

Book Review

***My Voice is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance.* David A. McDonald. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013. Pp. xix + 338. ISBN 9780822354796. Includes bibliography and index.**

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In his volume *My Voice is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance*, David McDonald explores the intricacies of Palestinian identity formation through an in-depth socio-political, historical, musical and performance analysis of Palestinian resistance from its inception in 1917 until today. The author cleverly takes his readers through an ethno-historical journey, highlighted by rich descriptions of places, events, musical performances, and personal memories that portray an informative, though at times sentimentalist, representation of the development of what it means to be Palestinian, and how this meaning is “locally defined, contingent, and born of unique structures of power, experience, and consequence” (McDonald 2013, 283).

The book is divided into nine chapters divided into three different sections, accompanied by a referential online video and audio archive. In the introduction and first chapter, the author presents his main aims, research methodology and theoretical background. He emphasises his overarching idea that Palestinian resistance music cannot be defined as a specific repertoire, but rather as the way in which artists of different Palestinian communities – those living in Israel (‘48 Palestinians or Israeli-Palestinians), residents of occupied Gaza and the West Bank, and refugees in Jordan – have used music “in the service of the larger project of Palestinian self-determination.” (2013, 6) Chapters 2 to 5 provide a detailed historical overview of Palestinian resistance song and its close interrelation with socio-political events in Palestine, Israel and Jordan, whilst chapters 6 to 9 present two different musico-performance examples extracted from McDonald’s extended fieldwork: the Jordanian-Palestinian activist musician Kamal Khalil and his intifada band Baladna (Our Homeland), and the Israeli-Palestinian rap group DAM.

My Voice is My Weapon attempts to map the different ways in which Palestinian music performance, whether in the shape of folk, intifada, or more contemporary music genres such as global Arab pop and African-American hip hop, has played a major role in the representation and shaping of local and national notions of resistance. Chapter 2, “Poets, Singers, and Songs: Voices in the Resistance Movement (1917-1967),” and chapter 3, “Al-Naksa and the Emergence of Political Song (1967-1987),” trace the broad history of Palestinian resistance song, poetically interspersing

some of the author's experiences in the field with descriptions of political events, accounts of the lives of well-known resistance artists, such as the poet Nuh Ibrahim, and a detailed analysis of some of the most representative protest songs, in particular "Al-watan al-akbar" ("The Great Nation"), "Sharafat ya Nixon Baba" ("Welcome, Daddy Nixon") and the famous "Wayn al-malayin" ("Where Are the Millions?"). In chapter 4, "The First Intifada and the Generation of Stones (1987-2000)", the narrative shifts to talk about music as a predominant means of socio-political mobilisation, especially through the revival of folk songs, in search for an essentialist view of an "authentic" Palestine; the rise of religiously-charged music; and the blending of Western and Arab musical aesthetics by the middle and upper class Palestinians. Chapter 5, "Revivals and New Arrivals: The al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2010)", reviews turn-of-the-century transnational Arab pop ballads and musical reactions among the Palestinian youth, especially in the diaspora in Jordan.

After this historical account of the interrelations between Palestinian resistance, music and national constructs, McDonald moves on to examine in more detail two contrasting musical examples that embody some of the issues he has been discussing. In chapter 6, "'My Songs Can Reach the Whole Nation': Baladna and Protest Song in Jordan", and chapter 7, "Imprisonment and Exile: Negotiating Power and Resistance in Palestinian Protest Song", he presents an ethnographic study of musician-activist Kamal Khalil and his band Baladna, which was famous in Jordan during the first Palestinian intifada of 1987. This close examination presents interesting insight into Palestinian musical life in exile, and how these experiences play themselves out in the broader strategies of national identity formation. For example, McDonald describes the ambivalence of the use of music as both cultural integration between Palestinian-Jordanian and Jordanian communities, and protest against Israeli occupation, stating how such negotiations allow "Palestinians in Jordan to pursue their everyday lives as Jordanian citizens feeling as though they had done *something* for the cause" (2013, 197).

Finally, chapter 8, "New Directions and New Modalities: Palestinian Hip-Hop in Israel", and chapter 9, "'Carrying Words Like Weapons': DAM Brings Hip-Hop to the West Bank", offer an extremely detailed performance-based analysis of two concerts of the Israeli-Palestinian rap group DAM, one in Lyd, Israel, and the other one in Ramallah, in the West Bank. The first concert was a mass open-air affair attended by two separate audiences: visiting Jews and local neighbourhood Palestinians. However, McDonald narrates how, throughout the performance, "small communal pockets of interaction began to take place" (2013, 234), such as shared dancing circles and collective singing. In addition, DAM's constant linguistic adaptations – from Hebrew to Arabic – and their

clever use of extra-musical references also served to create a bond between the two audiences and the group. In turn, in the second concert DAM performed for a Palestinian-only audience that was sceptical of their use of an American/Israeli musical style as representative of Palestinian resistance values. Nevertheless, as McDonald describes, through the intersecting of call-and-response chants (i.e. “Where are we?... Ramallah” and “Arabic... rap!”) and other symbolic actions (i.e. the musicians showing their identity cards (a strong representation of the Israeli occupation) to the crowd), DAM managed to fulfil one of the main aims of their concert: to reinforce Arabic rap as a new form of Palestinian musical resistance. The detailed description of these two performances and their respective group-audience interactions powerfully show the importance of the context when trying to assign meaning to any type of musical act, especially in situations of social and political conflict.

Theoretically speaking, the book uses music and musical performance to explore broader issues of belonging, power, resistance and nationalism, primarily targeting an ethnomusicological audience. While the theoretical applications of this volume in the field of ethnomusicology are not entirely new, McDonald’s way of considering such a complex issue as Palestinian identity through an ethno-historical view of its scattered music scene presents an innovative and fresh approach to the often essentialised portrayals of this issue. In particular, the biographical analysis of Kamal Khalil and Baladna, and the detailed performance examination of DAM’s concerts give the readers vital information regarding issues of (self-)representation, which is the first step towards the longed-for Palestinian self-determination. Emphasising the subversive characteristic of local artists within large and static discourses of national identity, the author argues “for the utility of music performance in resolving central questions of individual subjectivity, agency, and collective identity formation” (2013, 23), the key elements of global discourses of resistance.

In all, *My Voice is My Weapon* is an enjoyable and compelling piece of writing, both for the general public and academia. This study lays the foundations of Palestinian ethnomusicology, also contributing to other important academic work on Palestine, such as Zachary Lockman (1997) on Palestinian identity and nationalism, or Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg (2005) on the reconsideration of Palestinian and Israeli popular culture interactions, among others. At the same time, it is also an important addition to recent studies on music, conflict, and the arts of resistance, such as John O’Connell and Salwa el-Shawan Castelo-Branco’s *Music and Conflict* (2010) or Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy’s *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures* (2013). McDonald presents us with interesting and relevant case studies and materials of analysis that help create a solid foundation for anyone who intends to undertake in-depth research into any area of Palestinian

musical production, and its deep interconnections with the different local and national ideals of resistance.

Bibliography

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