continued military and political domination of Lebanon. For more on the struggles for power during Lebanon's civil wars, see Traboulsi (2012 [2007]) and on Lebanon's fraught history with Syria, see Salibi (1988).

[23] The revolution and its demands became a platform for Hariri's "Mustaqbal (Future)" political party, which mobilized its supporters and allies into what is still known as the "March 14" bloc. While the revolution was successful in prompting the end of the Syrian occupation, it was met internally with considerable resistance, primarily from the Shi'a Muslim political parties Amal and Hezballah, whose "March 8" alliance continues to espouse pro-Syrian sentiment.

[24] This was true for both "March 8" and "March 14" supporters, but the futures that they rallied behind were very different.

spectrum, Lebanon's future became a central part of social and political platforms. It is difficult to hear certain lines of "Herzan" as anything less than a condemnation of civil-wars-era warlords turned politicians whose rhetoric about a better future for Lebanon conveniently glossed over their own roles in creating the conditions that necessitated such a radical reorientation of Lebanese politics. In the final verse of the song, Hamdan sings: "Stop proselytizing/your house is made of glass/drop the stones/ at least do something good for you."[25] The final minute of the song features each of the song's motifs overlayed onto one another. Reggae meets the sound of radio tuning, static, and futuristic beeping and chirping, joined by Hamdan's heavily echoed (but no longer compressed and filtered) voice "ooh-ing" farther back in the sonic field. Soon after, a hand drum track that doubles the rhythm of the bass line is introduced into the mix. While there is nothing explicitly Arabic music about the drum line, the sound of the hand drum indexes an Arabness, and more specifically Arabic music simply by virtue of its timbre.

Like much of the music that Soapkills has become known for, "Herzan" takes on the complexity of its present political moment with a blend of self-aware tongue-in-cheek nihilism. More than simply the perceived melancholia or malaise that have come to define Soapkills' oeuvre in journalistic writing, I argue that the band's performances, arrangements, and lyrics confront real-life loss and hopelessness though wit, sarcasm, and dark humor. Indeed, taking back agency, giving voice to lived experience, and voicing one's own view were an explicit part of how the band perceived its role in Beirut's early alternative musical world. In a 2015 interview with French weekly cultural magazine *Le Vif*, Yasmine Hamdan recounts the band's formation:

> the notion of underground didn't even exist: we immediately had a fanbase, but the old guard didn't understand what we were doing; more so because there was something confrontational about our songs…There was a feeling that something new was developing and that [making] music meant voicing one's own view. [26]

That Soapkills achieved the level of success that they did, and the lasting impact they have had as the progenitors of alternative music in Lebanon is a testament to the moment that Hamdan describes above. In the wake of the civil wars' enduring material and political carnage, Soapkills' music spoke to and for a generation of Lebanese people who had little to do with the wars' events, but who had nonetheless inherited responsibility for recuperating some semblance of home it their aftermath. "You looked at Beirut and you knew that something special, something terrible had happened there," Hamdan muses in the aforementioned *Le Vif* interview, "*but there was also a sense of hope*. This mixture of corn vendors, car horns, churches, and mosques [was] a noisy but exciting thing."[27] Where many journalists have heard a resigned melancholy in Soapkills' music, I hear an emerging sense of hope.

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[25] The original lyrics in Arabic are:
حاج طاعتي دروس للناس بيتك معمر من ازاز فلوت الحجر من ايدك اعمل شي بفيدك عل قليل

[26] Translated by author, from "Liban, Année Zéro," published May 28, 2015. https://focus.levif.be/culture/magazine/liban-annee-zero/article-normal-1003987.html. The original text reads: "la notion d'underground n'existait même pas: on a tout de suite en un fan-base mais la vielle garde ne comprenait nos intentions; d'autant qu'il y avait quelque chose de l'ordre de la confrontation dans nos chansons…Il y avait le sentiment que tout cela était nouveau et la musique signifiait prendre la parole."

[27] Translated by author, emphasis mine. The original French text reads: "Tu regardais Beyrouth et tu savais qu'il s'y était passe quelque chose de particulier, de terrible, mais elle dégageait aussi de l'espoir. Ce mélange de vendeurs de maïs et de klaxon, d'églises et de mosquées, un truc bruyant mais excitant."

Scrambled Eggs

If Soapkills was the sound of Lebanon's late-90s teenage melancholy, Scrambled Eggs were their diametrical opposite. Where Soapkills reached audiences through their contemplative, searching lyrics and sound, Scrambled Eggs, their punk-rock contemporaries, spoke to the disquiet of the post-wars moment of upheaval and change. Founded in 1998 by Charbel Haber (guitar and vocals), Marc Codsi (guitar), Tony Elieh (bass), and Malek Rizkallah (drums), the band's youthful belligerence was a fitting counterpoint to Soapkills' melancholy. "After the Lebanese Civil War my teenage friends and I were at war with everyone – our parents and the whole community," remarks Charbel Haber, in an interview with Ethnomusicologist Thomas Burkhalter,

> We were a bit bourgeois, and we started to have new needs, ideas, and dreams. We listened and played rock and punk, we wore fucked-up jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes. We tried to break out of certain rules of our conservative society, but we never did so completely. Whatever we did, our parents accepted us at home, they gave us money and they took care of us. We were not real rebels. All the drugs we've done, we did them in our parents' houses…We smoked, and our parents watched TV next door. Real punks loved to shock society; we, however, only had small illusions of being able to change Lebanon.[28]

Unlike Soapkills, Scrambled Eggs' hard-hitting, aggressive sound did not immediately appeal to a wide demographic. The band's first three albums, *Human Friendly Noises* (2002), *No Special Date Nor a Deity to Venerate* (2003) and *Nevermind Where, Just Drive* (2004), chart Scrambled Eggs' journey from a contemplative ambient sound towards the chaotic, experimental, guitar-driven sound they became known for. *No Special Date nor a Deity to Venerate* is bookended by tracks filled with noise—static, distortion, badly recorded voices conversing in the distance, fragmented ostinati, and dreamy, ethereal guitar lines. The album's opening track, "Type Command Period or Esc to Cancel," is a 17-minute long exploration of the aforementioned noises that is as disorienting as it is difficult to listen to. Much like Soapkills, there is a meandering, almost melancholy nihilism and aimlessness to the band's experimentalism that echoes Haber's above claims; their sound and approach to making music seem animated by a well-studied and curated unpleasantness whose chief intervention was its belligerence even as this belligerence was a response to a perceived lack of meaningful social or political intervention. The band's difficulty and its impenetrability, at once a sincere experimentation of the possibilities of sound and a warning to listeners seeking the simplicity of rock or post-punk to turn the other way, is at the heart of the band's role in the fabric of alternative music during this early moment.

[28] Charbel Haber, in conversation with Thomas Burkhalter, https://norient.com/blog/chabel-haber.

Figure 1.16. The members of Scrambled Eggs, Charbel Haber (left), Malek Riskallah (center), and Tony Elieh (right) (Image taken at Cafe Restaurant Falb - Austria Nickelsdorf 25-07-2011 Konfrontationen Festival, https://www.facebook.com/SCRAMBLEDEGGSLEBANON/photos/10150387578314746).

I don't remember hearing about Scrambled Eggs until late 2006, when they released their fourth album, *Happy Together Filthy Forever*. Suddenly Scrambled Eggs' anger, their belligerence, what Ziad Nawfal described as "their most abrasive, violent set yet (2009: 26)," made sense. It spoke of a loss that we were all feeling. The momentum of the Cedar Revolution, the possibility that it represented for a different future for Lebanon, had come to an abrupt and disastrous halt during the summer of 2006, with the outbreak of a violent, month-long war (the "July war") between Hezballah and Israel. Recorded largely during and immediately after the July war, Scrambled Eggs' fourth album captured the rawness of the moment. Even today, the album remains a chilling artifact of this moment in Lebanon's history.

The album's fifth track, "1984," is a live recording made during a performance at Beirut's Club Social on Jul 22, 2006, in the middle of the almost month-long war.[29] It is a potent reminder that life went on during even the worst violence of the 2005/6 moment, lush with ambient noise, the hum of conversation and movement in the background. In the foreground a repetitive, marching 4/4 drum and bass line peppered with guitar interjections that accelerates to a frenzied, driving climax over the first two and a half minutes of the track. When Haber's vocals enter, they are incomprehensible amid the din of the instrumental lines. His singing is raw and rough, his voice breaks with strain as he almost yells the lyrics. "Just shoot, let it all out," are the only clear and comprehensible words in the recording, as the band gets impossibly louder. Haber's performance is impassioned, bolstered by the furious, lashing force of Rizkallah's trap set and Elieh's bass, all of which come to an abrupt silence at the end of the track. While

[29] The July war began on July 12, 2006 and the fighting ended with a ceasefire that came into effect on August 14. Despite the cessation of fighting, the war didn't officially end until September of that same year, when the Israeli Defense Force lifted its naval blockade of Lebanon.

murmurs of an audience are audible throughout the track, the band leaves no room for their response or for their applause at the end of the song.

There are no lyrics included in the physical copy of the album, but I managed to find the track's lyrics in an old note posted to the band's Facebook page. While the track is over four minutes long, "1984's" lyrics are short: "The chopper is gonna come down chopping your head/I'm not a man who runs in circles/not yet/just shoot let it all out." Despite the lyrical claim about not running in circles, the limited text means that there is a circularity to the song's performance as the four lines are repeated over several minutes. The motif of helicopters looming overhead is mirrored in the CD's packaging, which features silhouettes of helicopters flying against a white background on its inner CD sleeve, tying the album's physical presentation and its tracks to the larger moment in Lebanon's history that it represents.

Without a doubt, however, the album's most successful and widely circulated track is its first, "Russian Roulette." The surf inflected post-punk track represents Scrambled Eggs at its most belligerent—loud, aggressive, irreverent, and in a much more literal sense, contending directly with war.[30] The track immediately overwhelms listeners with a wall of sound in which bass, trap set, guitars assault listeners from the entirety of the sonic field, interrupted by vocal interludes in which the texture thins, highlighting Haber's vocals and Abdelmalek's breakbeats. The rumble of the bass guitar and drum, the hollow thud of a dampened or filtered snare, the lower range of Haber's voice, and plenty of gritty distortion bolster the aural assault. Coupled with the song's surf-inflected introductory guitar riffs, the song feels further emplaced in the common characterizations of Beirut as at once hardened by ongoing cycles of violence and a bastion Mediterranean hedonism. The album's cover art reinforces this, with a landscape sketched in black ink depicting Beirut's *Sakhret el Raouche* (Pidgeon Rock) with several silhouetted figures falling—presumably to their deaths—into the sea, a crowd of silhouettes queued to follow them.

[30] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word "belligerent" is a modification of the Latin *belligerare*, to wage war.

Figure 1.17. Album cover, Happy Together Filthy Forever (art by Yasmina Baz)

The song's refrain, "love your dope and I hope you choke," doesn't seem notable or out of place within a post-punk song. In a Lebanese context, however, and more specifically during and after the July war, these lyrics can be heard as a thinly coded condemnation of Hezballah, the political party responsible for Lebanon's involvement in a war with Israel, and which among locals is widely known to grow marijuana in Lebanon's Eastern Beqaa valley.

Beginnings and Endings

The years bookended by bands like Soapkills and Scrambled Eggs' most iconic works saw a renaissance of local musical production. "A revolution kind of happened," remarks Serge Yared,

> I think it was in 2000, or in 2002. I have the date here. It was in February 2002. Tony Sfeir decided to compile all the tracks that were circulating, and he made a compilation called Commusication. It was a kind of stepping stone, kind of historic…as a record it was the first compilation with all the post-war Lebanese musicians. And it was a mixed bag. You had Soapkills and Scrambled Eggs, and Blend, and Mazen Kerbaj, and Aks'ser, so there wasn't a kind of—I mean, all the genres were represented.

The same year saw the founding of Sfeir's record label, Incognito, a label dedicated to producing local music that spanned genres from Arab Jazz, folk music, locally composed European art

music and what became known as alternative music. Sfeir was not alone in founding a record label, nor was he the first. "You had Forward Music, created by Ghazi Abdel Baki in 2001, then Incognito [Tony Sfeir's label] in 2002," Yared explains, "then Mooz records, which is Zeid Hamdan, Khaled Mouzanar, Omar Cababe, 2004…Al Maslakh in 2005 by Sharif Sehnaoui, which a couple of years ago had 19 albums." In 2006, Charbel Haber and his Scrambled Eggs bandmates joined the record label boom with the experimental label "Those Kids Must Choke."

While many of the aforementioned record labels went on to carve out an important space for themselves in Lebanon's independent local music worlds, CD Theque and its sister label Incognito were foundational. "It was the first local hub, it was the first place that would sell local products like local notebooks, local books, local comic books, local records/albums/CDS, local films and DVDs. They were the first people to claim a local national Lebanese scene. And they were also the first to do these compilations," says Ruptured Records founder Ziad Nawfal when I asked him about Sfeir's enterprise. As a producer, organizer, promoter, chronicler, and musician in his own right, Nawfal is undisputedly a central figure in Beirut's contemporary alternative music world. "Most of the stuff that I did at the beginning was what I had learned from them. From being around them," he admits,

> how to generate barcodes, how to design CDs, how to design cheaply. And the first CDs I printed at their print house, before it went bankrupt…A lot of the musicians who eventually went on to become Beirut's indie scene worked there. So Raed Yassin worked there for a long time, Charbel Haber worked there for a short time, a lot of people worked there. People who went on to become musicians, filmmakers, video makers, worked in that shop.

Despite its eventual failure, Sfeirs's business was an integral space in which the possibilities for local music were imagined, and the skills, ambition, and personal connections for realizing some semblance of a future musical ecosystem were nurtured. By 2005, the feeling of possibility that drew many into Sfeir's orbit was on the verge of crossing over into reality.

The two years following the assassination of Rafik El Hariri marked numerous beginnings and endings. Although the events of 2005 brought upheaval, they were charged with a sense of hope and optimism that spread past politics. The following year, however, marked a much more definitive ending. The July war with Israel destroyed Lebanon's infrastructure, and the political instability and renewed violence drove many who had returned after the civil wars hoping to build a new life to leave the country. The youthful ambition and possibility that drove worlds that had germinated in the 1990s and begun to bloom around independent music in the early 2000s was subdued by the weight of the material, human, and creative losses of 2005/2006. Quite significantly for the moment that I have been tracing, Yasmine Hamdan left Lebanon for Paris, ending an era of local alternative music defined by the sound of Soapkills.

Later in 2006, Sfeir collaborated with Zeid Hamdan and his business partner Khaled Mouzanar at their short-lived MOOZ Studio. The collaboration yielded a compilation album titled "Lebanese Underground," a name that Hamdan has since turned into a music publishing platform and artist's alliance. The compilation, like Incognito, featured artists from both MOOZ and Incognito's catalogues, many of whom Hamdan continued to work with after MOOZ shut down at the end of 2006. As a musician, Hamdan met the demise of Soapkills by founding rock band, The New Government, whose sound was inspired by Scrambled Eggs' hard-hitting belligerence. In a conversation with me, he explains:

> I went to a concert…And I was blown away by how powerful and incredible they [Scrambled Eggs] sounded. And Marc Codsi and Charbel [Haber] were friends, and at the end of the concert I was like, "you know what? I'm going to do a rock band, and I'm going to be your rival". And then I gathered the New Government, and then we were rivals! I faced them, I said, "I'm gonna do a rock band". Because I was a trip hop band. And I felt I needed *balls*, because I felt—the boys are so beautiful, they're so kickass…and here there were two rock bands on the scene! One was pop, and melodic, and powerful. And the other was, you know, sonic youth style, of banging, of power.

Although Hamdan frames his investment in diversifying his musical projects as being inspired by envy, desire, and machismo, I suggest that Hamdan's turn to rock was also in part a product of the moment. Lebanon's political instability did not end with the July war, nor were the questions of Syrian involvement, Hariri's assassination, and Lebanon's political future resolved after the revolution in 2005. The landscape of the city, scarred anew by Israeli bombing, became progressively more militarized in the name of security, as protests, strikes, and the assassination of public figures continued. The band's name, The New Government, is an obvious indicator of Hamdan's politics, gesturing to the fact that Lebanon's government had crumbled amid disputed parliamentary elections, an unpopular president, and ongoing power struggles between the March 8 and March 14 political blocs. The New Government, Hamdan jokes, was just that, a tongue-in-cheek offer of replacement, complete with marketing materials styled like political posters.

2006 also marked the founding of Tunefork Studios, a recording space owned and run by Fadi Tabbal in collaboration with Sfeir's Incognito. Tabbal, who is unambiguously one of the most central figures in alternative music today, worked at CD Theque, and made his early connections primarily through that space.[31] While it would take several years for Tabbal and his recording studio to become the household names that they are today, its beginnings mark a moment in which alternative music started to become a distinct entity. The experimental/free jazz musicians broke off into their own world, driven largely by the international attention that trumpeter and artist Mazen Kerbaj earned through his blog, which documented the Israel war through comics and tracks on which he improvised on his trumpet to the sound of war planes and bombing. Hip-Hop also took off, growing from a niche scene within alternative music's purview to a vibrant world in its own right.

2. "Something big was about to happen"

"I always try to find a landmark event that marked the passing from a generation to another, from a phase to another," muses Serge Yared, "And this, to me, was the landslide victory of Mashrou' Leila in the 2009 Radio Liban contest. And this is where they won, and this is where something happened. Something big was about to happen." For Yared, pop-rock band Mashrou' Leila[32]

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[31] For example, this is where he met Ziad Nawfal, his business partner and eventual owner of Ruptured Records, Serge Yared, with whom he would found the Incompetents in 2008/9, and presumably Charbel Haber, with whom he has worked on numerous musical projects, the most recent of which is *The Bunny Tylers*.

[32] Mashrou' Leila's name can be translated both as "A Night's Project," and as "Leila's Project." Both translations have become part of the band's foundational lore. Translated as "A Night's Project," the band's name refers to their impromptu formation at a jam session at the American University of Beirut's Architecture and Engineering Department. The second translation, "Leila's Project," has also figured prominently into the band's persona. On social media, many of Mashrou' Leila's announcements were written as letters from a coquettish character, Leila, to an adoring lover.

marks a transitional moment from the so-called "pioneer phase" to an "age of innocence." "Why do I call this the "age of innocence?" he asks rhetorically,

> because after the failure of CD Theque you had people who were experimenting with all of it. Everything was DIY. Like, you had a friend who was a graphic designer, you would call that person and he'd do a cover for your album. Then you'd call another friend of yours who had a contact in a bar, to perform, etc…

Yared's points of reference, the debut of Mashrou' Leila, and the fall of Sfeir's Incognito and CD Theque, are intimately connected to one another. Mashrou' Leila, a group of seven undergraduate students studying at the American University of Beirut's (AUB) architecture/engineering department, created shockwaves when it competed in and won the "Modern Music Contest" in March 2009. The event, convened and sponsored by the public radio station "Radio Liban," the Basement club,[33] and Sfeir's Incognito, sought to reinvigorate local independent music by offering new bands a chance to win a record deal with Incognito. The competition was unique in its focus on up-and-coming local alternative bands, as well as in its structure. While bands on the lineup were vetted by Sfeir and his collaborators, the winners were determined by both a panel of experts, and a popular vote that took place over the internet. For the price of 10,000 Lebanese Pounds—at the time the equivalent of $7—those interested gained admission to the event, and received a special compilation CD featuring a track from each of the bands participating in the contest, and access to the online audience vote. Mashrou' Leila swept the competition, winning both the popular and the expert judges' votes.

Although the competition promised the winner a fast track to a record and distribution deal, none of it came to fruition. "We won the radio competition. It yielded nothing, because Incognito closed like a month after," explained Mashrou' Leila front man Hamed Sinno. Sfeir's record label, CD shop, and musical production pipeline fell apart in late 2008. In conversations with Sfeir himself, as well as musicians, producers, and organizers who were involved in his enterprise, the reason for the closure remained ambiguous and unclear. "Some say it was because Virgin [Megastore] opened, so it attracted some of the clients. Wifi became faster, so people could download music, and eventually you had iTunes, and you could legally buy music," Yared muses. After a pause he continues, "it was very bad management from CD Theque. It collapsed because it was really poorly managed. And you had no quality control in the catalogue. It was a very uneven catalogue. That's it." Sfeir himself attributed the closure to a desire to escape his role as "father figure" to the alternative music world, a decision that alienated many of those with whom he worked closely.

With CD Theque gone and Incognito's catalogue sold off to other interested labels, the alternative music world lost a central node and meeting space. While the end of Incognito meant the loss of possibility for Mashrou' Leila, its absence made space for the growth of new musical institutions owned and operated by people who had worked and learned at Sfeir's businesses. Ziad Nawfal began hosting live performances devoted to showcasing the work of local alternative musicians on his long-running *Ruptures* radio show. In partnership with sound engineer and producer Fadi Tabbal, who with the help of Sfeir had established his Tunefork

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[33] The Basement was a club owned and operated by Lebanese DJ JADE (Jad Soueid). Soueid became involved with Lebanon's alternative music world in the late 1990s, as part of a band called Blend who made huge waves when they were signed to EMI Records. Blend dissolved soon after the release of their first album, but its members have continued to be involved in alternative music in Lebanon. From 2005-2010, the Basement was the premier space in which to perform and hear independent local music.

recording studio in 2006, Nawfal's "Ruptured Sessions" (a play on his show's name, *Ruptures)* birthed a new iteration of a local alternative music world.

With exposure from their "Modern Music Contest" win, and a widening local fanbase, Mashrou' Leila was successful in recording and releasing their eponymous first album with B-Root Productions. "I remember when I published my book in 2010—*Untitled Tracks*—Mashrou' Leila had just started, because they were in the last paragraph of my text," Ziad Nawfal recalls.

> So I remember writing, "these guys just started, and it'll be curious to see what they'll do next". After that, things changed…that's when the political labels started. Because Mashrou' Leila were political…So they established a certain direction. Then the Arab Spring happened…So yeah, somewhere between the war of 2006, the Arab Spring, and Mashrou' Leila, the scene completely exploded.

That Nawfal cites Mashrou' Leila alongside sociopolitical events that caused tectonic shifts in the landscape of life in the Arab world is telling. This was the perceived power of Mashrou' Leila, charged with youthful energy and the potential for change. They may not have been doing this intentionally, but for audiences and for other members of the alternative music world, Mashrou' Leila's debut continues to be a defining moment.

As a young Lebanese person, hearing Mashrou' Leila's first album felt like a revelation. I hadn't grown up listening to music written or sung in Arabic, a lot of which I couldn't related to either linguistically or affectively. My friends and I hadn't grown up listening to music in Arabic, and for a long time, we felt like impostors to both the language and the culture surrounding it. It had never occurred to me that there might be a way of carving out space for myself in that soundworld, that I had options that weren't either to assimilate to what I was told was my cultural heritage, or learn to accept that I had no place in it. Like many my age, I had grown up in Lebanon's postwar moment but was too young to have been a part of the era of Soapkills and their contemporaries. I came into political consciousness largely after the 2006 war, in a moment that totally lacked the unbridled sense of possibility of the late 1990s and early 2000s. And then came Mashrou' Leila. The band was irreverent and in your face. They had vision. It wasn't hope, it was activism, political agitation articulated through the banal and everyday. It was belligerent and it was optimistic. Only this belligerence had nothing to do with loss. It was a refusal to be lost, to experience loss, to accept ongoing loss. It was about a future, hope, optimism, a livelihood, better conditions of life, and cultural belonging. Rather than articulating a sense of possibility for the future, Mashrou' Leila represented a drive to seize the possibility of imagining a different Lebanon by speaking truth to power.

"For me the two landmark events that allowed us to witness the transition from one phase [of alternative music] to another are both concerts [Mashrou' Leila] gave," Yared explained to me, "they gave two iconic concerts. The DEMCO steel concert that was in 2009, and in 2010 they had their first appearance at the Byblos Festival. These two events, to me, are actually the ones that showed us that the scene can grow bigger than what it was." For audience members and fellow musicians alike, Mashrou' Leila's rise to fame was laden with the possibility of something more, and the two concerts that Yared referenced were landmark moments in both realizing that social, musical, and political change could be possible, and in collectively imagining and enacting that change.

The first event was an album launch concert held at a steel manufacturing warehouse on the outskirts of Beirut in December 2009. Although the promise of a record deal with Sfeir's failed label Incognito never materialized, the competition that they had won cemented their role

as the rising stars of alternative music in Lebanon. Despite growing interest, Sinno tells me that the band didn't expect very much commercial success for their first album.

> So we recorded this album, and we did a launch concert. And we were like, lets over-print CDs, and they'll last us for a while. We printed 1500 CDs thinking that was extra, but they sold out. We didn't have enough at the concert, because a lot more people showed up than we expected. And that was another turning point, in terms of how seriously we took things, and honestly in terms of how seriously we were taken.

The album, *Mashrou' Leila*, that accompanied ticket sales featured nine original songs whose sound and subject matter explicitly confronted a slew of social and political issues endemic to Lebanon in the post-civil-wars era. For example, the album's two hit singles, "Fasatin (Dresses)" and "Shim El Yasmeen (Smell the Jasmine)," deal with themes of inter-sectarian relationships, pre-marital sex, and queer desire. Other tracks lyrically and sonically confront corruption, ongoing violence at the hands of militia leaders, the toxic societal gatekeeping of gossip culture, and the ways that cultural norms map onto gender and class.

Musically, Mashrou' Leila's first album employed and gestured towards a wide spectrum of local practices. Haig Papazian's violin lines often quoted Armenian folk tunes, Sinno's vocal production and technique wove in and out of classical Arabic music convention, lyrics borrowed from Lebanese folk and popular songs from the late 20th century, all set within a conventional pop-rock style. Notable also was the fact that the band's lyrics were entirely in the Lebanese Arabic dialect, a choice that set them apart from both local alternative bands who sang in a mix of English, Arabic, and French, and from mainstream popular music which was sung almost exclusively in the Egyptian dialect. As a whole, *Mashrou' Leila* lyrically and sonically participated in a project of mapping the social, political, and cultural landscape of the moment by demarcating the boundaries of a dominant lifeworld from which many young people felt alienated or excluded, and stubbornly, insistently, belligerently occupying and making use of that space. In a 2013 interview with CNN, guitarist Firas Abou Fakhr echoed this sentiment, arguing that "our daily lives were the major inspiration, being young people and part of a changing country trying to form its future in a very sensitive period."[34]

This social, political, and cultural mapping and re-orienting, what Sinno understated as "an element of working within our language and questioning some stuff," is complemented by the album artwork. *Mashrou' Leila's* album cover and insert feature band-created renderings of a map of Beirut.

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[34] Damon, Arwa, "The Lebanese art rockers creating the soundtrack to the Arab Spring." Published February 27, 2013. https://www.cnn.com/2013/02/27/world/meast/mashrou-leila-lebanon-rock

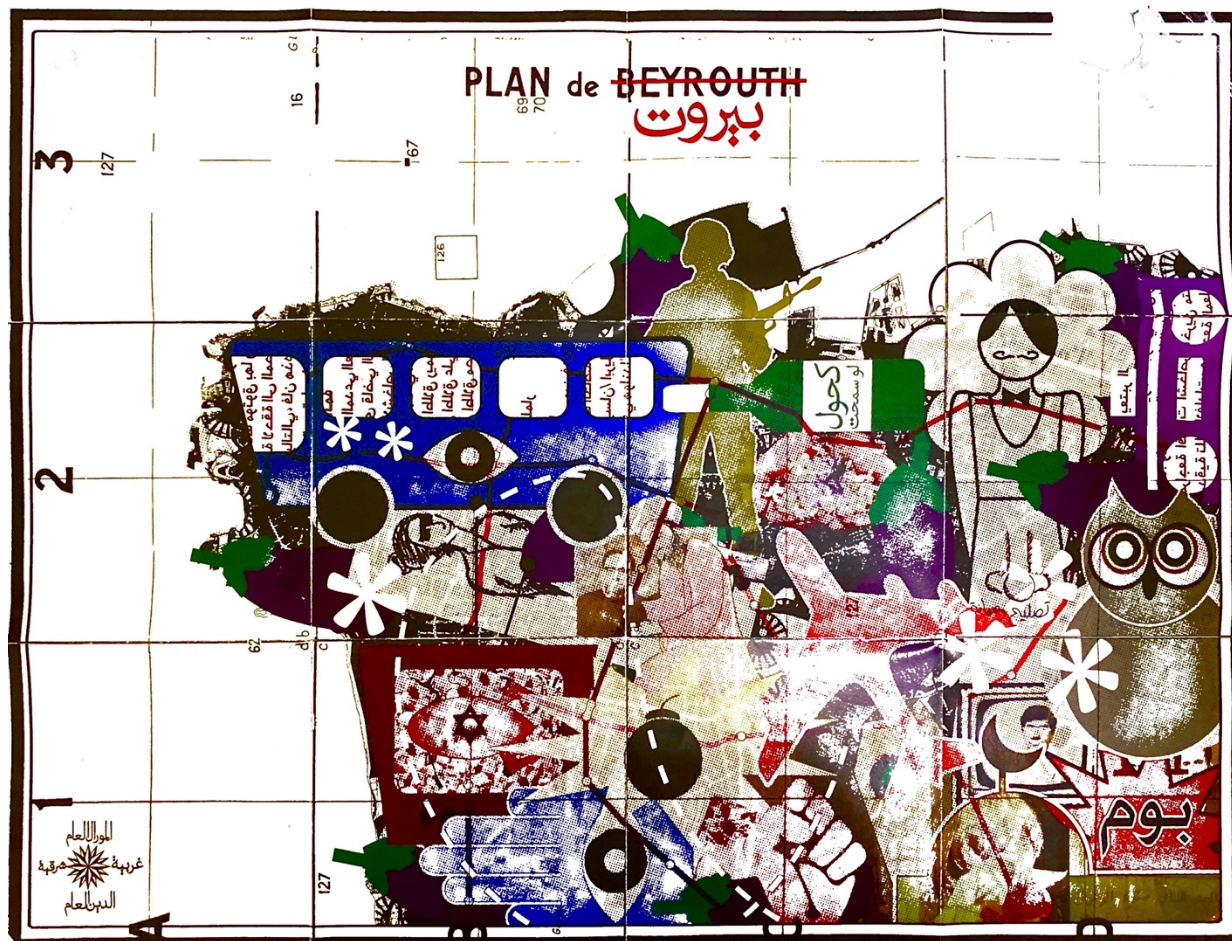

Figure 1.18. Map of Beirut included in Mashrou' Leila's eponymous album (art by Hamed Sinno).

The map that accompanies the album is a full color collage of images superimposed onto a gridded plan of the city of Beirut. In the place of neighborhood or street markings, the map features images like silhouette of a soldier in fatigues holding a machine gun laid across Beirut's downtown, the site of the most protracted fighting of the civil wars. To the soldier's left, in the largely Christian neighborhood of Gemmayze is a bottle of alcohol, and underneath it there are hands filled with jasmines as though held out in offering. In the map's South-Western corner representing the largely Hezballah run neighborhoods of Dahiye and Haret Hreik, a satellite map is obscured by a large blue palm with the evil eye at its center (a *Kaff*),[35] a bomb set off with a comic-book-like boom effect, and the outlines of an old television set displaying the Israeli flag whose white background has been replaced with a pink camouflage pattern, the shape of a cartoonish rocket framing the star in its center.

Cartoonish explosions dot the borders of the map, featuring the word "boom" in Arabic, and in one instance using the image of an owl (in Arabic "boomeh," or "boom" in the plural) as a visual pun denoting yet another explosion. In the center of the map's Southern border sits the

[35] While this is unambiguously a representation of the *Kaff,* or Hand of Fatima, meant to ward off the evil eye, it is worth noting that Sinno himself has a tattoo of an eye in the center of one of his palms, in reference to the same thing.

symbol of a clenched fist, framed by the white dotted flightpath of an airplane circling the city, the outline of a mosque's dome filled in with images and a sign declaring "No Parking, by order of the Lebanese Army." Photographs, sketched figures, the Lebanese Forces party symbol, and clip-art flowers and eggplants dot the rest of the image. The city, a loud, cartoonish, disorienting collage of references and images is bounded only the white expanse of the Mediterranean Sea, and held together by the faint outlines of the map of a city-wide public transit system that never existed. The image's title, "Plan de Beyrouth," is also amended, the French "Beyrouth" replaced with the name in Arabic. In the bottom-left corner, the map's compass directs the viewer to the "general morale," in the North, "general religion" in the South, and to "Sharqieh" in the West, and "Gharbieh," in the East, both references to the wartime division of Beirut into and East and West side. Here, the East ("Sharqieh") and West ("Gharbieh") are mixed up, rendering the compass all the more useless. Much like the album itself, the album art claims space through a re-mapping of the city in the band's own terms, and physically re-orients understandings of being in and experiencing Beirut through myriad visual markers whose legibility varies with the viewer's own insider or outsider knowledge.

In July 2010, less than a year after the unprecedented success of their album launch concert, Mashrou' Leila became the first independent Lebanese band to headline a concert at the Byblos International Festival. While the fact of their inclusion in the festival lineup is significant in itself, creating a path for the inclusion of other local bands in subsequent years and gesturing to a potential for success outside of the small circles of Beirut's alternative music world, the performance would become iconic for larger political reasons. In the two years since their founding, the band had established itself as a powerhouse of social critique, bolstered by a growing awareness of lead singer Hamed Sinno's queerness. On stage, Sinno became the embodiment of Mashrou' Leila's seemingly fearless irreverence, at times visibly feeling out of place but nonetheless demanding to take up physical and sonic space on a stage and at a festival that subscribed to the status quo.

Not long into the performance, a group of fans raised a rainbow flag. I remember that moment vividly as the first time I'd seen a rainbow flag in Lebanon, let alone one that was being flown proudly at a public event. Soon after, Sinno, during an instrumental interlude in their hit song "Raksit Leila (Leila's Dance)," smiled at the group and gestured for them to hand him the flag. That the flag flew in public at all was notable on its own, made all the more so by its incorporation into the set of a headlining Lebanese group at the Byblos Festival. Flag in hand, Sinno continued to dance around the stage, stilling only to deliver his lines, flag grasped between the fingers of one hand in a gesture reminiscent of Umm Kulthum with her handkerchief. Rather than returning the flag to the audience at the end of the song, Sinno wound it around the microphone where it would stay for the remainder of the concert.

Acknowledging and then bringing a rainbow flag onto the stage was a radically transgressive act carried out with a casualness that can be read as both belligerent and aspirational. For most of the concert, it was impossible to take a photo of Sinno without also including a gay pride flag, and many photographs released by the press in the following days were either partial shots of the stage, or shots of Sinno from earlier in the show. Although the flag's presence went largely unreported by mainstream media, the act became a notable absence, confirming this moment as one of political and social disruption achieved through an occupation and disruption of the visual field of Mashrou' Leila's concert and of any documentation of it.

Quite notably, the audience included members of Lebanon's political class, including then Prime Minister Saad El Hariri. This added another layer of significance to Sinno's decision

to bring the pride flag onto the stage, in that the act challenged the status quo maintained by homophobic laws in the presence of many of the same people who upheld those laws. Sinno followed this unarticulated act of stubborn defiance by explicitly calling out a politician in the audience. While introducing the song "3al 7ajiz (At the Checkpoint)," Sinno explained that the lyrics were inspired by his own experiences with soldiers and private security manning checkpoints around his Ras Beirut home, located across the street from the Hariri palace. As the band began the track's instrumental introduction, Sinno thanked the Prime Minister for the thuggery of his soldiers and for the hyper-securitization of the neighborhoods surrounding his family home following Rafik El Hariri's assassination in 2005. He then launched into the opening lines of the song, a barrage of curses and insults, as though leveling them at Hariri himself. Hariri and his entourage walked out of the show not long after.

"Mashrou3 Leila's Concert Spoke for a Generation," claimed the headline of an article published in Lebanon's premier English-language newspaper, The Daily Star a few days after the band's Byblos show.[36]

> Hamed Sinno, the band's lead singer, could not keep himself from shouting "We're in Byblos!" throughout the show, leading some to wonder whether he was reassuring his audience, his band or himself that this was truly happening. For his fans, Sinno has become the voice of a generation, addressing problems alien to their parents. For the older members of the Byblos audience, Mashrou3 Leila's insouciance when it comes to traditional boundaries must have been a tad provocative.

The concert at Byblos clearly and definitively articulated the band's politics and commitment to occupying the physical and ideological spaces from which young, queer, liberal, secular-minded Lebanese people had been (and largely continue to be) excluded. While reviews and reactions to the show would be quick to characterize what happened that night as an act of resistance or rebellion, for people of my generation in the audience that night, the band's performance inspired belonging, hope, and optimism for a future free of sectarian conflict, political corruption, and heteropatriarchal social norms. While it was largely absent from international and regional press coverage of the band, this sentiment was echoed by the same Daily Star article, which closed with the author's musing that "you could not help but feel that, for Lebanon's young generation, Mashrou3 Leila represents something almost resembling optimism."

The band's critical politics, catchy sound, and youthful energy quickly launched them into local and regional success accelerated by the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a series of popular uprisings that began in December 2010 in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. While Lebanon was not a part of the Arab Spring, Mashrou' Leila's belligerent optimism rendered via catchy but socially and politically loaded songs were quickly and easily adopted by young protesters and revolutionaries. This was particularly true in Egypt, where the band's song "Ghadan Yawmon Afdal" (Tomorrow is a Better Day), an Arabic-language rendition of the Gorillaz's "Clint Eastwood" first performed at the 2010 Byblos Festival show,[37] took on new meaning for those fighting for their own better tomorrows.

"I think the people that create music are the product of the same system that produces the revolutionaries we see changing the Arab world today," commented Sinno in a 2012 Daily Star

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[36] http://151.106.57.141/Culture/Art/2010/Jul-13/119623-mashrou3-leilas-concert-spoke-for-a-generation.ashx

[37] The track is not quite a cover of the Gorillaz song. Musically, Mashrou' Leila's rendition is a cover, however the lyrics were largely re-written while conserving the original's melody and cadence. The band wrote and performed this cover to commemorate the fact that they were playing at a festival whose lineup also included the Gorillaz.

article titled "Lebanon's Mashrou' Leila reflects hope of Arab youth (Hadid, 9/24/2012)." When I asked him about the band's entanglement with the Arab Spring, many years after the fact, Sinno had a more nuanced answer:

> At the time being gay meant being in resistance. And so by the time the Arab Spring stuff started, I guess there was enough of a history of us playing in those countries…and [of] people understanding that what we were saying was critical even if they only understood that aesthetically, like, "oh they're criticizing these structures that we don't necessarily have in Egypt, or in Morocco," but there was a meta-language where this was an alternative band not in the sense that they were making alternative music but that they representing alternative politics to a collectively miserable status-quo.

The belligerence—the combative irreverence—that launched Mashrou' Leila in a Lebanon that was still reeling from the aftermath of the political events of 2005/2006 became kernel to something akin to what Tony Sfeir articulated as a common "haleh," a state of being or set of circumstances. Sinno echoed this sentiment in conversation:

> at the time it was very hard to imagine anything other than a politics of negativity. And I think that is something that is very quickly accessible to people. It is a lot easier to collectivize around anger than it is to collectivize around joy. It's a lot easier to see the political when it's criticizing something than it is to see how political it is to rally around a joyful song about love.

Although their affiliation with the Arab Spring had immensely powerful effects on the band's commercial success and ability to tour in Europe and North America, for Mashrou' Leila and their listeners, there was more at stake. Faced with the possibility of a future foreclosed by violence, corruption, oppression, or "misery," those who participated in the series of uprisings that became known as the Arab Spring were fighting for the possibility of imagining different futures for themselves and their countries. Like Lebanon in 2005, at stake was the right to be an agent in one's own life and the ability to change the conditions of possibility for imagining and realizing personal and collective futures.

3. "We wanted to do music, and we had so much hope, and so many big dreams"

"So from 2011 until 2016/17, you had the "age of reason," narrates Yared. "You had the rationalization and the professionalization of the scene…and that generation benefited from the experience of the older generation," he explains, "like, they benefited from Fadi's [Tabbal] experience at Tunefork…You had Beirut Open Stage, with Elias Maroun, Beirut Jam Sessions, you had Wickerpark."[38] Yared's "age of reason" planted the seeds and nurtured the growth of the alternative musical world that makes up the bulk of this dissertation. Digital musical platforms like Beirut Jam Sessions, local music festivals like Wickerpark and Beirut and Beyond, music blogs like Revolver, countless venues, and bands like Postcards and Safar were established in during this period. Today, they are integral to the recorded history and memory of alternative music in Beirut by virtue of having been able to work within established institutions lead by an older generation of individuals committed to nurturing an alternative musical world in Lebanon.

This moment of growth came on the heels of Mashrou' Leila's unprecedented success within the region and internationally, and during a time of relative stability for Lebanon. By

[38] Wickerpark is a local alternative music festival run and curated by Georges "Junior" Daou.

relative stability, I mean that political conflict settled to the extent that the day-to-day experience of living in Lebanon became less fraught and worrisome. Civil war in Syria had changed the fabric of the country and its politics by shifting attention towards Lebanon's political entanglements with Syria and the massive influx of Syrian refugees. In government, tensions between the pro-Assad Hezballah-lead March 8th coalition, and the Saudi-allied, pro-rebel Future-movement-lead March 14th coalition ran high. These tensions were further exacerbated by a new wave of involvement and subpoenas by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon convened by the United Nations in 2009 to investigate the assassination of Rafik El Hariri.[39] This government in-fighting lead to a series of resignations that left Lebanon without a president from 2014-2016, as political parties squabbled over the balance of power, largely ignoring a growing refugee crisis that overtaxed the country's paltry infrastructure.

Although anger and dissatisfaction with the government's mismanagement of the country inspired several heated protest movements between 2011 and 2015, on the level of the everyday this period felt like a moment of calm compared to the years since 2005. In hindsight, these years seem more like a calm before the storm, or perhaps the eye of the hurricane that swept the country in 2015, when parliament's inability to agree on a waste management plan following the closure of Lebanon's largest landfill lead to the massive pileup of trash on across the country. The garbage crisis launched an explosive wave of anti-government protest movement known by its slogan, "You Stink!" which called for revolution and reform. While the government opened two new temporary landfills in 2016, the waste management crisis remains largely unresolved.

"My experience with it, how it started with me, to give you a personal point of view, was 2013," Salim Naffah tells me. Salim is a guitarist, singer, and lyricist whose involvement with alternative music began with the electro-pop duo Loopstache:

> At that time, there was nothing happening here. There was Mashrou Leila, there was Adonis. Wanton [Bishops] had just released music, [Who Killed] Bruce Lee was still playing covers…We had no one to look up to. We had no reference of what alternative music was in our scene. Because you had Adonis, which has a completely different circuit. Mashrou Leila who was already way out of our intimate zone, and everything else like Scrambled Eggs and Incompetents and those guys, they were way older, I mean Fadi [Tabbal] was my sound teacher at university…And at that time there was Safar that was starting up, Postcards too, and then Elias Maroun created this Beirut Open Stage, and this is where we all met.

Many of the musicians I've spoken with (most of whom are or were members of the aforementioned bands) have echoed Naffah's timeline, citing Elias Maroun's Beirut Open Stage and then Fadi Tabbal's Tunefork Studios as foundational spaces in and around which the alternative world as it exists today began to cohere.[40]

Mayssa Jallad and Elie Abdelnour, the duo known as Safar, echoed Naffah in pointing to Beirut Open Stage as a catalyst for their careers, driven by its founder Elias Maroun's vision and a coalition of recordists, producers, promoters, space owners, and musicians invested in exploring the possibilities of a local independent music world. "It became an amazing platform,"

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[39] The political coalitions that arose in response to Hariri's assassination and the 2005/6 opposition to Syrian occupation that it inspired continue to dominate Lebanese politics. While individual parties' allegiances regularly shift between the March 8 and March 14 camps, the coalitions are still lead by Hezballah and Hariri's Future movement respectively, and are defined by their allegiance with or opposition to Syria and Iran.

[40] For more on Beirut Open Space and Tunefork Studios, see Chapter 2 "The Cost of Admission."

reminisced Jallad. "He'd have amazing themes, like theme nights. They'd do duos, or Rolling Stones, Beatles, then…I forgot. But he had specific themes, and more people would come to perform and it got bigger and bigger," Abdelnour filled in.

> *Jallad:* And he decided to do a compilation album that he called "Wave One," after this first wave of events that he did all around the city, and creating this community. He spoke to Fadi Tabbal. I think they had the connection from that Basement concert, the Radio Liban One that Mashrou' Leila won. After the first wave, he decided that this was really working and he kind of systemized it. He did competitions at the Grand Factory. And the competition was a weekly thing. And then he produced Wave Two. We were part of Wave Two as well. We gave them "Wa Namshi" (And So We Walk). And then he did Wave Three. And it became so nice and big that he wanted to open a space.

Beirut Open Stage's compilation albums were and remain a record of an emergent local alternative soundworld, representing a group of musicians and musical ideas who—in their original configurations or as part of new musical projects—have come to define a recent golden age of local alternative music. These bands were made up mostly of younger musicians who were born immediately after the end of the civil-wars, and who, like me, had come into political consciousness around the events of 2005/2006. Where their local musical predecessors made music and were read through the framework of postwar melancholia or revolutionary fervor, for many who participated in the successive waves of Maroun's project, the goal was to explore the possibilities of making music in Lebanon.

"We were all fresh grads from school in our first or second year of university, and we wanted to do music, and we had so much hope, and so many big dreams of doing things, because we were doing things, you know?" Naffah explained nostalgically.

> We were very creative, and we were working all the time. Whether it was us, or whether it was Safar, or Postcards, or Wanton [Bishops]…we used to encourage each other a lot. So if Wanton [Bishops] had a show, they would call Postcards to do an opening. Whenever we [Loopstache] wanted to do a show, we'd call Safar to do half a show…everyone was different, we all had a different vibe. It was very nice back then, and we all had hope because we were building what became for a very short period of time for me, the alternative music scene in Beirut. We created something and we worked really hard…But I think things escalated a bit too quickly, and it was too good to be true for what it was…And this nice thing that was happening back then, it doesn't exist anymore.

Although there was very little that was explicitly political about the early music of bands like Safar, Postcards, Wanton Bishops, or Loopstache, I contend that Beirut Open Stage and their participation in it were political in their relative banality. It is easy to look back on the event and the compilation albums it released solely through the lens of institution and scene building. Indeed, the possibility that drove many bands to participate in Beirut Open Stage revolved around the promise of a career making music. However, the possibilities represented by Beirut Open Stage and their waves of compilation albums have other valences. Implicit in the fact of attempting to foster the formation of a local musical world was an investment of time, energy, and money in the possibility of a future in which such a world could exist. It meant finding possibility in the desire of young people to create lives for themselves in Lebanon. It was aspirational in that it gathered around it a world that might flourish into something more, a world

in which young people wanted to stay in Lebanon, in which there was opportunity for young people who chose to stay in Lebanon. Furthermore, it was a space that made room for audiences and bands to cohere around shared tastes, shared desires, shared investments in cultural, economic, social futures in and for Lebanon.

By inviting young musicians to write, perform, and record original music, Beirut Open Stage asked them to render audible their tastes and their experiences, to attune themselves to their everyday and inscribe its traces into sound. It was less about finding a place to belong than it was about imagining what belonging might look and sound like. In the local music blog Revolver, reviewers and critics saw a similar, albeit marginally more romanticized project:

> Beirut is a place where the fast paced life blessed with stress of insecurity, bombings and traffic jams will make you indifferent to everything. The beauty of life slips unnoticed sometimes from between the rubble clutter. However, there are still people working their asses off to change that and bring the beauty of this city back to the surface and make it glow proudly with what is the original essence of Beirut, its people and its talents. Beirut Open Stage (BOS) is an organization that aims to showcase the best of Lebanon's new artistic talents through a series of open stage events/concerts across the country's capital, making people come together over something beautiful for a change.[41]

This search extended past the ideological or metaphorical, to encompass lived experiences of the city. Beirut Open Stage events happened across the city, bringing its audiences to neighborhoods or spaces that they might otherwise have not explored. While the project was by no means egalitarian or comprehensive in the sense of including or appealing to people from across the city or across social classes, I see in the naming, the choices of location, and even the album art—depicting an aerial map of Beirut in its entirety—as gestures towards the (largely unrealized) possibility of a more expansive lifeworld that cohered around and was animated by sound.

Figure 1.19. Album covers for Beirut Waves 1, 2, and 3 depicting a street map of Beirut.

Critical to this moment was also a sense of technological possibility. Social media was taking off, and it was possible to amass a following fairly organically through shares and views on Facebook or YouTube, and this was a huge part of the possibility. It wasn't an opening up to the world as much as it was a multiplying of pathways into/around the world. Social media

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[41] https://projectrevolver.org/features/articles/beirut-open-stage-presents-beirut-wave-one-the-album-the-project-the-dream/

meant mobility, economic mobility, career advancement, and social mobility, and a well deployed music video or share often granted bands a kind of exposure that was previously only possible through a record deal. During our conversation, Naffah stressed this:

> We'd spend 13 or 14 hours a day working in the studio, making sure everything was spot on, releasing a video. Social media worked really differently back then, if you released a video it would get 5 or 6,000 shares in a couple of days, today if you get 400 you're great.[42]

Julia Sabra, lyricist, vocalist, and multi-instrumentalist for dreampop band Postcards similarly attests to the centrality of social media, specifically Anthony Semaan's YouTube based Beirut Jam Sessions:

> In Lebanon, it was the moment. Abroad it was 2008/9, but in Lebanon in 2013 it was like, "yes! Indie folk is in." When we started we didn't know anything…we found these small bands and we decided to copy them…Our drummer Pascal [Semerdjian] had a clear vision—that we should start playing covers in bars, and then when we had enough of a fanbase, people would start following us for our own stuff. And this is what actually happened, because our own music actually sounded like the covers… Like, you know Beirut Jam Sessions, when we started is was when they first started also, so the goal for us—because we saw the Wanton Bishops sessions and were like "oh my god, you CAN make your own music in Lebanon—we were like, "by the end of this year we're going to be on Beirut Jam Sessions, we're going to have our own session," and we did that too, and it was great.

Sabra's memory of Semerdjian's vision for Postcards' career trajectory is a testament to Yared's characterization of this moment as an "age of reason," made possible at least in part by the mobility afforded by social media. More significantly, I see in both her words and Semerdjian's plan for local success a desire and excitement about the possibility of "making your own music *in Lebanon*."

Although today they have become known for their introspective dreampop, Postcards' early music rode the wave of indie folk that swept much of popular music in the late 2000s/early 2010s. Their Beirut Open Stage single, and arguably the biggest hit of their first EP, is "Oh the Places We Will Go." The track's sound is characterized by jangle of Sabra's ukulele and occasional banjo lines and a catchy chorus. During live shows, Sabra begins the song by inviting audiences to participate in the call and response of the chorus, in which Sabra sings "Oh, the places we will go," prompting a lively responding "Oh!" from the audience. It is not difficult to understand the track's popularity—it is fun, light, and engaging, a carefully studied combination engineered to allow the band to make their own music in Lebanon.

Mayssa Jallad and Elie Abdelnour's band Safar, contemporaries of Postcards and Beirut Open Stage alumni, has traveled a different path to success. Where Postcards found fame through careful planning (and talent) Safar's music more explicitly takes on the question of a

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[42] Here Naffah is referring to ongoing shifts in Facebook algorithms implemented a priority system for displaying brand and artist pages which emphasized personal connections individual news feeds. Where small bands were able to widen their reach organically, through content shares and likes, this system prioritized pages that already had larger audience bases, and whose posts received more engagement as measured through comments rather than likes. In effect these changes made it less likely that smaller bands without marketing teams or budgets would be seen in users' news feeds, which in turn meant lower reach, lower engagement, and further demotion algorithmically.

future in Lebanon. "Safar is very emotive," Jallad told me when I asked about how they have conceived their music and sound. "But it's been consistent," I pointed out, "a lot of your music has been about…" "Leaving. It's true," Jallad completed my sentence. I mentioned to them that as someone who left Lebanon, Safar's music has often spoken to my longing for home, my desire to be able to make a life for myself at home in Lebanon. "There's heartbreak, yeah," agreed Abdelnour.

> Mayssa Jallad (MJ): [It's] a self-fulfilling prophesy. We didn't know that we were going to leave, why did we name ourselves Safar?[43] There was something in us that kind of knew, from the beginning.
>
> Elie Abdelnour (EA): What? That we'd leave?
>
> MJ: That we'd leave. Even when we first started in 2013, it was my last year of college, and there was this whole uncertainty about what would happen next. And you [Elie] were sure that in a few years you'd leave
>
> EA: because of med school.
>
> MJ: yeah, to do all that stuff in America. And I was like "yeah, sure sure." Who actually knew that we'd get there? So I think there was a looming theme of having to leave this place. Which happens in "Olive Oil Soul," which is on our first EP.
>
> EA: it's about going back home.
>
> MJ: From the very beginning. Right at the beginning, it was there.

The track Jallad referred to, "Olive Oil Soul," is one of four on the band's 2014 EP, *23 Kilograms*, a reference to airlines' checked baggage weight limit. The track's sparse instrumentation—tom toms and bass drum, sustained bass guitar notes, closely mic-ed acoustic guitar chords, and Jallad's reverbed crooning amplify the melancholy of "Olive Oil Soul's" lyrics. "I know what you need/a little cool breeze/lie down and relax/and stretch out your back," begins the first verse:

Breath in Breath out
Let go of your doubt
Sit back in your mold
You olive oil soul

Look up to the sky
Not a cloud in sight
Just follow the birds
And make sure you've heard

The sparrows, the doves
The migrating flocks

[43] Jallad here is referring to the fact that in Arabic, "Safar" means travel. The band was named after a well-loved barbershop on Bliss Street, across the road from the American University of Beirut.

They come and they go
They follow their soul

I know what you need
The shades of a tree
The warm smell of bread
A comfortable bed

You close your eyes
Burgundy choirs
You hear their call
So far and small

The sparrows
The doves
The migrating flocks
They come and they go
Just like me and you[44]

In the original EP version of the song, the track ends with the additional lines, "big birds they fly, big birds we fly, looking for home, away from home." Through the metaphor of birds' seasonal migration, the track speaks to an experience that many in my generation have shared. Where Postcards' music was a mechanism for carving out a space for themselves in Lebanon, Safar's EP, and most of their music since, reckons with the feeling of having to leave because there are no viable futures in Lebanon. The metaphor of migration resonates both in terms of its obvious parallel to emigration, and in the sense that many of us live in between two places—home, where there is no future, and elsewhere, where there might be one—traveling back and forth with the seasons.

Beirut Open Stage went on to launch three "waves" of alternative bands, many of whom were still performing when I moved back to Beirut for my full year of dissertation research in Fall 2018. Everyone I talked to in the music world mentioned Elias Maroun, but despite many attempts to contact him both by myself and through shared connections, he remained elusive. The moment of possibility that sprung to life around Maroun's Beirut Open Stage had lasted through 2017. Working off of the success of the nomadic Beirut Open Stage, Maroun and several partners opened a performance venue fittingly named Beirut Open Space. While in theory the space met all of the needs of a growing alternative music world, it never managed to capture the magic and the demand of the Open Stage events. Beirut Open Space went bankrupt after a year, and Maroun, once a central node within Beirut's alternative musical world, withdrew himself from it.

After several hours of conversation, Yared recaps his timeline:

> So you had a model that appeared and crashed. After that you had the DIY way of doing things. At some point, it grew, so you had all that money that was invested—studios, many studios opened as well, and many closed, except Fadi's. Many places opened and shut down. And now I think there's a new phase, which is one of retraction. It's getting smaller again, but it has more dedicated people. Musicians who are more dedicated, the

[44] Lyrics from https://soundcloud.com/safarmusicbeirut/olive-oil-soul

> public who go to concerts don't go to be on Insta[gram] and stuff, but to listen to the music, etc…

Sabra, whose Postcards is perhaps the only band of her generation that has remained local, active, and in its original configuration, saw renewed possibility in this "retraction,"

> I feel hopeful. At first, the first wave for our generation was 2013, which is when there was Beirut Open Stage doing all these small competitions, which we were part of and which is how we met Fadi. And then Beirut Jam Sessions, and Wickerpark was just starting to become a thing, and there was this whole wave of indie bands…and there was a dead zone. Now there's a rebirth, but I feel like it's on a smaller scale…There are less people, but they care more.

The period of relative calm during which Beirut Open Stage and the bands that found success through it were established definitively broke with the garbage crisis in 2015. Like Jallad and Abdelnour, many musicians and their audience members left Lebanon in pursuit of work or higher education, and few have plans to permanently return. The thrumming lifeworld that existed around alternative music in the early-to-mid-2010s is now much more subdued and seasonal. When I spoke with them in 2019, the members Safar had remained active in local alternative music to the extent that they could—most of their EPs and their full length album were written over voice messages and in recorded in short spurts during visits back to Lebanon. Jallad had just moved back to Lebanon, in search of a way to make life work at home, and although we didn't know it then, in a few months, a revolution would break out, and everything would change again.

2. The Cost of Admission: Production, Performance, Circulation

In the overwhelming majority of academic case studies, the notion of alternative or indie music is implicitly antithetical to established institutions or institutionalization. With roots in 1980s post-punk and its DIY anti-establishment ethos, alternative music as it has evolved in Euro-American contexts has hinged on a rhetorical—if not economic or material—independence or rejection of the dominant music industry and popular musical aesthetics. The studios, labels, and festivals that have existed within alternative music scenes have been similarly DIY, defined by the ad-hoc nature of participants' operational knowledge, equipment, sound, and planning. A proverbial buy-in to this central tenet of independence or alterity in music is at the crux of the genre's sound and definition.

Where histories of alternative or independent music in Europe or the US conventionally attribute developments in its history and sound to particular places, collaborations, or material conditions, I contend that the so-called "buy-in" is an equally rich and relevant framework for understanding the trajectories of independent or alternative music scenes. [45] By "buy-in" I mean the symbolic and literal moment of shaping an approach to sound and music-making through a particular ideological or aesthetic orientation. Lebanon's alternative music scene, while initially established in the 1990s with a staunchly DIY approach to music making and circulation, has since grown into a vibrant musical lifeworld, complete with an ecosystem built and sustained by established musical institutions. Following from the previous chapter's chronological and social history of alternative music in Lebanon, this chapter examines moments of buy-in, asking: who it is that seeks out such transactions, what and where they seek admission to, and who determines the cost?

To answer these questions, this chapter focuses on what I call the "cost of admission." The term "cost of admission" conventionally refers to the cover, band charge, or ticket fee that audiences pay to gain access to particular spaces, groups, or milieux of music-making; it also gestures to the economic frameworks that have shaped studies and understandings of genre formations and aesthetics. Such economic frameworks disproportionately focus on either institutionally driven and dictated top-down directives governing aesthetics, or bottom-up, fan and audience participation in the delineation of genre through the expression of taste via sales and concert attendance. In these formulations, "cost of admission" refers to the terms on which the act of buying-in is evaluated. It implicates a currency of and for admission—something that is exchanged or offered in order to gain entry.

While the economic conditions of possibility for the emergence of a particular genre and its aesthetics are significant to understanding it, what is lost in such frameworks are other factors that render such exchanges possible. In addition to marketability and sales, admission to particular sites of production, performance, and circulation are often determined by artists' social, ideological, and aesthetic orientations. These orientations, as much as economic factors, mediate access to vital people, places, and opportunities for personal and career growth. As currency for both the possibility and act of buying-in, I argue that aesthetics, ideologies, and social relationships can also comprise the cost of admission and must therefore figure into any of the aesthetics and politics of a genre.

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[45] See, for example, Kruse, *Site and sound,* and Fonarow, *Empire of dirt.*

Particularly in studies on the institutionalization and professionalization of independent or alternative music, there has been a concern for the aesthetic consequences of a move away from the DIY, economically independent industry model on which dominant conceptions of indie are based. Such readings are implicitly Marxist in the way that they attribute aesthetic outcomes (superstructural consequences) to economic moves (base decisions). Here, professionalization and institutionalization are equated with corporatization and are thus posited as antithetical to indie's anti-establishment ethos. Sounding polished and professional in a way that suggests money or expertise—even when there has been no encroachment by "big money"—is construed as selling out. There is, in other words, both an economic and an aesthetic dimension to allegations of "selling out," which denotes a perceived loss of independence and abandonment or corruption of an ethos or ideology. This is as much a product of a Marxist framework foreclosing understandings of genre and aesthetics as it is a consequence of a continued centrality of the 1980s Euro-American post-punk ethos of DIY anti-establishmentarianism in defining independence in music. Both approaches, the framing of sound through its economies or through a dated sense of the ideologies that animate it, elide the specificity of place, time, and the idiosyncrasies of key actors in determining the conditions of possibility for the emergence and sounding of the alternative in music.

In his 1999 study of the aesthetics and institutional politics of two indie record labels, David Hesmondalgh addresses the aesthetic dimensions to the question of selling out by suggesting that institutional positions do not necessarily have traceable aesthetic outcomes, but that aesthetics may have a hand in determining institutional policy. Echoing arguments by popular music scholar Reebee Garofalo (1987), who strongly advocated for a "cultural Marxist" approach in which the economic aspects of cultural production must be considered alongside social relationships and practices of consumption, Hesmondalgh's argument frames institutional aesthetics not as superstructural, but as part of what in Marxist terms would be called the "base." Written more than a decade before Hesmondalgh's article, Garofalo's "How Autonomous is Relative: Popular Music, the Social Formation and Cultural Struggle" stresses the importance of considering the myriad social and ideological pressures and relationships that figure into and alongside—rather than in opposition to—a label's economic and aesthetic decisions (1987) . Together, Garofalo and Hesmondalgh make a necessary intervention into the larger field of popular music studies writing on independent music and musical genre by insisting that factors like integrity, authenticity, autonomy, and cooptation are highly variable categories, driven by relationships that are not purely economic.

Where chapter 1 outlined the conditions of possibility for the formation of alternative music's soundworld, this chapter approaches that soundworld as a loose but nonetheless potent and authoritative structure of power. Although alternative music in Lebanon remains an informal and porous network of individual actors and spaces, there does exist something analogous to "making it," achieved through access to particular spaces or affiliations with particular people and mediated by aesthetic and social gatekeepers. Often, admission is paid socially, through affiliation and exclusion, aesthetically, by sounding a particular way (or not), and ideologically, with respect to personal politics, ideas, and approaches to music making. These costs in turn admit musicians to spaces of performance such as music festivals and concert series, sites of production, by which I mean particular recording studios and record labels, and platforms for circulation, particularly online via social media. Alternative music in Lebanon has been shaped through such conditions for buy-in, by the people who have delineated these conditions as well as by the artists and fans who have accepted their terms. The rhetorics and aesthetics of

alternative music in Lebanon are negotiated in such moments of buy-in. Such framing departs from understandings of alternative music as a genre that is always already shaped by and derived from Euro-American iterations, and foregrounds instead the specificity of place and people in understanding and defining a genre.

Section 1 of this chapter examines the role of corporate sponsorship in mediating the formation and aesthetics of alternative music in Lebanon. Focusing on Red Bull as a case study, it explores the ways in which musicians' and organizers' relationships with corporate sponsors lay bare the various rhetorical, material, and social factors entangled in the decisions to form or reject such relationships. It investigates the aesthetic and ideological costs of admission or affiliation with corporate entities by focusing on a particular set of musicians who have accepted Red Bull sponsorship or worked closely with the company.

Section 2 turns to the Tunefork-Ruptured axis, a collaboration between Beirut's premier independent recording studio, Tunefork, run by producer and musician Fadi Tabbal, and Ruptured, a record label operated by radio DJ and performer Ziad Nawfal. While this collaboration between two independent grassroots musical institutions is a far cry from transnational corporations like Red Bull and the economic and symbolic capital that they levy towards setting and maintaining their costs of admission, it nonetheless represents one of the primary voices and locally organized infrastructures that shape the sound of alternative music in Lebanon. Tunefork, specifically, has risen to prominence largely by virtue of the fact that it is the most established and professional studio in which to record and from which to begin to circulate independent music. Admission to Tunefork grants artists access to a social and creative network that promises full use of Tabbal's expertise, the studio's space and gear, and opportunities for collaboration, performance, and distribution. Moreover, albums produced and green-lighted by Tabbal at Tunefork have historically all but guaranteed a distribution and licensing deal with Nawfal's Ruptured Records. But for many there are steep aesthetic, social, and ideological costs of admission affiliated with becoming part of the Tunefork crowd.

1. Corporate Sponsorship

What does an energy drink have to do with a music scene?

Red Bull is perhaps best known globally as an energy drink. Established in Austria in 1987, the company invented the category of the energy drink in Western markets and quickly grew into a multi-billion dollar corporation boasting the lion's share of its market (Economist, 2002).[46] The brand took what seemed like a natural step into the world of professional sports sponsorship in the late 1980s, and has since expanded its operations with ventures into car racing and extreme sports sponsorships.[47] That Red Bull, an energy drink, is affiliated with professional and extreme athletics is not surprising given its association with high-stakes, adrenaline-fueled tasks and the relative frequency of corporate sponsorship seen in the sports world.

In 1998, however, Red Bull's corporate sponsorship strategy took an unexpected turn with the establishment of the Red Bull Music Academy (RBMA). Conceived in partnership with Yadastar, a German consultant agency that managed its creative and curatorial elements until the dissolution of the Academy in 2019,[48] RBMA was a workshop and lecture series targeted

[47] https://www.redbullmediahouse.com/en/history

[48] The company announced in April 2019 that after 20 years, it was parting ways with Yadastar and would be dissolving all programs affiliated with the partnership. This included Red Bull music academy, Red Bull radio, and associated concert and lecture series. See https://www.residentadvisor.net/news/43548.

towards independent up-and-coming musicians.[49] The event, held for the first time in Berlin, brought groups of 30 musicians to various cities across the world to participate two-week long terms, during which musicians were granted access to recording spaces and gear managed by a studio team of accomplished producers. While making music and collaborating with fellow attendees was highly encouraged, the only mandatory element of the Academy was attendance at twice-daily lectures by well-known musicians, producers, engineers or other pioneers in their fields.[50] Admission to the RBMA was conditional on an audition via demo tape or vetting by local cultural ambassadors, and guaranteed participants a fully funded trip with accommodations in the host city as well as unlimited access to the Academy's spaces and activities (Zeid Hamdan, interview with author, 2/28/2019). In addition to the academy itself,[51] the RBMA as a division produced longform editorials on its "RBMA Daily" website, hosted and broadcast radio shows on its RBMA Radio station,[52] sponsored stages at existing global music festivals, and organized its own Red Bull Music Academy festivals and showcases. Each of these branches highlighted the work of Academy alumni, adding valuable exposure to an already full list of perks offered in exchange for participation in the RBMA program.

Despite the success of Red Bull's music academy and its radio station and music journalism platform, the corporation did not make moves to centralize its media projects until 2007, when it founded Red Bull Media House. The Media House, which is still active today, is a branch of Red Bull tasked with running the company's various media divisions under one centralized corporate body. Upon its establishment, the media house took on responsibility for the RBMA, and further expanded the company's musical involvement by founding a record label, "Red Bull Records," and a music publishing arm in addition to television production, photography, and publishing divisions. Under the corporate umbrella of Red Bull's media house, each of these divisions commissions, produces, and circulates original content in line with the company's stated "purpose of providing a global platform to promote creativity."[53] It is important to note, however, that partnership with one division of the Media House does not guarantee involvement with other branches; artists who are selected to participate in the RBMA, for example, rarely get signed to Red Bull Records or featured on a Red Bull TV segment.

The idea behind Red Bull's cultural outreach program is to grow the company's involvement with and patronage of cultural influencers in a bid to capitalize on their reputations and fan networks. Through affiliation with people who "inspire others with their personality, creativity, and performance,"[54] Red Bull is able to affirm a brand image built around a youthful drive to push the boundaries of the possible (Cetin, 20019). This principle has guided them in their collaborations and partnerships with daredevil athletes and cultural actors alike.

In the years since Red Bull Media House was founded, the brand has borrowed extensively from and expanded on the model of artistic collaboration and production that made its music academy a groundbreaking success. In the musical arena, Red Bull has taken the

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[49]For information about the founding of the Academy, see: https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/about. For more on Yadastar, see: http://yadastar.com.
[50] Ibid.
[51] The events of the Academy involved performances by guest artists and participants and the dissemination of guest lectures via the Academy's website.
[52] This station began as a branch of Red Bull Music Academy, but soon split from the division to become an independent branch of the company's media arm under the name "Red Bull radio."
[53] In Cetin, 2019, from Red Bull's statement regarding shutting down Red Bull Music Academy: https://www.residentadvisor.net/news/43548
[54] https://www.redbull.com/in-en/energydrink/contact-sponsorship

project of organizing and producing to a much larger scale. Today, the company organizes a Red Bull music festival in 16 cities across the globe, has exclusive distribution rights to live streams of several established music festivals such as Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza via its Red Bull TV service, and has launched "Red Bull Amplifier," a platform from which to support music startups. Past established formats like the music festival, the brand credits itself with pioneering new ways of organizing musical performance. One so called "signature concept" is the Sound Clash, "a unique live musical experience that brings two bands with different sounds, styles and influences together under one roof to compete for the devotion of a room full of fans."[55]

Events like the Sound Clash or Red Bull's "3Style" DJ competition are organized and managed by the cultural marketing offices established in most of the 171 countries in which the company operates programs and distributes its energy drink. These cultural marketing offices are staffed largely by locals who bring marketing expertise, cultural competence, and established social and business networks to the table, and who are thus able to design, adapt, and implement sales and outreach programs that are highly specific to their local market. As liaisons between local and global scales of operation, and arbiters of Red Bull funding, local cultural marketing managers are gatekeepers of corporate sponsorship and collaboration.[56] Now more than ever, local marketing teams have an unprecedented degree of power to make or break local artists and music scenes. In the wake of Red Bull's 2019 decision to dissolve its Music Academy, the company has resolved to transition to a "new setup which empowers existing Red Bull country teams and utilizes local expertise"[57] even as it appears to be scaling back its decades-long involvement in independent music scenes. It has instead boosted its revenue and image by focusing on EDM artists who have been easily integrated into the company's existing marketing efforts around club culture and extreme sports.

Red Bull: Buying in and selling out

I first started to understand the depths of Red Bull's involvement in Lebanon's alternative music world when I attended their 2013 "Soundclash." Held inside the massive warehouse space of Forum de Beyrouth, the event pitted two local bands against one another. On one stage were Who Killed Bruce Lee, a relative newcomer to the Beirut alternative rock scene. Across the room from them, billed as the "oriental" foil to WKBL's Western rock sound, were Mashrou' Leila, already established veterans on the local and regional independent music circuits. Between these two poles stood the audience, presided over by Lebanese standup comedian Nemr Abou Nassar, backed by Jade, a longtime musician and venue owner in Beirut's alternative and EDM scenes. Fadi Tabbal, of Tunefork Records, sound engineered the night. The message was clear: the night was about showcasing what Red Bull perceived to be the best—or rather, the most recognizable—homegrown talent Lebanon's independent cultural scene had to offer. While the company paid homage to the Jamaican Reggae and Dub origins of the Soundclash formats in which musicians engaged in an impromptu competition, their rigidly structured high-budget showcase event was a far cry from the performance practice's origins.[58]

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[55] https://www.redbull.com/in-en/events/red-bull-sound-clash

[56] It bears noting that access to Red Bull Headquarters and its global programs is not distributed equally across its various outposts and cultural managers. Local artists who work with or are sponsored by Red Bull local or regional marketing offices in Euro-American contexts are disproportionately favored for the brand's festival circuit over artists from the global South or East.

[57] In Cetin, 2019. From Red Bull's statement to Resident Advisor, https://www.residentadvisor.net/news/43548.

[58] See Stolzoff, 2000; Cooper, 2004; and Veal, 2007.

Red Bull's Soundclash featured several rounds. First, the warmup, during which each band played a few of their original songs. The second round had both bands cover the same song—Britney Spears' "Toxic"—in their own unique style. Third was the takeover, during which one band began a song of theirs and the other band took over, adapting that same song to their style. After the takeover came the clash, which demanded that each band play reggae, hip-hop, and indie pop adaptations of their original songs. Lastly, the wildcard round required the bands to collaborate with an artist whose work was a departure from their own style. Mashrou' Leila brought Franco-Moroccan singer and actress Hindi Zahra onto their stage for an mashup of one of their songs with Zahra's "Beautiful Tango." Across the room from them, Who Killed Bruce Lee featured Maestro Harout Fazlian and six flutists from the Lebanese Philharmonic Orchestra for a genre-bending rendition of their song "Pool Party" mixed with Bach's "Minuet and Bandinerie Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B minor." The show closed with both bands on one stage, singing a song together in an act of unity and collaboration that was revealed as the surprise twist of the night. Where audiences had been set up to witness the rivalry between Mashrou' Leila and Who Killed Bruce Lee, they were treated instead to playful banter and unexpected musical crossover.

Despite the virtuosic range of genres and styles on display at Red Bull's 2013 Soundclash event, its marketing and bands' frameworks for interpreting the aesthetic challenges thrown their way during the event clearly indicated Red Bull's expectations for the night.[59] Mashrou' Leila, represented on posters and promotional graffiti by Arabic-language stylization and the image of a masbaha—Islamic prayer beads—symbolically represented a cultural and musical Arabness. Conversely, Who Killed Bruce Lee represented the wild, raw masculinity of English-language, Euro-American rock, represented visually by a set of nunchucks—ostensibly a reference to the actual Bruce Lee. This juxtaposition, an East-meets-West clash of civilizations meant to shock and awe audiences local and foreign alike, implicitly positioned—both literally, in terms of spatial arrangement within the performance venue, and discursively—the bands in opposition to one another, suggesting that their approaches were incommensurate with one another.

[59] While the terms "genre" and "style" are often used interchangeably in colloquial conversation, it is critical that they be differentiated in academic contexts. In popular music studies, genre refers to formal and structural elements, such as musical conventions and institutional or industry organization, that shape music's characteristics and aesthetics. Style refers to the articulations of these aforementioned formal and structural elements. It denotes the ways that a particular person or group of people interpret and actualize musical convention.

The simultaneity of the “vs” as ”versus” and an Arabic “7 [٧]” combined nonsensically with the Arabic letter “alif maksura [ى]” adds further dimension to this in its visually clever but ultimately linguistically meaningless mobilization of the Arabic written language. The nunchucks as a signifier of Who Killed Bruce Lee’s namesake operates similarly as a reference masculinity on display in Western action films. Though a potent signifier of “Western-ness,” the signification is only achieved here through an allusion to an East Asian body and mediated by what is arguably the ultimate signifier for Euro-American masculinity—the big-budget action movie, itself a forum that exoticizes Asian martial arts practices and constructs stereotypes of “Eastern” cunning. The image reads as particularly absurd in the context of a Red Bull event predicated on a sonic and discursive flattening of local musicians into a “West and the rest” model, and alongside the contrived symbolic playfulness of the Arabic letters and almost uncomfortably orientalist affiliation of Mashrou’ Leila’s more Arab sound with Islamic prayer beads.[60]

Figure 2.20: Image of the 2013 Red Bull Soundclash's promotional graffiti on a wall in Beirut's Hamra neighborhood (by author, 01/2020)

Still, there was little room for deviation from this prescribed model. Even when either band covered their counterparts’ songs, the expectation of shock and novelty suggested hard and strict boundaries between what was possible or permissible for an English-language vs. an Arabic-language band. The bands had little control over these characterizations, and everything to gain from their affiliation with Red Bull, whose name and brand held a considerable amount of symbolic and social as well as economic capital within Beirut’s growing alternative music scene. Their considerable presence as sponsors of alternative music was marked most visibly by the

[60] It bears noting that the symbolic equation of Mashrou’ Leila with Islam is particularly orientalizing because of the fact that the band is made up of both Muslims and non-Muslims who have explicitly worked to orient their image and marketing away from religion, even as press has celebrated them for their religious plurality. In their public persona, as well as in their politically liberal rhetoric, they are markedly secular within the religiously charged field of Lebanese socio-politics.

Red Bull coolers that were a hallmark of any alternative music stage between roughly 2008 and 2015. While the company's involvement with alternative music in Lebanon has waned considerably since 2013, they have played a significant role in delineating the material and economic conditions of possibility for many of the alternative musicians who began to make music in the late 2000s.

Working with Red Bull

It has been several years since the last time I attended AUB [The American University of Beirut] Outdoors, and while it is unremarkable as a carnival, I'm excited to note that the multi-day event's musical lineup features several alternative bands. On the night I attend, KOZO, Waynick, and the Wanton Bishops are performing. Post-rock band KOZO has been given an earlier time slot. They go on stage just as the sun is setting, and play their set to a group of largely disinterested people milling about and chatting on The American University of Beirut's Green Oval, a grassy quad in between several of the oldest—and one of the newest—buildings on the University's campus. The intricacies of KOZO's lush soundscapes are lost to this open-air venue, and their relatively disaffected stage presence inspires few people to wander close enough to the stage to hear their music any better. By the time the alternative pop/rock band Waynick begins their set a few hours later, the Oval has drawn considerably more people. Many of the band members graduated from or still attend AUB, and there is an obvious element of school pride coming from the audience. The band plays through their recently released EP, Before I Leave*, adding several new songs, such as their Arabic-language cover of Beirut's "Postcards from Italy" as well as an English-language cover of Florence and the Machine's "Dog Days are Over" and a new Arabic-language original. Interest in the performance is at its highest during the performances of these covers, as well as when the band performs their single, "Carolina." While the stage is set up for tonight's headline performers, The Wanton Bishops, an over-eager MC leads the steadily growing mass of teenagers in a round of the Macarena, cheering and encouraging them as they shimmy and jump in unison to the dance trend that preceded their birth but which hasn't seemed to wane in popularity at large Lebanese gatherings. Finally, Macarena over, stage set, The Wanton Bishops begin their set to loud applause. It is completely dark by now, and the band's bright floral backing motif and flashing lightshow is captivating. Front man Nader Mansour bursts onto stage in his signature tight pants and a striped shirt rolled up to his elbows and unbuttoned to his sternum, launching the band into their first song, "Waslaha." The crowd, fully at attention and ready for the show, dances and sings along, yelping and yelling encouragement as Mansour dances across the stage. I am as surprised by the audience's enthusiasm and seeming familiarity with the band's music as I was at their presence on AUB Outdoors' lineup. I had heard through other artists that The Wanton Bishops were no longer performing, and their inactivity over the last few years seemed to confirm these claims.*

Figure 2.21: The Wanton Bishops perform live at AUB Outdoors (by author, 5/5/2019)

The Wanton Bishops emerged onto Beirut's alternative music circuit in 2011, quickly distinguishing themselves through Mansour's growling baritone and harmonica playing, and their Garage/Blues sound in a musical landscape dominated by the indie rock/pop or folk bands. While the Bishops have hosted a revolving cast of drummers, guitarists, and bassists—recruited both from Lebanon and abroad—at its core were Nader Mansour and Eddy Ghossien, who spent time as a Blues cover band before beginning to collaborate on original music. The band independently released their first EP, *Bad Rhyme*, in 2011, and followed with their debut album, *Sleep With the Lights On,* the year after that, establishing them as active members of Beirut's then-bustling and rapidly-growing alternative music scene.

The duo made waves when, in 2014, they announced that they had signed a publishing deal with Red Bull Media House's Publishing Portfolio and would spend the Spring of that year touring the United States. The tour was funded in its entirety by Red Bull, who shot and produced a documentary, "Walk it Home," chronicling the tour and documenting the story of the band's establishment and rise to fame. The documentary premiered in 2015, at large Red Bull-funded gala events in both Paris and Beirut, and released on Red Bull TV's website for public streaming.[61] That same year, joined by guitarist Salim Naffah of electropop band Loopstache and drummer Pascal Semerdjian of Postcards, the band wrote and recorded their second EP, *Nowhere Everywhere*, which was produced by Fadi Tabbal at Tunefork Studios and partially recorded and mastered at Red Bull Studios in Los Angeles.

While The Wanton Bishops' signature growling garage-blues sound shone through on the EP, *Nowhere Everywhere* featured for the first time songs with Arabic-and English-language lyrics and an Arabic music inflected sound. "Waslaha," the song that opened The Wanton Bishops' AUB Outdoors performance to the roaring applause of their audience, also opened the aforementioned EP, immediately immersing listeners in the band's new sound. The song opens with a synthesized bass loop, which gives way to the first verse of the song, "You're so pretty,

[61] Available here: https://www.redbull.com/in-en/films/the-wanton-bishops-documentary

you're so fine/I'll run for you to the battle line," Mansour sings in English, before echoing his vocal line on the harmonica. The synth loop repeats throughout the verse, as does Mansour's call and response between his voice and his harmonica. Heralding the first chorus, the instrumental backing cuts out, for two beats, before re-entering, sounding entirely new lines to complement and highlight the difference between the English-language verses and the Arabic language chorus. Mansour's voice, multi-tracked, chants through the chorus, singing: "kam ishtahaytu waslaha/laylun ma ba'ada layla/lamma malat khasraha/al fajru sarakha ah ya layla."[62] During these Arabic-language choruses, Mansour's vocal production pivots from the growling scratchy blues yells for which he has become known to a more clear and nasal melismatic chant. The multi-tracking of Mansour's voice further distinguishes this section from the verses. These vocal characteristics evoke musical styles such as the ataba and mijana, which have been and continue to be practiced primarily by Bedouin communities in the Levant, and in regions of Lebanon in which these peoples are or have been a significant presence.[63] It stands to reason that Mansour, who is from one such place—the Eastern Lebanese city of Zahle in the Bekaa Valley—drew sonic inspiration from music that he heard and continues to hear when back in his hometown. *Nowhere Everywhere* is filled with such sonic contrast, illustrating the band's approach to what Mansour has called "not fusion music, but confusion music,"[64] referencing the myriad sonic and cultural influences at play in The Wanton Bishops' more recent sound.

Implicit in Mansour's performances and press surrounding the Wanton Bishops' recent work is the assertion that their new sound draws from traditional or classical Arabic sounds and cultural practices with which the band members grew up. Salim Naffah, Mansour's bandmate and close collaborator during The Wanton Bishops' affiliation with Red Bull, noted, however, that the impetus to make music that sounded "more Lebanese" came at the behest of their corporate funders. "Little by little," he told me,

> when the guys that were investing in us started to tell us "guys, we need to make Lebanese music, it has to be more Lebanese." I was younger, stubborn, and for me it was "no, I'm not doing that." It was an alternative Blues/garage band, that's what we did. But Nader understood it. He did it badly, but he understood it. The album did not pick up…because we never did this. I'm not gonna lie to you, I never did it. I was never a big fan of Oriental or Lebanese music. I grew up listening to rock and roll…The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Queen, Led Zeppelin, whatever. I was never a fan of the Orient, and I did not know how to play with it. Neither did he [Mansour]. He did a lot of research, he dug into it. He did his homework, but—let's say you're doing your homework, you have no idea what you're doing, but you're reading the book, so whatever you're going to do is like the book, but in your own way. You know when you copy your friend's homework, and you're like, changing a word or two…that's how we were doing things. We need a bit of electro, we put it in. We need one riff of oud. There was so much pressure, because there was big money on the table (interview with author, 07/12/19).

Naffah's experiences highlight the aesthetic cost of admission; faced with an opportunity for financial success and wider, international circulation, The Wanton Bishops adapted their sonic orientation, adding a "Lebanese" twist to their garage-blues sound. While Mansour saw this as a reasonable and acceptable price to pay for access to Red Bull's sphere of influence and

[62] "How I craved her/night after night/when she turned her waist/the dawn exclaimed "oh night/Layla!"

[63] For more on this, see El Hajj, 2015.

[64] The Wanton Bishops, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4ryECMc3i0

funding, his bandmate as well as many of his colleagues in Lebanon's alternative music world, when faced with a similar choice, did not feel the same. Naffah's discomfort and lack of familiarity with Arabic music made occupying a hybrid Arabic and electro-blues sonic space feel forced and insincere. The fact that such a contrived move was a condition for continued corporate sponsorship further soured the situation.

Despite the dissolution of his formal contract with Red Bull, Mansour has continued the project of incorporating local sonic and linguistic influences into his sound. In the years between their 2016 EP release and the 2019 Outdoors performance, The Wanton Bishops has evolved into a solo project of Mansour's, supported by a revolving cast of local musicians. The Bishops' frontman takes every opportunity to showcase his knowledge of Arabic music at their Outdoors show, inserting short maqam-based improvisatory instrumental breaks into older songs, and performing longer expositions on his synthesizer in lieu of extended introductions or solos. During one such extended introduction, Mansour slowly builds weaves through maqam Nahawand on C—which can also be interpreted here as C harmonic minor— introducing progressively more complex phrases as he goes, sometimes in response to the crowd's cheers and calls of encouragement. A minute and a half into this unmetered introduction, Mansour makes eye contact with the drummer as he brings the phrase sequentially downward into a pseudo-qafla.[65] A beat passes, the bass drones on, and the drummer cues a derbakkeh sample playing a fast Maqsum.[66] Mansour gestures at some belly dancing with his arms and shimmies his hips back and forth a few times, but can't quite bring himself to execute any actual dance moves, before sauntering over to his synthesizer for a sprawling and fevered maqam-like improvisation to the opening motifs of the song "Hitman" from *Nowhere, Everywhere*. The crowd goes wild, dancing and yelling and clapping along. Emphasizing the drum sample, the trap set plays the role of riqq, filling in the drum rhythm on the hi-hat and cymbals while keeping time with straight quarter note snare hits. The bass also plays a percussive role, mirroring a Maqsum daff part by outlining the basic Maqsum rhythm using the tonic and fourth as dums and takks respectively. The guitar adds to this, strumming chords in time with the rhythm's takks.[67] Although anyone familiar with the band's music would know to expect it, when Mansour finally raises his head to sing into the microphone, the English verse that comes out feels shocking in light of the lead-up. The Wanton Bishops' set is full of such moments, marking what can be viewed as both a success and a failure of their project to seamlessly incorporate Lebanese influences into their music.

Later in the show, Mansour switches his synthesizer out for the 'oud that has been resting behind him. "This is a new one for you," he says as he plugs the audio into the 'oud's pickup, "we're trying to define Lebanese rock and roll. This one is called "Habibi"." Despite the ambitious intention, the song that follows sounds more like the Wanton Bishops' earlier, garage-blues music than an evolution of its more recent sound. The sonic markers of the band's "more

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[65] A qafla is a short musical phrase built on sequential motion that usually highlights the lower tetrachord *(jins)* of a maqam and signals the end of a phrase or section.
[66] Maqsum is one of the most common *iqa'at,* or Arabic rhythmic modes. It is a 4/4 rhythmic mode, and is characterized by the following distribution of Dums (bass hits) and Takks (higher pitched rim hits): DT-TD-T-. To translate to Western notation, each letter represents an eighth note and the dums occur on the first and third downbeats of the measure.
[67] The guitar, bass, and trap set here mirror the sound of a conventional Arabic percussion section, made up of a riqq, daff, and derbakkeh. The daff, a hand-struck frame drum, outlines the core rhythm with no embellishments. Atop this, the riqq, a close relative of the tambourine, and/or the derbakkeh, a goblet drum, often play the same rhythm with embellishment and fills.

Lebanese" sound, unlike even their earlier rendition of "Hitman," which incorporated Arabic tonality and rhythmic structures, were the metallic twang of Mansour's 'Oud, and the refrain of "ya habibi" that punctuated the song's chorus. For Nader Mansour and his Wanton Bishops, it would seem, the "Lebanese-ness" of a rock song could be defined by the sound of the 'oud—although not necessarily its conventional use—and the presence of a lyrically-cliche Arabic-language refrain. Mansour's 'oud performance is less sensical as a marker of "Lebanese-ness" in rock, particularly as it features in this purportedly genre-defining effort primarily for its distinctive timbre as it repeats the song's main finger picked melodic phrases.[68] While the claim, and its implications about the necessity of defining local genres, is intriguing, The Wanton Bishops' execution betrays the fraught and forced circumstances under which their approach to music-making arose.

I begin with The Wanton Bishops because their relationship with Red Bull is exceptional. In terms of the depth of their influence and involvement in the band's sound and operations, possible largely because of the locally unprecedented level of access that they reached within and across the company's global corporate divisions, The Wanton Bishops stand apart from other alternative musicians in Lebanon. For most, a relationship with Red Bull is markedly more hands off, although no less impactful. For example, although Mayssa Jallad and Elie Abdelnour's band Safar are known today as an alternative synth-pop duo whose sound relies heavily on synthesized bass and looped guitar, they were conceived as a much larger musical outfit. Their first EP, recorded with Fadi Tabbal at his Tunefork Studios, was written by the duo but recorded and performed live as a full band with a trap set and upright bass. The marked shift in their sound, they tell me, was a matter of circumstance:

> Mayssa Jallad (MJ): we were sponsored by Red Bull. But they didn't give us enough money fly out four people. So I think we intentionally thought about the second EP as something that could be played by three. And we took the idea of looping further…Elie looping his guitar, like an extra layer, and just layering in general. So yeah, that's why I think the second EP started being more like Fadi [Tabbal] and Elie and I.
>
> Elie Abdelnour (EA): because we had written the first EP as a four piece. But we needed to take these songs and perform them as a trio.
>
> Nour El Rayes (NR): Because of Red Bull? Because of the money?
>
> EA: Yeah, because we'd landed a few shows in Europe and we had to come up with a solution…but then the writing changed. That's what Mayssa was saying.

While the shift in aesthetics was not directly mandated by Red Bull, the band's new sound was a direct result of the financial constraints that they faced as an independent band preparing for a tour, and the possibilities that Red Bull's limited sponsorship afforded them. Similarly to the Wanton Bishops, Safar found themselves faced with aesthetic consequences that counterweighed the opportunities opened up by their alignment with Red Bull. Unlike The Wanton Bishops, however, Safar were not willing to go all-in in exchange for the promise of "making it." "[Red

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[68] Mansour's finger picking is notable because it represents another departure from conventional 'oud performance, which mandates that the 'oud's strings be plucked with a plectrum rather than strummed or finger picked like a guitar might be. While this might not stand out to the casual observer, an 'oudist or anyone acquainted with the instrument might interpret this as a marker of amateurism or lack of training.

Bull] can steer you in a specific direction," Jallad tells me, "but it's just because you're so thirsty… I don't know if it's a blessing in disguise or if we missed our shot or whatever, but [Red Bull Lebanon's cultural manager] Sam Wahhab called me right before I left for America, and he said "hey, I got you a gig opening for Ellie Goulding in Dubai,"

> I was like, "sorry Sam, but…I'm moving to America for my Masters." He said "that's too bad!" So opening for Ellie Goulding, she's a super pop artist…it would have maybe gotten us some huge opportunities. But in what direction were these opportunities? Who were we going to meet if we opened for Ellie Goulding? We don't know. I can't answer that question. But [to Elie] would you do it now, if you could?
>
> EA: I would do it…but just for the sake of playing for all those people, of opening for Ellie Goulding…but the repercussions, and to see who might talk to us after? I don't want that.

Despite their "thirst" for opportunity and for the promise of a larger audience base, when faced—like the Wanton Bishops were—with dropping everything to pursue the possibility of fame or pursuing their own needs and interests, Safar didn't hesitate in choosing the latter. The anecdote is, however, indicative of the ways that Red Bull's cultural directors have been able to determine the conditions of (im)possibility in which artists create and operate in small markets like Lebanon.

During a conversation with Zeid Hamdan in February 2018, we sit on his balcony overlooking Ashrafieh's Jesuits Garden, his several-months-old son on a playmat in between us. Hamdan, whose career as a musician and producer has spanned almost two decades and includes bands like Soapkills, The New Government, Zeid and the Wings, and most recently Bedouin Burger, tells me about his decades-long relationship with Red Bull. "They are like a minister of culture," he muses,

> in a normal music environment you have publishers, you have producers, you have labels, so…here and there they give you support, or advances. In the Middle East there's nothing like that. So I was lucky to be able to have Red Bull…if I need a push in any aspect, they understand the need, and they would give me support. Sometimes they would print flyers for me. Sometimes they would help with the bar at an event where I needed a bar. They would send the waiters and the bar. Sometimes they would pay for the equipment. Sometimes they pay travel costs. So it's been *super* helpful, and they've been doing it since I started (2/8/2019).

Red Bull is funding Hamdan's upcoming trip to the Oscars as part of the compositional team for Nadine Labaki's film *Capernaum*, and he has been excitedly posting about the event on his social media accounts. During our conversation, he receives a text from Red Bull Lebanon's cultural manager Sam Wahab letting him know that the brand would have appreciated being tagged or mentioned in Hamdan's posts. The text sets Hamdan into frenzied motion, quickly going over to his laptop to correct his mistake. "They really like my work," he tells me, "I could not fly to LA. But then they said, "we'll pay the ticket." But, it's true that I react as if I owe them, because of this ticket. I have to thank them. They need this to be able to help me. But, they're friends, you know? Sam's a friend, Fuad's a friend. So when they help me I need them to look good in front of their bosses." While Zeid assures me that there have never been any aesthetic strings attached to Red Bull's support, his exchange with the brand's representatives

during our meeting highlights that there are social costs to his involvement.

Red Bull's offer of funding, framed as a favor between friends, carried with it the expectation that Hamdan would be explicit and public about his indebtedness to the brand and its cultural managers. Despite the frantic energy with which he set out to correct his error the morning that we met, Hamdan seemed nonplussed at the idea that Red Bull's support came with these kinds of strings. For Hamdan, the costs of collaboration and sponsorship—of Red Bull's presence in Beirut's alternative music world—were far outweighed by the benefits.

> a lot of my friends, when I started collaborating with Red Bull said "it's a soda! Come on man, what the fuck are you doing? You don't have to sell your soul to the brand. You're promoting a bad product!" And I told them, "what is this? Look, they're not forcing me to drink the product, they're not asking me to do an add." I drink Red Bull, I enjoy it. I enjoyed it before I discovered coffee! So I was familiar with the product, and then the people…when I met the *people* not the product, the team. I feel close to them, you know? …They [Red Bull] grow a scene, they help it mature, they accompany it, they go with it, they breed it. It's very good.

Faced with friends' concerns that affiliation with Red Bull was tantamount to "selling your soul to the brand," Hamdan gestured to what he perceived to be a much less concerning cost of admission and the scene-building efforts that the corporation took on and supported. At stake in this exchange was Hamdan's DIY ethos—by aligning himself with a transnational corporation and agreeing to exchange social media endorsements for financial support, Zeid had, according to dominant narratives about the ethos of alternative music, effectively sold out. To this, however, Hamdan brought a different understanding of what it might mean for an artist to "sell out." For Hamdan, the passive promotion and occasional praise mandated by Red Bull was a far cry from other sponsorship deals that required artists to verbally and actively endorse a commercial product. Rather than buy into Red Bull's corporate rhetoric, Hamdan understood his relationship with the brand as more of a measured affiliation.

The question of selling out or "selling one's soul" in exchange for monetary support is one that weighed on many alternative musicians, even after they had complied with Red Bull's vision and requests. Salim Naffah recounts:

> I mean, we were forced to be Red Bull products. Which was not the point, man. We wanted to make music and be on stage. We didn't wanna be holding a fucking Red Bull can, and having a Red Bull cooler behind us, and praying to the gods of Red Bull, every time we wanted to do something we had to say thank you Red Bull. Red Bull, man, it's a fucking toxic can, right? They wanted to be—they wanted to be gods.

Where the amounts of money implicated in Red Bull's relationship with artists like Zeid Hamdan and The Wanton Bishops ranged in the tens of thousands, Red Bull's funding packages for affiliated alternative musicians in Lebanon averaged in the range of $5000-8000 a year. Often the funds offered covered the costs of producing and circulating an album, airfare from Lebanon to Europe for a tour, or booking costs for a space for a local concert. In most cases artists received this cash in exchange for promising to feature a Red Bull cooler on their stage and to be seen on social media carrying Red Bull cans. The requirement for support was endorsement of this corporate involvement in the alternative scene, a move that seems antithetical to the rhetorics of independence at play in the generic designation "alternative" or "indie," but which was vital to the ability of some musicians to continue making music in an environment with few

opportunities for earning money. In these cases, Red Bull's financial support was entangled in larger discourses of musical integrity, and fears of appearing to have "sold out" by buying into structures of corporate funding.

While Red Bull has been the most prominent corporate patron of Lebanon's alternative music and musicians, it is one among many transnational corporations whose cultural outreach programs have sponsored or funded independent music. By and large, however, companies like Dewars, Johnny Walker, and Absolut Vodka collaborate only with promoters and organizers, entrusting these gatekeepers and tastemakers to select appropriately popular and marketable bands for corporate-sponsored festival and concert lineups. In these kinds of arrangements, promoters and organizers seemed to be exempt from the judgement or anxieties leveled at individual artists or bands who established relationships with corporate entities. Where artists articulated feelings of stress or tension between the economic and material conditions of scarcity that necessitated corporate collaboration and the ethos of independence from corporate or mainstream affiliation that implicitly equated corporate affiliation with selling out—an ideological and often aesthetic loss of legitimacy and quality—organizers are able to continue to operate within alternative music's lifeworld, without similar fears of having "sold out."

As representatives of alternative musical institutions in their own right, organizers like Anthony Semaan—whose Beirut Jam Sessions live concert series has merged with his long standing "Dewars Club" music nights—are able to bridge the rhetorical dissonance between corporate funding at a larger scale, at the grassroots, DIY ethos that has been conventionally associated with alternative musical lifeworlds. Although opportunities for such corporate sponsorship have significantly diminished in the years since their height in the early 2010s, their presence within Lebanon's alternative music world has impacted, clarified, and rendered visible a hegemonic rhetoric of the "alternative" that govern music in Lebanon. Indeed, the notion of alternative or independent musical institutions seems oxymoronic in and of itself. Dominant narratives driven by historical understandings of Euro-American notions of the alternative in music frame the term as a material and aesthetic distancing from the very notion of established or professionalized musical institutions. In Beirut, however, independent musical institutions and programs geared at professionalizing and building capacity among musicians abound.

2. Tunefork and Ruptured, A New Musical Axis

It feels like Fadi Tabbal is the busiest man in Beirut. After months of emails back and forth, we finally find some time to meet at his studio in between other engagements. As the founder and sole force behind Tunefork recording studio, Fadi has had a hand in the vast majority of independent music in circulation in Lebanon over the last ten years or so. I arrive early to our meeting, and decide to take the stairs up to the record studio. On the way, I reflect on the centrality on the magnitude of the space I am climbing towards, thinking about how Tunefork's recording studio is a place that has played host to musicians from across the spectrum of aesthetics and genre. And yet, while Fadi has recorded and produced music for artists making classical and experimental Arabic music (what he calls "Oriental music")[69] *as well as Arab*

[69] The term "Oriental Music" here refers to what I and other scholars of music in the Middle East call "Arabic" or "Arab" music, and is used broadly to denote music that features styles of music, forms, instruments, and melodic and rhythmic modes that emerged largely from and were codified in Egypt and the Levant through the 20th century. For more on the aesthetics and cultural politics of this music, see Chapter 3, "Remediations." The use of "Orient" or "Oriental" is common in Lebanon and other parts of the region largely among French speakers or as a remnant of

Jazz, folk, and the occasional mainstream pop song, Tunefork and the man behind it are associated primarily with alternative music.

Finally, I reach the correct floor and make my way to the correct door, inconspicuous except for the small Tunefork Studios logo placed next to the doorbell. The door is slightly ajar, and from inside I can hear snippets of conversation. I recognize Julia Sabra's voice immediately. I'd noticed that Sabra, the lead singer of local dreampop band Postcards, had started working the soundboard with Fadi at shows, and her presence here today has confirmed that she is now a part of the Tunefork team. I knock, and have to do so a few more times before someone notices my presence at the door. I'm immediately struck by how small and informal the space that greets me is as I am ushered into the sound booth, which doubles as Fadi's office. A couple of old armchairs, an impromptu kitchenette, and a small balcony make up the antechamber and social space of the recording studio.

Through the glass at Tabbal's office, I can see that most of the apartment is taken up by the actual recording studio, a large, oddly shaped room littered with cables and instruments on racks, and dampened by an eclectic array of foam, carpets, and a small leather couch in one corner. The remainder of Postcards—guitarist Marwan Tohme and drummer Pascal Semerdjian—mill about casually readying the space for what I soon realize is a band rehearsal. I set my equipment up nervously, cognizant of the relative amateurism of my handheld recorder and tripod compared to Tabbal's recording setup. I ramble as I get started, anxious to make a good impression on this musical and cultural gatekeeper. Tabbal is nonplussed by this and I realize later that this is largely because he, too, is a practiced rambler.

Tabbal begins by telling me about his training as a mechanical engineer, and his path to founding Tunefork in 2006, but the conversation soon turns to his career as a musician, producer, and teacher at the Académie Libanaise Des Beaux-Arts [ALBA]. Central to each of the many hats that he wears in the music world, Fadi tells me, is an appreciation of sound and attention to composition. "I have the same guidelines that apply," he explains, "Which is: 1) sound 2) recomposition 3) rethinking, and I forgot the most important one: never do something because you want someone to hear it. Never." These guidelines map out Tabbal's expectations for both himself, as a musician, and for the artists that he works with at Tunefork. Implicitly, they also delineate the costs of admission into the musical and social spheres that orbit around Tabbal himself and his studio.

First and foremost, he tells me, bands must be willing to develop skills as critical listeners, and then turn their critical ears towards their own music and sound. When I ask him about bands that want to make music that they perceive will sell or appeal to a particular audience base, his reaction is definitive: "I don't work with those bands. The ones that want to be enjoyable only…The stuff that's enjoyable, we do it together, but in terms of having a "yeah, let's just play together"…I can't. I can't do something with zero thinking about it. Just give me 1%!" I ask him if what he means is that an artist's sound needs to be more deliberate, to which he clarifies "No! Just 1%," he reiterates, " I'm not extreme at all as a person, just please give me a little bit. Come to it with a little more thought than "I wanna do this." That's why there's stuff I just can't listen to. Even though I work with them" (5/21/2019).

French and British colonialism in the region. While the history of the term and its denotation particularly in US American academia may seem fraught, it is not a politically or socially loaded term in Lebanon. As a researcher however, I couldn't bring myself to adopt the term, but found no confusion or resistance from my interlocutors who favored it over my preferred "Arabic music."

Tabbal's reference to working with bands with whom he would not pursue more than a formal working relationship highlights the fact that admission to Tunefork can be gained at many scales. Paying Tunefork's fees will most often grant you admission to his studio, and access to his skill as a recordist. Indeed, Tunefork Studios' newly revamped website boasts a list of albums by artists whose work ranges widely in terms of style, genre, and level of fame, from the neo-Oriental stylings of Nidaa Abou Mrad and Ghassan Sahhab, to recent tracks on indie pop-rock band Mashrou' Leila's albums, and experimental jazz, to name just a few. Fadi tells me that his real investment, however, is in nurturing and growing an alternative music scene, a task that he has dedicated the last few decades of his life to, first as a musician and record shop employee, and since 2006 as a producer and sound engineer.

The Tunefork "family"

Despite Fadi's dedication to alternative music in Lebanon, admission to his and Tunefork's musical life and soundworlds is not granted automatically to anybody working on alternative music. There is a difference between being a band that records at Tunefork and being a Tunefork band. While the former grants artists legitimacy through affiliation with and authorization by Fadi and the reputation he has built for his studio, the latter implies a more complete social admission. Tunefork bands are part of a "family,"[70] a cohesive social and musical unit that will come to each other's shows, share resources (and often band members) and operate with the full social, intellectual, and economic weight of Tunefork studios thrown behind it. Until recently, this type of affiliation came with an almost guaranteed distribution contract with Ruptured Records, a label owned by Tabbal's long-time friend and collaborator, Ziad Nawfal.[71] While the perks of admission speak for themselves, for some bands, the costs are too steep. Many artists are either unwilling or unable to adapt to or adopt Tabbal's guiding aesthetic and ideological principles for approaching sound. "They're very helpful people," said one musician whose band works loosely with Tunefork, "but you feel like there's some sort of clique, and you have to be part of it or you're just doing your own thing."[72]

Joe Kazan, keyboardist and singer of indie-pop band Waynick, describes similar difficulties of gaining admission into Beirut's dominant alternative spaces and social spheres.

> I feel like there's this very prevalent persona of the misunderstood artists in Beirut, where it's like if you don't like my music then you're doing it wrong…[and] for a lot of artists in the scene…our music is a bit too simple, it's a bit too pop for their tastes. For us it works. I feel like we make simple music that people can relate to, and we make music that we want to listen to...It's about our daily experiences here in Beirut…no beef with any of these people. They're all colleagues, and we all help each other out whenever we need anything…we record all of our stuff at Fadi's. He's been a great mentor [but] our relationship with him is very different than the rest of the scene, because for the others, he kind of sponsors them...He's part of the band, he makes decisions with them. With us, he strikes the exact balance we need. I mean we pay for all of that…He gives us the

[70] Several artists described Tunefork using the term "family" independently of one another. The list includes Julia Sabra, Salim Naffah, the member of Safar, and the members of KOZO.
[71] In 2019, Nawfal and Tabbal began to disentangle their respective institutions from one another. While Tunefork is still represented in the Ruptured catalogue, Tunefork bands are increasingly rare among the label's new acquisitions.
[72] The artist in question preferred not to be identified, citing a desire not to disrupt or adversely affect working relationships. This is understandable given the prominence of Tunefork artists who make up the "clique" within alternative music's production and performance circuits.

> service, but also he gives his input, he gives his opinion, and takes ours into consideration. There's a partnership (Interview with author, 7/11/2019)

For many artists currently active in the alternative music world, access to Tabbal and his studio was a perk of winning one of Beirut Open Stage's "Wave" contests, music competitions in which hopeful musicians submitted an original song in order to be considered for a live competition. Finalists were selected based on a video or recording, and then invited to perform live in a quasi-battle of the bands in which audience members cast votes for their favorite acts. The winners were granted free sessions with Tabbal towards recording and producing their winning track which would be featured on a compilation CD alongside fellow successful competitors. I had only ever heard rumblings about Beirut Open Stage before I arrived for my formal year of fieldwork, and was shocked to find that the platform was responsible for bringing bands like Safar, Alko B, and KOZO—bands comprised of artists who are firmly established as part of the "Tunefork family"—into the studio with Tabbal. Waynick is no different. They began working with Tabbal after winning Beirut Open Stage's final contest, "Beirut Wave Three," in 2016. However, while Kazan mentions he and his fellow bandmate Sarah Abdo demonstrated willingness to be present and active members of the alternative scene, they have been excluded from the Tunefork family by virtue of their aesthetics and ethos.

Echoing Fadi's fundamental framework for making music, the artists who orbit within Fadi and Tunefork's gravitational field make music that reveals their concern for a critical—almost obsessive—attention to sound, and dedication to making music that is "interesting" rather than commercially successful or pleasing to fans. Bands like Waynick, whose music is deliberately upbeat and "simple," aiming to build and maintain a fanbase rather than provoke deep thought or demonstrate connoisseurship, fall short of the costs of complete admission into the Tunefork family. More than simply a difference of approach to music-making, the tension between the aesthetics and ethos espoused by bands like Waynick and by members of the Tunefork family mediates access to Lebanon's most dominant site of authentication for alternative musicians.

While there exist several established and respected music festivals and social media platforms for the performance and circulation of alternative music, Tunefork studios and Fadi Tabbal have become de facto arbiters of success within an increasingly insular alternative music lifeworld. This makes sense. Given the degree of respect and demonstrated expertise afforded to Fadi and his studio, recording at Tunefork Records and working with Fadi Tabbal have become equivalent to "making it" as an alternative musician in Lebanon. Until recently, when Tabbal and Nawfal decided to put their working relationship on hiatus due to creative differences, working with Fadi—and specifically being a Tunefork band—significantly increased one's chances of being offered a contract with Ruptured Records, the record label established and run by Fadi's childhood friend and long-time business partner Ziad Nawfal. "As far as the curation goes, Fadi will suggest projects, and I will suggest projects, and the stuff that we both agree on we'll release," Nawfal told me when we met at a café on a rainy February afternoon,

> Even if there's a product that I don't like, if he likes it, it can still get done, and vice versa. Of course, each one of us has a right of veto, which we use. But we've rarely had to use it, unless the product was really shitty, or unless the product, one of us really did not like…It's pretty much that we share duties. It's more me than him. He's mostly Tunefork. So he's the studio, I'm the label. This is how this is organized. The studio is

> entirely his, the label is entirely mine, but we choose to collaborate on certain things (2/27/2019)

Nawfal's rundown of his arrangement with Tabbal demonstrates the kind of representational power that Tunefork as an institution has in/over perceptions and realities of alternative music, and specifically Tabbal's role in it. For better or worse, his approval can mean fast tracked success or a more difficult road. Similarly, the implications of affiliation with Ruptured go beyond just a record deal. Since 2008, Nawfal has run one of the only radio shows that plays local alternative music. Nawfal's radio show, Ruptured, the namesake of his eventual record label, both afforded musicians a wider reach and a chance to be discovered by a larger audience base both locally and internationally. While the show itself never reached the levels of fame or listenership required for mainstream radio success, its value was in the authentication afforded by affiliation with Ziad Nawfal's highly trained ear and recognized musical taste. Around since the mid-2000s, Ruptured and Tunefork's presence in the alternative music scene has grown considerably in the last five years or so, in large part due to their alliances, as well as strategic collaborations with music venues and concert series and the commitment of both Nawfal and Tabbal to work with and nurture the growth of alternative music in Lebanon. [73]

When I arrived in Beirut in October 2018, I was struck by the presence of one or both institutions' logos on the majority of promotional posters and social media posts surrounding alternative music in the country. During an interview with Zeid Hamdan, I mentioned the perceived rise of this new musical axis, to which he reminded me that this is simply what happens "when a musician teams up with a DJ, and teams up with a studio, and teams up with a journalist, [they] become an active working force in the music business. The musician records in the studio, the DJ plays the music, the journalist writes about it, the DJ plays it on the radio."

> This is what today Tunefork and Ruptured are. They cover the spectrum of the music industry in their scene. After that, once they produce, they can produce whatever they want! They can produce noise, they can produce improv, they can produce pop. It will reach. It will reach because the DJ will play it, the journalist will write about it. The circle is full…Maybe you have the magazine Wired in hand, and it was Ziad Nawfal sending his playlist.[74] And his playlist is…[laughs] is his roster. You see? It's good for them, it's good for the music, it's good for me (2/8/2019)

Hamdan's explanation for the fact that I seemed to be seeing and hearing music only by Tunefork-Ruptured bands attributed this as much to industry connections and alliances as to talent and appeal. As individuals who have built and operated independent musical institutions in Lebanon, Tabbal and Nawfal have earned or been granted the ability to act with the curatorial authority and aesthetic force of the institutions with which they have become coterminous. Months later, Joe Kazan offered me a similar but differently nuanced explanation, noting that "you have Revolver,[75] and you have, obviously, Tunefork, and then you have Ruptured. That's

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[73] For more on the history of these institutions see Chaper 1: Soundworlds and Soundworlding.

[74] Zeid is referring to a recent issue of Wired, in which Ziad curated a list of the best alternative music from Lebanon.

[75] Revolver is an online music magazine founded in Lebanon in 2013. Currently, it is the largest media outlet that covers alternative music in Lebanon, contributing artist interviews, concert and album reviews, curated playlists, and longform writing on various topics surrounding independent and alternative music in Lebanon. Several musicians who are part of the Tunefork family such as Karl Mattar of Interbellum and Charlie Rayne are also writers for the media outlet, and one of its founders, Bernard Batrouni, is a friend of many alternative musicians.

the trio, and they're the only things that are still active. So people think that's the only way that you can do things" (7/11/2019). Alternative music's already small ecosystem, once rich and thriving, has gradually dwindled as spaces in which to perform and congregate have gone under, corporate sponsorship has moved on to the more lucrative fields of extreme sports and EDM, and musical institutions have been dismantled due to burnout in the one or two individuals whose efforts sustained them.[76] As the possibilities for recording, performing, and circulating music have gotten more scarce, those sites and actors that remain have become dominant both by virtue of the perceived success or legitimacy that presumably allowed them to outlive their peers, because they are, as Kazan put it, "the last man standing."

Hearing Tunefork: sound and aesthetics

Mayssa Jallad and Elie Abdelnour are even more charismatic in person than they are on stage as alternative duo Safar. Jallad has recently returned to Beirut after completing a master's degree in architecture, and Abdelnour is back briefly before he begins a psychiatry residency in Minnesota. When I hear that they're both in the country, I immediately reach out about setting up a meeting, and they are quick to suggest a time and place. Founded in 2013, within the framework of what became Beirut Open Stage's "Wave One," Safar is one of the oldest bands still performing today. As a band who emerged alongside peers like Who Killed Bruce Lee, The Wanton Bishops, and Postcards, and who came into Fadi Tabbal's social sphere through Beirut Open Stage, they are a trove of knowledge, ideas, and experiences that they prove more than willing to share. We talk about their backgrounds, how they got started as a band, their thoughts about alternative music in Lebanon and the ways that it has changed over time, and inevitably come to the subject of Fadi Tabbal and Tunefork Studios. I tell them that I haven't yet met with Tabbal, but that we have a meeting scheduled for the next morning. I admit to them that I'm nervous, as Tabbal has become so central to alternative music in Lebanon. "If there's one name in Beirut indie right now," I begin, "It's Fadi," finishes Abdelnour (EA).

> Nour (NR): …it's because he's so present. He's so fundamental. To the sound too. You can hear Tunefork. There's a Tunefork sound.
>
> EA: yeah. It's true.
>
> Mayssa Jallad (MJ): But he would hate that by the way, if you said that to him…It's true, but he'll hate it.
>
> EA: I think that some people…tend to say that every band that comes out of Tunefork Studios sounds the same.
>
> MJ: I've heard it. So much. I heard it not long ago.[77]

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[76] Beirut Open Stage is one such institution. After an immense amount of success with the competition and concert series, its founder Elias Maroun teamed up with Ziad Nawfal and Fadi Tabbal in order to open Beirut Open Space. The venue was conceived as a space in which alternative and independent musicians would be able to congregate, collaborate, and perform. After a year, the space shut down, citing both financial trouble and Maroun's desire to take a step back from music and reassess his goals as primary reasons for its closure.

[77] Interview with author, May 20, 2019.

Jallad is right. Rarely did an interview go by without someone bringing up the perceived sonic homogeneity and navel-gazing of Tunefork's alternative music sound. Music-makers across the board confirmed the prevalence and weight of this critique, whether they were echoing it in a call for change or raising the topic just to refute it. I was quick to clarify to Abdelnour and Jallad that I did not meant to echo the popular sentiment, simply to highlight that the studio had developed a signature sound. "Like Motown," offered Abdelnour, "Or Sun Records, or Phil Specter," I added, to both their approval.

Figure 2.22. Elie Abdelnour (left) and Mayssa Jallad (right) (official press photo, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=124753979656180&set=pb.100063647353674.-2207520000..).

Even a cursory listen across Tunefork's alternative music portfolio reveals a distinct sonic orientation if not a distinct sound, no doubt driven by Tabbal's cardinal rule about taking sound and composition seriously. Dreamy soundscapes, large open sonic spaces, sequenced ostinati, synths, heavy multi-tracking and looping, closely mic-ed vocals, fuzzy guitars, gated and reverbed snare drums, and droned bass feature largely across a wide array of records produced and put out by Tunefork bands. When I met with Fadi the next day, he indeed didn't seem to like the suggestion that there might be a distinctive Tunefork sound. That his recording studio has a distinctive sound that has come, in some ways, to define contemporary alternative music in Lebanon is no surprise. Tunefork is the only independent recording studios of its caliber left in Lebanon today,[78] and as such operates as the major hub and crossroads of alternative music in Lebanon. As a mentor and recordist, Fadi

[78] This is not to suggest that there are no other independent recording studios. Several formal and informal studios do exist. One such studio is Zeid Hamdan and Khaled Mouzannar's MOOZ Records, which boasts an impressive lineup of artists and producers—including Scrambled Eggs and Lumi's Marc Kodsi—as well as a robust portfolio of projects such as the soundtrack to Nadine Labaki's Oscar-nominated film Capernaum. Tunefork, however, is unparalleled in terms of the number of alternative musicians and albums that it produces, as well as in terms of its visibility and audibility in contemporary alternative music.

Tabbal's reach and influence are unprecedented. Bands ranging in commercial success and international circulation from acclaimed indie-pop band Mashrou' Leila and dreampop trio Postcards to new or up-and-coming artists like post-rock bands KOZO and Ilvy have worked with Fadi at Tunefork studios. But reputation is not solely responsible for the Tunefork's central role in mediating the aesthetics and rhetorics of alternative music in Lebanon today. Tunefork's partnership with Ruptured records, Fadi Tabbal's strategic collaborations with performance venues and concert series, and Tunefork's relatively small size and scale of operation are also significant factors.

Tabbal's Tunefork Studios and Ziad Nawfal's Ruptured record label were not conceived as complementary institutions. However, their founders quickly recognized the potential of bringing Tabbal's extensive experience as a sound engineer together with Nawfal's industry contacts and reputation as a radio show host, DJ, and organizer. For almost a decade following the establishment of Ruptured records in 2008, alternative musicians who were granted entry into the "Tunefork family"—those whose aesthetic orientation and attitudes towards sound, and who became part of Tunefork's social sphere—received a distribution and licensing contract with Ruptured. As Ruptured artists, musicians were able to earn money and expand their reach and audience base through the sales of physical albums distributed by the label, as well as through the exposure and performance opportunities afforded by Nawfal's social and professional network, which spans across labels, musical publications, and festivals throughout Europe and the United States. For example, through Nawfal and Ruptured's promotion, Tunefork artists like Interbellum, Safar, and Kinematik have been featured or reviewed in *The Wire* magazine and on curated playlists featured on music blogs and on Ruptured's Spotify page. Moreover, when Nawfal performs DJ sets both in Lebanon and at European music festivals in which he often participates, music by Ruptured artists are featured heavily in his mixes.

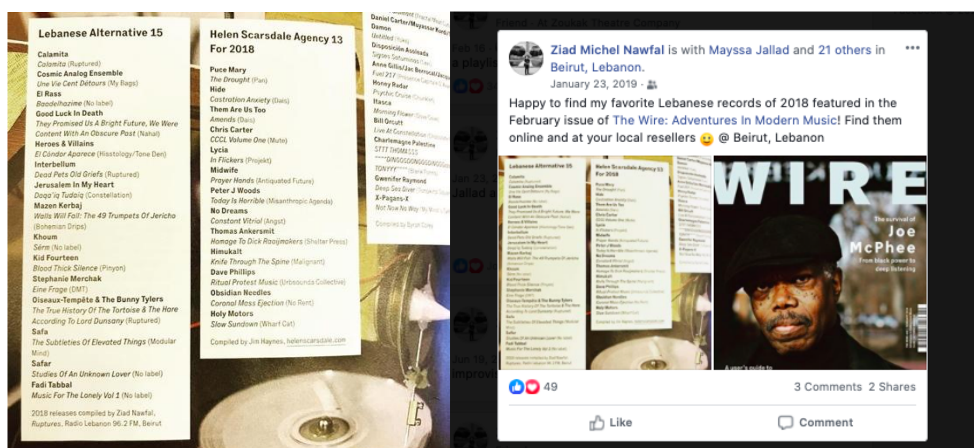

Figure 2.4: Post by Z. Nawfal announcing the publication of a list of "Lebanese Alternative 15" which he curated for The Wire.

With Ruptured first, and in the years since, Tabbal has sought out strategic collaborations with musical institutions of all types. Tabbal's aforementioned relationship with Elias Maroun and his Beirut Open Stage and later its short-lived physical manifestation, Beirut Open Space, brought him into contact with entire generations of musical hopefuls. More recently, Tabbal has extended Tunefork's sound engineering services at no cost to the Beirut branch of Sofar Sounds, a monthly intimate concert series that takes place in different locations across the city and which features artists spanning across genres, levels of experience, and scales of exposure or circulation. Both Tabbal and Maria Antoun, Sofar Beirut's director, articulated this partnership

as one whose primary purpose was to expand and nurture independent music in Lebanon, particularly during a time when there seems to be a dearth of performance venues and new bands, due largely to an inhospitable economic and political climate in the country. In practice, however, Tabbal's presence at and involvement with what is arguably the only regular concert series—and certainly the only regular mixed-genre one—in Beirut today allows him both to give his up-and-coming bands a platform from which to perform and begin to circulate their music as well as to meet and work with a steady stream of new or unknown musicians.

Together, Tunefork's partnership with Ruptured and its collaborations with other independent local institutions has placed the studio and its artists at the center of the recorded and circulated history of alternative music in Lebanon. Although Ruptured takes on albums by artists who do not work with Fadi Tabbal, the vast majority of its alternative music portfolio is made up of Tunefork albums. Similarly, Tabbal's involvement with institutions like Sofar Sounds has not necessarily granted him a monopoly over new artists. However, as was the case of Beirut Open Space, Sofar Sounds has brought him into contact with artists whom he may never have encountered, and allowed him to extend offers or express interest in working with them before anyone else can. In terms of both its dominance over the recorded history of alternative music and its indispensable role within musical institutions that support new and up-and-coming artists, Tunefork, its sound, and its artists have become the primary referents for new artists and their music. Joe Kazan, whose band is part of a younger cohort of alternative musicians confirms this. "I still go to things by Postcards, because I love them, I love their music," he tells me,

> I looked up to all of them as a student, back then, and I think what they do is cool, and they're doing their own thing at the moment. I just think in general there's this emphasis on post-rock, dream pop, shoegaze…I dunno, I don't think they realize the impact they [the Tunefork family] have on younger musicians (7/11/2019)

The members of post/math-rock band KOZO express a similar sentiment, citing bands like Scrambled Eggs and the Bunny Tylers—bands comprised of musicians like Tabbal himself and an older generation of musicians affiliated with Tunefork, like Charbel Haber—as well as more recent post-rock outfit Kinematik, as primary figures and reference points in their sonic enculturation into Lebanese alternative music.

The most significant piece of this puzzle, however, is Fadi Tabbal himself. Until very recently Tabbal handled all of Tunefork's creative direction, sound engineering, and production by himself. While by all accounts Tabbal is respectful of his musicians' creative autonomy and individual styles, some sort of signature sound seems inevitable, given that Tunefork's music is all produced in the same room, using the same equipment, and by the same one man. In his capacity as at once curator, recordist, musician, teacher and mentor, and a musical "matchmaker," Tabbal and his taste and vision are central to the ways that alternative music's aesthetics and rhetorics have evolved and been defined over the last decade.

The question of Tabbal's curation became most clear to me in a conversation with the members of Safar. "We were markedly more jazzy [at the beginning]…I remember we did a Beirut Jam Session in Colonel in Batroun, and Fadi was there," Mayssa Jallad recalls,

> …and we were like "So Fadi, what do you think?" and he was like "hmm…you guys have something, but if you want to stay in this musical direction I'm afraid I can't help you."

> NR: Wow, really? Flat out?
>
> MJ: I mean, that's Fadi…So we were like ok, do we try to listen to him? Do we see what he has to say? And we did. And that's when we started the first EP. After that conversation, after that summer. [and at the] release party…I remember thinking "oof, it came together," it worked. It made sense now. Because we're not Jazz musicians. We can't pretend to be classically Jazz trained or whatever. We do music out of a kind of impulse. I think that's what Fadi meant. Is that "I can't help you because you don't [do this style]….I think that's the real power of Fadi.
>
> EA: He sees.
>
> MJ: It's about being true to yourself. Not about pretending to be anything. And were not pretending to be anything, but his kind of approach and his kind of mentorship brings out the best in you, rather than you trying to copy something.[79]

Tabbal's creative direction is expressed in Safar's recollection of Tabbal's insistence that the band had potential that he could help them realize if they abandoned their attempts at jazz as well as their repeated references to his mentorship. By and large, regardless of whether or not they become part of the Tunefork family, bands that work with Tabbal frame their relationship with him as one that is heavily inflected and shaped by his mentorship. Both Tabbal and the artists that he has worked with revealed that he expects artists to engage in a significant amount of close listening and to think and talk seriously about sound as a way to clarify and articulate their desires for their own music. Tabbal described this approach as stemming from his primary principle for music-making—that sound should be considered alongside other elements of

[79] Interview with author, 5/20/2019.

composition, like lyrics—as well as from a genuine investment in the quality and survival of alternative music in Lebanon.

Figure 2.5. Fadi Tabbal and Julia Sabra overseeing the soundboard a Safar Concert (photo by author, May 30, 2019).

For the artists who record at Tunefork, the frustration with the common allegations of a homogeneous "Tunefork sound" stem from the ways that such allegations assume that their working relationship with Tabbal is one of unidirectional control rather than collaboration. Pre-empting my question about it, Julia Sabra, the singer and lyricist for Postcards, was adamant about the fact that "it's never been about his [Tabbal's] own name, it's always been about pushing the scene, and about sound, and about making people aware of sound…[but] he doesn't impose his own sound on the band." Speaking to Postcards' evolution over the course of their relationship with Tabbal, she continued:

> It doesn't sound like Fadi anywhere. He just took a band who was playing ukuleles, and he pushed us a little bit, and we still sound like ourselves. The fact that we changed sounds wasn't like because Fadi said "You know guys, I really like shoegaze and dream pop, just go there." Just naturally by talking to him, and bouncing ideas off each other, we ended up feeling at home there (7/10/2019)

Sabra's comment, meant to address the question of working with Fadi Tabbal, was also her response to a way that audiences understand the sonic trajectories of bands like Postcards, who broke out into the alternative music world as an indie-folk band but who now make music that might better be categorized as dreampop. At a concert of theirs in January 2019, I heard and participated in several conversations between audience members in which long-time fans of

Postcards or alternative music more generally confidently explained that "this sound change occurred because of Fadi Tabbal, whose experimentalism is at the heart of many Beirut bands' sound."[80] While the indictment implicit in dominant perceptions of Tunefork as possessing a homogeneous sound—that Tabbal is creatively controlling and allows musicians access to only a narrow aesthetic palette—is easily dismissed by listening across Tunefork's portfolio and talking to the artists involved, Tabbal nonetheless commands a huge amount of influence over artists who work or want to work with him. In his capacity as mentor and teacher, he commands the respect and love of the artists he works with, artists who largely came into his studio without very much, if any, professional musical experience.

In addition to the ubiquity of recordings and performances by Tunefork bands, and the potential career and personal benefits of becoming part of the Tunefork family, a compelling factor in Tunefork's seemingly unified orientation towards music making is Tabbal's singular role in professionalizing and mentoring bands since the beginning of their careers as artists. [81] "Thank God for Fadi," Julia Sabra said, reflecting on her growth as a musician over the last few years. "I went to NDU for three years, but the best music lessons in my life I've gotten from Fadi," [82]

> He's listened to everything, he knows everything, he's super objective when it comes to…and he understands,…he knows everything, it's not just pop, it's everything. And he taught us how to listen, and how to think about music, and how to approach sound, and how to—he pushed me to write better lyrics. I'm the musician I am today because of Fadi, honestly, and I think a lot of people are. If they don't say it, it's because they can't admit it to themselves, but it's there, honestly (interview with author, 7/10/2019).

For bands like Safar, who adopted their band name and started writing original music only after they met him, Tabbal became such an integral part of their songwriting process that for a short while, they considered and billed him as a member of the band, going so far as to take him on tour with them through Europe (interview, 5/20/2019). Tabbal is not quite as involved in most of Tunefork's other bands, but his insistence on developing a mature and intentional sound through close listening and dedicated work has nonetheless shaped their experience and at times their ability to record and release music.

The members of KOZO invited me to sit in on one of their rehearsals at Tunefork studios. During breaks, we chatted about their history as a band, their experience making music in Beirut, and their upcoming album. "It took two years to get here," guitarist Georgy Flouty (GF) told me. Drummer Elie Khoury (EK) added:

> EK: with the help of Fadi…because we wanted to record a year ago. Like, the songs we have on the album are songs that we've been playing for ages.
>
> GF: and a lot of songs didn't make it.

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[80] Audience member in conversation with author, January 2, 2019.

[81] It is significant to note that a unified orientation to sound is markedly different from a single way of sounding. An orientation to sound informed by Tabbal's mentorship and production and inflected by the social and musical crossings that take place at Tunefork Studios makes room for a wide array of aesthetics and styles whereas the notion of a single sound forecloses the possibility of variance.

[82] Notre Dame University (NDU), one of few universities in Lebanon that offer graduate degrees in music. After graduating from the American University of Beirut, Sabra completed a master's degree in Musicology at NDU.

> EK: yeah. And Fadi made us work and work on them and change them. Especially now that we have 3 guitars, it's like, layering the frequencies and getting the tones right so that everything could be heard.
>
> Andrew Georges (AG): I think we really hated Fadi for a while. We were really frustrated, and we really just wanted to get the record out.
>
> Camille Cababe (CC): He was like "no, you have to practice 2-3 times a week, practice the songs."
>
> AG: But I think he had a much broader vision than we did.
>
> EK: He saw us—I think he used to place more value on us than we placed on ourselves

When bands do prove themselves as having paid the Tabbal's costs of admission by striving to meet his exacting aesthetic standards, KOZO told me, there are marked perks. In addition to access to a vibrant social sphere and affiliation with a reputable independent music studio, artists who gain Tabbal's trust are granted access to Tunefork as a physical space:

> Charbel Khoury (CK): I think that the turning point for us was…Fadi actively has this idea for the studio. He wants to make it into a space where it can feel like home for as many people as it can fit. It's not that big. So he started letting us practice here, which is really cool. We get to practice with top-notch gear.
>
> GF: the same that we use in the concert, and when recording, so we get to refine our sound.
>
> EK: Plus there's a sort of family there. The Tunefork family. You have Kinematik, and Postcards, all these bands that we collaborate with and we're very good friends with. They help us and we help them. It creates this environment for musicians to unite.
>
> GF: Musicians that work hard. I feel like that's the most important thing for him.

The willingness to work hard, exemplified in KOZO's case by a strict and serious rehearsal schedule as well as a willingness to delay gratification and any financial gains brought on by releasing an album until it was good rather than good-enough, is perhaps the most crucial factor in gaining admission to the Tunefork family. Fundamental to Tabbal and Tunefork's raison d'être is a dedication to nurturing and growing alternative music in Lebanon. For artists, this translates as an expectation that they will work hard, defined in different circumstances as continuing to be active, committing to circulating good music, and supporting and collaborating with one another. More than a symbolic mechanism for authentication as an independent musician in Lebanon, an aesthetic orientation, or a social network, Tunefork is the crossroads at which musicians meet and exchange ideas, form alliances, and embark on unlikely or unexpected collaborations. For example, Salim Naffah, who began to work with Tabbal as part of electro-duo Loopstache, found his way into The Wanton Bishops through Tunefork, and later recruited several Tunefork friends to accompany him on albums and in performance as his most recent persona, Alko B. Postcards drummer and bassist Pascal Semerdjian and Marwan Tohme have

worked on several Tunefork albums, accompanying bands like Safar, singer-songwriter Interbellum with Postcards singer Julia Sabra, and Tabbal's own Bunny Tylers in addition to Semerdjian's brief time touring with The Wanton Bishops.

While the relatively small size of Lebanon's alternative music world, and its limited capacity to support artists has fostered creative re-arrangement and collaboration among artists and bands, Tunefork has worked to accelerate this tendency, and Tabbal's almost virtuosic ability to play musical matchmaker is at the heart of it. For musicians, the exchange of ideas and expertise presents new and potentially exciting opportunities to grow and learn from one another. By and large, musicians have been successful in their attempts to participate in multiple musical projects, each with a markedly different sound and aesthetic. However, this collaborative spirit is sometimes cited as a primary element in Tunefork's sonic homogeneity, one which affects local music on a larger scale by blurring the sonic boundaries between what were once clearly defined genres that circulated in Lebanon's alternative music world. Ziad Nawfal, Tabbal's long-time partner at Ruptured Records, says that differentiating between musical scenes and genres has become more difficult in the wake of such collaborations:

> It was super clear-cut before. And now, it's become a bit of a mess, because a lot of musicians nowadays play in different bands. And this is entirely Fadi's influence. Because he produces everyone, and because he records everyone, and because everyone intrinsically trusts him at Tunefork, everyone listens to him when he says "you should play with X, or you should play with Y," or so on…He is sort of the matchmaker for the younger breed of musicians. You will notice that two musicians from Postcards play with the Bunny Tylers, X musicians from Postcards play with Interbellum, the guitarist from KOZO plays with Filter Happier, and also plays with Alko B…this sort of incestuous cross-pollination thing is all Fadi's doing. And he's brilliant at it, because he's got an incredible ear and mind for association, and he's been able to do that wonderfully well. The downside of this is that now everyone sounds the same. Interbellum sounds like Postcards, who sound like Bunny Tylers. Postcards used to be folk, now they're rock. Bunny Tylers used to be extremely experimental, now they're more pop-ish. That's the downside of this cross-pollination, breeding between musicians (2/27/2019).

Despite its detractors, and the considerable amount of criticism leveled against it, Tunefork is the only institution of its kind. In the more than 5 years since corporate funding interests have shifted from individual alternative musicians or bands to electronic music or collaboration with promoters and organizers, Tunefork has emerged as the primary site through which to build some semblance of a musical career, receive mentorship and support, and find a musical community. Crucial also is Ruptured and Ziad Nawfal's role in circulating and providing revenue streams to Tunefork artists. Tunefork's collaboration with Ruptured has established the studio and its artists as the foremost voices in alternative music in Lebanon today, both in the country and outside of it. More than ever before, the Tunefork-Ruptured axis represents the authoritative sites and sounds of Lebanon's independent and alternative musics, and Tabbal and Nawfal's ambition, vision, and expertise are central to it.

3. Remediations: The Politics of Historical and Musical Positioning

Hamed Sinno is the only member of Lebanese alternative pop/rock band Mashrou' Leila whose body is not tethered to an external instrument. Unlike his bandmates, Sinno's stage presence is dynamic; he jumps, writhes, flirts, and banters with audiences and the rest of the band. On stage at the Baalbak Festival in 2013, Sinno—clad in tight leather pants and a white tuxedo shirt embroidered with flowers and vines—amateurishly belly dances to violinist Haig Papazian's solo, twisting and whirling his body in time with the beat. Three years later, at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall, he vogues to the driving drum and synth bass lines of a song, walking his way over to grind playfully against keyboardist Firas Gerges. At a different point in the show, Sinno gets down on one knee, clapping at Papazian in a gesture that invokes a conventionally masculine Arab dance style.

At a 2016 concert at the Forum De Beirut, Sinno's entire torso tenses and releases as he cycles through register and vocal color, bringing his thumb and index and ring fingers together to grasp and emphasize strong beats and significant words or syllables. Watching from the crowd, I can't help but notice that his hands seem more animated during passages which more heavily resemble Arabic music in terms of vocal production and ornamentation. His hand makes a subtle 'wave' motion, following the brief dip of his voice into a neighboring tone. Later they climb and weave as he sings an intricately winding melodic pattern, make a subtle 'wave' motion following the brief dip of his voice into a neighboring tone. Finally, the fingers of one hand turn up and away from his body slightly—the phrase has ended, leaving me struck by how strongly his musical and gestural references to Arabic classical music shine through.

Figure 3.23. Hamed Sinno at EXIT Festival 2017 (Photo by Jelena Ivanović EXIT photo team, https://www.flickr.com/photos/48584875@N05/35744616416).

In many obvious ways, Mashrou' Leila's music is deeply indebted to the Arabic music

that its members grew up around. In keeping with its established conventions, most of their songs are set in a recognizable maqam[83] and rhythmic mode.[84] Sinno's vocals are deeply inflected with classical Arabic musical ornamentation and coloristic play, and perhaps most obviously, until Summer 2019, they wrote songs only in Arabic. Still, their particular style of Arabic indie rock-pop has been critiqued for being not Arab enough, and simultaneously too Arab. Sinno's Arabic pronunciation—particularly allegations that it is garbled and unclear—and skilled vocal ornamentation are often at the heart of such evaluations. Mashrou' Leila is not unique in this way. Many Lebanese musicians making alternative music have faced allegations of being either inauthentic to their Lebanese and Arab roots, or of being too preoccupied with performing cultural authenticity. The stakes, here, are multiple. Both at home and abroad, musicians bear the burden of representation—of speaking for Lebanon, from some sort of "genuinely Lebanese" subject position. This has a bearing on musicians' mobility and their music's circulation; they must strike a balance between being different and compelling enough to appeal to a Lebanese and regional audience, but remain marketable to, and legible within an international market whose expectations from a Lebanese band are reductive at best, and orientalizing at their worst.

This issue goes beyond market pressures. Musicians involved in making Lebanon's alternative music whose work articulates the experiences of a milieu of urban, well-educated, socially and financially mobile individuals, are entangled in larger conversations about Lebanon's seemingly elusive national history and character. The question of cultural positioning—and by extension historical positioning—is deeply implicated in the politics of claiming a national history for Lebanon. Academic and journalistic writings on the period since the 1975-1991 civil wars' end frame understandings of Lebanese society and politics around a governmentally mandated amnesia surrounding the wars' events. In the absence of any officially endorsed narratives of, or fora for discussion surrounding this period in Lebanon's past, the time before the onset of protracted violence in 1975 has been constructed as a foil to these years—a lost "golden age," characterized by economic growth, cultural cosmopolitanism, and religious plurality. Through these lenses—"golden age" nostalgia and post-war amnesiac trauma—Lebanon's present is construed as precarious and perpetually at the verge of renewed violence. These lenses have in turn shaped understandings of cultural practices in Lebanon and by Lebanese artists as negotiating issues of collective memory, defiantly witnessing and healing from the violence of the wars, or anticipating future violence. Artistic work that has not confirmed or replicated these tropes has enjoyed less commercial and critical success, particularly in the international press and market.

Artist and writer Walid Sadek proposes that the precarity of the present is caused in large part by the forcible severing of conceptions of time and understandings of Lebanese history from places of experience and habitation (2011:49). Where this rupture is caused in large part by

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[83] It should be noted that none of this is intentional. The band has maintained that their composition process is not explicitly concerned with any resemblances to Arabic music and its conventions.

[84] Most authors agree that Arabic music is, at its most basic level, characterized by a body of urban secular genres (such as the dawr, qasida, muwashshah, taqtuqa), the compositional use of maqam—melodic modes that make up the raw pitch material of Arabic music as well as conventions of sounding and unfolding these pitches—setting within a certain iqa'a, or rhythmic mode, and a skilled vocal rendition. To be considered skilled, a vocalist needed to showcase clear Arabic pronunciation, a strong voice, wide range, clear command of various coloristic resonances (rasp, nasality, head vs. chest, open frontal resonances), and be able to dynamically accentuate the song's text through immaculate pronunciation and the skilled deployment of various ornaments (Danielson, 1991; al-Khula'I, 1904). For more on Maqam, see Scott Marcus' 1989 dissertation, "Arabic Music Theory in the Modern Period."

dominant political rhetoric and academic framing, Sadek insists that art and ostensibly other cultural practices are key to repairing the seeming incompatibility of temporal frameworks with feelings and experiences of place. The work of the artist, Sadek claims, is to search for a "habitable chronotope…a concrete whole made of thickened time which charges space and turns it responsive to its movement" (2011:49).[85] In Sadek's formulation, a "habitable chronotope" promises to challenge the hegemony of opposing conceptions of temporality that continue to exert force over ways of being in and experiencing Lebanon's present. Writing in Lebanon in the aftermath of former prime minister Rafik El Hariri's February 2005 assassination and the Summer 2006 Hezballah-Israel war, the opposing conceptions of temporality that Sadek is referring to here are what he terms the "prolonged now" of Hezballah's political rhetoric urging hyper-vigilance in the face of infinitely imminent threats to the nation, and the Future Movement's framework of waiting in which the future set in motion by Hariri's assassination is deferred until a conclusive verdict about his death is reached. Hegemonic and competing conceptions of the space-time of Lebanon's national history have existed since the nation's founding, which was and continues to be marked by tensions between Arabism and Phoenicianism. [86] Before the events of 2005, the major spacio-temporal incongruity shaping experiences of daily life in Lebanon was caused by the Lebanese government's policy of silence and denial surrounding the events and legacies of the 1975-1990 civil wars. In the wake of such competing and overlapping conceptions of temporality, I argue that the question of art's role in rehabilitating or repairing the relationship of time and space is fundamental to many of the issues of positioning that face my interlocutors involved in Lebanon's alternative music world.

For many alternative musicians in Lebanon—individuals who were born largely towards the end of, or immediately after the civil wars—the way through this dilemma of representation has been to insistently reject the need to engage it at all. Still, a considerable amount of alternative music in Lebanon is clearly legible within 20th century paradigms of Arabic or Lebanese music-making, commonly referred to as Arabic music (al-Musiqa al-'Arabiyya), and *fulklur*, or Lebanese popular song. The vast majority of artists, however, are hesitant to attribute this sound to a deliberate effort to index past musical practices and the social and cultural politics with which they are aligned. Instead, many of my interlocutors have insisted that their particular vocal stylings, ornamentation, approach to pitch and rhythm, lyrics, and at times instrumentation are "just what happened."[87] This reluctance to take a firm stance on the role of such repertoires within contemporary musical practice is in large part a product of the aforementioned politics of positioning.

In this chapter, I examine the work of artists whose music indexes these cultural and political pasts. I argue that references to, and indexing of dominant musical practices such as Arabic music and *fulklur* operate towards two separate but entangled ends: to position alternative music in relation to local and global circulating musical practices, and to (re)mediate understandings of the trajectory of Lebanon's history and politics in attempts to imagine and evoke a habitable chronotope for Lebanon. By this I mean that artists reframe understandings of

[85] Sadek, here, references the work of literary theorist Michael Bakhtin, who first proposed the chronotope as a way of understanding narrative texts as constructing particular fictional worlds rather than being composed solely of a sequence of diagetic events. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as follows: In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time…thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (1981 [1930]:84).
[86] For more on this, see "Lebanon Before the "Lebanese Nights"" below.
[87] Author's interview with Hamed Sinno, 12/7/2016.

the country's present by addressing or evading what Sadek describes as a "political crisis surrounding the conception of a national time" (2011:51). Following from this, I argue that these spatiotemporal re-mediations open up possibilities for imagining and anticipating social and political futures alternative to the "inevitable" continuation of sectarian violence. This chapter explores how this indexing does the work of bridging the past with the present, in order to construct or imagine a future in which the sounds, practices, and values of Lebanon's past—thought to have been lost to the political and cultural violence of the civil wars and the subsequent decades of officially endorsed amnesia—are relevant and accessible. By "resurrecting" (Toufic, 2009) and re-mediating referents from various musical pasts, I argue, musicians are drawing historical, sonic, and cultural through-lines, thus establishing and claiming a localized, sounded repertoire of performance practice. This repertoire drawn largely from Arab and Lebanese musical pasts, is itself entangled in the histories and politics of mid-to-late-20th century independence and nationalist movements, all of which come to bear on the discourses of authenticity, creativity and emplacement in contemporary alternative music in Lebanon.

The Politics of Positioning

I meet Joe Kazan, the keyboardist of up-and-coming indie pop band Waynick,[88] and one of its principal vocalists and lyricists, early on a Thursday morning. Café Younes, located just off Ras Beirut's bustling Hamra Street, is conveniently deserted at this hour. Joe, a medical student at the American University of Beirut, is generous with his limited time. Over several hours, he talks to me about the difficulties of starting out as an indie band in Beirut, and is forthcoming about the ways that Waynick has tried to be strategic in its songwriting. He tells me that local promoter and Beirut Jam Sessions organizer Anthony Semaan, a good friend of Kazan's, had urged the band to try to make music in Arabic. Semaan, Kazan tells me, knows representatives from streaming services whose companies, interested in tapping an Arab market, were looking for local artists whose music would sell to an Arabic-speaking audience. "And we have barely any bands in Lebanon who do any Arabic music, so why not? But for me it was about not pushing it…if it worked it worked. If not, then not. That's the issue with Lebanese people," he tells me:

> Arabic is no one's first language...a lot of people force themselves into Arabic music...[but] we tried…it started off with me doing a cover of "Postcards From Italy" in Arabic. So, it was just me, in my dorm, trying to translate something…I was trying to evoke the language used in the Rahbani Era. It was about pronunciation…It was like, half Lebanese, but also half actual Arabic. It has this very structured way of pronouncing things. And I think people are actually enjoying it. So we have these two songs that we're doing in Arabic... It's going to be this social experiment for us (7/11/2019).

Joe's comments clearly delineate the problem-space in which many of Lebanon's alternative musicians must operate and make decisions.[89] Local alternative bands come under pressure to act as representatives of some sort of authentic Lebanese-ness, measured against often reductive and

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[88] Waynick—which translates to "where are you?"—is an inside joke, a reference to the fact that members of the band had a hard time finding the location of their first rehearsal at the American University of Beirut.

[89] "Problem-space," is a term coined by anthropologist David Scott in *Refashioning Futures* (1999) and further expanded in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004). Scott defines "problem-space" as "an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological stakes) hangs (2004:4)."

idealized notions of what a band from Lebanon should sound like. These notions are constructed mutually by the international music market, press, and at times academia, as well as by people in Lebanon who are attached to particular ways of being Lebanese and expressing Lebanese culture. As suggested by Kazan's evocation of the Rahbani brothers[90], these pressures call for an alignment with Lebanon's dominant sonic heritage regime (Bendix, 2012), which, as this chapter will explore, anchors authenticity to specific chronotopes. Furthermore, they are bound to the Arabic language in a way that is incommensurate with musicians' lived experience.

When Kazan argues that, in Lebanon, "Arabic is no one's first language," he refers to the fact that our generation (at least, a specific socioeconomic subset thereof) largely grew up codeswitching between Lebanon's multiple official languages at home, and at school was educated in English or French. The absurdity of demanding "authenticity" through language is plain in the keyboardist's story of his first-ever "Arabic" song, a laboriously translated cover of an English-language track. It seems only appropriate that the band Kazan chose to cover, comprised exclusively of (non-Arab) Americans and based in Santa Fe, is called Beirut; the choice seems to underscore the dynamics of imperialism and exchange that resulted in both the assumption that Kazan would express himself most "genuinely" in Arabic and the material conditions that ensured he could not. Anthony Semaan understands these dynamics as being implicated in a larger "identity crisis,"

> meaning—I'm sitting with you right now, we're speaking in English not in Arabic, one. There's—when artists start writing songs, because they've been influenced by English music, they write in English. And so, there's this identity crisis that we all have as Lebanese. And that's having an effect on how music is being recorded and spread, and so on. I dunno, it's really difficult to see how to pinpoint it, but I think having that identity crisis has a major role already in us being confused, and what we're writing (4/7/2019).

Here, Semaan expresses anxiety surrounding the "influence" of English-language music as having generated a crisis of identity, evoking (consciously or not) a long history of Lebanese cultural politics. Indeed, the choice of language is here implicated in a larger politics of positioning, which surpasses the issue of marketability or perceived authenticity. This politics of positioning is bound up in the fraught project of claiming a past for Lebanon, and by virtue of this, understanding or recuperating discourses surrounding its national character. Instances of alignment with heritagized and authenticated musical practices engage and challenge dominant chronopolitics (Elias, 2015) by suggesting ideological and cultural through-lines that actively combat narratives of loss or rupture since the civil wars.

In order to understand the "audible entanglements" of musical practices with understandings of and orientations towards the space-time of Lebanon both throughout the 20th century and in the present (Guilbault, 2005), I will briefly outline a history of Lebanon from the formation of the Mutasarrifiyya of Mount Lebanon in 1861 until the outbreak of the civil wars in 1975. In writing this history, I attend to the mutually generative relationship of music with Lebanese nationalism first under the French mandate, and then in the decades immediately following Lebanese independence in 1943. I will also pay particular attention to the ways in which sound articulated and framed the temporal politics of the nascent Lebanese state. In particular, I will focus on the founding of the Baalbak International Festival and the

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[90] The Rahbani Brothers were composers and musicians whose mid-to-late 20th century work with the singer Fairuz was integral to the creation and dissemination of a Lebanese nationalist mythology as well as a distinctly Lebanese musical idiom. For more on the Rahbani Brothers and their role in Lebanese nationalism, see below.

establishment of its "Lebanese Nights" program in 1957 as pivotal moments in the negotiation and sonic articulation of Lebanon's chronopolitics. Baalbak and its "Lebanese Nights" are important primarily as the site of the emergence of the Fairuz and Rahbani sound, which, as Waynick's Joe Kazan implied, continues to index dominant understandings of Lebanon and its musical pasts. Having established the context, I will turn to the ways in which these historical ideological and aesthetic forces operate on the present in relation to practices such as Lebanon's alternative music. Following the work of Lebanese artist and theorist Jalal Toufic and queer theorist Jose Muñoz, I call this kind of semiotic work a "resurrection" (Toufic, 2009) or unearthing of the "not-quite-conscious" (Muñoz, 2009:21), which operates in service of reorienting understandings of the life in Lebanon, and articulating investments in possible futures.

Competing Temporalities

When Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers were asked to compose and perform music at the Baalbak International Festival's inaugural "Lebanese Nights," the Festival's organizational committee, was not enthusiastic about the idea.[91] The inclusion of the "Lebanese Nights," a folkloric program which sought to *preserve* and *revitalize* tradition, in the 1957 season of the Baalbak International Festival, was a decision made largely by president Camille Chamoun and his wife, Zalfa. In the face of mounting sectarian tension, the president sought to codify and institutionalize folk traditions which he felt were being eroded by rapidly changing demographics and large-scale migration and emigration (Stone, 2008). In the face of this presidential mandate, the Festival Committee "could barely hide their anger, concern and fear about including a program of local art in this international festival" (Nabil Abu Murad, in Abi Samra 1998:9). Their vision for Lebanon as represented at Baalbak left no room for "traditional" Arabic song as it had existed. They cautioned against the length of such songs and the aesthetics of *tarab*, to which they claimed their audience had become averse after experiencing more "cultivated" foreign works at Baalbak. Despite the Festival Committee's concerns about contaminating the West-facing image of Lebanon developed at Baalbak, Fairuz and the Rahbanis did perform their work in 1957. The trio were met with such success that they continued to stage musical plays at Baalbak almost annually until the Festival's suspension in 1975, at the beginning of the civil wars.

The Committee's fear about tarnishing the reputation of Baalbak as a site and a cultural event by including music that seemed too "Arab" articulated tensions dominant within Lebanon's politics since its coherence into a geopolitical body in the 1860s, and then a national entity in the 1920s. At odds were two dominant spatiotemporal orientations towards Lebanon and its history. The Festival Committee, in line with dominant Christian nationalisms, was attached to the idea of Lebanon's ancient pre-Islamic, Roman and Phoenician past, and sought to orient Lebanon in relation to Europe and the West. Arabic music, based in Egypt and associated

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[91] According to a 1957 article in local French-language newspaper *Le Jour,* The Festival Committee was made up of: Aimeé Kettaneh (President), Selim Haidar and Khalil Hibri (Vice-Presidents), Jean Fattal and Samir Souki (Secretaries), Jean Skaf (Coordinator), Elia Abi-Jaoude (Tresurer), May Arida, Nina Jedejian, Salwa Es-Said, and Fouad Sarrouf (Advisors). While the committee is purported to be made up of volunteers, those who have served on it have always been prominent members of middle-and upper-class society. As evidenced by accounts of how Aimee Kettaneh came to be the founding president of the Festival committee, the first committee was made up of close friends and acquaintances of Lebanon's Presidential couple (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2010). It is notable that the committee featured a high proportion of women, and that the individuals who served on it came largely from Christian families.

at the time with the growing tide of Nasserism, was understood to represent a predominantly Muslim pan-Arabist orientation, and positioned Lebanon within Arab and Islamic cultural histories.

Lebanon Before the "Lebanese Nights": 1860-1957

The idea of an autonomous Lebanese state began to crystallize in the semi-autonomous Mutasarrifiya of Mount Lebanon. The Mutasarrifiyya was established in 1861, following the end of the 1860 Mount Lebanon civil war between local Maronite Christian and Druze populations, a conflict commonly cited as Lebanon's first sectarian war. The war of 1860 created an ideal opening for French forces, who intervened in defense of the Ottoman Empire's Christian minorities, to realize long-standing colonial interests in the region. Due largely to French rhetoric of humanitarian intervention, the Mutasarrifiya became a self-governing entity within the framework of the Ottoman Empire, conceived as a haven for Christians but inclusive of the Druze of Mount Lebanon. In *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteeth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*, Lebanese historian Ussama Makdissi argues that the Mutasarrifiyya and the 1860 civil war, rather than arising out of an existing culture of sectarian affiliation, caused an intensification and discursive centering of such identity categories, thus entrenching the sectarianism which continues to shape understandings of Lebanese socio-politics (2000). For the Ottomans, Europeans, and local elites, Makdissi asserts, sectarianism became a convenient mode of justifying and advancing political moves towards reform, intervention, and the reconsolidation of power. The Mutasarrifiya lasted until 1914, when administrative rights were returned to the military governing body of Ottoman Greater Syria in response to the outbreak of the First World War. However, from it rose a powerful and pervasive chronotope of "the mountain" as the locus of an authentic Lebanese-ness.

With the Ottoman defeat in 1919 came the division of the Levant into French and British mandate areas. Realizing the Mutasarrifiya's vision of an independent Lebanese state, the French mandate of Greater Lebanon was created in 1920. As historian Kamal Salibi explains:

> [the] Maronites had pressed for the extension of this small Lebanese territory to what they argued were its natural and historical boundaries: it would then include the coastal towns of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre and their respective hinterlands…and the fertile valley of the Bekaa…According to the Maronite argument, this 'Greater Lebanon' had always had a special social and historical character, different from that of its surroundings, which made it necessary and indeed imperative for France to help establish it as an independent state...the French government did not support their demands without reserve. In Mount Lebanon, the Maronites had formed a clear majority of the population. In a 'Greater Lebanon', they were bound to be outnumbered by the Muslims of the coastal towns and their hinterlands, and by those of the Bekaa valley…The Maronites, however, were insistent in their demands (Salibi, 1988:26).

The expansion of Lebanon's borders brought with it more than just a challenge to the Mutasarrifiyya's demographics; in contrast to the mountain's master-narrative of Lebanon as the genetic and cultural inheritor of the glories of ancient civilizations such as that of the Phoenicians, residents of the newly incorporated coastal and valley regions understood themselves as belonging to a shared Arab culture and past. This was a clash of temporalities as much as a clash of cosmologies and sectarian identities.

It is no surprise, then, that investments in the creation of a national musical culture, distinct

from popular Arabic and art musics,[92] animated Lebanese public discourse in the early 20th century. Even before Lebanon gained its independence from France in 1943, questions of modernization—understood as distancing Lebanon from Arabic musical repertoires in order to achieve cultural parity with Europe—were of critical importance to a growing milieu of Lebanese intelligentsia (Abbani, 2018). In addition to the proliferation of the piano as a symbol of both middle-class status and its emergent modern cultural sensibility, steps were taken to institutionalize this Eurocentric modernity through the creation of the Dar al-Musiqa (The House of Music) in 1910. Dar al-Musiqa would be renamed Madrasat al-Musiqa al-Wataniyya (The National School of Music) in 1925, and eventually the Madrasat al-Conservatoire (The National Conservatory of Music) in 1929 (Abbani, 2018:60). In each of its iterations, the Conservatory of Music provided instruction only in European art music. The implications of this were clear; modernity, according to dominant Lebanese sensibilities of the time, meant being well versed in a canon of European art music. Rather than simply emulating such styles and genres, however, Beirut's growing urban middle class of well-educated, socially and financially mobile intellectuals and businesspeople argued for the need to revitalize local and regional art forms by infusing them with elements of European art musical practice (Abbani, 2018:56). From the moment of their emergence, then, the cultural logics of the nascent Lebanese state deliberately positioned the country in between a European modernity and an Arab past, defining the present in the tension between the two

The urgency and parameters of this project made sense. The establishment of the State of Greater Lebanon under the French Mandate marked the first moment in which Lebanon, as a bounded geopolitical entity, existed and was recognized as such. While the Mutasarrifiyya gestured towards the existence of a Lebanese state, the distinctly Lebanese national cultural imaginary that did exist before the end of the First World War was tempered by the Mutasarrifiyya's economic, social, and political entanglements with the Ottoman Empire and Greater Syria. The rhetorics of modernization central to discourses around music and music making in the early 20th century echoed larger conversations and anxieties about the expansion of Mutasarrifiyya's borders to include new territories to its North, South, and West into what became known as "Greater Lebanon".

The French mandate ended in 1943 with the creation of the Republic of Lebanon. Where the French colonial administration had neglected to implement any institutional solutions to the sectarian tensions created by the expansion of Mount Lebanon's geopolitical borders, the Republic's first act included the negotiation of a National Pact. A "gentleman's agreement" between Sunni and Maronite political elites, the National Pact laid the foundations for Lebanon as a multiconfessional state, and institutionalized a compromise between Lebanon's competing spatiotemporalities. The agreement established Lebanon as an independent, sovereign entity *'thu wajh arabi'*—with an Arab face, but a Western, cosmopolitan character. Moreover, it formalized an agreement by Christian and Muslim leadership to seek neither unity with Syria and pan-Arabist ideologies, nor special ties with France or the West. In doing so, the National Pact gave rise to a new spatiotemporal politics preoccupied with carefully balancing the competing interests and orientations of various national groups as well as negotiating and drawing the

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[92] Genres of music associated with the 19th century's Nahda [Renaissance] were known as turath, or heritage, and were understood in the early 20th century as high art forms. They were therefore distinguished from popular music of the time—what is now thought of as classical music, and what I have elsewhere referred to as "Arabic music". For more on shifting conceptions of turath, see Salwa El-Shawan Castello-Branco's 1980 "Al-Musika Al-'Arabiyyah: A Category of Urban Music in Cairo, Egypt, 1927-1977."

boundaries for Lebanon's futurity as a nation-state.

"Lebanese Nights" and the Creation of a Lebanese National Music

In the decade immediately following Lebanese independence, the spatiotemporal compromise of the National Pact failed to completely assuage tensions between competing Christian and Muslim chronotopes. Instead, these tensions bled into debates around an emerging national culture, including efforts to distance Lebanon from Arabic music. These efforts matured with the establishment first of the Baalbak International Festival in 1955 and then the creation of its "Lebanese Nights" in 1957. While there existed a significant body of local musics in circulation predominantly on national radio, the music composed for and performed at The Baalbak International Festival's "Lebanese Nights" acquired an unprecedented level of representational authority, and to this day continues to index notions of Lebanese-ness in music. This was possible largely through its affiliation with Baalbak as a focal point of an emergent Lebanese nationalist mythology, and the Festival's close ties to the Lebanese presidency and the former French authorities.

Baalbak as a site and as a sign sits at the intersection of multiple overlapping claims to and orientations towards the space-time of Lebanese nationalism. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984, the ancient Roman city in the Eastern Bekaa Valley is one of Lebanon's premier tourist destinations, and has been at the center of several national branding projects and tourist campaigns over the decades. Proto-nationalist narratives based in Baalbak's Phoenician and Roman pasts predated the Republic of Lebanon, but became central to Lebanese nationalism in the 1950s and 60s. This historical orientation—which reflected dominant Christian chronopolitical investments by establishing a connection between Lebanon and a pre-Islamic past—was authenticated by the founding of the Baalbak International Festival.

The brainchild of then-president Camille Chamoun, the Baalbak Festival staged its first performances in the summer of 1955. The concept grew out of a tradition of performing at the ruins which dates back to 1922, when a group of high ranking French military officers on a tour of the new mandate area were inspired to recite poetry on the steps of the Temple of Bacchus. The group later continued to stage plays in the same location, featuring members of the French and Lebanese Christian elite (Stone, 2008). That the official history of the Baalbak Festival is aligned so closely with the French mandate of Lebanon and its annexation of the Bekaa valley to create Greater Lebanon brings to light the inherent inequities within the construction and institutionalization of the Lebanese state and its heritage regime. After the Festival's success in in the summer of 1955 came the decision to turn it into an annual organized event, and a festival committee was formed. Attempts to reconnect Lebanon with its Phoenician past were central to the Festival's rhetoric. For the occasion of the first Baalbak Festival, Chamoun wrote,

> The historical role of Lebanon has been since time immemorial, is now, and will continue to be primarily the development of culture and civilization. In organizing this International Festival in the magnificent temples of Baalbeck…Lebanon has been conscious of and faithful to its heritage. ([1955]1994)

The work that Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers performed at Baalbak's "Lebanese Nights" (re)mediated musical and visual signs that indexed the rich and gloried pasts that Chamoun was referring to. Through their music, the temporal and identitarian compromises that defined national character according to the 1943 National Pact were brought to bear on musical style and aesthetics.

While the body of work written for and performed at Baalbak's "Lebanese Nights" in the 1950s and 60s was varied, it is united by several key compositional and stylistic characteristics. Crucially, considering the Festival Committee's concern about the length of *tarab* songs, most of the music written for Baalbak was significantly shorter than most songs in circulation at the time—particularly those of the popular *ughniya* genre. Moreover, most of the pieces were entirely pre-composed, and therefore left no room for improvisation or extemporaneous expression, thus distinguishing the Baalbak/Rahbani style from dominant *tarab* convention. The Rahbani Brothers' lyrics were rooted in environmental imagery pertaining to Lebanon, used the Lebanese dialect, and eschewed established poetic settings, further distancing themselves from *tarab* or Arabic music. The Rahbanis' choice of instrumentation was also integral to creating the conditions of possibility for a distinctly Lebanese style of music. The majority of circulating musics at the time, known by the blanket term "Al Musiqa al Arabiyya," or Arabic music, featured instruments that originated in the *takht* ensemble—oud, violin, nay, qanun, and Arabic percussion. While these instruments were present in Rahbani compositions, their orchestration emphasized less conventional instruments such as the accordion, wood recorder, buzuq, and piano, as well as European orchestral instruments. In an interview with ethnomusicologist Kenneth Habib, Mansour Rahbani speaks to their myriad influences:

> We were influenced unconsciously by Arab music, and Byzantine, Syriac, Muslim, Turkish, Armenian, Assyrian. Also we were influenced by European music because we studied that. Also the windows of all cultures are open. For example, a song is born in America and the next day it becomes popular in Lebanon. Nowadays the interaction between cultures is very fast…We are influenced by all of this…when we produced, our production was neither eastern nor western, but it was Rahbani... Without modesty and without lying. We are international (2005:144/5).

Echoing the internationalist sentiment Mansour Rahbani's statement, the music that debuted at Baalbak in 1957 clearly positioned itself sonically in relation to the three points of reference dominant within nationalist discourse at the time: Arab nationalism, the West, and Lebanese culture, conceived as local folklore. Drawing from the linguistic cosmopolitanism central to Lebanese national character, the Rahbani brothers and their contemporaries at Baalbak used three distinct musical "languages," or *alwan*[93]—lawn arabi (the Arabic), lawn fulkluri (the folkloric), and lawn gharbi (the Western), in order to sonically and aesthetically position Lebanon. *lawn arabi,* which drew from Arabic music, is most audible formally. The rhythmic organization, song form, tonality, and the use of *takht* instruments furnished the music of the Rahbani brothers with an "Arab face." These Arabic musical stylistic elements amounted to what was largely a symbolic gesture, much in the same way as the National Pact's nod to Lebanon's Arabness.

Many of the elements that placed the Rahbanis' music within repertoires of Arabic music were undermined by characteristics that exemplify *lawn gharbi*. European orchestral instruments such as the piano, xylophone, and various woodwinds and brass, were unable to produce the quartertones that characterized Arabic music's tonality[94]. As a result, most of the Rahbanis'

[93] Translated: "colors". In his 1982 article, "Musical Aesthetics in Present-Day Cairo," Lebanese ethnomusicologist A.J. Racy defines the concept of "lawn" (the singular of "alwan") as a set of aesthetic properties which characterize styles, ethnic groups, or individual artists.

[94] The Arabic tuning system was stardardized into 24 equal steps per octave at the 1932 Cairo Congress of Arab Music. The Congress was organized by a royal decree, on the strong recommendation of French musicologist

works were composed either explicitly in Western major or minor keys, or in musical modes corresponding to existing maqamat that did not feature microtones[95]. Texturally, this music distinguished itself from the monophony of Arabic music by utilizing vocal and instrumental homophony and polyphony which created instances of harmony that were uncharacteristic of Arabic music. The music, furthermore, utilized sonic tropes drawn from the canons of European art music—marching 4/4 percussion rhythms to denote the military, open fourths between trumpets do evoke royal grandeur—which were easily incorporated into this Lebanese popular musical project due to the central place of art music in the musical lives of Beirut's elite.

Finally, *lawn fulkluri* was indexed sonically by the use of the wood flute[96] and buzuq,[97] which were native to the Levant, and had been excluded from the popular and art music produced in Egypt. Rhythmically, the presence of the dabke[98] or dabke-inspired drum lines further located the Rahbanis' music in the Levantine folk. Lyrical references to the mountains and the sea, local foods, and folk songs worked further to place the music of the Rahbanis within an actively codifying constellation of Lebanese folklore and folk practices.[99] Significant also was the particular Arabic accent featured in their songs. The Rahbanis drew from the dialects spoken in Lebanon's mountain regions—the territories that had belonged to the Mutasarrifiyya—and adapted them by combining their characteristic sounds with the precise and clear enunciation of *fusha* Arabic.[100] The resulting patterns and cadences of speech became a hallmark of Rahbani songs, and have as a result become a standard for Lebanese dialect in music and official governmental settings.[101]

Rodolphe d'Erlanger. The Congress drew scholars and performers from Europe and throughout the Arabic-speaking world, who convened to discuss the past, present, and future of Arabic music, focusing on ways to revitalize and preserve it in the face of what was perceived to be a cultural decline.

[95] For example, the Phrygian mode corresponds exactly to maqam Kurd, and maqam Hijaz-Nahawand is differentiated from the harmonic minor scale only by a slightly lowered augmented second.

[96] Here, the wooden flute is explicitly meant to gesture towards the influences of Bedouin musical practices. For more on this, see El Hajj, 2015.

[97] The buzuq is a long-necked fretted lute native to the Levant, with corollaries in Turkey, Iran, and parts of Greece.

[98] "Dabke" is a generic name for a line dance native to the Levant. Dabke dances vary regionally and by country, but became an integral part of particularly Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian nationalist movements in the 1950s and 60s. As part of a Baalbak-centered effort to promote and preserve tradition and heritage, the Lebanese government commissioned two dancers—Wadi'a and Marwan Jarrar—to develop and standardize Lebanese dance. The couple were sent to the USSR for instruction in leading and performing in popular dance troupes, and upon their return, became instrumental in standardizing a Lebanese dabke which was performed both at Baalbak and in Rahbani plays (Adnan, 1994:135). For more on the history and contemporary politics of dabke, see Shayna Silverstein's 2012 dissertation "Mobilizing Bodies in Syria: Dabke, Popular Culture, and the Politics of Belonging," and her forthcoming book, *Performing Dabke: Popular Culture and Identity in Contemporary Syria*.

[99] The Rahbanis' project was contemporaneous with American University of Beirut professor Anis Frayha's efforts to collect and publish books of folkloric stories. Based in the same preservationism which inspired the Chamouns to host the "Lebanese Nights" at Baalbak, Frayha's books represent the discursive and ideological turn in public conceptions of national culture. Unlike the Rahbanis' project, Frayha's work was specific to the folklore of the Christians in Mount Lebanon, rather than that of Lebanon's Muslims or other coastal inhabitants. In an introduction to one of his books, Frahya wrote that the sectarian and geographic exclusions in his work were deliberate, as Lebanon's coastal cities were "never part of old Lebanon, Lebanon the mountain and the village," and its Muslim communities not the "inhabitants of old Lebanon" (Frayha 1957:10). For more on the (re)invention of folklore around this cultural moment, see El Rayes. 2022. "Hearing Cosmopolitan Nationalism in the Work of Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers."

[100] Fusha is the Arabic term for a formal register of Arabic that was standardized during the 19th century Nahda. In English, fusha is known as Modern Standard Arabic.

[101] Mansour Rahbani, confirms that this was a deliberate move: "We brought to our songs a new kind of orchestration, invoking melodies that spring from this and into them we introduced new poetic content. At that time

Although these three *alwan* draw from vastly different genealogies and musical practices to orient Lebanon sonically and inscribe the nation's newly conceived authorized heritage discourse, it is Fairuz's voice which ties all of these characters together and gives them coherence. Fairuz's voice functions conventionally within each *lawn*, while also challenging and reorienting these same conventions. The in-between-ness of Fairuz's voice can be heard most clearly in her use of a mixed voice rather than solely her chest or nasal resonances. Her voice also has a distinct lack of grain, a characteristic often described as "mukhmali" or velvety, full and clear (Habib, 2005). Both of these characteristics defy the conventions of Arabic music, which place value on full chest vocal production and vocal rasp or skillfully deployed breaks (Danielson 1991, Khula'i 1904). Fairuz demonstrates her proficiency as an Arabic music vocalist and showcases her classical training through her skillful and strategic ornamentation. Fairuz's voice, more than any other aspect of the Rahbanis' aesthetics or style, has become representative of Lebanon's music and symbolic of Lebanon itself.

Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers, and Lebanon's "Golden Age"

The decades between independence in the 1940s and the outbreak of the civil wars in 1975 are referred to nostalgically as Lebanon's "golden age." Defined largely by remarkable economic growth due to a policy of laissez-faire capitalism and the relatively peaceful coexistence of various religious groups, reports from the period often characterized Beirut and Lebanon as the "Paris" and "Switzerland of the Middle East." Even though the Lebanese writ large have enshrined this era in nostalgia and longing, this particular version of Lebanon was largely reserved for tourists and the educated elite. Utopian representations of cultural cosmopolitanism and religious pluralism are the most problematic elements of this nostalgia. While sectarian mixing and cultural exchange among the elites did occur, there wasn't any sort of public consensus concerning fundamental principles of governance, nor did there exist any administrative body which ensured confessional equality (Mackey 2008:82).

As the work of Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers grew less folkloric and their work became more and more difficult to present under the folkloric auspices of the Lebanese Nights, the trio's close ties with the Festival began to loosen. While Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers needed the Baalbak Festival in order to establish their representational authority, their ideological project continued to thrive even after their time with the Festival had ended.[102] Even as their music changed, it remained the authoritative sounding of Lebanon's various social, cultural, and political presents. Through the 1960s and early 1970s—the height of Lebanon's "golden age"—Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers continued to write and record albums, stage live performances, and tour nationally, regionally, and internationally. It was in this period that they devoted serious creative attention to television and movies, many of which drew from themes established at Baalbak even as the trio's sound became less aligned with the stylistic cosmopolitanism through which they gained their representational authority.[103]

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songs contained many perfumed and sappy words…were always about deprivation…and delicate and fragile expressions. The shortest song was twenty minutes long. We came along with the three minute song with changed words (and even changed pronunciation)" (from Zoghaib 1993:70, quoted in translation by Stone, 2008:47).

[102] Together, the trio are responsible for over 1000 songs, and 25 plays, the overwhelming majority of which feature original music and lyrics.

[103] For more on this period and on the relationship of the work of Fairuz and the Rahbani brothers to discourses of nationalism and belonging surrounding Mount Lebanon, see Christopher Stone's *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation* (2008).

Fairuz stopped collaborating with the Rahbani brothers in in late 1970s, following her divorce from Assi Rahbani and shortly after the 1975 outbreak of the civil wars, but continued to produce music in collaboration with her son, Ziad Rahbani. Quite notably, she did not perform in Lebanon for the duration of the civil wars, from 1975-1991.[104] Fairuz returned to Baalbak in 1998, to commemorate the Festival's first post-civil-wars season. Marking the occasion, literary critic Khalida Said noted that

> Fairouz…became the symbol of Baalbek. It is one of those rare times when an artist is transformed into a symbol for the nation…In the darkest days she did not give up her belief that art is the most lasting face of Lebanon…Thus she became a symbol for Lebanon and a sign of a desired utopian Lebanon (1998:125).

Fairuz's silence during the war was publicly received as an act of resistance against the violence occurring on Lebanese soil, and a show of solidarity with the Lebanese people. When young musicians index or come up against dominant notions of a Lebanese musical past, then, it is this very deliberately constructed version of a musical past, dominated sonically by Fairuz's voice, and stylistically by the aesthetics of Rahbani brothers' music, that they are referencing.

Musical Pasts as a Horizon of Possibilities

Zeid Hamdan's career has spanned the longest of any of his fellow musicians and producers. Many cite his and singer Yasmine Hamdan's[105] late 1990s band, Soapkills, as the progenitor of contemporary alternative music in Lebanon. In many ways, Soapkills' success delineated the parameters of how alternative music in Lebanon could sound. Journalists and academics writing on Lebanon have classified their music as trip-hop, citing their lo-fi sound, slower tempos, and use of synth patches, sequencers, and drum loops. Although this is a generic designation that has been confirmed and adopted by the band itself, when I met with Zeid in February 2019, he was careful to remind me that this was not all that was there. The music of Soapkills, and much of the music that Zeid and Yasmine Hamdan[106] have made since the band's dissolution in 2006, positions itself in relation to local and regional musics from the mid-to-late 20th century. Zeid told me that he has tried—with varying degrees of success—to bring these historical repertoires to bear on his music since Soapkills. When I asked him to elaborate, he quickly jumped up and searched for a video on YouTube—an adaptation of Asmahan's "Ya Dirati (My Village)," from her 1944 film "Gharam wa Intiqam (Love and Revenge)," which he arranged and performed live on national television with Dany Baladi, a former metal growler turned popstar with whom he worked briefly in the early 2000s.[107] "This track is so underrated," he tells me,

> and this way of playing it allows…any ear to appreciate it, you see? Just a guitar and voice

[104] With the exception of the staged performance of the Rahbani musical "Petra," which was shown in 1977 in both East and West Beirut.

[105] Zeid and Yasmine Hamdan are not related in any way, despite the fact that they share a last name, and were born in the same city in the same year.

[106] The band officially dissolved in 2006, after Yasmine announced that she would be moving to France to begin a solo career. She has been largely successful as a solo artist, and has released three albums under her own name, and one as the electro-pop outfit Y.A.S. In interviews and artist statements, Hamdan is forthcoming about her ambition to be a contemporary iteration of 20th century Arab divas like Fairuz and Asmahan.

[107] This song, and another adaptation—of "Ya Jarata," by Nazem El Ghazaleh—were performed on the LBC television show B-Beirut, on May 30, 2012. The video Hamdan and I watched can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcftjhy2smw&frags=pl%2cwn

> song. Most of the Arabic classical…people don't understand that it's just *songs*, you know? So that's what I like, and how I cover Arabic. I strip it from the cultural background, from takht, and I just expose the raw melody. But you keep the reference, the melody (2/8/2019)

Stripped also from this track are the markers of mawwal as a song form. Where a conventional mawwal is often unmetered or loosely metered and improvisatory, Baladi and Hamdan's adaptation leaves little room for extemporaneity. In place of the oud, qanun, and nay accompaniment featured in the Asmahan original, Hamdan accompanies Baladi on a guitalele,[108] keeping strict time with the rhythmic strumming chords.

Figure 3.24. Zeid Hamdan and Dani Baladi at Metro at Madina (photographer unknown, released on Hamdan's website: http://www.lebaneseunderground.com/dany-baladi-zeid-hamdan-live-at-metro-el-madina/)

I told Hamdan that the thing that hadn't changed is vocal technique. Baladi, despite his background in metal, and his lack of formal training in Arabic music, is skillful in his deployment of vocal ornaments. He easily executes complex turns, bends and inserts notes into longer vowel sounds, and smoothly shifts vocal resonances—from the sharp nasality of his head voice to the full warmth of his chest voice, with occasional deliberate vocal breaks or rasp inserted for dramatic effect. Hamdan agreed with me, and added that "the composition is the same," the melody is unchanged from the Asmahan original, "but I stripped all the orchestration that creates distance between you and the time and country. You don't relate to it [the original] immediately, you don't see how modern it is" (2/8/2019).

The issue, it would seem, is that the perceived social and cultural distance between Arabic music and contemporary life renders the former irrelevant. For Hamdan, an enthusiastic collaborator, co-owner and producer at Mooz Records who has worked with or produced a significant number of alternative musicians in Beirut over the last two decades, the project has been to find ways to bridge the gap between the *then* and *there* of Arabic music's pasts, with the *here* and *now* of alternative music's present. In the language of Lebanese artist and theorist Jalal Toufic, Hamdan's work with Arabic music "resurrects" referents that have been lost to the ideological and cultural violence of the wars and the time since their end by making evident their "withdrawal" from lived experience (2009).

Toufic uses the formulation "surpassing disaster" as a framework for understanding

[108] A guitalele is a hybrid between a guitar and a tenor or baritone ukulele. It is smaller in size than a classical guitar, but retains the instrument's six strings rather than the ukulele's four.

instances of human violence in a way that foregrounds the epistemic rupture they cause, rather than the number of lives or objects of cultural value lost in their wake. This epistemic rupture is caused, Toufic asserts, by the "immaterial withdrawal" of tradition—the loss of referents necessary to constructing a coherent or intelligible record of the past. In this framework, the artist's role is to resurrect the referent by making its withdrawal visible, thereby repairing the broken threads—both epistemological and semiotic—between the past and the present. While Toufic's writing places value on resurrecting referents that have specifically been lost or obscured and are no longer in circulation, I argue that alternative music's "resurrection" operates to make relevant in new and accessible ways those practices and aesthetics that have been abstracted by (or into) practices of heritagization, and which have come to operate largely as signifiers or sites for nostalgic yearning for a pre-war past. Specifically, I am talking about the musical practices associated with Lebanon's past that arose alongside 1950s discourses of heritage and cultural authenticity and their entanglement with a national nostalgia that obscures an actual, lived, past—that of the violence of the civil wars. Alternative musicians today are abstracted from these practices both by virtue of the exclusion of popular musics—particularly popular musics that draw from globally circulating repertoires—from these authorized heritage discourses (Smith, 2006, 2011), and by the manufactured nostalgia for the "golden age" with which such music has been ideologically and temporally situated.[109]

Zeid Hamdan does this kind of work with Dany Baladi, through covers such as "Ya Dirati," and much of his original work since. This project of resurrection is especially audible within the early music of Soapkills, where it was enacted very deliberately; for example, the two recently repatriated Hamdans[110] brought on local actor and playwright Rabih Mroue and artist Walid Sadek as lyricists and musical collaborators on their 2000 album, *Bater*. Mroue and Sadek's role in the creation of Soapkills' first studio album was to ensure the cultural relevance—to authenticate and impart its "Arabness"—and linguistic playfulness of the band's sound and lyrics.[111]

In resurrecting and re-mediating Lebanon's musical and cultural pasts, artists like Zeid Hamdan do the work of positioning themselves vis-à-vis a specific, emplaced, sounded history and praxis and suggesting that these practices have bearing on the contemporary moment. In doing so, these artists so render the pasts that they sonically index accessible to those in the future. In this way, such work is speculative and anticipatory. It is proleptic. In mobilizing a past from which they have been estranged via dominant chronopolitics, and to which they have been denied access by hegemonic understandings of genre and musical aesthetics, musicians are creating a vocabulary and set of referents for the construction and emergence of "habitable chronotopes," to use Sadek's expression, ways of representing the space-time of Lebanon that resonate with and express real, lived experiences of the present.

Mashrou' Leila's early music was explicit in its critiques of dominant chronopolitics and the havoc they have wreaked on lived experiences in the present. "'Ubwa," Arabic for "bomb," is the second track of the band's eponymous first album. The song opens with radio static, placing the listeners in an open, empty sonic field. A chromatic violin motif and heavily distorted

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[109] It is worth reiterating here, that alternative musicians' abstraction or distance from the "golden age" is also a factor of their relative youth. Born towards the end or immediately after the civil wars, these musicians' never experienced for themselves the cultural moment against which they continue to be evaluated and found wanting.
[110] Both Zeid and Yasmine Hamdan spent their formative years abroad, and only returned to Lebanon in their late teens, after the end of the civil wars.
[111] For more on this, see the discussion of CD Theque as a seminal space of artistic contact and collaboration in Chapter 1

guitar line pan across the soundscape, bringing with them a ticking sound. Police sirens follow shortly after them. The violin and guitar lines loop, rendering the ticking meaningless except to keep circular time. Into this din enters Sinno's voice, double-tracked and dispassionate in its delivery of lyrics that reference Fairuz's "Tik Tik Tik Im Sleiman:" "Tik tik tik Im Sleiman/Tik tik tik tik boom/…/How am I supposed to care for politics when everything here is booby trapped/And everybody's stubborn that their religion has the best color?"[112] The verses are punctuated by the chromatically meandering staccato of Haig Papazian's *colle*-bowed violin line.

The song lyrically indexes Lebanese musical pasts while sampling and referencing sounds that have become commonplace in contemporary life, such as the call to prayer and bombs exploding, atop a backbeat, a synthesizer, and electronically distorted strings. The track appropriates Fairuz's lyrics within a charged commentary on the frustration and helplessness of a present in which the path through and out of political violence seems fraught and circular. It is an explicit confrontation with the history of Lebanon and all that it drags with it. The rest of the album plays on similar themes. The track that follows "'Ubwa," "Min Al Taboor" ("From the Waiting Line"), begins with audio clips of newscasts and political speeches regarding recent violence in Lebanon. These recordings are pieced together loosely: the tape squeals as it is rewound, skipped over, layered, the words becoming unintelligible before they fade out entirely. The tape continues to squeal, taking on a percussive quality within the sonic fabric of the song—the words and events are irrelevant amidst persistent repetition, and the temporal slippage suggested by the cassette's outdated technology. A double tracked, reverbed vocal line sings:

> We've been fighting for 50 years/The same war, we can't forget/The country is sitting around waiting/And the queue goes as far as the airport/We're sick of religion, tired of humiliation/Longing for hunger, full from eating shit …[113]

The song reaches a climax in frustrated, echoed screams before giving way to a reverbed and delayed downward moving chromatic bass line, trapping listeners in a downward spiral. The tape continues to rewind as Sinno, double tracked once more, sings: "Seems like I know the place/But looks like I'm in wrong time/Seems like I know that I'm here/But everybody forgot that it's today." The vocal line repeats—even Sinno's protests cannot escape the circling in time. Slowly, the music fades out. Sinno sings in a heavily ornamented Lebanese Arabic dialect, Papazian's violin line is reminiscent of Armenian folk tunes with its improvisation on a double harmonic minor scale, the four-on-the-floor beat and synthesizer lends the song an EDM feel. The effect is a temporal and spatial pastiche, bridging places and times—Arabic musical pasts, Armenian folk tunes, the dancefloor of a club, the political stage—to sound out a particular present in which such seemingly incongruous references converge coherently around and through lived experience.

The band's more recent work is less explicitly confrontational in its sound and politics. Like Zeid Hamdan's music, Mashrou' Leila's more recent songs reference Lebanese and Arabic musical pasts largely through lyrics, occasional sampling, and Sinno's vocal technique. Despite this, Sinno has claimed to approach singing in ways that are not explicitly referential to Lebanese

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[112] By "color," the lyrics are referring to the affiliation of Lebanese political parties with particular colors. For example, blue is the color of the Future party, whereas green is associated with Hezballah, and Orange with the Free Patriotic Movement.
[113] Original lyrics:
صرلنا خمسين سني من حارب الحرب نفسها، ما منسى\ والبلد قاعة إنتظار و الطابور وصل على المطار\\قرفنا الدين، تعبنا الذل\ شتاقنا الجوع، شبعنا من الخرى...

or wider Arabic musical practices. Nonetheless, he indexes these pasts through vocal production and ornamentation. "El Mouqaddima" is the first track on Mashrou' Leila's second album, *El Hal Romancy* [The Situation/Solution is Romantic]. The track is performed in a layali-influenced style—it features several minutes of vocal improvisation on a line of text, with little-to-no instrumental accompaniment. [114] The album version is wet with reverb, the chirping of birds and a sustained bass drone evoking a vast sonic space. When Sinno's voice enters, it is heavily echoed, adding a temporal dimension to the sonic setting. "Ha-bi-bi," he sings, extending the middle syllable with a brief slide. Silence follows, the birds chirp, the bass drones on. "Ha-bi-bi," he repeats, climbing a few notes diatonically, then descending on the final syllable. More silence before he moves sequentially upward on the first and second syllable of the same word, extending the long "a" sounds and inserting brief but skillful turns at the ends of each sequence. Finally, on the last "-bi," he slides back to his starting pitch. Sinno repeats the word "Habibi" several more times, each exclamation builds from the melodic contours of the one which preceded it, slowly showcasing the melodic range—set in harmonic minor—of the track, and displaying Sinno's ability to execute increasingly difficult vocal ornamentations with relative ease. The two-minute song, one of only two from the album to make it onto the band's ten year retrospective compilation, *The Beirut School*, features just one line of text, translated roughly as: "my lover speaks in a foreign language, he speaks in accented Arabic."[115] The song climaxes around the word "ajnabi" (foreign), the first elongated "a" sound of which is extended over more than ten seconds, during which Sinno virtuosically oscillates between two notes, a quarter tone apart. He skillfully manipulates the timbre of his voice, playing between the nasality of his head voice, and the deep power of his belt while deploying well timed vocal breaks.

"I don't know," Hamed Sinno shrugs at me when I ask him about his voice, "We're just a band that is making music the only way we know how to make music. I'm not really trying to seem more or less Arab…I just am Arab, whatever that means. I grew up here, it's what it is" (10/30/2018). Sinno was trained as a singer in his high school's chorus, and first performed Arabic music during a school Arab cultural heritage night, for which there was little training or preparation. I hear a similar story from Mayssa Jallad, lead singer and lyricist of indie-duo Safar. "I never listened to that stuff," she tells me, during a May 2019 conversation with her and Safar bandmate Elie Abdelnour. The "stuff" that Jallad is talking about is the music of 20th century Arab divas like Fairuz and Umm Kulthum. If anything, she says, her singing style is more deliberately inspired by singers like Ella Fitzgerald, Feist, and Sufjan Stevens, but in the end she's just singing in "whatever way feels right." Certainly, it is easy to hear the aforementioned artists in Jallad's voice. Much like Sinno, however, "what feels right" bears audible resemblances to Arabic or Lebanese heritage music.

Unlike Mashrou' Leila, the majority of Safar's music has been written and performed in English, although the duo admits to me that their Arabic-language song "Wa Namshi," has received the most online attention. On tracks like "Wa Namshi," or the unreleased "Hatha-l

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[114] The layali is a genre of 20th century Arabic song that is often unmetered (although it is possible to perform a layali over a metered instrumental ostinato) and characterized by vocal improvisation, usually on the phrase "ya layl, ya 'ain".

[115] In Arabic: حبيبي بيحكي بالاجنبي و بيلدغ بالعغبي. Note that the word "'arabi" is intentionally mispronounced, as "'aghabi," to mimic an Arabic that is inflected by French. Rather than suggest that the singer's lover is French, the language gestures towards a milieu of Lebanese people who are primarily French-educated (known colloquially as "Frenchies"), and who operate predominantly in French, inflecting their Arabic with an immediately telling accent.

Bahru Li,"[116] Jallad sings her fusha lyrics with great care, pronouncing each syllable clearly and intelligibly. Her voice echoes this clarity, ringing loudly and confidently with the power of her mixed and head voices. In both English and Arabic, Jallad uses little ornamentation or vibrato, often relying on clever arrangements, dynamics, body language, and powerful lyrics for affective charge or aesthetic variation. Jallad's singing voice is perhaps most effectively described as "mukhmali," or velvety, a term that is usually used to describe Fairuz's voice.[117] Indeed, there are striking if not intentional similarities between the two singers' voices and performance styles, particularly when Jallad sings in Arabic. In both languages, however, what little ornamentation Jallad does deploy falls squarely within the conventions of Arabic musical practice.[118]

For example, "Articulations," a track off Safar's 2018 EP *Studies of an Unknown Lover*, is packed with subtle vocal turns placed skillfully on long vowels and strong consonants, as well as manipulations of vocal color and timbre. A minute and a half into the song, after an extended ambient instrumental introduction, enters first verse "Slowly you take my hand/Our skin touches we have similar articulations," Jallad sings, placing a quick vocal turn on the final vowel of the word "similar," and extending the "a" in the penultimate vowel of "articulations" by briefly switching into her head voice, thus creating contrast and introducing tension into the phrase. "Your knuckles and mine intertwine/All in my head," she continues, breaking up the vowels of the word "knuckles" with delicate turns in demonstration of the intertwining she references in her lyrics. The subsequent verses feature similar vocal play. The final lines of the second verse, "You touch my thigh while opening the drawer/I pretend I didn't feel," build lyrical and emotional tension that breaks on the final word, "feel," whose middle vowels Jallad extends by rising chromatically into her head voice, executing a turn, and then sliding back down below her starting pitch. Her voice's dynamics mirror the melodic contours of her declamation, growing louder as she ascends and then quieting with her descent, ending at almost a whisper. Jallad repeats the word three more times, establishing this vocal motif as the song's emotional and sonic focal point.

For both Hamed Sinno and Mayssa Jallad, there is something seemingly intuitive about singing in this particular way. The point here however, is not that these artists confirm tropes about the way an Arab musician is supposed to sound, nor is it an attempt to pigeon-hole musicians into a framework for sounding national belonging. Rather, I argue that there is a dominant, authorized, and authoritative way of sounding "good" in Arabic, that this is well known and widely understood either in people's ears through listening and exposure, or consciously through training, and that when artists sing in either Arabic or English, they bring these values and repertoires to bear on their sound. These kinds of references and remediations are also a resurrection of sorts: they unearth and render audible aesthetic values that are not-quite-conscious. I mean this in the sense of queer theorist Jose Munoz, who writes about drawing from the past, as a field of possibility, as a way of acting in the present in service of a new futurity (Muñoz, 2009:16).

The work that these alternative musicians do expresses and offers a different version of Lebanon that isn't explicitly nationalist, and that coheres around shared values and experiences

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[116] This song was inspired by a 2012 performance "Hatha-l Bahru Li (This Sea is Mine)" by the Dictaphone Group, whose goal it was to bring to light the monopolization of Beirut's shoreline and waters by private upscale development. The title also, perhaps unintentionally references a Mahmoud Darwish poem of the same name.
[117] See Habib, 2005, and Stone 2008.
[118] For more on vocal music convention and ornamentation in Arabic musical practice, see Danielson, 1991 and Khula'i, 1904.

of alienation and frustration from dominant ways of constructing and understanding the country from within and outside its borders. Alternative musicians draw from a wealth of histories and sounds that have been withdrawn from lived experience and cultural practices by the suggestive power of the press, academia, and public discourse. In the face of such a withdrawal, these artists create a horizon of possibility for a future that is predicated neither on the precarious uncertainty of a present that has been severed from history, nor on a nostalgia for a gloried past before the "surpassing disaster" of the civil wars. They bypass the foreclosed violence of the future which follows from such framings and offer alternative ways of relating to Lebanon's history, locating and understanding the present, and imagining or aspiring towards a future.

4. Speculative Soundscapes: Utopia Between the Visible and the Audible

I left Beirut in July 2019, excited to begin writing about the experiences and conversations I'd had over the previous year. I had made many plans for follow-up interviews over Skype—this was before Zoom became a staple of our lives—and for December, when I planned to return to see family. There was so much left to talk about, so many musical projects in the works that I was excited to see live or listen to. I intended for this chapter to focus primarily on three of these projects: KOZO's 2019 *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome*, Mayssa Jallad's *Marjaa*, and Zeid Hamdan's *BيT*. Each of these projects was conceived by musicians as a meditation on the politics of remembering. In their own ways, these projects were experiments in speculation, in which musicians proposed alternative ways of engaging and framing lived experience of the present by imagining alternative political pasts. Of these projects, only KOZO's album came to fruition.

I remember sitting on the bus in Berkeley one morning in October 2019, reading the Lebanese news. Things at home were not ok. Wildfires that had blazed through the country's mountain forests were still burning, fire fighters unable to quell them due to the government's failure to maintain essential equipment. The exchange value of the Lebanese pound was wavering as it hadn't since the civil wars, though at the time few of us knew to be concerned about it. That day, however, the biggest headline was about taxes: the government had increased them on tobacco, gasoline, and voice calls on messaging services such as WhatsApp, a staple of life in Lebanon due to the prohibitive cost of regular cellular service. I turned to my partner and joked that Lebanon could tolerate corruption and environmental disaster, but it wouldn't stand for a WhatsApp tax. We laughed.

It was the kind of joke we make all the time. Most of the Lebanese people I know lean hard on grim sarcasm, finding a way to deal with the unpredictability of Lebanese politics by making light of everything. We joked about how banalities like a WhatsApp tax would start another civil war because claiming the uncertainty felt better than letting it linger heavily in the air. The truth is, I can't remember a time when I wasn't afraid that Lebanon was going to fall into chaos. The country teetered so regularly on the edge of collapse that deferring it, narrowly avoiding whatever bad thing felt like it was coming, became a fact of life. That morning on the bus felt no different. The news from Lebanon was bad; compelled to decide between being afraid and making a joke out of it, I chose the latter.

The revolution began a few hours after that bus ride, on October 17, 2019. In the weeks following this first series of protests, millions of Lebanese people across the country and in its diasporas took to the streets to peacefully voice their desire for the end of an era of political corruption and civic mismanagement at the hands of warlords-turned-politicians.
Artists, musicians, and activists voiced this moment as the official end of Lebanon's civil wars, citing a perceived reunification of the country after decades of enforced sectarian division.

Figure 4.1. Two panels from a comic by Lebanese cartoonist Bernard Hage (The Art of Boo) depicting politicians gathered around the grave of the Lebanese civil wars (Instagram, 10/20/2019)

Though born of anger and frustration with the dominant regime, the revolution was also charged with hope. Unlike the movements that had preceded it, the revolution united Lebanese people from across religious, class, and geographic boundaries. Where Beirut, a wealthier cosmopolitan center, had been the epicenter of protest movements in the past, October 2019 saw millions of Lebanese people mobilize all over the country. Tripoli, a less affluent and historically more conservative and religiously homogeneous city North, became as central to the protests as Beirut was. The south-eastern Beqaa Valley, a region usually assumed to follow Hezballah party lines, surprised many by joining the movement despite Hezballah's threats of physical harm and significant social and political pressure against the revolution and its proponents. When political parties inevitably attempted to co-opt the movement, they were swiftly shut down. The revolutionary slogan "Kellon Ya'ne Kellon (All of them means all of them)," a wholesale indictment of the political class, felt truer as the revolution picked up momentum, amassing more bodies and occupying major squares and streets across the country.

Figure 4.2. A "religious map" of Lebanon in which religious stratification is replaced by the unity of the "thawra (revolution)." (Facebook, 10/20/2019)

In Beirut's Martyrs' Square and Tripoli's Al Noor Square, free kitchens, impromptu classrooms, debate forums, cafes, living quarters, and art installations materialized, funded and run entirely by revolutionaries. Every morning, groups of volunteers mobilized to collect trash and clean up the debris of celebrations or skirmishes from the night before in an effort to "leave no trace." These non-governmental communities of care and aid continue to define the spirit of the revolution for many, and were a great source of hope and pride for those of us watching from afar. Citizen-run initiatives emerged to combat hunger, address physical and mental health, preserve the cleanliness of the streets, provide access to education, and disseminate information about citizens' rights and options. These networks of mutual aid and care were in many ways necessary to sustain a revolution that spanned different geographic regions and social class, but they were also aspirational projects that sought to manifest the future that the revolution was calling for. They demanded a future in which the government acted in the interest of the people, rather than in the financial or political interests of party leaders. A future without sectarian stratification. A safer future, a cleaner future, a future in which civil rights were protected and the misogynistic, racist, and homophobic institutions that had hindered them were struck down.

The musicians, promoters, organizers, and space owners that made up Beirut's independent music world were quick to mobilize their social media fanbases to spread news and awareness through posts and livestreams. In solidarity with the first weeks of protest, concert series like Sofar Sounds and Beirut Jam Sessions put their programming on pause and spaces like the Grand Factory shut their doors, urging patrons to attend protests. On October 20th, local DJ and Grand Factory owner JADE (Jad Soueid) coordinated the installment of a stage and sound system in Beirut's Martyrs' Square. "We're setting up our SOUND SYSTEM at Martyrs' Square. Lebanese alternative singers performing in Arabic, please get in touch. This SOUND SYSTEM is for LOVE. PEACE & UNITY," read a widely circulated announcement on JADE's Instagram page.[119] "Today, we are not celebrating, our SOUND SYSTEM was conceived to bring people together," announced another post. Artists from across the alternative music world answered JADE's call.[120]

[119] It is significant that JADE's call for artists specified Arabic-language performance, as presumably he intended for the music to be accessible to an audience of protesters who were more mixed in terms of class and language.
[120] Many musicians answered JADE's call, and many more performed in Martyr's Square over the course of the ensuing months, including those who did not perform under the umbrella of "alternative music," such as rappers El Rass and Rayyess Bek,

The lineup included Safar's Mayssa Jallad, who performed a solo rendition of the track "Wa Namshi," Zeid Hamdan's band Zeid and the Wings, and a DJ set by Ziad Nawfal. Notable about these performances was an audience made up of listeners from across the spectrum of socioeconomic class, making it arguably the most diverse and popular (in a very literal sense) audience of alternative music in Lebanon. Represented also that night was Mashrou' Leila, whose music featured heavily as part of JADE's own DJ set. While the band themselves were vocal supporters of the revolution, vocalist Hamed Sinno and violinist Haig Papazian were in New York, the former having emigrated in fear for his safety after an August 2019 Mashrou' Leila performance at the Byblos Festival was canceled due to allegations that the band's music promoted satanism and moral depravity.[121] The performances that night were made up of representative samples of several eras in the history of local alternative music, united by an ongoing commitment to social critique and meaningful political change. In many ways, this event marked an opening up of alternative music through a weaving of its politics into an emerging populist revolutionary movement. Members of the alternative music world were also vital in disseminating news, primarily through Instagram livestreams of protests and clashes with police that were absent from official media broadcasts and reports due either to censorship or political partisanship.

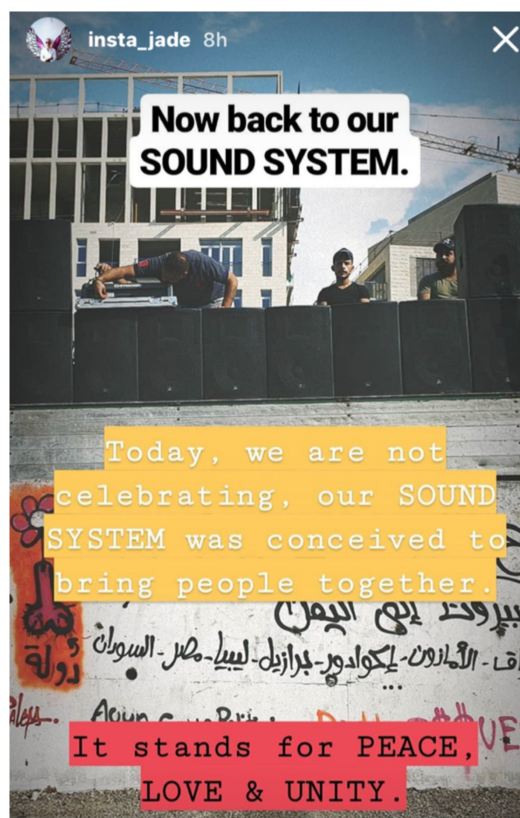

Figure 4.3. Instagram post by JADE (Jad Soueid). (10/20/2019)

In the leadup to November 22nd, Lebanon's Independence Day, prominent voices within Lebanon and its diasporas began to discuss what it might look like to reclaim the event. In place of the military parades that have comprised official observation of the holiday since 1943, revolutionaries across the country planned civil marches. In Beirut, the day was marked with parades, music, and art installations. Hundreds of Lebanese expats flew into Beirut to mark the occasion in person. In videos of Middle East Airlines planes bound for Beirut from various airports in Europe and the Gulf, cabins full of expats chanted revolutionary slogans. Many of those who returned gathered at Lebanon's Hariri International Airport to form a convoy that traveled from the airport to Beirut's Martyrs' Square, the heart of revolutionary action in the capital. More than an endorsement of the revolution, this act of return suggested a belief and an explicit investment in a better future for Lebanon.

I highlight this return because, for what felt like the first time in my life, Lebanese people–particularly young, educated, socially and economically mobile emigres–were moved to physically and symbolically claim the country and its future. Through acts like returning, and in posts on social media, expats concretely claimed a stake in the better future that the revolution

[121] These allegations were enabled in large part by Mashrou' Leila lead singer Hamed Sinno's homosexuality, and reflect the rampant sexism and homophobia that suffuses much of Lebanese political rhetoric.

demanded. As a member of this milieu, I was shocked by the way that I hungered for home. When talking to friends, and in many of my conversations with musicians, I often identify myself as having been "raised for export." As mentioned in a previous chapter, members of my generation who were raised in middle- or upper-middle class families were taught from a young age that their future lay elsewhere. The revolution, streamed live through my phone, awakened something in me that I didn't know was there: a desire to be *able* to go home, a need to claim Lebanon's better future as my own.

The revolution was still raging when I arrived in Lebanon in December 2019. The political events of the preceding months, coupled with the steady devaluation of Lebanese currency, had meant that many of the musical projects I'd planned to follow-up on hadn't come to fruition. Hamdan's musical projects had taken a backseat to his involvement in the revolution and his work as a producer, and Jallad's musical-architectural project, *Marjaa*, didn't seem to be ready for public release. The sole exception was KOZO, whose debut album, *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome*, had premiered at a show in September just weeks before the revolution broke out. My attempts to meet my collaborators were often interrupted by the near-nightly face-offs between revolutionaries and police at crucial crossing points between Hamra, where my family lives, and Gemmayze, where most of my collaborators live and work. Rather than attempting to continue my research as intended, I allowed myself to participate in what was arguably the largest and most promising political movement of my generation.

This chapter is not about the revolution, per se. Rather, it approaches the revolution as a prism through which the various repertoires and currents of thought and emergent futurities I have identified in the last few chapters can be refracted. In the face of the increasingly dystopian landscape of Lebanon, utopian, speculative, and imaginative thinking became both a tactic for dealing with the present and a rallying point around which protestors and revolutionaries mobilized across the country. Alternative music's politics represent one of many iterations of this kind of future-thinking. A central assertion of this dissertation is that life in Lebanon can as easily be viewed through the lens of hopeful futurity as it can through the framework of endless violence. For much of the country's recent history, class position and sectarian affiliation have been the de facto lines along which optimistic futurities were or could be imagined or accessed. However, the revolution marked a moment in which many of these disparate futurities came together in pursuit of the possibility of imagining and bringing about different, better futures for the country and everyone in it.

I started this chapter with the revolution in order to look back on the many threads of future work that it mobilized and that converged in its wake. The threads I examine are not always explicitly tied to the events of the revolution. There is not a linear relationship. Rather, this chapter explores the "future work"[122] that alternative music has performed , to better articulate how it was and remains integral to larger futures projects for Lebanon. It examines two musical projects that were inspired by the history of Beirut's built environment, looking at the relationship between architecture and futurity. The first is by post-rock band KOZO—a group whose music is recognized locally as "alternative"—and its 2019 album *Tokyo Metabolist*

[122] By "future work," I mean the labor of conjuring or realizing futures, even momentarily. I borrow this term from anthropologist Samuel Collins, who used the term to describe the ways that anthropological works (re)produce local futures by (re)inscribing teleological narratives about cultural progress. In *All Tomorrow's Cultures* (2008), Collins mobilizes the term for multiple purposes; first, it as a call for anthropology as a discipline to recognize its own role in foreclosing the futures that it writes about, and second as a more literal way of describing the work yet to be done on/in the field of anthropology itself.

Project, a speculative project inspired by post-WWII Japanese architecture, which asks what Lebanon might have been like if post-civil-wars reconstruction efforts had prioritized human rehabilitation over financial gain. The second is Mayssa Jallad's solo project, *Marjaa*, a fusion of her music with her vision as an architect. Drawing from her graduate work which attempted to reconstruct the architectural history of civil-wars-era Beirut, Jallad's project contends with her own generation's alienation from the city and its history at the hands of governmentally endorsed reconstruction projects in the post-civil-wars era.

Spaces of Possibility

When I returned to Lebanon in October 2018, I had never heard of KOZO. I was introduced to them during my first week back, at an intimate concert and Q&A by a one-man band called Interbellum, at which members of the KOZO came to help, busying themselves with setting up audio and video recording equipment and bantering good-naturedly with the artists and musicians in the audience. They seemed at home in a small crowd made up almost entirely of musicians central to the alternative music world that I had come back to Beirut to study, and I was intrigued. By the time I had the chance to sit down with them during a rehearsal at Tunefork Studios almost nine months later, I had become well acquainted with their music. The rehearsal wasn't my first visit to Tunefork, but the space, almost overflowing with the five band members and myself, was somehow transformed by KOZO's youthful energy. In Tunefork's small lounge-space, sprawled across the floor, the band told me about themselves, their road to Tunefork, and their upcoming first album, *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome*. But before they helped me make sense of their album's title, they rehearsed, and I listened.

KOZO is made up of five members, drummer Elie El Khoury, bassist Charbel Abou Chakra, and guitarists Camille Cabbabe, Georgy Flouty, and Andrew Georges. In Tunefork Studio's small recording room, surrounded by tangles of cables and an several arrays of guitar pedals, I heard what the National News called "a deeply immersive 35 minutes of sonic drama" come to life (Saeed, 2020). KOZO's music is largely instrumental, a collection of lush, expansive soundscapes and short, repetitive, interlocking guitar riffs spread out across the band's three guitars and rendered with virtuosic rhythmic consistency. The band's occasional lyrics mirror the guitar lines' short, repetitive phrases, and the one or two sentences featured in a handful of their songs are always written in Arabic and rarely set apart from the instruments in the mix. Abou Chakra, Georges, and Flouty's voices, like their guitars, are simply instruments that they use to thicken and enrich the sonic fabric of their music rather than focal points for the delivery of lyrics. KOZO's music sounds, above all, like an experiment in form. El Khoury noted in a 2019 interview, "we use the rhythms as parameters and we use these parameters to create repetitions that become the base of a song" (Ruptures, 2019). Indeed, the band's tracks use the instruments at their disposal to explore and iterate on formal ideas based around rhythmic play and complex time signatures.

Three of the band's five members are architects, and when I asked about the role and meaning of "Metabolist/-ism," they were eager to share. "We were really into this Japanese movement called Metabolism," guitarist Andrew Georges explained to me. "The whole idea was post-WWII, in devastated Japan, a bunch of young architects were thinking about how they could rebuild the city in a way that the architecture could become resilient." To fully appreciate *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome,* I had to better understand the architectural movement that captivated KOZO. In the 1950s, Japanese architects and city planners were faced with the fallout of protracted warfare—environmental devastation wrought by fire bombings and two nuclear

blasts, an influx of internally displaced citizens to major urban areas—as well as rapid population and technological growth. These conditions were exacerbated by land shortages and inadequate infrastructure and social services. Whereas the officidal response to this postwar moment had been to effectively put a band-aid on extant systemic issues by sanctioning sprawling urban developments, Metabolists advocated for a radical reimagining of what a city could be, positing urban spaces as living organisms rather than the machinic systems envisioned by dominant modernist frameworks. Inspired by the body's ability to adapt at the cellular level in order to sustain life, Metabolists proposed that the best way for a city to successfully grow, thrive, and sustain itself socially and materially was to accommodate cycles of urban growth and decay. Accordingly, Metabolist building plans in the 1960s and 70s were modular and self-sustaining, made up of discrete (often prefabricated) units that could be reconfigured or recycled as needed.

A project of utopian techno-futurity, Metabolism nevertheless resisted the kind of universalizing impulses that often color such endeavors, explicitly concerning itself with rehabilitating Japanese national identity. Although Metabolists rejected the idea of traditional revival, some of their core concepts like prefabrication and renewal were inspired by Japanese traditional architecture.[123] Significant is indeed the fact that the Japanese word for Metabolism, *shinchintaisha*, carries associations with the Buddhist concept of renewal and regeneration, further emplacing the architectural movement (Lin, 2010:22). [124]

Figure 4.4. Kisho Kurokawa's Capsule Tower (left, photograph: AFLO/REX/Shutterstock) and Kiyonori Kikutake's Sky House (right, WikiCommons)

KOZO's *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome* is also locally situated. "To put it in the simplest way," Georges tells me,

> we were inspired by specific buildings and specific spaces, to try to create the music in a way in which we would draw parallels between architecture and music. But the end result isn't really this stern and serious thing. It's just a playful attempt of hoping for a better Lebanon. I hate saying that because it sounds so nationalist. But it's not, it's just kids who wish things were different.

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[123] For more on this, see Goldhagen and Legault. 2000. *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture*.

[124] A salient example of this is the Ise Grand Shrine, which gets rebuilt every 20 years as part of a Shinto belief in this cycle of renewal and regeneration.

There is something both procedural and completely imaginative about KOZO's conceptual approach to composition, and in conversation they gesture to the slipperiness of those two categories. Bassist Charbel Abou Chakra explains the band's process as inspired by a deep identification with the Japanese Metabolists: "They were post-war architects who, *just like us*, were like, what's the link between us and this [architectural movement]? But if you look at a [Metabolist] building, the way it's structured, it isn't a generic structure, it's made up of things that depend on other things and that really inspired us [emphasis mine]." Abou Chakra's self-identification as a post-war architect, just like the Metabolists, clearly positions the band in relation to its album's conceptual roots. KOZO's work is not simply a matter of inspiration but one of identification. The work they have done consists of more than just observing and reacting to historical events that occurred across the globe from Lebanon. Rather, the band is doing the work of occupying the subject position of "post-war architect" and imagining the decisions they might make in Lebanon . Significantly, their imaginative efforts are not directed towards post-WWII Japan, but towards their own context in post-civil-wars Lebanon. While KOZO's album and the tracks on it are named after a mid-20th-century Japanese architectural world, their music is deeply situated in the band's own experiences of and aspirations for Lebanon.

Figure 4.5. Theater at the Niemeyer fairground (Image: Anthony Saroufim).

"For non-architects," guitarist Georgy Flouty explained to me, "[we are thinking about] what Lebanon could have looked like if architecture had been viewed differently after the war...Everything could have been different." In urban centers especially, architecture from Lebanon's "golden age" has assumed a central role in melancholic ruminations on dashed hopes and unrealized futures. From its 1943 independence to the 1975 outbreak of the civil wars, Lebanon saw a period of ambitious urban development, including government investment in projects by major international firms as well as the development of a brutalist-inspired, exposed-concrete style by local Lebanese architects like Philippe Karam, Khalil Khoury, and Georges Khoury. Many buildings from this era, especially those that remain unfinished, have become sepulchral monuments to lost possibility in the years since the civil wars. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is the Niemeyer Fairground in Tripoli, commissioned by the government in 1963. Designed by Brazilian "starchitect" Oscar Niemeyer, the permanent fairgrounds represented the promise of continuing prosperity and international exchange for the nascent country. Niemeyer's plans included permanent exhibitions, pavilions, playgrounds, theaters, a bowling alley, housing, shops, and even a space museum topped with a helipad. The act of commissioning Niemeyer, the ambitious Tripoli fair project, and the plans themselves perfectly encapsulated the optimistic futurity that animated this

period in Lebanon's history. But construction came to a halt with the outbreak of the civil wars in 1975. The sprawling complex, intended for family entertainment and cultural enrichment, was occupied by Syrian forces for several years during the 1980s. Today, its abandoned ruins are a pilgrimage site for modern architecture enthusiasts, emblematic of an unfulfilled promise for a bright future.

If, for visitors to the Tripoli fairgrounds, Lebanon's dilapidated modernist buildings are a bitter reminder of how "everything could have been different," something else is at play in KOZO's engagement with architecture. While the band's album centers around the imagination of a Lebanese that never happened, their undertaking is future-oriented rather than mournfully retrospective. It is not difficult to see the analogues between the context in which Metabolists were working and Lebanon after the civil wars. Like the young Japanese architects, the members of KOZO were reckoning with the aftermath of human disaster. However, whereas the Japanese Metabolist project was speculative in the direct sense of imagining and working towards a future that they hoped might be realized, KOZO's project of imagining a *different* past and speculating about the future that might have followed from this alternative past adds layers of imagination.

Figure 4.6. Arch at the Niemeyer fairground (Image: Anthony Saroufim).

"This [Metabolist] way of thinking—that if you can remove a structure you should remove it...this is how we were thinking about music," Abou Chakra told me. The principles of resilience and adaptability that informed many Metabolist designs, he explains, were integral to the album's conception. "Like why do we have to put a verse-chorus-verse?" he asks rhetorically, "because really, we didn't know anything about theory. We were just putting notes together. So we put together a new kind of structure for a song." KOZO's approach to writing *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome* involved both a process of "disciplining ourselves in different ways," as guitarist Andrew Georges put it, and of experimentation. "Like lots of things happen, Elie [Khoury] calls them happy accidents. I love that term. Things happen that we don't really think about but they become the essence of why this song is this song and not any other song." When I prompt them further, percussionist Elie Khoury chimes in:

> For example, drawing parallels with architecture. When you're designing in architecture, you're following a broad concept and a design process. What we try to do sometimes is to follow a concept, structure-wise. Like creating a guitar line, but deconstructing it and giving each guitar one note to play, and layer a drum beat over it playing a random pattern, and seeing what that gives. When you work on a design process and follow it to

> its end, you get happy accidents. You get happy accidents in architecture. And I feel like we're experimenting with process.

In a 2019 interview on Ziad Nawfal's Radio Liban show "Ruptures," Abou Chakra expands on this approach to composition by discussing how the band first comes up with "random" musical ideas or building blocks, and then conceives of a larger structure into which these small ideas can be interpellated. "Like a domino structure, or for example some buildings are held by cables," Abou Chakra continues (Ruptures, 2019).

It is easy to hear a metabolism-inspired design process in the seven tracks on the band's 35-minute-long debut album. *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome's* sound features minimal melodic content. Rather, short melodic phrases are split up into interlocking ostinati spread out across the band's three guitars, bass and drum set. Rhythmic and melodic phrases seem distributed among the musicians in a way that closely recalls the modular, adaptive nature of the Metabolist architectural principles that inspired them. For example, the album's fourth track, "Project Japan," begins with bass drone hits on the downbeat of each 2/4 measure. Fifteen seconds into the track, the bass is joined by a short guitar ostinato. This new melodic material sounds every features a sustained note (A) followed by a rising syncopated motion (B) (fig. 4.7). Even after repeated listens, it is unclear whether the ostinato is performed by a single guitar or whether it is simply a call and response phrase between two guitars playing a long note call (A) and a short response (B). While the slight timbral difference between what I hear as the call and response seems to suggest that the ostinato is indeed performed by two of KOZO's three guitarists, the section's accumulation over time of fragments into a coherent sonic whole is evocative of a process of architectural preservation and renewal. Like the Metabolists who inspired them, the members of KOZO make painstaking efforts to knit seemingly disparate musical ideas into a relatively seamless, functional line.

Figure 4.7. Project Japan first guitar ostinato with call (A) and response (B) phrases (transcribed by author).

Soon after this first call and response phrase enters, the band introduces a second ostinato (fig. 4.8). When it enters, this second ostinato sounds like a full-measure response to the first, an eighth note pickup followed by a syncopated rhythm on the downbeat of the next measure, thus shifting the rhythmic emphasis of the melodic line from the sustained note of the first ostinato to the downbeat of the second. This shift in rhythmic perception further suggests that the first ostinato be heard as a larger unit rather than as its own short call and response. Upon repetition the syncopated second phrase and the sustained note that made up the initial call (A) of the first phrase begin to sound like a single continuous phrase, casting the short (B) response in the initial ostinato as a response to a longer call phrase (fig. 4.9). The structural transformations at play over the course of the track's opening 45 seconds echo and reinforce the theme of Metabolist architecture, in which small cellular structures exist as part of larger organs and organ systems and are able to be rearranged or re-oriented to suit the needs of the system at any given moment (fig. 4.10).

Figure 4.8. Project Japan's second guitar ostinato (transcribed by author).

Figure 4.9. Both ostinati in relation to one another (transcription by author).

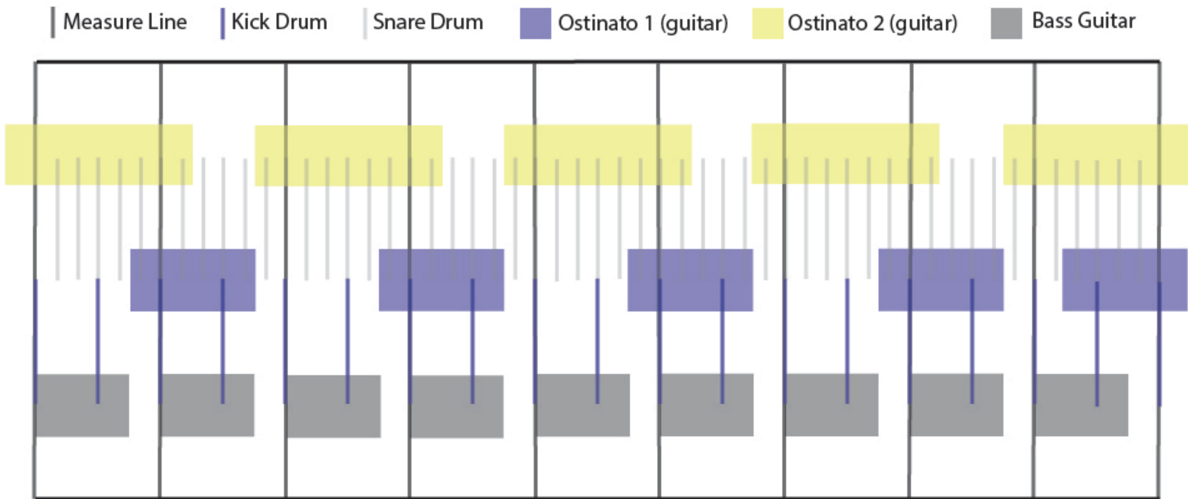

Figure 4.10. This figure, inspired by domino structure buildings, is an architectural representation the way that the track's cellular pieces come together to form a larger structure (by author).

In their opening statement to the special issue of the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* titled *Speculation: futures and capitalism in India*, anthropologists Laura Bear, Ritu Birla and Stine Simonsen Puri define speculation as the "making present and materializing of uncertain futures" (Bear, Birla, Puri, 2015). In both the opening statement and the issue as a whole, the authors highlight a pressing need to define heuristics in radically local terms:

> Speculation refers to processes that...are located deeply in the ethico-political systems we call culture and society…[it] must be historicized, situated, and investigated in its intimacies with practices of governing...marking a continuum between epistemology and

> economy, knowing and managing, and materializing and imagining...In its most contemplative incarnation, speculation also suggests other methods of seeing—divination, prophecy, imagination...it is a practice that aims to realize incalculably possible futures (p.1/2).

Heard alongside Bear, Birla, and Puri's intervention, KOZO's project has much to offer. As an album, an experiment in disciplinary crossing, and an intellectual endeavor, KOZO's *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome* is both an artifact and tool or pathway for speculation. The album can be heard as both a work of speculative fiction that attempts to recuperate a past and imagine a future for Lebanon by rendering these speculative pasts/futures audible. At the same time, the album might be heard as an example of speculation as well as a methodology or framework for future-work. Here, the speculative project is aural; through imagination it materializes and presences *possible* rather than *uncertain* futures. It is contemplative, but not necessarily anticipatory in the ways that the aforementioned authors define the term. In the following paragraphs, I will describe much of KOZO's work as both speculative and aspirational. While aspiration is, as Arjun Appadurai has noted, deeply entwined with a politics of hope (2004, 2013),[125] I use the term to refer more specifically to optimistic forms of speculation. Framed this way, aspiration is a hopeful projection onto or working towards the future.

KOZO's project is aspirational in both writing a restorative alternate history as well as suggesting possible ways forward in the actual present. The context in which they were writing and imagining this album was the result of the way that the civil wars actually ended–with further entrenched sectarian division and without any sort of societal reconciliation.[126] It isn't surprising, then, that KOZO's imagined past is one in which people and reconstruction on a human level were put first. KOZO's imagined ending to the civil wars also suggests a framework for addressing social problems such as corruption and sectarian stratification in the present. This framework, conceived through the lens of Metabolism (which was in and of itself a Marxist ideological movement), is implicitly anti-capitalist and non-sectarian. In many ways the principles that animated KOZO's album project foreshadowed the October 2019 revolution, which called for and achieved in unprecedented ways social cohesion around a shared state of being and set of experiences as Lebanese people rather than as sectarian subjects. In naming and drawing attention to Lebanon's past, KOZO is doing future work that resonates with many of the projects mentioned in chapter 3. Like Zeid Hamdan, Safar, or Waynik, they are creating bridges of consciousness, imagination, speculation, and sound between the past and the present.

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[125] Appadurai has argued that the capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity that is closely entwined with the norms, traditions, and values that govern a culture's doing towards the future. In this way it has a "recognizably universal [form]," but a distinctly local force. A culture of aspiration also affords navigational capacity, in that it maps out everyday and systemic steps towards a better future. Framed this way, Appadurai argues that the capacity to aspire is not distributed evenly, but that hope, "the political counterpart to the work of the imagination (2013:293)," is a critical tool for envisioning ways to change things.

[126] For more on post-civil-wars reconciliation, see chapters 1 and 3.

In addition to demonstrating conceptual and compositional practices of speculation, “Project Japan " is a salient example of the future-work that the album does in the specific context of Lebanon. The track features the full range of KOZO’s instrumentation, and utilizes the timbres of their bass, three guitars, and trap set to great dramatic effect. The track’s sparse introductory bassline builds gradually over the course of six 16-bar phrases, first with the inclusion of the first ostinato, followed by the second ostinato and then the entrance of a line with kick drum hits on each beat of the 2/4 measures, and an almost shuffling triplet pattern in the snare that suggests a 6/8 meter (fig 4.11).

Figure 4.11. Project Japan basic drum rhythms, with the kick drum suggesting 2/4 meter and the triplets and accents in the snare part strongly suggesting 6/8 (transcription by author).

One minute and 18 seconds into the track, the instrumental parts drop out and the track’s densely crowded sonic space opens up. In place of the overlapping ostinati develops a spectral, atmospheric soundscape marked by multiple, unmetered, overlapping heavily reverbed rising guitar lines. This dreamy soundscape reaches its climax at 2:25, when all of the instruments drop out and a recording of a male voice begins to tell a story. The voice belongs to Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury, and the story that he is telling is about his father’s childhood. Khoury’s father, renowned modernist architect Khalil Khoury, was a driving force in mid-century Lebanese architecture. Although Khoury wasn’t affiliated with the Metabolist movement, his approach to architecture was a Lebanese analogue of the Japanese movement, emphasizing many of the same political and social principles and concerns as the Metabolists.

In a September 3rd 2019 interview with the Lebanese online music news and criticism website Project Revolver, Elie Khoury explains how Khoury’s voice came to be featured on the album:

> Our album is a concept album that revolves around the Metabolist architectural movement in post-war Japan…the person who brought this movement to light is Rem Koolhas, [who wrote] a book on it called *Project Japan*. It’s the bible of metabolism, and basically Bernard Khoury hates Rem Koolhas…We found that hilarious (Revolver, 2019).

“It spiked our intrigue,” Andrew Georges continues,

> What Bernard brought to Lebanon is a political aspect to architecture. Metabolism had a political and communist message, and he [Khoury] brought a lot of the same political standpoints to our country. He’s not scared to send a message in his buildings; they scream out a lot of structuralist principles similar to those of Metabolism’s founders…And his father is Khalil Khoury, one of the fathers of modern architecture in Lebanon. He was *the* post-war architect [original emphasis].

In “Project Japan,” Khoury begins by speaking about his father’s childhood fascination with airplanes and his dream of becoming an aeronautical engineer. Set far forward in the mix and centered in the stereo field, the recording of Khoury’s voice stands out due largely to sonic artifacts, like static and room-echo, of a more casual recording setup.

Not long after Khoury begins his story, the instrumental tracks return, with both the introductory call and response phrases and the atmospheric guitar lines accompanying Khoury's voice. Here, the tracks are mixed at the same volume, removing any auditory focal point and making Khoury's speech difficult hear. In the track's final seconds, Khoury's voice becomes clear again as he describes how his father's dreams of building airplanes were dashed by his [Bernard's] grandfather, who urged his son to abandon this unconventional dream in favor of aspiring to something more feasible and realistic.

Heard as a cohesive whole, "Project Japan" works to locate Metabolist-inspired ideas that the band is working with in Lebanon. *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome* represents KOZO's efforts to lay a foundation for their own speculative experiment by excavating a history of local architecture. It is important that the recording of Khoury's voice becomes part of the sonic fabric of the track itself, because it becomes an essential part of the conceptual material that they are imagining with rather than an aside. The history that they are recording, recounting, and reconstructing becomes part of the creative work and presents listeners with a local analogue to the Japanese movement that inspired the album.[127] Here, when the band imaginatively occupies the subject-position "post-war architect," they aren't just importing something from elsewhere. Rather, they are reaching back to "here" and creating a historical and architectural through-line by imagining and evoking a different past.

The track's ending is particularly interesting in this context, because it sounds like a reflection on what didn't happen. The track's closing lines, "you can't do that, you can't do this here, this is not the right environment to do this," sound to me like a meta-reflection on the conditions of (im)possibility in which many young Lebanese idealists find themselves. As a young Lebanese person, I was always taught that there was no place for idealism or optimism surrounding meaningful social or political change in Lebanon. Many of the musicians I talked to over my time in Beirut, including the members of KOZO, mentioned hearing or learning the same as children. While the degree to which our upbringings were shaped by the belief that there were no viable futures in Lebanon varied greatly, for most of my generation (including myself), when the time came to pursue a life and career as an adult, leaving felt like the only viable option. And yet, the vast majority of the track is lush with spacious and dreamy soundscapes set alongside a bouncy, syncopated, almost child-like set of melodic phrases. It is about possibility and youthful imagination. That it ends with impossibility is notable, but at the same time the idea that one has to leave Lebanon in order to dream big is exactly what KOZO's experiment in sound attempts to combat or redress in the near past and in the present by asking "what if things were different? What if you could do these things here?"

Bernard Khoury's voice comes back in a second track on *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome*. In "Capsule Tower," Khoury's story continues, now focusing on his father's later experience in life. Here, Khoury reflects on his father's vision and impact as an architect in Lebanon. Unlike "Project Japan," "Capsule Tower" begins with Khoury's narration, and is joined by guitars and bass a few seconds later. 35 seconds into the track, Khoury and the rest of the band are joined by

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[127] KOZO's conceptual approach to their album has been a consistent part of their marketing and press. For example, the Facebook event page for a March 19, 2019 show at Hamra's Metro Al Madina noted that:
"Kōzō 構造 are a Math-Rock Quintet that have set their sights on a future long forgotten. They create a soundtrack for buildings of post-war japan with the use contemporary palettes ranging from washes of noise to hard edged jagged rhythms delivered through light hearted pop melodies. Their music embodies both the abstraction of spaces and design into sound palettes while deconstructing structures into pattern-driven rhythms and song anatomies" (https://www.facebook.com/events/304884913558519/).

the trap set. Khoury's voice gets dimmer as the track progresses, eventually fading out a minute and 15 seconds into the track. The guitars, bass, and drum set seem to contour themselves to the rhythms of Khoury's storytelling, their syncopated rhythms taking cues from the emphases and cadences of his voice. Here, Khoury's voice is the conceptual fabric, the foundation upon which the rest of the track seems to materialize. In addition to being woven into the sonic fabric of the track itself, Khoury's acts almost metronomically to project and organize the time of the track even after it has faded into the background. I hear Khoury's story about the politicization of Lebanese architecture and the architectural syntax of Lebanese modernism as proleptic in that it structures KOZO's own speculative sounding of an imagined space. In a very tangible way, sound, here, is doing future work.[128]

I witnessed and felt this future work in action when saw KOZO live for the first time in March of 2019. I'd seen many of the band members perform with other bands over the years, most recently at Fete de la Musique a few years prior, where most of the band had accompanied Salim Naffah during an Alko B set.[129] The show, performed at Metro al Madina, was advertised as an advance performance of the band's recently completed but as yet unreleased first album, *Tokyo Metabolist Syndrome*. In the audience were the familiar faces of musicians like Safar's Mayssa Jallad and the members of Postcards, accompanied by a loyal cast of alternative music fans who rarely missed a show, even by a relatively unknown band like KOZO (for all intents and purposes, I was one of those loyal fans). At the soundboard were Fadi Tabbal and Postcards' Julia Sabra, who had recently begun working sound at shows under Tabbal's tutelage. I remember being struck by the diligence and intensity with which the members of the band performed. While in between tracks they joked with the audience and with one another, when the music started they were laser-focused on managing complex time signatures, singing close harmonies in tune, and manipulating the array of pedals and cables splayed around each of the band's 4 guitarists. Half-way through the 45-minute-long performance, guitarist Andrew Georges addressed the audience. "I was supposed to say a whole thing in Lebanese," he explained over the sound of drummer Elie Khoury, "but I forgot to memorize it, bear with me." The audience cheered rowdily, and someone standing in the front row joked that they should speak "only in Japanese." The track continued without Georges' "whole thing in Lebanese." Later, the band joked almost apologetically that they couldn't speak Arabic properly, gesturing towards both this incident and their Arabic-language song lyrics.

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[128] I'm here inspired by art historian Pamela Lee's article "How Money Looks (1999)." The article's object, Man Ray's *Perpetual Motif*, consists of a metronome with a picture of an eye affixed to its arm. Lee's analysis of *Perpetual Motif* explores art's relationship to money, and money's relationship to time and temporality. One element of the work's futurity, Lee argues, is the metronome itself, which structures and organizes time, and in doing so projects time into the future. In this KOZO track, Khoury's voice takes on this metronomic quality, structuring and organizing time while also projecting it into the future.

[129] KOZO is a supergroup of sorts, created when members of the bands Lambajain and Filter Happier decided to collaborate on music that was totally different from the music that their respective bands had become known for. Both Lambajain and Filter Happier stopped making music around the time that KOZO began to take shape due largely to the fact that some of their band members moved abroad to pursue university degrees or in search of better jobs.

While KOZO's short and simple lyrics betray a lack of comfort with claiming the Arabic language as their own, what I and many in the audience heard when they sang was not discomfort. When the band sings, their declamation is clear and well-rehearsed. Like the recordings of Bernard Khoury's voice in "Project Japan" and "Capsule Tower," their repetitive chanting of a short amount of lyrical material directs listeners to hear their voice as generators of rhythm and pitch rather than conveyors/carriers of linguistic meaning. Anyone who has grown up or spent a significant amount of time in Lebanon might also hear in their vocal tracks clear markers of class position and upbringing. When the members of KOZO sing, their pronunciation clearly positions them as individuals whose primary language growing up was French and not Arabic.[130]

Figure 4.125. KOZO live at Metro Al Madina, Beirut 5/19/19 (photo by author)

As I have discussed in previous chapters, many of my interlocutors in Beirut's alternative music world were, like myself, raised speaking primarily English or French rather than Arabic. While most of us have a sufficient enough grasp of the language to function in daily life and consume popular media, most of us prefer to classify ourselves as not having grown up speaking Arabic at all rather than admit to a deep sense of discomfort and shame at being impostors to our own linguistic heritage. My generation's orientation towards the future is more than ideological. As evidenced by the members of KOZO on stage that night, those of us raised for export are marked by the assumption of a future elsewhere. The code-switching with which we grow up, often either celebrated as an element of our cosmopolitan upbringing or dismissed as a marker of our postcolonial past, was in our upbringing an approach to language that was laden with

[130] Perhaps the most straightforward example of this is the band's pronunciation of the word "ṭiyyarah (airplane)" in the lyrics for the track "Osaka 70." In both the recorded and live versions of the track, the band pronounces the word with a "ت (teh)" rather than the "ط (*ṭā*ʾ)" that appears at the beginning of the word, and leaves out the second, stressed "y" sound in the middle syllable (ṭiy-ya-rah). While they weren't referring to these particular lyrics, it bears noting that the word "ṭiyyarah" is used fairly widely and frequently as an example of what some perceive to be egregious mispronunciations of the Arabic language.

futurity. Our mouths were disciplined towards English or French, and most of us have worked concertedly to teach our tongues and palates to comport themselves around Arabic in a way that might seem a little less out of place at home. Like Georges, I have often found myself anxiously planning out and silently preparing my mouth for its transition into Arabic, or preemptively apologizing for what I perceive to be my own inability to adequately speak it. Most of us in the audience that night were similarly raised. To us, the band's apology pointed clearly to a dominant critique of our Arabic-speaking as somehow aberrant or inauthentic. This small statement made off-handedly in between songs worked to position the band and the audience collectively as somehow on the fringes of dominant Lebanese or Arab language and culture. In doing so, it explicitly created a space for a particular orientation towards language, and it claimed that space boldly in the same ways that the band's music works to claim a history and future for themselves and their audiences.

In her article "Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative","[131] performance theorist Jill Dolan asserts that performances "offers us...usefully emotional expressions of what utopia might feel like" (2001:456). Theater, she argues, "can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change" (2001:460). For Dolan, utopia represents both the impulse to imagine a different, better future, and an actual mapping of those imagined better futures onto the real in the present. In the vein of writers like Frederic Jameson (2005) and Roland Schaer (2000) Dolan's utopia is a mechanism for troubling dominant sociopolitics in the present by imagining a world in which the issues endemic to the present do not exist. Achieving this kind of critical and imaginative distance from the present, Dolan argues, requires a retreat from the real into a "kind of performative in which the utterance... inspires perhaps other more local "doings" that sketch out the potential in those feelings" (2001:457). While I have avoided using the term to describe KOZO's musical project, there is something distinctly utopian (in the sense that Dolan uses it) about their performances. Where for Dolan, theater might offer us a way to experience what utopia might look and feel like, I argue that KOZO's performances also suggest what utopia—a better future without the systemic issues of the present—might sound like. Following Dolan, I argue that these utopias, other/never-worlds in which Lebanon's post-wars reconstruction prioritized sociality over profit and political gain, can be felt in small, seemingly insignificant moments and gestures like Andrew Georges' apology.[132] Like their album, KOZO's performances do future-work. At the band's shows I felt a sense of communitas,[133] charged by

> small but profound moments in which performance call[ed] the attention of the audience in a way that lift[ed] everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what

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[131] This article did laid the foundation for Dolan's monograph, *Utopia in Performance,* in which she further explores the role of theater in conjuring utopias.

[132] Josh Kun also offers useful language for discussing the utopian tendencies of musical performances. His term "audiotopia" describes "the concept—that music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, that music is experienced not only as sound but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from" (2005:2). Kun's framework for understanding the potential for change embedded within sound and musical performance is immensely useful towards contexts like the one I described above. However, he mobilizes the term to describe music as a site of cultural encounter and exchange, with a particular focus on the individual listener as opposed to a larger community. Although the term "audiotopia" is an effective shorthand for describing the utopian in music, Dolan's framework seems more fitting to the particular context in which I am writing.

[133] Communitas is a term theorized by anthropologist Victor Turner (1969). The term denotes the way that participants in an event or audience members come to understand or feel themselves become part of a whole in an almost spiritual way. In this moment, one's individuality is felt as acutely attuned to others around them in a moment in which is suffused by an overwhelming sense of belonging to something together,

> the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense (Dolan, 2005:5/6).

Together, we, the audience were given the opportunity, momentarily, to speculate alongside KOZO about how Lebanon might be better. Through performance, the band made palpable their imagined past, and invited us to briefly occupy, to feel, to hope in, the future that might have followed from it.

As I left the theater, I thought for a long time about the reality of what really did happen in Lebanon's post-wars years. The socially oriented architecture that defines KOZO's imagined post-wars cityscape stands in stark contrast to a history in which post-civil-wars rebuilding efforts were monopolized by private companies, whose approach was to expropriate land in Beirut's downtown and almost entirely destroy surviving buildings in order to make space for high-rises, upscale shopping centers, and neo-Ottoman facades.

"Ancient City of the Future"

I can't remember what downtown Beirut was like in the 1990s. In all of my memories of crossing the bridge that separates what during the civil wars were East and West Beirut, Martyrs' Square, which anchors the neighborhood, is a blank space. It didn't occur to me to ask why we never went downtown–it simply didn't exist in my mental map of the city. I do have flashbulb memories of a photo exhibition in downtown's Place de L'Etoile, walking with my mother and grandmother through the streets of the newly reconstructed area while large, mounted photos of its old buildings provided a poignant counterpoint to their surroundings. Knowing what I know now, I can only imagine how my mother and grandmother must have felt, but as a tween, *al balad*[134] didn't mean anything to me.

When fighting broke out in 1975, downtown became its epicenter. Militia fighters occupied hotels, commercial spaces, and residential buildings alike, demarcating their respective areas of control and effectively cutting the area off from the rest of the city. Soon after, the city itself was bisected into an East and West Beirut by what became known as the "green line," and downtown became one of its most dangerous crossing points.[135] The conflict appeared to be over by early 1977, and, eager to move on, the Lebanese government formed the Council for Development and Reconstruction in order to restore the city center and improve its infrastructure. The plan was put on hold when the fighting resumed later that year. Efforts to rebuild downtown resumed six years later, in 1983, after the Israeli Defense Force was compelled to end their occupation of West Beirut and withdrew to Southern Lebanon. This time, the company tasked with reconstruction efforts was an engineering firm founded by Lebanese businessman, billionaire, and future Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. While the firm, OGER Liban,[136] began drawing up plans for its reconstruction effort, demolition crews took to downtown in an alleged effort to clean the area up. The demolition crews destroyed many of the most significant surviving landmarks despite the fact that the official 1977 master plan called for

[134] The term "al balad" literally means "the country," however it is often used to refer to downtown Beirut, with heavy connotations of downtown during Lebanon's 1950s-1970s "golden age."

[135] The formation of the green line—named after the foliage that grew wild amidst abandoned and destroyed buildings—catalyzed the territorial entrenchment of sectarian and class identities; East Beirut became coded as Christian, while West Beirut's mixed/majority Muslim neighborhoods were split along sectarian allegiance.

[136] OGER is not an acronym, rather it is the last name of Marcel Oger, who founded the French company in 1950. Hariri bought into OGER in 1979, founding Saudi OGER, and later expanded the endeavor to Lebanon. See: http://www.ogerinternational.com/the-group/profile/

their rehabilitation and safeguarding. It remains unclear who ordered or sanctioned these demolitions. Regardless, both the demolitions and the planning came to a halt when fighting broke out once more in 1984. In 1986, during another period of relative quiet, demolitions began once more.

For my mother (b. 1963) and those in her generation, downtown represents some of the worst trespasses of the civil wars. By contrast, my grandmother, who was born exactly four years before Lebanon became independent from France, remembers its bygone souks and grand boulevards through the rose-colored glasses of golden-age possibility. In truth, neither my mother's nor my grandmother's iterations of Beirut's city center exist anymore. When the fighting came to a definitive halt in 1990/91, reconstructing downtown became a top priority for officials looking to erase the physical and social scars of the past 15 years of conflict. Through a series of shrewd political moves, Hariri and his OGER Liban cemented their role as stewards of the reconstruction.[137] OGER's new master plan for the rehabilitation of downtown Beirut called for the demolition of most of the remaining structures, and called for the creation of a single firm to take over land ownership from the hundreds who still held legal rights to land in the city center. Meanwhile, even though plans for the downtown area were still being negotiated, demolition continued. Lebanese-Palestinian literary critic Saree Makdisi noted in 1997 that "more irreparable damage has been done to the center of Beirut by those who claim to be interested in salvaging and rebuilding it than had been done during the course of the preceding fifteen years of shelling and house-to-house combat" (674).

In line with the OGER and the Council for Development and Research's recommendation, a private real estate holding company named Solidere[138] was in 1994 granted the right to expropriate nearly 160 hectares of land from over 40,000 landowners in the area it began rebranding as the "Beirut Central District (BCD)."[139] Faced with growing controversy surrounding the Hariris' involvement and interests in the enterprise as well as the large-scale destruction of what remained of downtown, Solidere quickly embarked on an aggressive advertising campaign celebrating the rehabilitative work that the company was doing for Lebanon and its people. Solidere's plan for the BCD leaned heavily into this rhetoric of rehabilitation and restoration, framing its new development as bringing Beirut back in touch with its storied recent and ancient past. The company's slogan framed Beirut as the "Ancient City of the Future," implicitly and explicitly claiming to do a kind of temporal and architectural bridging between Beirut's past and its present in order to lead it into a more prosperous future.

For both Solidere and for the Lebanese government, downtown represented an opportunity to seize control of Beirut's historical narrative and perceptions of its contemporary character by enshrining particular parts of the city's history into the built space, and strategically

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[137] For example, the head of OGER became the head of the Council for Development and Reconstruction, and in 1992 Hariri was elected Prime Minister. In both cases, the private interests of Hariri and his business partners became de facto priorities of both the government and the body it had created to oversee reconstruction. For more on this, and on the built history of downtown Beirut during and after the civil wars, see Makdisi, Saree. 1997. "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere;" Mango, Tamam. 2004. "Solidere: The Battle for Beirut's Central District;" and Khalaf, Samir, and Philip S. Khoury. 1993. *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-War Reconstruction*.

[138] Solidere is an acronym for the company's name in French: Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction du Centre-ville de Beyrouth (The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District).

[139] Mango, 2004, p.15

obscuring others.[140] "What will presumably appear in a few years as the new Beirut," prophesied Makdisi,

> will present itself as recapturing and re-creating the old souk…(that is, harking back to the myth of the Levantine entrepot, to the happy Lebanon of the good old days, to a never-never land that has only ever existed in Solidere's booklets), and hence it will claim to re-present the past and the historical collective memory of the old Beirut...in its own spatiality. It will appear or, to be precise, it will be marketed as a re-creation of what was there before, rather than as something that is entirely novel, something that, properly speaking has no historical depth because it has no past at all, because it is part of a much broader process that has from the beginning tried to strip away the past and lay bare the surface of the city as sheer surface–spectacle–and as nothing more than that (1997: 686-7).

Figure 4.126 Neo-Ottoman facades of Beirut's Place de L'Etoile (photo by author)

When it opened up to the public in the early 2000s, Solidere's Beirut Central District boasted a mix of narrow cobbled streets and large boulevards, its shops and restaurants tucked into buildings with Neo-Ottoman facades standing alongside restored French-Mandate-era buildings and punctuated by monuments to Lebanon's celebrated antiquity—Roman baths, Crusader churches, and Mamluk mosques. However, the bustling popular city center that Solidere promised never came to fruition. The BCD—the downtown area that most of us just call "Solidere"—has in my lifetime only ever been the domain of the wealthy; a "never-never land" of uninhabited high-end housing developments and luxury shopping.

[140] For more on this see Sawalha, Aseel. 2010. *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City*; Khalaf, Samir. 1993. *Beirut Reclaimed;* Makdisi, Saree. 2006. "Beirut, a City without History?"

Walking Alongside Ghosts of the Past: Mayssa Jallad's Marjaa

During my conversation with Safar's Elie Abdelnour and Mayssa Jallad, Jallad noted that she was working on a new solo musical project. During downtime while Abdelnour was away, Jallad and I stole a moment to talk more about her future musical plans. "I kind of reached an impasse," Jallad explained to me, "I went to grad school in historic preservation. And I wrote my thesis about Beirut."

> I wrote about a specific event that happened in Beirut during the war. Because I'm a post-war baby, and I have no idea what happened. But the only clues I had were in the architecture. And that just came back. In all of my architecture projects, I just came back to these old buildings. And then I went and worked for an architecture firm and died. I felt like I wasn't exploring—like I wasn't saying what I wanted to say. I was in New York and I didn't belong in New York. My whole thinking was about being in Beirut and this city that I'm trying to understand. So I got this idea to do a music project about the city. That's what I'm working on now. I'm writing songs about the city and about specific events that have happened in the city. And I am referencing past events in each song, and every song will have its own little article, and every article will have an illustration or visuals that relate to it (5/20/2019).

Much like KOZO's debut album, Jallad's *Marjaa* represents a meeting of her work as an architect and historian with her work as a musician.[141] Jallad's sense of feeling out of touch with Beirut's past and of being haunted by both the city's past and its present iterations resonates strongly with the governmental policy of amnesia surrounding the civil wars. The governmentally endorsed erasure of the civil wars was both discursive and material, in the sense that much of Beirut's built past fell victim to demolition projects carried out by government contractors.

[141] These architectural/musical projects are also important because they represent a way that musicians have been able to leverage their day jobs, the things that they do to keep a roof over their heads, since they have been unable to invest in their music fully because they simply don't earn enough money. And this is aspirational—maybe not explicitly so, but definitely in the sense that they are bridging that disconnect between what they feel moved them to do music and what they have to do their jobs in order to get by. I see these projects as being animated by "what ifs," as in, what if in the future music was viable? what if what one did/studied didn't have to be compartmentalized from what one wanted to do? What if we brought the creative and imaginative spirit of alternative music-making to bear on what is conventionally understood as being rational and practical (work, making a living, etc…).

Figure 4.127. The shell of the Holiday Inn hotel is one of the few visual reminders of both the "war of the hotels" and the civil wars as a whole (666163/Wiki commons).

Jallad's MA thesis was concerned largely with recuperating a history of a specific area in which post-wars demolition and reconstruction projects almost entirely erased the history of what has been called the "war of the hotels," a series of battles fought in and around abandoned luxury hotels in Beirut's downtown area which were a pivotal moment in the cilvil wars' development. While I grew up not far from the abandoned shell of the Holiday Inn hotel, the site of some of the wars' most brutal skirmishes, I hadn't heard about the "war of the hotels" until later in my undergraduate studies. It wasn't until I took Marc Ghazaleh's "Layers of a Ghost City: Downtown Beirut Walking Tour" in 2018 that I really got a sense of how these battles were spatialized or how they fit into the geography of Beirut with which I had grown up. In her MA thesis, Jallad similarly admits to feeling out of touch with the city:

> The war is indeed...the common thread that defines the identity of all Lebanese today, even the post-war generation of which I am part. So why not build a common identity through it? I was born in 1990, when the 15-year civil war in Lebanon was coming to its end. In this thesis, I have written about events I have never experienced, and most of which I never knew existed. My parents never spoke about the war, yet I knew that my city had been through something devastating. I longed to remember… not just to know. I longed to remember as if memory, if traumatized enough, could carve itself into my parents' DNA and into mine and I could finally understand them (166-167).

Haunted by the specter of a lived and built past from which she felt alienated, Jallad, like myself and many of our peers, chose to dedicate her academic work towards learning about and creating connections with that past. In the same way as KOZO's album, or even this dissertation, Jallad's

thesis and musical projects are both efforts to work through and make a place for herself and people who grew up like her.

For many of us, leaving felt like giving up on a place that we felt inextricably bound to but were unable to understand or live in in any meaningful way. Jallad's admission about being in New York and feeling like it was not where she belonged resonated strongly with my own experiences of leaving Lebanon as a young adult, best summed up by Lebanese author and painter Rabih Alameddine whose expat character in the 1998 novel *Koolaids* muses "in America, I fit, but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong, but I do not fit (40)." Jallad's *Marjaa*[142] reads to me as an attempt to redress the problem of "fitting" by leveraging her expertise as an architect and her intimate knowledge of the city as tools for unearthing and claiming Beirut's and our parents' histories. "This thesis has proven to me that...the city is our mediator," she writes:

> It has been an enriching and traumatizing experience finding out about its violent past: I broke down when I read about the Black Saturday Massacre for the first time this fall. I was filled with rage when I realized SOLIDERE had demolished so much, and that the cafe I went to a few times was the site of the Normandy Hotel. I was emotional not because I had any personal stakes in these matters… but because I did not know about the history of my own city (166-167).

Reading Jallad's thesis, I was struck, as Jallad was, by how much I didn't know, and how much more jarring than I anticipated it was to see photographs and maps of the human and material carnage of the war. Whereas KOZO's project did a more circumscribed future work with little explicit activist intention, both Jallad herself, and her academic and musical projects, are deeply involved in explicit activism:

> I speak on behalf of the new generation who has inherited this city and its urban battles. It is time to take a distance from these events and observe them with a critical eye. It is time to be aware of the political parties who perpetrated them and continue to rule. It is time to consider the city's battles and the buildings of these battles as part of our heritage. (166-167).

Jallad argues that because the wars happened to all of Lebanon's citizens regardless of class or sect, their history and events, if recognized, might form some sort of shared basis for "postwar nation-building identity and inspir[ing] socio-political reform (thesis abstract)."

On March 27th 2020, after months of delay due to the Revolution, Lebanon's descent into economic collapse, and the outbreak of COVID-19, Jallad debuted a song from *Marjaa* on an Instagram music festival organized and hosted by Beirut Jam Sessions' Anthony Semaan. Via Instagram live, Jallad, body wrapped around a guitar, debuted "دهاليز (corridors)." "I'm really excited to be here with you, and a little scared," she laughs, "before I came back to Beirut two years ago, I decided to do a new solo musical project. And I decided to write songs about the city. So this song's name is "Dahaleez (corridors)" and it's about skyscrapers. I'm performing it for the first time" (3/27/20, Instagram live). Jallad begins the track with a short and sparse guitar introduction, along with which she hums in her breathy, almost labored, lower register.

The introduction sets the tone for the rest of the song's "A" section, in which Jallad's breathy voice is accompanied by occasional strummed chords. "I walk alone and look towards the horizon, from the blue sun//who lives here? No one lives here//My city is hostage to a skyscraper, corridors" Jallad begins to sing. This "A" section is largely unmetered, and Jallad

[142] The term "Marjaa (مرجع)" means reference, or something you continually refer back to.

takes her time with each word, singing them with her eyes closed, each exclamation heavy with the weight of the history she is unearthing. Jallad's vocal phrases are short, punctuated by her breathing and the striking sounds of her careful pronunciation. The consonants in the first few lines of the song's lyrics are put skillfully to use both as canvases for ornamentation and as elements of the sonic texture of the song, [143] with sounds like the sharp uvular stop of the letter qaf (ق) at the end of the word "afaq (horizon) and the glottal stops of the last letters of words like "zarqa' (blue)" reinforcing lyrical and musical phrasing.[144] Further reinforcing the song's grounding in Arabic musical convention, the last word of the stanza's final line, "Dahaleez" (also the title of the song), becomes a springboard for a virtuosic improvised musical climax in which the vocal line rises sequentially on the word's extended "a" sound (da-hA-leez) highlights Jallad's vocal range while exploring the breadth of the C# Phrygian (also convincingly heard as Maqam Kurd on C#) scale in which the song is set. Jallad's skilled embellishment and steady climb into her belting range mark this moment as a stark contrast to the breathiness at the lower end of her vocal range in which she sang the song's first lines.

"I walk alone," Jallad begins again, seemingly returning to the top of the "A" section, "with a map in my hand from which I don't understand anything." Rather than continuing into a new stanza, Jallad lingers on the final sound, a glottal stop, of the last word in this line "shay' (anything)." Jallad repeats the sound six times, each sounding more labored, unsettling, and uncomfortable than the last as, eyes still shut, her breaths turn to gasps between successive "eh...eh...eh...eh...eh...eh" sounds. The track shifts historical subject positions, occupying both the past in which the city is being actively destroyed and a present in which she is unable to reconcile what she knew happened and what she herself has experienced. Jallad's performance draws from and reenacts the distress she reported feeling upon learning about the devastation of the civil wars, while perhaps also attempting to imagine what it must have been like to be there, then.

The song's "B" section begins after a short pause, with an arpeggiated guitar line and a more metered, less ornamented vocal line. "There's a hospital here, but I don't see it//There's a hotel here that fills the sky," she sings. The relative lightness of this "B" section is interrupted by the same repeated glottal stop as Jallad sings "sama' (sky)," gasping once more between declamations. "There's a sniper here who falls from space," she continues, as though the gasped interlude had never happened, "there are ghosts here and the murderers are alive, free among us." Through lyrical subject matter, clear gestures towards Arab singing convention, compositional practice, and song form, the subtleties of pronunciation, and performance, the song section clearly lays out the stakes of Jallad's project. While it is not clear whether she is singing about a particular space or an event during the "war of the hotels," the song's references to hotels and snipers make the historical setting explicit. In addition to its efforts to recuperate a lived and built past, the song also clearly laments the loss of or disconnection from this history, echoing Jallad's own labor of unearthing and reconciling maps of Beirut's past with its present. Finally, references to the disappeared—to buildings, people, and ghosts—and to the murderers living

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[143] For more on conventions for ornamentation in Arabic music, see chapter 3. Virginia Danielson has written extensively about vocal ornamentation and declamation through the framework of Umm Kulthum's oeuvre (Danielson 1991).

[144] The general care that Jallad takes to pronounce the consonants of the Arabic alphabet is certainly deliberate, and stands out when heard alongside other Arabic-language alternative music because of the conventional associations of age and class with language discussed above in reference to KOZO's comments about being unable to speak Arabic properly.

prosperously among us is unambiguously an indictment of Lebanon's current political class, many of whom led militias during the wars and perpetrated some of the wars' worst crimes.[145]

After the song is over, Jallad takes a moment to gather herself and then turns tear-filled eyes to the camera.

> Thank you very much. This was very emotional, I'm a bit shaky...This is a new song, completely, it has not been released. and this quarantine gave me the chance to finish writing it. [She switches to Arabic] because we haven't been able to leave the house...I was forced to finish the song...I just wanted to say that I hope you are all well, mentally and physically. Your mental health is really important. So please don't be alone, I know we're quarantining, but keep talking to people. and keep talking to people that you love. One needs to try to take care of their mind during these times. It's tempting to lose yourself, especially with everything going on in the country. [She pauses] And in fact, the revolution is ongoing. Even though they're trying to remove the tents from downtown. But the revolution is ongoing, and no one is going to be able to suppress it. And, the revolution really happened. Just like everything [all of this—COVID, economic collapse] really did happen. So I'm just saying that it's important to take care of your mental health. Do the things you love, and talk to the people you love, and take care of yourselves and your families. I love you.

After singing a song about the erasure of a communal history, Jallad's closing remarks are careful to affirm that the revolution—another popular event that the government has tried time and again to co-opt or erase—really did happen, and that the events of the months since October 2019, absurd as they may seem, really did happen. The stakes here are interpersonal, in terms of advocating for mental health and mutual support. They are also political. Jallad clearly sees potential here, either for restorative work to be done through addressing the ways that the wars and their aftermath have divided the country or for the revolution to mark yet another moment in the political class' ongoing erasure of history and stratification of Lebanese society.

Watching Jallad's performance from thousands of miles away in my armchair in Berkeley, California, I can't help but think about the unintended and unanticipated futurity of *Marjaa*'s debut. The performance took place virtually, as part of a concert series designed in the wake of a human disaster that had nothing to do with Lebanon or violence. A central facet of Jallad's framework for the project is rethinking what it can mean to occupy spaces that you have been denied access to. Jallad's music is about reconnecting with lost spaces existing in ruins which interrupt lived experiences of contemporary post-wars Beirut by serving as visual reminders of a past we have not reconned with. And yet the question of being denied access to

[145] In is no secret that Lebanon's dominant political coalitions are simply versions of civil wars era militias. Lebanon's official post-war reconciliation policy of "no victors no vanquished" has allowed the leaders of these militias to remain in power, now as members of government. For example, Lebanon's current president, Michele Aoun, in exile from the country until 2005. Named commander of the Lebanese army in 1984, Aoun launched what he called a "war of liberation" from 1989-1990, during which he Lebanon's presidential palace (he was not the elected president) and bombarded much of Beirut in protest of the Taif Accord, which he believed did not adequately address Syria's occupation of Lebanon. Similarly, Samir Geagea, a member of partialment and leader of the Lebanese Forces party, was incarcerated for war crimes until 2005. As a militia leader, Geagea, was renowned for his brutality and his right-wing beliefs in an ethnically pure Lebanon. He was, along with other prominent Maronite militia leaders (many of whom are also government officials today), for the 1982 massacre of hundreds of Palestinian civilians residing in Beirut's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. For more on these events, see Arsan, 2018; Traboulsi, 2007; Kassir, 1994; Hanf, 1993.

public spaces, and of communally occupying these spaces now takes on new valences, collapsing the distance and disconnect wreaked by the wars onto Beirut into the conditions of quarantine and distancing imposed by a global pandemic. While Jallad's project was about contending with the ghosts of what Toufic would call "surpassing disaster," here we were joined together by a wholly different experience of disaster. Due to global COVID-19 lockdown, we were all suddenly unable to access or occupy public spaces, all preoccupied by our own personal and communal futures. At play in Jallad's performance, and at least in my own reception of it, were multiple modes and scales of futurity. The question of Lebanon's future became wrapped up in the apocalyptic, sci-fi-esque disaster of the pandemic, all experienced through the techno-futurity of a music performance series hosted on virtually, on Instagram. Unexpectedly, a project about making sense of experiences of space out of time (reckoning with the ghosts of a violent past) has taken on resonances of a post-human, sci-fi futurity vis-a-vis this disaster. As I have argued at length throughout this dissertation, musicians like Mayssa Jallad have been instrumental in creating the spaces in and through which to begin to make sense of the competing temporalities that many Lebanese people contend with. After two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains unclear how the pandemic's own temporalities (the suspended now of the pandemic, the anticipatory "after times," and their antecedent, the "before times") will weave their way into the gordian knot of Lebanon's existing travails with time. But events like the Beirut Jam Sessions Instagram concert series seem to offer many of us spaces to imagine what it might look like to continue to labor towards better futures even as the conditions of possibility remain nebulous and unclear.

The Revolution: A Coda

I began this dissertation with a chapter that explored alternative music's worldings through sound from the 1990s to the mid-2000s. While the currents of futurity that I trace throughout this chapter are unique in their own right, they are nonetheless indebted to decades of social and political work that came before them. In many ways, the musical projects that I've written about in this chapter can be heard as contemporary iterations in the genealogy of the sonic world-building of Lebanon's alternative music that I began to map out in the dissertation. The contemporary musicians' labor and their vision that have explored here continue to define the world of possibility in which younger alternative musicians make their home. As I mentioned in the opening to this chapter, musicians like Zeid Hamdan and the members of Mashrou' Leila have been pivotal voices in the October revolution. While Zeid was able to perform and protest on stages, however, Mashrou' Leila's voices were represented in absentia. It would be wrong of me to end a chapter about future-work without discussing the pivotal role that they have played in manifesting spaces of possibility.

Over the last five years, following the release of their third studio album *Ibn El Leil*, Mashrou' Leila have been banned from playing in much of the Arab world. In Jordan, a concert was shut down due to government concerns about the band's incompatibility with Jordanian values. In Egypt, they became personae non gratae after a series of arrests and investigations in response to photos of pride flags being raised at the band's concert and that were circulated on social media.[146] In July 2019, just weeks before their August 9th ten-year-anniversary performance at the Byblos International Festival (where they had performed twice before), the

[146] Notably, one of these fans was Sarah Hegazi, who was arrested and tortured for three months for "inciting debauchery" after photos of her at the concert holding the rainbow flag circulated on social media. Hegazi sought and was granted asylum in Canada, where she took her own life on June 14, 2020.

band found itself caught yet again in a tempest of religiously fueled moral panic. Following a social media campaign by Christian activists accusing the band of inciting blasphemy,[147] the Maronite Archdiocese of Jbeil (Byblos) issued a statement that called for the show's cancellation, claiming that the band "undermine religious values and human morals, and attack sacred symbols of Christianity."[148] The band came under fire primarily for its social media presence, and for the lyrics "I baptize my liver in gin, in the name of the father and the son," from the *Ibn El Leil* track "Djinn." While in official statements Christian leaders condemned the band for blasphemy, unofficial statements by clergy and religious activists were more explicitly homophobic in their protests. The moral panic that flared up around the band's Byblos performances, as in Egypt and Jordan before that, had little to do with religious values, and everything to do with the persistent homophobia of the entrenched sectarian heteropatriarchy.

After days of exchange between the band, the Festival organizers, and the Archdiocese, the Festival announced that it would be cancelling the show so as not to endanger the band or its audiences. Members of the band, two of whom were in the US and had not yet returned to Lebanon for the concert, were called in by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for questioning. Fearing for his safety after hearing rumors that the ISF was ready to arrest him at the airport, Hamed Sinno elected not to return to Lebanon, and has been in exile since. Most obviously, the decision to ban Mashrou' Leila from performing at the Byblos International Festival is compelling evidence of the Maronite Church's homophobia, its extragovernmental territorial authority, and a lack of division between church and state. I argue, however, that like Egypt before it, Lebanon's censorship betrayed both recognition and fear of the band's proven ability to manifest change. As a band whose audience spanned across class and linguistic boundaries in ways that most alternative music didn't/hasn't, Mashrou' Leila gave many of us a common language and starting point for doing socio-political critique.

When I returned home after the revolution had begun, I noticed that my mother had stopped listening to the radio, and had instead bought two copies of *Ibn El Leil*, which she listened to on repeat in her car (one copy was a backup, in case the first wore out). When I asked her why Mashrou' Leila, and why *Ibn El Leil,* she shrugged, "with everything that's been going on, I can't listen to anyone else. Just him [Sinno]. No one else gets it." It is telling but unsurprising that my mother, who is more than twenty years Sinno's senior and who was a teenager when the civil wars began, felt seen and soothed by an album released long before the revolution began. Telling but not surprising, because Mashrou' Leila has been a primary locus of what Jill Dolan calls "utopian performatives," doing[s]...in which hope adheres, that communitas happens, that the not-yet-conscious is glimpsed and fled and strained towards" (2005:170).

At performances, where diverse audiences gather and find common ground through and around Mashrou' Leila music, other futures come to life. Queer activists raise rainbow flags and for a moment they occupy a future in which such an act is not dangerous or subversive. Religion, class, and generational differences seem to disappear, replaced instead by the joy and relief of seeing oneself—a common *haleh (state of being)*, as Tony Sfeir put it—reflected in the music. In the early weeks of the revolution, Instagram posts were flooded with Mashrou' Leila's music; their tracks were played over loudspeakers at protests in Martyrs' Square, and local artists worked lyrics from the band's songs into representations or recreations of iconic scenes from

[147] The campaign began in response to a four-year-old post on Hamed Sinno's Facebook page, in which he shared a meme depicting the head of the pop singer Madonna photoshopped onto the body of the Virgin Mary. The singer captioned the post "Madonna and Fanboy—artist unknown."
[148] Translation by author.

protests. More than a sonic companion to the revolution's events, Mashrou' Leila's music became a shorthand for understanding and sharing news, discussing goals, and voicing hopes for the future.

Figure 4.128. Revolutionary art depicting iconic moments from protests, captioned with lyrics from Mashrou' Leila songs.

I saw some of those futures in action during my brief trip home in December 2019. Apart from the spirit of collaboration and mutual care that animated many of the conversations I had with people on the street, I was able to experience parts of the city that had been closed off to the public during my childhood. During the months of protests held downtown, in the areas built and managed by Solidere, revolutionaries had dismantled many of the fences and barricades that obscured or restricted access to buildings that the company hadn't yet razed or rebuilt. After protestors tore down the fences surrounding it, the Egg (Phillipe Karam's unfinished movie theater) became a meeting place, a forum for public debate, and a lecture hall in which secondary school and university teachers held public classes for students who had missed school to participate in the revolution. The walls and barricades around Beirut's Grand Theater, which was built in the 1920s, shut down and damaged during the civil wars, and then expropriated by Solidere, were also brought down. I visited both the Egg and the Grand Theater with my mother. She'd been inside the Egg before, but not the Theater, and together we added this historic space to our mental geography of the city we'd both grown up in. Even in its dilapidated state, I felt more connected to Beirut's history while staring up at the Grand Theater's crumbling stained glass skylight than I ever had walking through Solidere's sterilized "ancient city of the future." Here, too, were literal spaces of possibility, made accessible to the Lebanese people through collective action in the name of better futures.

Conclusion: After the Blast

> *Writing, like performance, is always only an experiment, an audition, always only another place to practice what might be an unreachable goal that's imperative to imagine nonetheless. Writing, like performance, lets me try on, try out, experiment with another site of anticipation, which is the moment of intersubjective relation between word and eye, between writer and reader, all based on the exchange of empathy, respect, and desire.*
>
> - Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (p.168)

> *"If time and history seem to have broken down—abandoning the fragments of historical memory in a present also unevenly strewn with the detritus of unfinished future possibilities—it becomes essential to conceive of history not as an end in itself but as the foundation of a present more adequate to the challenges facing contemporary Beirut and Lebanon. What this suggests, in turn, is that the task of reconstituting history and memory will flourish most productively in those forms that enable, even require, entirely new understandings of narrative, of community, of temporality and subjectivity. What such projects require, in a sense, is the making of a readership, an audience, fully open to the challenges and rigors of their formal, structural, chronological, and narratological heterogeneity. What is really missing, then, is the right kind of audience, the appropriate reader, viewer, listener, one whose sensory and cognitive faculties could process a story spoken in dozens of fragmented narratives, told in hundreds of voices, recollected in thousands of images, while sorting out the threads of alternative possible pasts, presents, and futures, all at once.*
>
> - Saree Makdissi, (2006:213)

Today, more than ever before, I find it difficult to access the optimism that has been the lifeblood of this dissertation. Lebanon's future seems bleak at best, and apocalyptic at worst. I don't know how or whether things can get better, and some days it seems like nothing will ever be ok again. If I feel this way, from the privilege of my stable life in the United States, where I can take my clean water and 24/7 electricity for granted, then what must it be like to live in Lebanon right now? I can only get impressions. Brief snippets, small, fleeting windows into life after the blast. Lebanon today exists at the intersection of three overlapping timelines – the stalled "now" of the 2019 October revolution, the pandemic's nostalgic "before" and aspirational "after" times, and, since August 4, 2020, the now dominant chronotope "after the blast," which itself has displaced the extended revolutionary present with its own foil, "before the blast." Living in relation to the blast feels uncomfortably analogous to the temporalities of before and after the civil wars that marked my childhood and teen years. And yet, to echo my mother's mantra, "life goes on."

In many ways, this dissertation has been a testament to that sentiment; in the midst of unthinkable violence, of ongoing precarity and collapse, life does go on. In this dissertation, I have traced the history and politics of alternative music in Lebanon as a way of exploring the possibilities that such music opens up for thinking about, imagining, aspiring towards ways that life might not just go on, but get better. In the preceding chapters, I have looked to constructions of the "alternative" in music in Lebanon since the 1990s to examine how popular music creates material and ideological spaces of optimistic futurity. In order to understand the stakes of the "alternative" in the practices that accrue this designation, this study examines what musicians' sound, performances, and discourses are conceived as *alternative to.* In it, I argue that the "alternative" gathers around itself a life/soundworld in which a generation of Lebanese people labor to imagine futures that aren't centered around precarity or the anticipation of more violence. This is articulated through the framework of what I call "belligerent optimism," an

irreverent but hopeful musical and ideological orientation. I argue that this orientation is crucial to re-framing the scope of inquiry on music in Lebanon, making space to ask questions about hope and possibility without romanticizing or dwelling on past and future suffering. Rather than acts of resilience, a framework of belligerent optimism understands the practices of daily life in Lebanon as stubborn attempts to build a life and strive towards a better future in spite of seemingly impossible political and economic conditions.

The framework of alternative as an aesthetic and ideological orientation articulated through a disposition of belligerent optimism has also informed my methodological approaches. As a Lebanese person, my own belligerent optimism has shaped investigative choices in ethnographic interviews, concert attendance, and close listening. Each of these methodologies have helped to clarify how alternative music is understood by its practitioners, and how it is positioned in relation to musical and sociopolitical structures. In pursuit of a deeper understanding of the alternative, the dissertation foregrounds the voices of musicians whose music ranges widely in terms of popularity and circulation alongside the voices of producers and organizers. The belligerence that frames this dissertation, as well as the decolonial lens through which it approaches questions of genre, are further realized by contextualizing my understanding of alternative music in relation to mid-20th century practices of local music-making through historical sound sources. Also in keeping with the dissertation's decolonial politics, I have centered the voices of Lebanese scholars whose writings concern the role of Lebanese art in challenging and subverting dominant politics.

I ask what it could mean to take local concerns and ways of life seriously, and to orient frames of inquiry from deeply situated perspectives and positions rather than from more broad, globally-oriented frames of study. I frame my inquiry through a practice of situated critique which draws at once from long-term ethnographic work and from my own attunements and experiences as a Lebanese person to propose new ways of understanding the work that music can do in non-Western contexts. I bring these perspectives to existing writing on music and futurity, by thinking through sound as a speculative tool through which aspirations for the future might be heard, felt, and realized.

Where does this leave us? Where does this leave me, a "native ethnographer" writing about home? The chapters in this dissertation represent efforts to explore what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like to write an ethnography that is particular, situated, and imaginative. In many ways, this dissertation is an object of what, after Jill Dolan, I might call utopian thinking. It is both medium and message, a work that studies the flourishing of hope and optimism in the future work of young Lebanese people while also being a work of optimistic futurity in itself. As I mentioned above, the stakes for me are more than purely intellectual or career-oriented. This dissertation represents my own "doing in futurity" (Munoz, 2009:26). It is my own way of realizing and imagining a better future for Lebanon, by belligerently and insistently taking up space, in company with those who have done brave and necessary work, within existing conversations that seem to only see the ways that Lebanon will not or cannot change for the better. It is an artifact of my own fight for its future, and for my own future in it.

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