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Egyptian Revolution: The Music of Reform

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Egyptian Revolution: The Music of Reform

Abstract

Overview: On January 31, 2013 National Public Radio (NPR) reporter Leila Fadel broadcasted an interview with Omar Kamal, devout Salafi turned beat boxer in Cairo, Egypt. Kamal was a drug addict and a drummer who decided he wanted more out of his life and searched for fulfillment in Salafi Islam. The Salafist sect is a very traditional, strict and conservative form of Islam which, among other things, discourages its followers from playing music – especially the kind of angst-filled rock that Kamal was playing. In an attempt to find direction, Kamal gave up his music and followed the religion to the letter, obeying the rules the leaders set in place for him and dedicating himself to this new lifestyle. The new life required him to accept new values and limits on his behavior and character; more specifically it required a musician to stop playing music and give up a passion.

Shortly after, protests broke out in Egypt calling for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. His regime had never supported the Salafist religion, and under his rule Salafi Muslims endured persecution and turmoil. Despite the previous maltreatment, the Salafist leaders advised their followers not to participate in the protest demonstrations and to avoid the conflict. Omar Kamal was surprised to see the leaders take such a hypocritical stance after all the harassment they had borne in the past years. He decided to leave his religious path to join the revolution and fight against Mubarak. Once he joined the protests, he went back to his music finding that not only could he express his anger against the government, but he could also express his confusions and frustrations about his religious experience and his identity crisis.

His return to a musician's lifestyle served as an outlet that gave Kamal that sense of fulfillment that he searched for in religion. While still a devout Muslim, Kamal claims that the Salafis must adapt to the new Egyptian culture and support the changes it is undergoing if the religion wants support and followers. He states in the NPR interview, "the people aren't stupid and they won't believe you, just because you claim that God is on your side." This clash between modernization and traditionalism is part of the reason why music is thriving so well in revolutionary Egypt. Musicians and fans draw from a plethora of musical genres and with this spectrum of musical styles, there is a song that speaks to everyone.

Keywords

Writing

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Egyptian Revolution: The Music of Reform

On January 31, 2013 National Public Radio (NPR) reporter Leila Fadel broadcasted an interview with Omar Kamal, devout Salafi turned beat boxer in Cairo, Egypt. Kamal was a drug addict and a drummer who decided he wanted more out of his life and searched for fulfillment in Salafi Islam. The Salafist sect is a very traditional, strict and conservative form of Islam which, among other things, discourages its followers from playing music – especially the kind of angst-filled rock that Kamal was playing. In an attempt to find direction, Kamal gave up his music and followed the religion to the letter, obeying the rules the leaders set in place for him and dedicating himself to this new lifestyle. The new life required him to accept new values and limits on his behavior and character; more specifically it required a musician to stop playing music and give up a passion.

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Music has become so important among many other mediums of expression because it gives artists like Kamal a way to speak passionately about what moves them most in their culture,

society and politics. These fervent musical pieces feed the young Egyptian generation hungry for change. As major fans of the revolutionary music, Egyptians helped musicians' songs increase popularity until many eventually went viral around the nation, then the world. As the youth took to the streets, they carried their accusations of Mubarak and the lyrics of Egyptian rap on their tongues. The general fan base used lyrics as chants at protests and increased the fame of Egyptian music. The Egyptian youth had a strong ambition to instigate a revolution and used the tools which they saw best to get their message out. Music was one of these tools. They could identify with their choice of genres, specifically rap, heavy metal, folk or hip hop because it spoke to their struggle. Depending on their taste and demographic, there was music Egyptians felt appealed to their emotions.

Even before the ideas of a formal revolution entered the minds of discontented Egyptians, the spirit of change entered their souls through music. Most analyses of music's relationship with the revolution focus on whether it was a cause or an effect and whether it was vital to the revolution's success or not (LeVine, Swedenburg). However, this discussion looks not at music's role, but why it was even there to begin with. This project responds to a void in the research and demonstrates how music became such a powerful part of Egypt's revolution. Egyptian music fans used revolution-inspired artists' music and influential genres as tools to achieve their goals for reform which is why music was so prominent in the revolution's protests.

The Egyptian Revolution: An Overview of Important Stakeholders and Events

Now, the music of discussion was not the cause of the revolution but rather an inspiration of an ongoing conflict that rose to the top as a representation of societal unrest. According to AlJazeera's timeline of events, the revolution officially began on January 25, 2011: the day Egyptians deemed the Day of Rage. Lit with anger over poverty, unemployment and governmental corruption, the people demanded President Hosni Mubarak leave office.

Thousands of Egyptians marched in Cairo and faced the police force that was armed with tear gas. Protests broke out all over Egypt in major cities like Alexandria, Mansura, Sawan and Assiut. Ideas of reform and anger spread like wild fire through social media websites like Facebook and Twitter. The revolution had begun.

The following day, protests turned much more violent and by January 26 approximately 1,030 people had been injured. The government blacked out the social media sites and some cell phone services in an attempt to contain the protests. However, it seemed as though nothing would stop the enraged Egyptian population. On the 29th President Mubarak announced that he would dismiss his cabinet and take on a vice president, Omar Suleiman, for the first time in his 30

ruling years. Cairo's Tahrir Square was completely occupied with protestors and yet Mubarak still refused to step down. Mohamed ElBaradei, former United Nations affiliate turned democracy activist, joined the protest with a great welcome from the Egyptians. The protestors cheered when he addressed them claiming that, "What we started can never be pushed back." On the first day of February, Mubarak announced that he would not run for re-election but would finish out his current term. He promised his people that he would reform the constitution, economy, and job opportunities. The now one million people in Tahrir Square did not care about his promises and continued their occupation and protest. After a five day blackout, the protesters gained back their internet and once again used it to rally even more people behind their cause. February 4th marked the eleventh day of protesting and Egyptians named it the Day of Departure after rumors circulated that Mubarak would resign. Members of the ruling National Democratic Party resigned, including Gamal Mubarak the president's son, but the president still held onto his office. When President Mubarak addressed the public one more time on the 10th, he was expected to announce his own resignation but only stated once again that he would remain in office till the end of his term in September.

That night, the Egyptians responded with fury. They made it clear they would not leave their protest till they got the result they set out for. After intense violence in Tahrir Square and other major cities' protests, Mubarak officially resigned on February 11, 2011. In the following days, people celebrated the victory and returned to their homes. The Egyptian military promised to hand over the governmental power to elected officials. There has been no final death or injury count of the entire revolution and the prospects of the coming Egyptian government are still unclear.

Egyptian Protestors' Musical Inclinations and Political Determination

Maybe one of the most provocative declarations about the determination of the Egyptian youth is that this generation of Egyptians has been able to instigate more change in a matter of weeks than their parents were in thirty years (Baker, et al.). There is something very special about the determination of all the Egyptian youth who are striving to make a better future. One Arab blogger, Ulysses, who experienced and enjoyed the revolutionary anthems first hand, finds the title "Arab Spring," which refers to many revolutions across the Middle East, undermining to the effort because "seasons just happen, but people make revolutions happen." Protesters support one another despite ethnic, territorial or historical differences, which is the only way that they can further their success in the aftermath of the revolution.

When the regime used physical oppression against an individual on the street or at a protest,

passerby Egyptian citizens rallied behind the victim in support of one another, united in opposition to a common enemy (Lynch 77-78). The majority of almost every Arab country's population is under the age of 30, so their loyalty to each other and their cause is very important (Baker et al.). Mark LeVine, a musician and professor of Middle Eastern studies at California State University-Irvine, claims in his book, *Heavy Metal Islam*, that it is important to listen and watch the upcoming generation because it will help understand the future of the Middle East, specifically Egypt (5). Egyptian student Khaled Kamel stated: "I don't care who ends up running this country, as long as I have the ability to change them if I don't like them" (Baker et al.). This generation did not start a revolution on a whim. The ideas and motivations of change were rooted deep in their minds long before the first protest. Influenced by the aspects of the culture they identified with, young, modernized Egyptians waited for the spark that would set ablaze the fire of revolution in the rest of the population. Heavy metal and rap music have characteristically resistant messages, which Egyptians heard and let consume them even before the official revolution. They lived protests decades before they demonstrated it.

People use what they identify with to get a message across and the Egyptian youth found inspiration in the music of up and coming artists. Without this generation as a fan base, the music could not possibly have played such a significant role in the revolution. For example Ramy Essam, a rapper who played at Tahrir Square was tortured for speaking out against the government and his Egyptian fans only saw this as more of a reason to support him and his tenacity (LeVine, "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 1). The oppression he faced only strengthened the people's admiration for him which increased his fame and his music's popularity. Essam is also a very personable star; he met with his fans at protests and worked side by side with them in the struggle for change (LeVine 2). Together they found strength to pursue the cause and maintain the spirit of reform.

Many of the protestors grew up as heavy metal fans so the themes of resisting authority and going against societal norms have fueled their desire for change for years. Their interest in new music and a new future gave both the revolution and the musical genres fresh energy (Ulysses). The fans and the music built off each other; when music came out that inspired the protestors they supported it and that inspired musicians to create more music and so on.

This Egyptian generation also used the tools available to them to circulate the music and the message. Access to the internet radically and dramatically changed the role of music in the revolutionary movement because it could reach all over with a click of a mouse (LeVine, "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 2). Joshua Asen, a filmmaker and writer of the *Hip Hop Diplomacy*

blog reported in an interview for Naomi Westland's article "Rappers Provide Anthems Rising over Arab Spring," that the people were so moved by the music once they found it online that it, "helped get thousands of young people out of Internet cafes and into the streets and kept them pumping their fists until regimes fell." The internet gave people a chance to hear the message through the music and then go out and support it in protests.

The rise in popularity of rappers and other musicians was only made possible through the interest of the fans. Despite its origins in the west, these fans no longer saw rap music from other countries as foreign, but as tactics to use against the regime for their benefit (LeVine, "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 3). The Arab youth, so driven in their quest for change, used ideas as tools to bring people together in a common cause. Only something very important to a group would warrant the injury and death that protestors faced during the revolution. A survey conducted by the P.R. firm Asda's Burson-Marsteller, reported in the article "Rap, Rage and Revolution," states that in nine Middle Eastern states, the younger generation ranked democracy as more important than good civil infrastructure, access to the best education and even fair wages.

This is a clear objective coming from a group which has claimed the revolution as their own from start to finish (Baker et al.). They have set goals and changes that they want to see happen. As seen with their tenacity when Mubarak refused to step down, they have the best interests of their culture and society in mind which help them succeed. In a mainly traditionalist society, revolutionaries need to put the interests of local culture as their main values so that they can gain support from all social classes. The determination and dedication of the Egyptians paid off in success. When word spread of their accomplishment, Bahrainis adopted lyrics of protest to fight for reform in their own country. Not too long ago, this generation was called the "lost generation," thought to be caught up in the corruption and inequality of their homeland, but now it is the "miracle generation" making change the way they want to see it, and bettering Egypt on their own terms (Baker, et al.).

Inspired Musicians as Unstoppable Protestors

Those carrying signs at the protest demonstrations are not the only activists for change; the musicians lit with the fire of revolution that allowed emotion to come through in the music are responsible for giving the determined Egyptian youth a form of expression for their emotions. This music has also surprisingly caught the interest of an older generation too, similarly inspired by the message of the lyrics. Music can be used as a tool "to move crowds into a sentimental or affective state, such as anger, mourning, nostalgia or patience" (Swedenburg). The strength of

music on people's emotions can unite them under a shared sentiment, turning the passion of one into a cause of thousands. Artists suffered for their music's effectiveness and many have been abused, arrested and sometimes killed by the regime for their obvious defiance (Lynch 77-78). However, this did not stop the music production. Musicians believe that their music is an important form of expression (Baker et al.) which deserves to survive in light of the still corrupt and bias Arab entertainment industry (Ulysses). The music was obviously not permitted by the government to be widely circulated so the fans had to find other means to spread it. Also, the copyrights which protected the allowable music prevented mass reproduction of the song for the protest cause. However, during the revolution, this did not stop Egyptians and it still does not stop them from spreading the de facto anthems (Rizk 1). Although technically it is musical piracy, fans downloaded music through illegal websites even before the revolution. In Table 1, the data presents the most popular websites for illegal downloads compiled from Alexa.com and reported in "Notes from Egypt's Alternative Music Scene: Business Models, Commons and Copyright" by Nagla Rizk of The American University in Cairo (17). Note that in three of the five websites mentioned, Egyptians make up more than half the user base for illegal downloading.

The conveyed passion through lyrics and performance has touched the hearts of many Egyptians. The music gives them an opportunity to challenge social norms that otherwise define society (LeVine "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 1). With such strong foundations, the impact of this music was forged out of the performance which sustained the social movement (Swedenburg). Not all music can speak to people in a way to have them unite for a common goal, it takes serious talent and specially chosen words to get that kind of result. A musician with that kind of talent can rally a people together. To an outside world, the mediums of expression that reflect social issues are what symbolize a historical event like the Egyptian revolution; a musician can be a global symbol (LeVine, "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 1). Those that challenged culture and question the biggest problems in Arab society can be hated for it, but also praised for it.

Popular rapper, El General released a song "Rais Lebled" which means "President of the Country," in which he speaks to the regime about its unacceptable corruption. Before the revolution he and his music were relatively unknown in the public sphere (Lynch 77-78). Egyptians took his words to the protests chanting the lyrics of his rap to show their persistence: "Miseries everywhere, Mr. President. I talk with no fear, although I know I will get only trouble, I see injustice everywhere" (Baker, et al.). When Bahrainis saw the success of the Egyptians they

too took these lyrics to protest. “Rais Lebled” became an unofficial anthem of the Arab Spring to the young protestors. Because he directly attacked the regime and posted his music to Facebook, El General was arrested on December 24, 2010 (Lynch 78). His supporters responded in rage as if their own brother had been arrested, showing their support for the power of his music in their cause (LeVine, “Music and the Aura of Revolution” 1).

Ramy Essam, another rapper previously mentioned wrote a song, “Irhal” (Leave), which was wildly popular among the Tahrir Square revolutionaries. In an interview with Mark LeVine, Essam summed up his work as an artist: “My role is to take what people are feeling most deeply and put it into words that can speak to everyone over and over again” (“Music and the Aura of Revolution 1). This dedication to a fan base and a cause is why music was so prominent in the revolutions. Music aimed specifically at the protesters emotions earned a place in the Egyptians’ demonstrations.

Other rappers like Arabian Knightz and El Deeb had a presence in the music scene as well (Westland). El Deeb was a banker in the Persian Gulf but born in Cairo, and left his career to become a musician in the name of the revolution. Many artists still work day jobs despite their new found fame in the revolution and continue to produce music because it helps the cause (Ulysses). El Deeb’s devotion to his homeland and its strife come through in his lyrics as an expression for others to use as well. In his writing he looks for answers about his culture and its problems with corruption, sexual harassment of women and social inequality. These types of songs turned fans from fear to revolt (LeVine, “Music and the Aura of Revolution” 2) and “became the de facto anthems of Tahrir Square” (Westland). Anything played at Tahrir Square was not accepted solely on the message of the lyrics but also with the passion of the performance. Revolutions’ successes do not depend on a song but the song has a way of illuminating the aspects of change foreseen by the public.

Artists who fought the regime also had to fight the social norm. Going against the traditional views, rappers and hip hop musicians brought forth their passion in such a way that challenged the current culture. At the beginnings of the revolution, the rap movement was still seen as controversial because it was characterized as a challenging and questioning genre. Thus, musicians who played it were mostly underground and had to produce and advertise it themselves (Ulysses). Through their belief in the strength of their message and their drive to be heard, the music took hold of a fan base and spread across Egypt and the Middle East. Musicians struggle to incorporate the modern sound with the Arab historical culture. Being that hip hop originated in the west, musicians took care not to let their music sound too much like that of the

United States' because although they sought change in their community, their heritage is still valuable to them. Those artists who could equally include both the pride of their Egyptian, or just Arab background, challenge the corruption they despise, and make their music original from its western origins are the artists who gave music its function in the protests. They also unified the new specific, vibrant Arab hip hop genre. Usama Kahf of California State University, Long Beach asserted this balance in her article from the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*: "It makes the difference between being labeled a traitor or imitator of the west and getting respect as a voice of legitimate resistance (3)." The music that surfaces as most popular for its message can also provide insights to Islam and society (LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam* 2)

The passionate lyrics and stirring melodies of traditional music, or folk music, had a presence in the Tahrir Square protests because they included the history of Egyptian struggle and brought nostalgia to the hearts of the protestors. While the songs themselves contained messages of perseverance and drive, the performances also evoked the emotions of the people. Songs' meanings were found in performance not just lyrics. El Tanbura, a folk group, performed at Tahrir Square and was a perfect example of a passionate performance. They played an anthem written from the year their band formed in 1978, "Patriotic Port Said," which reminded listeners of the Egyptian workers settled in barracks when digging the Canal 150 years ago. This musical reminder of Egyptian history mobilized feelings of militancy and unity of the nation in the protesters. It linked the history of Egyptian struggles – and victories – with modern problems (Swedenburg).

Influential Musical Genres of Protest

Just like it takes a special artist to write the music of a protest, the type of music has to speak to the people. The authentic Arab culture's music speaks to the protesters in a way which motivates them to make a stand for societal reform and challenge the status quo by giving a new critical perspective of a community (Kahf 2; LeVine "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 2). It does this by combining the historical folk music that evokes nostalgia over past Egyptian troubles, with common modern themes of opposition to current authority. The music which effectively encapsulates this mixture and balance will play a role in the future of Egypt's cultural growth after the revolution (Swedenburg). This complexity of culture is what gave music its clout in the revolution. John Cassel, an American activist working in the West Bank, said that the "vibrancy of Arab culture is something we in the west don't understand well" which describes the layers of humanity that come through in their forms of musical expression. The characteristics of the most popular genres during the revolutionary period were such that they allowed artists and fans to

identify with their basic messages of patriotism and nationalism and the surprisingly contradictory characteristics of resistance and opposition.

Heavy metal messages were in the hearts of the Egyptian youth before the revolution and helped to encourage their resistance against the regime's corruption and societal inconsistencies. Metal has a common theme of small-group solidarity, subversive messages against corruption, useless violence and political perishing (LeVine, "Music and the Aura of Revolution" 2). As aforementioned, the musicians of heavy metal and rap did not copy sounds of western styles but indigenized it and made it their own, meaning it could no longer be considered a foreign genre in the Middle East. Since it was so specific to the Arab world, it was specific to their struggle and resistance. Now Arab music has become so original it even influences western music (John and Joyce Cassel). Muslim history has many figures that appeared to come far from the mainstream of culture but made their impact in the growth and change of the Arab world much like rap artists who originally seemed out of the social norm before they gained a following (LeVine, Heavy Metal Islam 2).

The rap and hip hop movements are also characterized as having oppositional theories and an against-the-grain mentality. It is angry music that has come to be a defining representation of Arab culture in 2011 (LeVine, "From Protest Songs to Revolutionary Anthems"). It gets its angry persona from its roots in 1970's New York with claims of injustice, poverty and inequality (Westland). By nature it goes against the mainstream which means it tends to get a lot of resistance from various cultural forces. In the Arab world it bore extra criticism from a society that has a negative reaction to anything that sounds western, especially something that critiqued their way of life (Kahf 2). It gained support however when it became so authentic to the Egyptian cause, and the Arab Spring in general. Sub genres like that of the Arab hip hop movement arise out of the conditions and forces that mold music, like the state of the culture and politics. Much of the hip hop and rap was largely computer based so if an artist had an idea, talent, and a computer, he or she could make music. Because of this new way of producing, music could be specific and indigenous to the Egyptian culture. According to Tricia Rose, author of Black Noise, hip hop is a "form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly-rhythmic electronically based music" (Rose qtd. in Kahf 6). It also frequently used profanities which was unheard of in Egyptian music until recently (Swedenburg).

There is an important difference between true hip hop and commercialized hip hop which is all too often more associated with the title than the authentic rap and hip hop. According to Mark LeVine it was once thought that the mass reproduction of music, like that which comes about as

a result of viral internet networks, would take away from the specialness of the art; However, the art form simply has taken new form in its spread (“Music and the Aura of Revolution” 4). The social turmoil of Egypt has let the distinctive music grow and blossom (Swedenburg).

The third genre which had a great influence in the presence of music at protests was a traditional folk genre. The Egyptian folk group Tanbura led a revival of a music called *simsimiyya* in the Nile Delta and celebrated the revolution in Tahrir Square. *Simsimiyya* is a five string lyre that dates back to the time of the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs (“Tossing out the Fish” 6). While much of the rap and hip hop evokes urban modern imagery, Egyptian folk music uses imagery of the prior generations. A softer and calmer genre, folk music still can have a charge of revolution without having aggressive qualities of rap, hip hop and heavy metal (LeVine, “From Protest Songs to Revolutionary Anthems”). The music has a simpler sound and more natural than the computerized hip hop.

The advantages of the simplistic folk music appeal to artists when writing because it allows them to send a message without a lot of added sound or complexities. In fact, Ramy Essam decided to switch his music to a more traditional sound because he found he could make a stronger statement with just a guitar and his voice. Essam says in an interview with Mark LeVine, “My music became more revolutionary as it became softer” (“From Protest Songs to Revolutionary Anthems”). Rap expresses the public’s frustrations and angers but folklore music expresses the public’s hopes and needs. The people identified not only with the music’s current cries for reform but also its historical aspects which remind listeners of past turmoil that was eventually overcome; for example some Egyptian music modernized songs about the 1919 British occupation. The key to the power of these songs is that these are issues which Egyptians have since moved passed, just like they hope to move passed the current government corruption, poverty and inequality.

The folk genre came of inspiration from oppression and a desire to preserve traditional music basics in Egypt. Just as the western origins of hip hop influenced the Arab subgenre, many folk artists pulled ideas from American folk singers Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. However, a major influence of Egyptian folk music is an Egyptian singer named Sheikh Imam who was paired with a renowned poet Ahmed Fouad Gigm. Their music sang against state violence and encourages the work of future folklore musicians. A famous piece of Imam’s is “Donkey and the Foul” which is a musical allusion to President Mubarak and his successor son Gamal and their corrupt administration.

Folk music helped the Egyptians push past the regional and ethnic divides and the different

classes of their overall culture and unite together in protest. The traditional sound of folklore enticed all ages because its message was simply that of hope for the future and this gave those that opposed the new hip hop's message an equally effective musical outlet. Egyptian folk music was an expression of the soul of the people and their needs (Swedenburg). Those that can incorporate the energy and power of the rap sound with the soulful historic base of folklore in their music will likely have a role in the cultural future of the post-revolutionary Egypt.

Egyptian Revolutionary Music: A Personal Expression and Outlet

Although many of the demonstrations did have their fair share of violence, it is important that the Egyptians did have access to and did implement a peaceful way to express their feelings about their unacceptable political and societal conditions; this expression was music. Success of their attempts are still preliminary and there is no way of knowing where the future of Egypt is headed just yet, but there is enough substantial progress that it can be considered a success in regards to bringing about change, given that Mubarak has stepped down. This success is not completely attributed to music but the fact that music had such a prominent presence in demonstrations shows that it was clearly a useful tool to the protestors.

People get enthusiastic when they have an anthem or a symbol of their causes and goals. Music can give people this symbol but also move them into an emotional state which feeds their desire for reform. The more people want change, the more art expresses that desire. The power of the musical expression gained momentum as more people joined the cause for reform. The way music speaks to people is unexplainable but certainly moving.

Music can take all the aspects of a culture and reflect back the most important parts and issues by having them rise as the most popular among the fans who built the culture to begin with. Because of this system it has a great effect on fostering change. That which is good and celebrated in a society can be praised by a song; but equally as it is supportive it can be destructive. If the public denounces a practice or situation like the government corruption, poverty or inequality in Egypt, music can be a strong argument against the wrong doings of the guilty parties. In all this, music provides a record of history and preserves that which was an important message at the time.

The revolution would have never succeeded if people had not joined together. Egyptians used music that spoke to them and that became significant for their foundation for societal improvement. Egyptians' "imagination and openness to the world, and the courage of their convictions, remind us that Muslim and Western cultures are more heterogeneous, complex and ultimately alike" (LeVine, Heavy Metal Islam 3). Music can bring together many diverse ethnicities and cultures by becoming a common ground of interest. Much like the musical

influences of western music on Arab music, and vice versa, the music also brought together the people Egypt giving them something to show their convictions through. The music of Egyptian revolution was not a soundtrack but was intrinsically tied to the social movement.

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