

Tunisian Music: The Soundtrack of the Revolution, the Voice of the People

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In North Africa, between Algeria and Libya, you'll find the small country of Tunisia with over 10 million inhabitants, most of whom I found to be both welcoming and generous.¹ The North borders the Mediterranean and boasts sandy beaches with beautiful aqua blue waters and the capital of Tunis. The South treasures the mysterious and vast Sahara desert and lush oases with their numerous palmeries.

It was in this country, 5,000 km from my home here in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, that I found myself at the end of May 2012. I was interested in the opportunity to immerse myself in a part of the world I knew little of, do field research for the first time, talk to first-hand witnesses concerning one of the most important world events of the early second millennia, and delve into the relationship between history and music. These interests culminated in a proposal that I created and submitted to the Summer Research Program at the College of the Holy Cross where I was working on my Bachelors of Arts in French and in Music. I was thrilled to find out that I was accepted to participate in the program sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. As a Mellon Fellow, I spent 5-1/2 weeks conducting research under Holy Cross music professor and librarian Alan Karass. This was Alan's tenth trip to Tunisia as he was working on his Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology on the Douz Festival in the country's south. He introduced the other student, Matt Burke and myself to his friends and contacts (or his "Tunisian peeps" as we came to know them as) who became our family during our time in Tunisia as well as our richest sources of information. I was given the opportunity to interview them as well as their network of artist acquaintances, giving me the chance to talk face-to-face with profound musicians and other citizens, as well as traditional musicians and rap stars alike. Unless I happened to find someone who felt more comfortable speaking in English, we communicated in French, which is widely spoken in Tunisia. Before leaving for North Africa, I had thought that my foreignness and the importance and relative newness of the subject matter I was to address would make it very difficult for me to gather information. To the contrary, I found my interviewees to be extremely willing to share their experiences and opinions on the Jasmine Revolution and its relationship to Tunisian music. Their openness and generosity in sharing their wealth of information and opinions made my research possible.

The reason for my research in Tunisia last summer was to find out the influence of Tunisian music on the Jasmine Revolution of 2010-2011. (I just want to note that my interviewees suggested the term "revolution" cannot be applied to the events of December 2010-January 2011 because the term implies a complete change, while change in Tunisia is still in process today. A public upheaval may be a more accurate term. However, since media sources widely use the word "revolution" to refer to the time period I will be discussing today, for simplicity's sake I will use the term. Just keep in mind that it is not a complete revolution I am referring to, but a historical moment marked by a public cry for change and the start of that change).

In order to share with you what I discovered, I will start my presentation by briefly situating Tunisia in its historical context. I will then explain what the Musical Scene in Tunisia looked like

¹ "Central Intelligence Agency." *The World Factbook*. CIA, 15 May 2013. Web. 02 July 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ts.html>.

under the dictatorial regime of Ben Ali. After touching briefly on the reasons for the Jasmine Revolution, I will present a case study on a Tunisian rapper whose story highlights the relationship between music and the revolution. We will see how Tunisian music served as a voice of the people and a soundtrack to the Revolution. I will then discuss changes brought about in the Tunisian musical scene as a result of the events of late-2010/early-2011, finishing with the vision of Tunisian musicians for their music.

Now, to begin, let me situate the Tunisia I came to in the summer of 2012. It is generally believed Berbers were the first inhabitants of the region. The Phoenicians arrived and discovered the Berbers, and later became the founders of Carthage. Romans, Vandals and Byzantines followed. It was not until 670 CE that the Arabs first arrived. The land came under Ottoman rule in 1574, but administration was handed over to the *deys* and *beys* in 1590.² In 1881, due to its great debts to France, the European nation took over control of Tunisian administration.³ The North African country remained a French protectorate until 1956.⁴ The nation's independence from France brought Tunisia into a new era under President Habib Bourguiba. Over the next 2 decades, many progressive changes would take place, especially for Tunisian women. Yet in 1987, having become old and weak, a coup ousted Bourguiba on the claim that he was no longer mentally fit to be president. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took power in his place and was elected president in 1987, and re-elected four more times.⁵ David Kirkpatrick of *The New York Times* explains that under Ben Ali, Tunisia "boast[ed] a relatively large middle class, liberal social norms, broad gender equality and welcoming Mediterranean beaches. United States officials [gave] it high marks for its aggressive prosecution of terrorism suspects. / But Tunisia also [had] one of the most repressive governments in a region full of police states. Residents long tolerated extensive surveillance, scant civil liberties and the routine use of torture."⁶ During his presidency Ben Ali made reforms that allowed the president to renew his candidature beyond the previous allotted period of three five-year terms. More changes were made which limited the influence of other Tunisian authorities. For example, the implementation of Article 32 reduced the role of the Parliament to simply approving the president's plans, and not coming up with their own.⁷ Free distribution of information was also restricted under Ben Ali. Telephone lines were tapped, letters opened, and threatening websites were blocked under government control. Unemployment, though having slightly decreased in the previous decade,

² "Tunisie: Histoire. " *Encyclopédie Larousse en ligne*. Larousse, n. d. Web. 01 July 2013. < http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/Tunisie_histoire/185567 >.

³ Weslati, Slah. "Chapitre II: Déclenchement De La Révolution. " *Chronologie De La Revolution Tunisienne: Democratie Ou Guerre Civile?* [Tunis]: Nirvana, 2011. 41-55. Print.

⁴ "Tunisia Profile. " *BBC News*. BBC, 21 May 2013. Web. 02 July 2013. < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14107720> >.

⁵ Chrisafis, Angelique and Ian Black. "Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali Forced to Flee Tunisia as Protesters Claim Victory. " *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 15 Jan. 2011. Web. 02 July 2013. < <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/14/tunisian-president-flees-country-protests> >.

⁶ Kirkpatrick, David. "Protests Spread to Tunisia's Capital, and a Curfew Is Decreed. " *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Jan. 2011. Web. 03 July 2013. < http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/world/africa/13tunisia.html?_r=0 >.

⁷ Julliard, Jean-Francois. *Tunisie, Le Livre Noir*. Sfax: Med Ali Editions, 2011. 179. Print.

remained high under Ben Ali, with rates at 14% in 2010.⁸ The discontent in the country was kept quiet through censorship. Threats to, and criticism of, the government's control were noted and handled with care, including the musical scene.

Under Ben Ali there were two main Tunisian musical scenes. The first type, government-sponsored music, was music that was non-threatening to the regime. Ben Ali emphasized the importance of the *mezwed*, a traditional bagpipe instrument, for Tunisian culture. Certain modern artists were also highly mediatized and given many opportunities to perform at festivals by the favor of the government, such as Sonia M'barek and Lotfi Bouchnak.⁹ Only these musicians with government approval were allowed access to enough concerts and media attention to be able to make a living from their music. Their musical subjects were non-threatening, or beneficial, to government control, often being simple love songs or propaganda-like songs.

Meanwhile, other musicians were forced to keep their music in the second musical scene of Tunisia, that of the Underground. The genres of the Underground music did not necessarily differentiate it from other music. However, hip-hop (with the exception of Tunisian rapper Balti) and *chanson engagée* (a French term for socially engaged music) were scarcely mediatized and found their home in the Underground scene. Generally the music of the Underground differed from the other music of Tunisia at the time in its lyrical content. These songs would either critique the governmental system or encourage reflection and creativity, both of which threatened the dictatorial regime.

A limited audience of intellectual elites kept the music of the Underground alive. Small concerts were put on and recordings distributed by *Facebook* or person-to-person. Musicians I interviewed suggested that the government would generally leave musicians to work in peace, as long as they had limited influence or only an influence which worked to the government's advantage, but would certainly never encourage the work of Underground artists by providing grants or licenses to perform in national festivals. So the Underground survived, but in obscurity. Music that threatened Ben Ali's government was censored in two ways: physically and psychologically. Controlling the granting of *cartes professionnelles*, which allowed musicians to perform in Ministry of Culture events, limited the strength of the Underground musical scene's influence on Tunisian people. More blatant acts of suppression also took place, such as shutting down concerts, restricting access to YouTube, and the occasional incarceration of musicians. The government also used fear to keep people from composing threatening music. Through psychological pressure, the government's problem with music challenging and disrupting the regime was nipped in the bud.

Censorship of Tunisian music reveals the fear the political powers had of artists. The authorities kept close scrutiny on the musical scene, knowing its great importance for, and influence on, Tunisian society. "Art, for them," says 26-year-old Youssef Bousbie concerning

⁸ "Tunisia - Population - Historical Data Graphs per Year. " *IndexMundi*. IndexMundi, 01 Jan. 2011. Web. 02 July 2013. < [http:// www. indexmundi. com/g/g. aspx?c=ts&v=21](http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=ts&v=21) >.

⁹ "Tunisie. Programme Du Festival De Carthage 2010. " *Kapitalis*. Kapitalis, 09 July 2010. Web. 01 July 2013. < [http:// www. kapitalis. com/culture/40-musique/751-tunisie-programme-du-festival-de-carthage-2010. html](http://www.kapitalis.com/culture/40-musique/751-tunisie-programme-du-festival-de-carthage-2010.html) >.

the Ben Ali regime, “was the only means of self-expression and they were afraid of it. . . What was the most dangerous for them was to leave these young artists to work in peace. ”¹⁰

The End of the Ben Ali Regime

On December 17, 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the Prefecture in his hometown of Sidi Bouzid. The 26-year-old's actions were a response to a personal experience of authority mismanagement. He came to be seen as a sort of emblem of the people's frustration with the regime's corruption and misgoverning. Bouazizi's act sparked a series of demonstrations against the government spreading from city to city. The Tunisian people wanted liberty, equality, and dignity, which became themes of the revolution. Thousands of Tunisians took to the streets of Tunis on January 14th, 2011 to make their demands heard. By the end of the day, to everyone's surprise, Ben Ali and his family had fled the nation, freeing Tunisia of its dictator and signaling yet another new era for the nation.

During the upheaval, while Ben Ali and his regime were still very much in charge of the government, a 21-year-old rapper from the city of Sfax, Hamada Ben Amor (whose stage name is El Général), launched a music video of his previously-written rap “Rais Lebled,” meaning “Head of State. ” In his article “Anthems for a New Generation,” Dr. Adam Jones explains that the rap includes “a highly-charged indictment of the regime's political malfeasance, and the impoverishment of the people.”¹¹ El Général also wrote a song entitled “Tunisia our Country,” concerning the growing protests spreading throughout Tunisia starting in December 2010. The response of the regime to the young rappers' calls for political action was quick and more than hostile. Secret police were sent to Hamada Ben Amor's house to arrest him. He was kept at the Ministry of the Interior for three days before being released because of public pressure.¹² The heavy-handed response of the government only heightened the buzz around the song. Via the Internet and person-to-person distribution, the song spread throughout Tunisia. Almost every Tunisian I spoke to concerning El Général was familiar with his name and “Rais Lebled. ” His music was an act of courage that intrigued Tunisians. One interviewee suggested that it helped reveal to the Tunisian people that the government was so weak that it was terrified by a 21-year-old boy making music videos out of his home. The government's response to “Rais Lebled” became a sign that this was a good time for Tunisians to demand change in their nation. Just as the political situation of Tunisia influenced the writing of El Général, this song influenced Tunisia. He is one example of how music influences, and is influenced by, its context.

Interestingly enough, I entered Tunisia with the idea that people used El Général's lyrics as chants during the popular protests; however, I didn't come upon a single Tunisian to verify that. Upon reading articles from sources such as *The Times*, I found that El General's lyrics were used

¹⁰ "Interview with Youssef Bousbie. " Personal interview. 14 June 2012.

¹¹ Jones, Adam. ““Rais Lebled” (To the President) - Hamada Ben Amor (El Général). ”*Anthems for a New Generation*. 09 Jan. 2011. Web. 02 July 2013. < <http://newanthems.blogspot.ca/2011/01/rayes-lebled-hamada-ben-amor-el-general.html> >.

¹² Walt, Vivienne. "El Général and the Rap Anthem of the Mideast Revolution. ” *Time World*. Time, 15 Feb. 2011. Web. 02 July 2013. < <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2049456,00.html#ixzz2XvWGDRMc>. " >.

in protests, but not in his own nation.¹³ While the lyrics of “Rais Lebled” were important to other revolutions in the Arab Spring (such as in Egypt), what seems to have been most important for Tunisia was the story attached to the rap. Someone dared to speak out publicly against the government whose reaction then highlighted its corruption and weakness. The story, enabled by music, encouraged people to action.

The Tunisian revolution was for the people, by the people. My interviewees confirmed that an intellectual or artistic elite did not spur it on. However, musicians did participate with other civilians during the upheaval by joining in crowding the streets and filming the scenes before them in order to share these video clips. Citizen artists were mixed in with the regular Tunisians. They understood their people and used their music to encourage the fight for dignity, most of which came out shortly after the revolution, such as Zammouri’s “Hymn to the Revolution.”

The revolution was affected through a lifting of censorship. Even the day before fleeing, Ben Ali made YouTube accessible in Tunisia. The freedom of expression allowed for the Underground musicians to increase their public. Through the Revolution many Tunisians discovered *chanson engagée* for the first time.

I believe it is because of Tunisian citizens' ability to relate to the music of the Tunisian Underground that it became so widely popular. The music spoke of realities experienced by Tunisians under Ben Ali, but directly after the revolution, these same artists knew the changes the Tunisian people had undergone. Artists of the Underground were on the streets with the people during the protests of 2010/2011. Their music comes from a place of understanding that I believe is recognized by many Tunisians and has led to their popularity.

Tunisian actor Lotfi Abdelli told me that, “It’s a question of a mirror. If your message doesn’t represent me, [then] I can’t hear you, [and] you don’t mean nothing for me. If your message... speaks about me [and] my problems, [then] you represent me. It’s easy, sometimes, art.”¹⁴ Popular art, he suggest, reflects what the masses value. As such, it is possible to study art as a means of understanding the hopes, fears and emotions predominant in a society. The popularity of Tunisian Underground music directly after the revolution suggests Tunisian citizens related to the music. They discovered there was a music that spoke to their experiences before, during, and after the revolution. The music uncovered by the revolution is the voice of the people. It was created by citizens and spoke to citizens, highlighting the experiences, emotions and thoughts of Tunisia.

Amel Hamrouni spoke directly concerning the appropriation of music by a people as a means of expressing themselves. She had been a member of a band since the eighties but had always been limited to small venues as she was part of the Underground musical scene. When speaking to Amel Hamrouni about her experience with music during the revolution, she told me: “During the revolution, we heard people singing in the street, amongst others, our songs, and it was something extraordinary. Ah, yes. . . it was personally the most beautiful moment of my life. To realize like this, all of a sudden, that the collective memory has interiorized songs to express, in a given moment, their joy or their revolt. This proves that the song is part of people’s personality

¹³ Ghosh, Bob. “Rage, Rap and Revolution: Inside the Arab Youth Quake.” *Time*. Time, 17 Feb. 2011. Web. 02 July 2013.

< <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2050022,00.html> >.

¹⁴ “Interview with Lotfi Abdelli.” Personal interview. 14 June 2012.

and their art.”¹⁵ This one story exemplifies how many Tunisians viewed the Underground music as the voice of the people after the Revolution.

Music and musicians were present for the revolution, but music cannot be said to be the reason for the public upheaval. All the artists I interviewed were in agreement that music was not the spark of the events of 2010/2011. Hamrouni herself says: “I think. . . that artistic work never makes the start of revolutions. I don't think so. It is always the material life, the material base which makes people realize or be conscious of their situation.”¹⁶ My interviewee, and now-friend, Youssef Bousbie said, “Video and photos give us the true image, and music, let's say, is like movie music. You have the image and you have the soundtrack which makes you imagine, makes you break free with everything that you see.”¹⁷

Like a well-composed soundtrack that heightens the emotions of the audience watching a movie, the music released around the time of the revolution heightened peoples' emotions. Alone, a soundtrack cannot portray a full story as a movie can. Yet it is vitally important in adding to the story. Likewise, in Tunisia, the reality of circumstances (known through personal experience or video clips) triggered the revolution while music took on the crucial role of encouraging the youth in their fight. The events of December 2010 and January 2011 were inspired and led by Tunisian citizens reflecting on their own situations. Music served to continue to inspire and encourage the striving for greater liberty *after* the protestors had already decided this is what they wanted and would seek.

While the musicians of the Underground were gaining fame, the former stars were falling from their glory, such as Sofia Sadok. Most had remained silent during the revolution, unsure that a change would come about with the government and not wanting to lose their advantage in the Tunisian music scene. The Tunisian public was disappointed and some even felt betrayed by these artists who did not speak up for them in their hour of need. Afterwards, some artists gave public explanations for their silence, but the Tunisian public did not want to take back their previous stars, whether it was due to a desire to remove themselves from all that represented the old regime, resentment for their silence, interest in other newly-accessible music, or a mixture of all of these reasons.¹⁸

What does the music that was popular in Tunisia right after the revolution tell us about the nation? Before the revolution, courage to speak against the government was unique. Speaking honestly about censored issues has become less important today since freedom of speech is more widespread. One interviewee informed me that he did not think that El General's raps were of very good quality (speaking from a perspective of technique), but that he was mostly famous because of his courage. Intricacy and quality were not necessary traits for music to be popular around the time of the revolution, but it has become more important to Tunisian audiences since.

Last summer my interviewees told me that some important goals of musicians for Tunisian music, especially hip-hop are to: develop a unique modern musical style, establish a vibrant musical scene, and place their country's music on the world stage.

¹⁵ "Interview with Amel Hamrouni." Personal interview. 25 June 2012.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Interview with Youssef Bousbie." Personal interview. 14 June 2012.

¹⁸ "J'étais la plus patriote des artistes tunisiens" *Mosaïque FM*. Mosaïque FM, 24 Dec. 2011. Web. 24 July 2013. < <http://archive.mosaïquefm.net/index/a/ActuDetail/Element/17436--J-étais-la-plus-patriote-des-artistes-tunisiens--.html> >.

Tunisian musicians are in the process of trying to fine-tune their work, to create art of quality that is effective in portraying its message. Just as a strong and good constitution (which is still in the process of being revised) and government are being sought after in Tunisia, so is quality music.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me review what I've said to get a clearer picture of what we've discussed. I began by touching on Tunisia's history and moved on to explain the consequences of Ben Ali's dictatorial regime on Tunisian Music. We explored the difference between the two scenes of music existing before the revolution: the government-approved and the Underground. Next we discussed the role of Tunisian music and musicians during the revolution, realizing that music did not start the revolution but did play an important role in expressing the experiences of the people and encouraged the people to continue to fight for liberty: the people's voice and the Revolution's soundtrack. Then we saw the Underground's public grew thanks to freedom of speech, while on the other hand former stars decreased in popularity. Finally we glanced ahead with Tunisian musicians to catch a glimpse of what they hope for the future of their nation's music.

I believe that many Tunisian musicians, in love with their people, will continue to be the voice of the people. As it managed to soundtrack the Jasmine Revolution in the face of a dictatorship, it will continue to soundtrack the story of Tunisia, being inspired by real events and encouraging righteous responses, just as it already is doing today. Tunisian music will walk hand in hand with its people into whatever lies ahead for them.

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