

dock to rock at the
byblos international
festival



sound of change

in beirut, a new generation of musicians want to make a difference—not just make people dance. by mackenzie lewis

A FEW HOURS from Damascus, Syria, the bloodiest site of the Arab Spring, is a city seemingly untouched by the revolutionary wave that began back in 2010 and has claimed thousands of lives since. In Beirut, Lebanon, summer is being ushered in with fruity cocktails at rooftop clubs like Sky Bar. The Porsche tops are down, the cleavage is out, and the sugary sounds of local pop idols Haifa Wehbe and Elissa are blasting from the speakers in cafés and bars all across

town.

In this glittering city, mainstream Arabic music is synonymous with aging-but-well-preserved coquettes who make pouty faces while purring to their habibi. The songs are catchy, but this is bubblegum pop: all fluff, no substance. “What you see in Arabic music videos are just bimbos with no thought, no philosophy—just icons based on aesthetics,” vents Zeid Hamdan, frontman of new Arabic electro pop group Zeid and the Wings and a 20-year veteran of Lebanon’s independent music scene. “In the rest of



impromptu street style



is there any other kind?



downtown beirut's pristine exterior.

the world, an artist can lead to change.”

Beneath Beirut's glossy façade is a country recovering from a 15-year civil war, a conflict with Israel in 2006, and more recent internal political tension. While the mainstream forges ahead to a mindless pop soundtrack, beneath the surface is a vital music scene that often refuses to tune out the political climate. These musicians are nothing like their saccharine-sweet counterparts. They're battling governments and injustices with their lyrics, committed to inspiring more than just hip shaking in their fans.

Hamdan, with his '70s porn star glasses and bedhead hair, is understandably frustrated with the mass perception of what a musician should be. “When musicians apply for the artist visa in Lebanon, they get the same visa as a

'cabaret dancer,’” he points out, referencing Lebanon’s unofficial job title for the world’s oldest profession. “It’s not an artist visa; it’s a prostitution visa.” But for Hamdan, music is an act of love, not money; it’s a way to relay a message, even if it gets him in trouble. And it often does.

Last July, Hamdan was arrested for defaming President Michel Suleiman. “The Lebanese army is sensitive,” he says by way of explanation, brushing off the fact that its sensitivity is accompanied by a maximum two-year jail sentence. While he typically sings about love stories that transcend local obstacles like religion and

war, it was the last line of his reggae-influenced song “General Suleiman”—“General, go home!”—that sealed his fate. When we speak, he carefully clarifies that the then-general was a “good man” who pacified a country with four recognized languages (Arabic, French, English, and Armenian), 18 religious sects, and a history of unrest. At a certain point, though, he’d done all he could and it was time for him to move on. If that’s what Hamdan told the army, they didn’t buy it. Within hours of being locked up, more than 2,500 supporters had mobilized on Facebook and the authorities let him go.

“Artists have to be involved in politics. Our voices are heard more than most people, so we have to do something,” explains Hiba Mansouri, a female vocalist who updates classic Oriental songs with an electro-dub beat, and longs for Arabic music’s golden age when legends like Oum Kalthoum had the luxury of singing about love. Today things are more complicated; Mansouri recently penned



welcome to hamra: lebanese hospitality, even in graffiti

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: byblos festival photographed by [waël hamzeh](#); street style and tattoo photographed by [mitch messmore](#); graffiti and downtown beirut photographed by [mackenzie lewis](#)



time traveling,
beirut style:
a downtown sidewalk
overlooking
roman ruins

lyrics that must be kept safely behind studio walls. "I wanted to sing about fear, about how we shouldn't be afraid anymore," she says of a song written in solidarity with others in the region. "But the lyrics are very strong... I have family [in another country] and if I sing it now, someone could go after them. I'm not afraid for myself, but I'm afraid for them."

It's not just overt harassment that prevents musicians from speaking out. "Auto-censorship is a bit of a problem," says Hamed Sinno, singer of the emerging Arabic rock fusion group Mashrou' Leila. On their self-titled first album, the seven-member band tackled social issues in skinny jeans and days-old stubble. "Obviously we don't go around saying we want to slit this politician's throat and piss on his wife's body...but you'll always meet people in the audience who just don't want to hear a political message, and it makes you kind of question whether you want to talk about it." Former prime minister Saad Hariri, son of assassinated prime minister Rafic Hariri, once stormed out of a Mashrou' Leila show. But he's in the minority; the band has seduced crowds from Amman to Cairo to Paris,

their message resonating with people across various backgrounds.

While some musicians tread with caution, a small few are embracing the clash. In the midst of the Arab Spring, Lebanon is fertile ground for a rising punk scene. "We need it," Zeid Hamdan says of bands like female-fronted Detox, who declare that dirty cops, militias, and wars inspire them to play music. The scene is young but Hamdan sees hope in its anti-establishment spirit. "We need those who are willing to say, 'This is fucked up,' who refuse appearances and are strong with their thoughts," he says, glancing across the sidewalk café where we're sitting. "We need dirty bastards."



vitton, ysl, and a healthy
dose of contemporary art at
the city's modern souks.

what to download:

Arabic singer Fairuz is a national hero, and some of the new music coming out of Beirut can be traced back to her work in the '60s. It's worth a listen if you want a better understanding of Lebanon's musical heritage, which still influences singers like Hiba Mansouri. Early pioneers of the indie scene emerged in the form of Scrambled Eggs and Soapkills, an electro-pop duo that included Zeid Hamdan (now of Zeid and the Wings) and Yasmine Hamdan (a.k.a. Y.A.S.). They've passed the torch to Mashrou' Leila and Adonis, two next-generation bands that have coincidentally been compared to the band Beirut. When a heavier beat is in order, check out Lebanese hip-hop artist El Rass and Katibe 5, a group of Palestinian refugees rhyming a story that often goes unheard. Lebanese music is a mix of English, French, and Arabic, but you'd be surprised by how much you can understand without speaking the language.

where to hear it:

dany's RUE 78, HAMRA
Beirut's artsy clique drinks at this cozy bar, where you can hear live

music and DJs spinning everything from jazz to funk to electro.

demo

RUE DU LIBAN, GEMMAYZEH

The basics: a mellow vibe, free wi-fi, and DJs with great taste in indie rock.

drm

SOURATI STREET, HAMRA

Settle in with a more refined crowd at this upscale industrial space, with live local and international acts, drinks, and dinner.

metro al madina

HAMRA STREET, HAMRA

For those who never thought they'd hear live music at a cabaret show in a subway-styled bar-cum-theater.

where to stay:

le grey MARTYRS' SQUARE, DOWNTOWN HAMRA

Five-star hotel, five-star price tag—but well worth it. **campbell grayhotels.com/le-gray-beirut**

the mayflower hotel

YAFET STREET, HAMRA

A clean and comfortable midrange option, right in the center of the action. **mayflowerbeirut.com**

saifi urban gardens,

PASTEUR STREET, GEMMAYZEH

A hostel, language school, bar, restaurant, and backpacker HQ. **saifigardens.com**

the three summer festivals not to miss:

byblos international festival

The Phoenicians established Byblos back in 5,000 BC. Now the seaside town hosts a weeklong assortment of international acts that in previous years have included Moby, Nouvelle Vague, and Malian musical duo Amadou and Mariam. **byblosfestival.org**

baalbeck international festival

A hundred years from now, sunburned tourists will visit these Roman ruins to pay homage to the gods worshipped within them: Zeus and Sting. Since 1955, over 40,000 fans have gathered each year in an ancient temple to see performances by acts like Nina Simone, Miles Davis, and Plácido Domingo. **baalbeck.org.lb**

fête de la musique

Explore downtown Beirut as you discover amateur and professional musicians from Europe and Lebanon. This free festival takes place in key historical and cultural spots around the city—just the motivation you need to check out the landmarks, too.



tktktkk tulum, mexico

In January, the Sunday Styles section of *The New York Times* ran an article proclaiming that "Tulum, Mexico, is a new hotspot for fashion insiders." Well, it was barely more than an unusually long and perfect strip of white sand when a couple from San Francisco opened Zamas, a low-key, 15-room hotel in 1993. But even as Tulum has become one of the trendier destinations for American urbanites—new hotels open seemingly every week, packed in like sardines along the beachfront—simplicity and a refreshing lack of pretension remain the draw at Zamas, which is still run by the same couple, on hand nightly in the al fresco restaurant to regale with stories, drink in hand. They couldn't give a shit if you're a fashion insider, an actor, a musician, whatever. Everyone's wearing flip-flops, after all.

The rooms and beachfront cabanas are spartan, with water heated by solar power, and small wind turbines. Outlets won't support laptops, hairdryers, or other high-powered appliances, and there is no AC. Such a dearth of amenities is, of course, a good thing. This is the Caribbean: a place for hammocks and books, not Twitter and blow-outs. It's the lack of apology for such charming rusticity that makes Zamas, perfectly located for snorkeling, exploring Mayan ruins,

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