

**LOUIS BREHONY, *Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2023). Pp. 340. \$59.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781649033048.**

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Three-quarters of a century have now passed since the formal displacement of most Palestinian communities from their land, although dispossession began decades before 1948.<sup>1</sup> “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience,” wrote the late Palestinian scholar Edward Said in a moving and oft-cited reflection.<sup>2</sup> Modern exile in particular is terrible with its devastating war machines, imperialistic strategies, and transnational religious discourses saining the worst of human atrocities. For those exiled, life becomes uniquely multidimensional and multi-sited. To borrow a musical word, Said calls an exiled life “contrapuntal” (186) where multiple contrastive melodies of one’s life play on simultaneously and create strange overlaps, tangled harmonies, and unresolved moods.

In *Palestinian Music in Exile: Voices of Resistance*, Louis Brehony positions “exile” as method to tell the stories of several Palestinian musicians, artists, and activists modulated across many territories, including Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Cairo, Istanbul, Manchester, and yes, Gaza and the West Bank in Palestine. *Ghurba*, one of Arabic’s words for “exile,” is “the experience of being away from one’s homeland” (17), and the stories Brehony writes about describe this geographical movement without return. *Ghurba* can also describe the feeling of “estrangement” one can feel *within* one’s homeland. Describing physical exile and interior estrangement, this book brings together a host of Palestinian realities that mostly feature contemporary musicians and their tremendous capacities to live—and at times, thrive—in exilic contrapuntal complexity. The wide scale of Brehony’s ethnographic study demonstrates that the unresolved issues of Palestinian homeland—with its concomitant layers of persistent settler colonial violence, supportive imperial infrastructure, and ensuing politics of non/recognition—is one of the most impactful and consequential global issues today.

Crucial to the unfolding narratives of exile in this book is the indigenous Palestinian lifeway of *sumud* that Brehony defines as “steadfastness” (5). Drawing from Laleh Khalili and Lena Meari, Brehony adds that *sumud* is also “inherently optimistic” and even celebratory, “valorizing the [Palestinian] nation’s endurance in dire circumstances” (11). That joy forged from *ghurba* is also “the revolutionary force and agency of the oppressed” and “a refusal to cooperate or surrender to colonial authority” (15). Turning to his ethnography, Brehony interprets the musical actions of his Palestinian collaborators with the phrase “*sumud-as-critique*” (21). Palestinians standing “steadfast” is anything but inert, staid, or static. Brehony demonstrates that “*sumud-as-critique*” is utterly anticolonial creative resistance, a core component of Palestinian solidarity, and one that he insists is innately aesthetic. For those readers who are unfamiliar with Palestine outside of the mass-mediated AV-bytes or those Western-centric conversations that often victimize and misconstrue Palestinian lifeways, Brehony’s book will surprise. The innovation, imagination, and resourcefulness of Palestinian peoples shine through each narrative and are effective antidotes to misinformed pundits.

The seven chapters of *Palestinian Music in Exile* describe many creative Palestinian acts of *sumud*. Chapter 1 features vocalist Reem Kelani who grew up in Kuwait in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Kelani sang songs made famous by superstar Lebanese singer Fairuz which became for many Palestinians a soundtrack in the wake of the 1967 Naksa (setback). Caught between historic dispersion and grinding geopolitical petro-powers in the region, Kelani’s story emphasizes the faults of most cosmopolitan analyses, argues Brehony. The high-minded and entitled sense of “cosmopolitanism” as a cultural emergence between equal entities does not apply here. Kelani’s family exhibits the mobility and multicultural sensibilities of a classic cosmopolitan subject. But these conditions are superimposed by imperial decrees and repercussions. It is a cosmopolitanism of crossfire and removal from elitist structures.

From Kuwait to countries within the Bilad al-Sham—in this case, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon—chapter 2 features several Palestinian musicians expressing exile through instrumental performances on the ‘ud (Arabic lute), guitar, and Scottish bagpipes. Noting the diverse intersections of places, musical genres, musical schools, and collective histories, Brehony uses the frame of *lahja* or linguistic “dialect” to parse how Palestinian musical identity surfaces with nuanced difference across exilic communities in the Bilad al-Sham. Young, feminine grassroots movements come to the foreground in chapter 3 with Brehony’s discussion of Umm ‘Ali (pseudonym).

Raised in Gaza's Bureij refugee camp but currently living in Manchester, England, Umm 'Ali narrates what it was like to be a pre-teen listening to protest songs on cassettes during the first Palestinian *intifada* or popular uprising, beginning in 1987. Her story demonstrates the feminine infrastructures in revolution and, again, demonstrates the importance of cassette culture for the circulation of popular sentiments.

The next three chapters telescope into Palestine itself. Readers who already know about the musician Tamer Abu Ghazaleh will find a great deal of interest in chapter 4. Raised initially in Cairo by parents who had fled Palestine, Abu Ghazaleh returned to Nablus as a young teenager, aided by the Oslo Accord agreements. From the strong influence of Khaled Jubran and the band Sabreen to lessons at the Musical Conservatory of Music (now the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music), Abu Ghazaleh's music voices both conventional Arab music structures and sounds as well as distinct and experimental expressions. In other words, according to Brehony, Arab alternative music did not start after the events of 2011 as often espoused (133). Rather, some Palestinian musicians have been innovating Arab music in the decades before 2011, producing expressions that challenge mainstream regional popular musics.

Chapters 5 and 6 narrate the tenuous nature of life for Palestinian individuals that dwell *min al-dakhil* or "from within the interior" of the Zionist Israeli state. Those unfamiliar with Palestinian histories of displacement may not realize that some never left Palestine, despite the widespread forced removals of the 1948 Nakba. Brehony considers the political resistance of instrumental music with the 'ud player Saied Silbak in chapter 5. Chapter 6 features refugee youth in Gaza: Reem Anbar ('ud), Rawan Okasha (vocalist), and Said Fadel (multi-instrumentalist). The chapter is full of song titles and lyrics with brief descriptions of the musical categories *tarab*, *watani*, and *turathi* to orient the reader. The intersections of these categories within the musicians' narratives demonstrate how they compose and perform music that is both recognizable and anthem-like for the Palestinian people but infused with young vitality and new ideas.

Finally, Brehony scales out again in chapter 7 to consider Palestinian exile in Istanbul with a group of young musician comrades that meet regularly to create, collaborate, encourage, and organize politically. The fact that they meet on an island off the Turkish coast further illustrates the multiplicities of spaces where Palestinian musicians and artists find themselves today.

One of the great treasures of *Palestinian Music in Exile* is in the wide sampling of litterateurs, artists, musicians, and activists that demonstrate the social complexity of being a musical Palestinian. From

George Kirmiz to Ghassan Kanafani, Leila Khaled, and Naji al-Ali to Sayyid Darwish, Fairuz, Marcel Khalife, and Julia Boutros and to musical bands Al-Ashiqeen, Sabreen, Sol, and Dawaween, Brehony foregrounds both Palestinian and Arab agents of change to show that “music and politics always coexist and frequently coalesce” (7). Likewise, the book is a virtual songbook (especially in chapter 6) of music that has voiced exilic Palestinian sentiment and political resistance.

Graduate and undergraduate instructors and students who are looking for an entry point into contemporary Palestinian expressive culture, history, and identity will find such material across this book – perhaps in a dizzying and labyrinthine fashion. Despite their global circulation, Palestinian groups such as DAM or dubstep band 47Soul are minimally referenced.<sup>3</sup> Brehony chooses to feature musicians – many of them women – working with historical Arab music repertoires and forms (e.g., *tarab*). It is an additional highlight that, with the exception of Abu Ghazaleh, none of the musicians featured in this book have a formal recording contract.

Brehony’s explication of *sumud*-as-critique, then, has the textures of street, home, and family, giving the Palestinian “aesthetic revolution” (5–7) a remarkably grassroots and accessible quality. As such, *Palestinians in Exile* is a valuable contribution to ethnomusicology, musicology, anthropology, global and area studies, and more importantly to the continual work of Palestinian recognition and liberation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Readers can continue learning about the diverse array of Palestinian music with the “Educational Resources on Palestine,” recently published online by the Society for Arab Music Research: <https://samr.club/palestine/>.