

Beirut's Underground Music Scene



Hajar Ibrahim

لبيروت

For Beirut

2022

Acknowledgements

Over the years, I've formed tightly knit friendships and networks that extend throughout the arts community, saving me from the disillusionment that is living in Beirut. It reminded me of the importance of social healing, which arises not from within an individual but in their interaction with a larger community - especially as a collective struggle endures. I want to thank Heinrich Böll Stiftung for this opportunity, all the artists that welcomed me and helped me with this research, my friends who supported me, and especially my mother. A special thanks to my friend Sam Symes for, for teaching me how to use InDesign, and helping me structure and design this photo book.

Heinrich Boell Stiftung, 2022-2023 ©

Table of Contents

Prologue	11
The Artists Spotlight	17
Zeid Hamdan	
Tunefork Studios	
Julia Sabra	
Fadi Tabal	
Maysa Jallad	
Paō	
Marc Codsí	
Ziad Moukarzel and Beirut Synthesiser Centre	
Tanjaret Daghet	
Issam Hajj Ali	
Chico Records	
The Clubbing Spotlight	113
Concluding Remarks	147



Public concert in the town of Hammana,
Hajar Ibrahim

Prologue

Beirut is an amalgamation of contrast. While some sites are constantly rebuilt as testaments to capital, others are left to serve as crumbling reminders of everything the city has gone through. Nostalgia coexists with constant reimagination and recreation, a dynamic visible throughout the Middle East. But perhaps we— whether at home or in the diaspora— are too keen to hand the entire narrative over to nostalgia. For those that have left, Beirut is only home in the sentimental sense. And for many of those that remain, the only worthy and redeemable parts of our city can be found in the past, in our collective memories. However, this project explores the elements which infuse our city's current times with meaning and feeling beyond in relation to the past— namely, Beirut's welcoming underground music scene and generally bustling, unconditional vibrancy that should not and can not be understated.

While life here is undeniably difficult, this project does not prioritize looking at 'nowadays' through the prism of crisis and the given of our resilience. This is not to underemphasize just how much our struggles shape our lives— the interviews of each individual artist highlight this collective struggle of living in Lebanon. The struggle is integral to their creative processes and overall stories. However, this project chooses to focus on the vibrant and creative forces which stand in constant dialogue with the worn and broken. The historical antagonisms and mutilated sociopolitical system which give Lebanon a quick pace of change also spill their impacts over to the arts scene. Thus the Lebanese art scene is in constant evolution, in constant renaissance. These same artists which have struggled through the past few years along with the rest of us are a key source of revitalization and liberation for ailing Lebanon, especially since music and the arts are matters of the soul.

Music reduces the friction between the inner and outer, between our realities and fantasies, between the self and the community which music weaves, and between the self and the world at large. It balances one's being as the gaps between different experiences falter. The unisonance of music and community facilitates a flow between peaks and valleys, which extends beyond the spaces and times in which the basses boom. We let out anxiety, cope with the uncertainty and transitoriness of life, and remember something simple but key— we have the right to enjoy ourselves.

Beirut's authentic sound— found in its underground music scene— is both intimate and communal. While local artists tap into their unique understandings of and relationships to the environment, the scene also maintains a collective identity with values that extend far past appreciating certain genres. These communal values can be found in the widespread practice of reclaiming and transforming free and abandoned spaces into venues. These reclamations are acts of political and symbolic significance which exist in continuity with those of the 2019 protests.

It's important to note that underground here does not mean niche and unpopular. Indeed, the presence of the underground in Beirut visibly outweighs that of the mainstream. Beirut nightlife is almost entirely built off the consumption of underground artists who refuse to join the mainstream music industry in that they are often not signed to labels and pay little to no attention to optimizing their business models (unlike regionally popular Arab stars). Just like the protests were both popular and anti-establishment, the Lebanese underground is as well.

The voices and footage collected here are the product of a single summer. The full scope of the scene spreads far past what was captured here within my limited time. However, for those interested, throughout this book I have referenced many of the spaces, artists, and projects which I could not personally cover but are nonetheless vital to the scene.

We need each other, and we need the music.

Explanatory Note

All artists in my interviews note both the economic crisis and the Beirut explosion as great factors impacting their lives and work. Below is essential context on both these crises.

Economic, Financial and Banking Crisis

The pulverized Lebanese pound fluctuates almost hourly, with 150% hyperinflation of the Lebanese Lira since 2019.

In 2019 1\$ was 1,500 L.L. By 2023 1\$ devalued to 100,000 L.L on the Black Market.

Officially, the dollar exchange rate remained at 1,500L.L despite the financial crisis and inflation until it was adjusted to 15,000 L.L by the Central Bank in February in 2023 - noting that it was trading on the Black Market at 100 times more.

All depositors in Lebanese banks, regardless of their nationality, cannot withdraw their life-time savings, their salaries, their current account funds from Lebanese banks as of 17 October 2019. This makes everyone reliant on remittances from abroad, cash transactions and transforms the entire economy into a cash economy. This procrastinated crisis and the failure by the Central Bank to control capital and adjust the official currency exchange rate have

allowed for the black market to flourish and replace the formal banking sector, adding more hardship to small businesses, the private sector and individuals at large.

Beirut Explosion

On August 4, 2020 a massive explosion caused by 2750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate stored irresponsibly at the Port of Beirut killed 220 people, injured at least 7,000 and left 300,000 people homeless and displaced.

The blast was one of the biggest non-nuclear explosion recorded in human history damaging at least 77,000 apartments and causing around 3.8-4.6 billion dollars in material damage.

Judge Tarek Bitar faces many blockages from the Lebanese government after he tried to request parliament to lift immunity on suspects.



Beirut building on film, 2022. Hajar Ibrahim



Ziad Sahab and the Band
at Metro Al Madina, Hajar Ibrahim



Artist Spotlight

Ziad Sahbani at Metro Al Madina,
Hajar Ibrahim

Zeid Hamdan



Cover photo of Bedouin Burger band

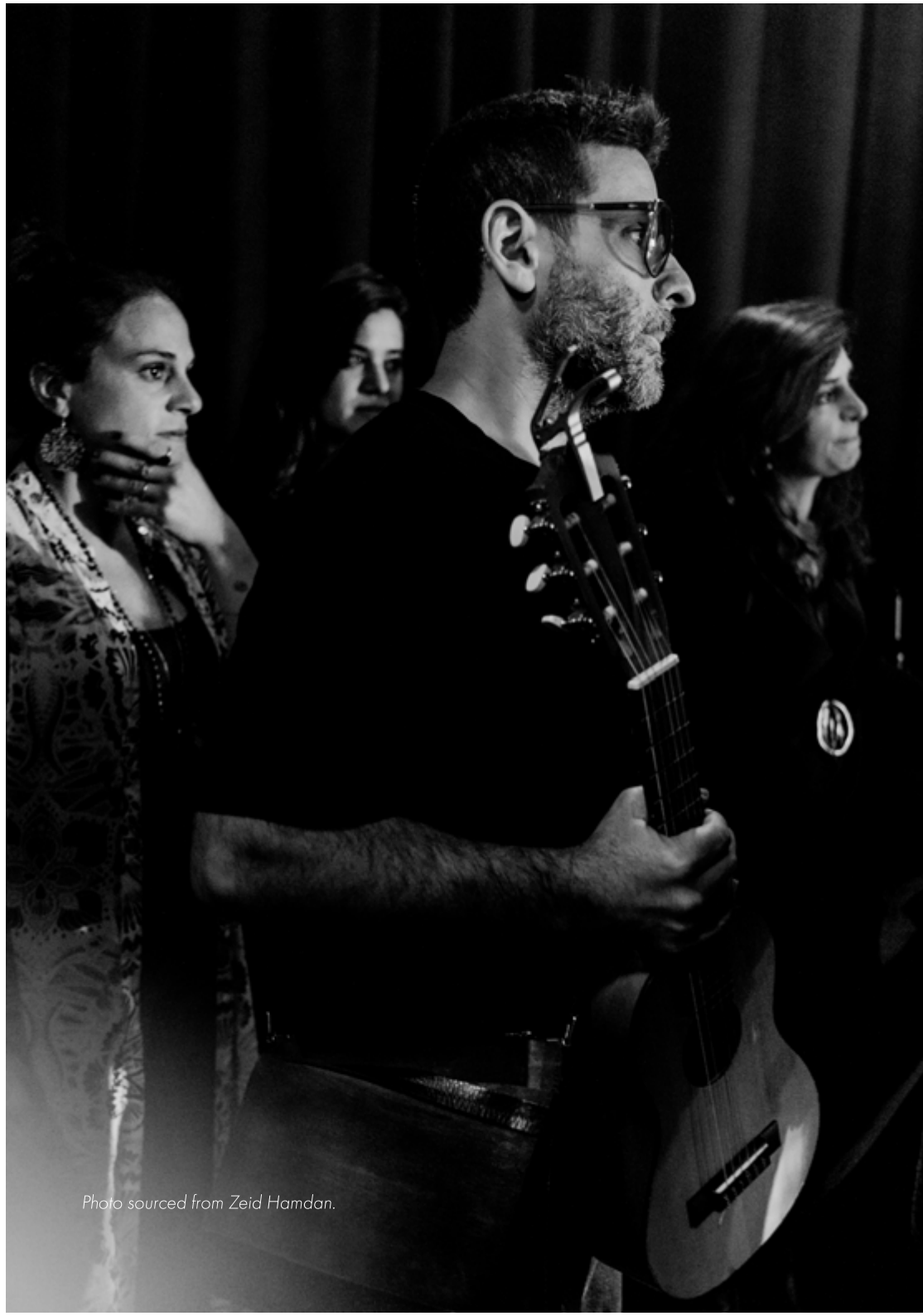


Photo sourced from Zeid Hamdan.

Eminent music producer Zeid Hamdan has been part of *Soapkills*, *The New Government*, *Zeid and the wings*, *Bedouin burger*, alongside his solo works. He has also worked with many other artists including Maii Waleed and Maryam Salih. He is named one of eight leading lights in Lebanese culture by CNN and frequently called the Pope of the Middle East Underground Music Scene.

“ At a very young age, through my sister I realized the power of art. How art can make us appreciative, interested, inquisitive beings. It drew me to music because I felt the magical power of musicians.

Once I got a guitar, I realized I was not good at playing it the traditional way, and instead I decided to try composing. I would just chum the chords and create melodies in a very clumsy way. The game of composing became something I was passionate about. Strumming a combination of chords and imagining stuff, imagining stories, expressing things that were very personal.

You can have no relation to anyone and not be able to talk to anyone and suddenly you are with the instrument and you are strumming on it and there is this little group that forms and this incredible vibe. Since my early teenage years I was drawn into this community aspect of music. Community because people gather, put their differences aside. It's a tool to socialize allowing you meet incredible people.

”

“ I met Yasmine Hamdan, the other half of Soapkills, when she was in college. She introduced me to the Arabic music she used to listen to growing up. Then we combined her clumsiness plus my clumsiness, and started developing this new kind of Arabic music. Arabic music is always impressionistic in the traditional sense anyways. But Yasmin and I, in our characters of disrespect to traditions, started interpreting minimal beats on a drum machine and oversimplifying chords, and then she would sing.

If a Arabic classical musician would listen to it, they would say but this is wrong. We had very often this reaction that what we were doing was wrong. But we would always enjoy it.

We took the freedom to disrespect this classical form, and started adapting, Ya Habibi Ta'ala, Ya Men Hawa, and Mara Fel Geneinnah. It was very sincere, we had no idea about the music business, we felt comfortable and created music thinking no-one would hear it.

After the war, life became filled with toxic traditions, however we managed to create a little bubble within that. The Syrian army was still around, and Downtown Beirut was wrecked and destroyed. People were still healing from the war.

And then came this bunch of energized and enthusiastic teenagers who were proud of their Arab culture. When I write a nice Arabic song, or when I reorchestrate an Arabic song in a cool way, I have this great energy in my heart - not because I feel I've created something new, but because I rediscovered what it was. ”



Zeid Hamdan in Paris,
Hajar Ibrahim

Zeid Hamdan and the Lebanese Underground Platform

“ Before Facebook there was a platform where every artist could go and upload his picture and his news. It was in WordPress format, and Scrambled eggs, Soapkills, Lumi (see Marc Codsí section), The New Government and other bands updated their info without being tied down to anyone. I don't believe in contracts at all, and this is what makes the underground music scene unique. **Verbal agreements and the trust of friendship and honest work carries us through the process. It's a collective, and it's a relationship.**

Now we make use of technology such as Instagram and Facebook. I do Instagram lives, however they're not as interactive as I wish, I wish I could see and interact with everyone joining the live.

With some time I'll be able to create spaces and recreate, for example, my neighborhood that was destroyed in Beirut and have people go into bars and places. I can play music for a bunch of you, and we can interact.

I love that this is wealth for me. It's not about the money, it's about the community. These kind of spaces and interactions makes my job much better. And that doesn't mean that I don't interact with people in reality, but it means that I go beyond just the pictures and the faces.

Zeid Hamdan on Lebanon

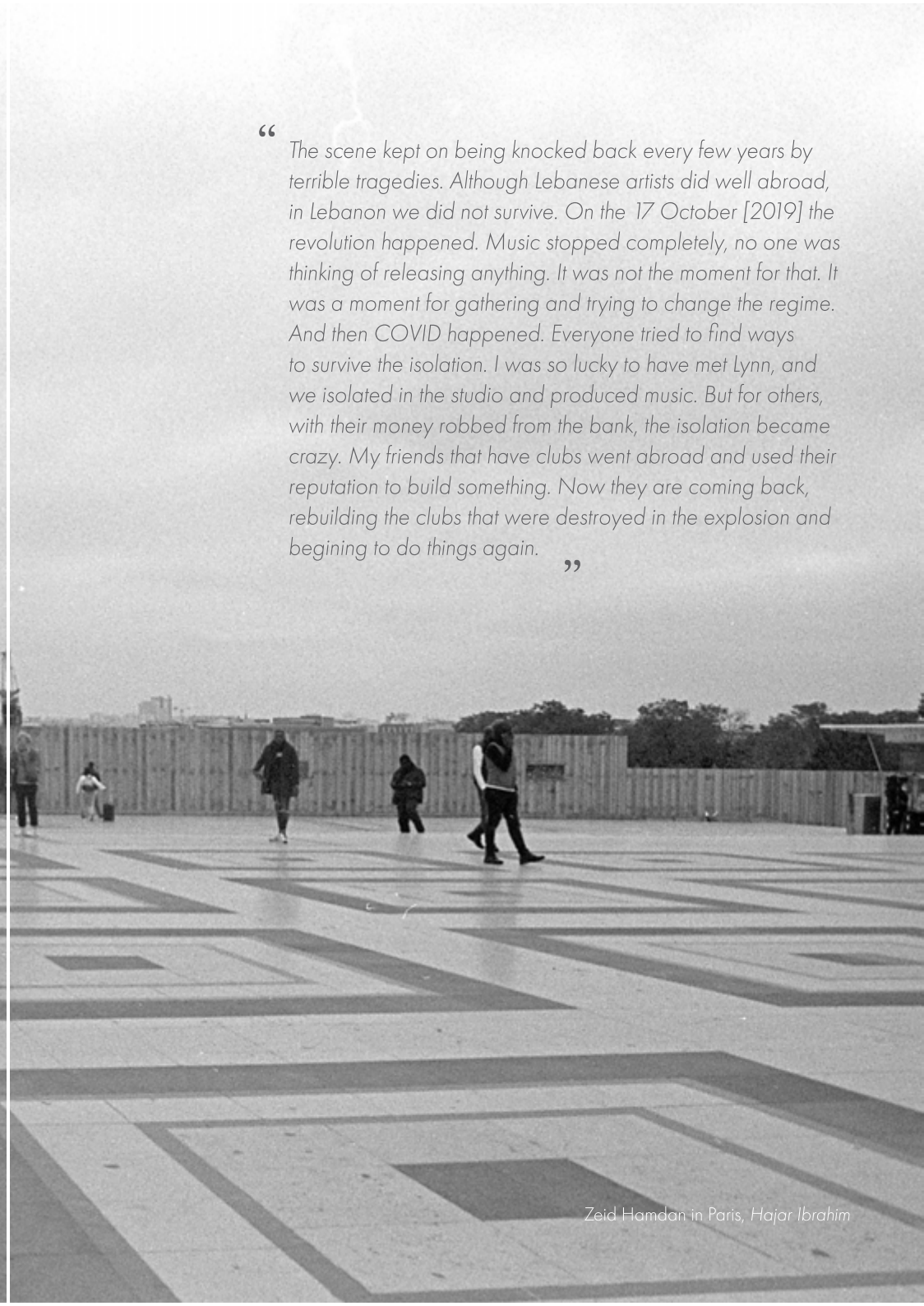
In Lebanon it was limited but it was good, we had all our friends, and a massive house. You did not need to go anywhere, you had your family and your friends. **What I had in Lebanon was really like childhood.** But then my house got destroyed, and I found myself thrown out into the world. I'm trying to recollect the pieces, trying to find who is where. Concerts allow me to gather another sense of family, but at a wider spectrum. Now I'm in a much bigger arena, there's a big sense of loneliness and things can get difficult. In Paris, I live on a couch. After twenty years of hard work, I'm back on the couch like a student. But, as long as I'm able to do what I love, I can accept any hardship.

I would perform maybe every week in Lebanon. **Beirut was this huge discotheque.** It was a great place for all the arts. In the whole of the Middle East, there was no place of tolerance such as Beirut. Not in Egypt, nor Jordan, nowhere. We really were a cultural hub, and although there was no support from the government, a huge scene of clubs and industry started to emerge because of the importance of entertainment.

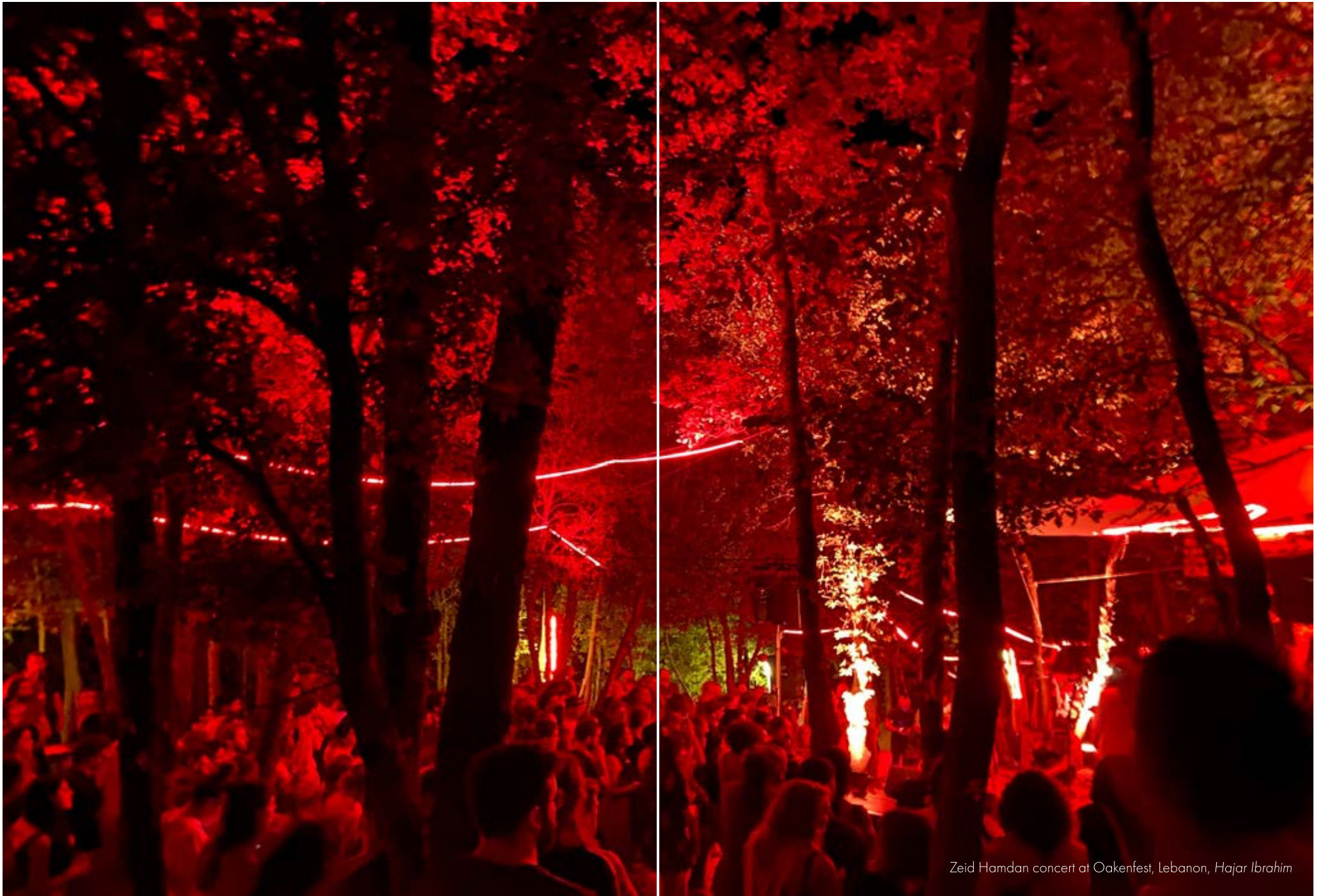
”



“ The scene kept on being knocked back every few years by terrible tragedies. Although Lebanese artists did well abroad, in Lebanon we did not survive. On the 17 October [2019] the revolution happened. Music stopped completely, no one was thinking of releasing anything. It was not the moment for that. It was a moment for gathering and trying to change the regime. And then COVID happened. Everyone tried to find ways to survive the isolation. I was so lucky to have met Lynn, and we isolated in the studio and produced music. But for others, with their money robbed from the bank, the isolation became crazy. My friends that have clubs went abroad and used their reputation to build something. Now they are coming back, rebuilding the clubs that were destroyed in the explosion and beginning to do things again. ”



Zeid Hamdan in Paris, Hajar Ibrahim



Zeid Hamdan concert at Oakenfest, Lebanon, *Hajar Ibrahim*

Tunefork Studios



Fadi Tabbal and Sundowner band,
Hajar Ibrahim

Julia Sabra

Part of the band *Postcards*, together with Pascal Semerdjian and Marwan Tohme, Julia Sabra is a vocalist, lyricist and musician, playing the keyboard and guitar. Julia is also a sound engineer, managing Tunefork Studios.

“ At the beginning, when Tunefork was founded in 2006, I was the sole owner. Overtime it changed into a collective. At Tunefork we never took a dime for production, recording or consultation. Our motto is **knowledge is free for everybody**. This includes production as it is a way to arrange and understand sound. We make our salaries through corporate work abroad, as well as through donations.

When the explosion happened we took it upon ourselves to make a list of all the music equipment that got destroyed and created an independent fund, the **Beirut Musician Fund**. We distributed the Tunefork's money to around thirty musicians. Due to its success, we have helped students at Onohub [an NGO and music hub]; NowBeirut, a venue destroyed in the blast, and a Buzuq maker in Akkar.

”

Postcards

Beirut Open Stage was an informal competition where established bands would play, followed by newer bands. At the end, the new bands were able to record their singles for free at Tunefork.

We [*Postcards*, Julia Sabra's band] recorded our first single in spring 2013 at Tunefork, following the Beirut Open Stage. That's how we met Fadi, and from then on we have been working with him. Everything has become intertwined, he is almost a ghost member of the band — he's part of the process, the arrangements, the productions - everything.

”

Julia Sabra, Hajar Ibrahim



After the Fire, Before the End

The first half of the album was inspired by this sudden quiet and this stop of life, reflecting upon everything that happened with the Revolution and the economic crisis. We have been living in an illusion, it wasn't a good life - we started seeing all these little bits of trauma here and there in our past.

Then the explosion happened. It pushed us to write even more and suddenly we had a lot to say- a lot of pain and anger.

It took time, because Pascal [Julia's bandmate] was heavily injured. He was at the hospital for a couple of weeks. Mainly he broke his knee, so he couldn't play anything. The first time we did a small rehearsal at his house, he wasn't even playing the drums with his foot.

Julia Sabra and
Fadi Tabbal,
Hajar Ibrahim



Part of it was also trying to find something to hold onto. It felt like the apocalypse and the end of the world. We were so down and music was the wanting that gave us life again. It came out of necessity. With all these emotions, I felt like I was about to explode and it had to come out somewhere. And as soon as we sat down it all came out.

*We would ask ourselves everyday, **should we leave?** However, a big part of it is the community, the music scene, and all our friends. We are really privileged here despite all the shit in Lebanon. We get to come to the studio and rehearse and record for almost nothing, and collaborate and be inspired by other musicians. This community takes years to build and we don't take that for granted.*

*The country is tiny, everyone has in some way or another worked or played with someone else. **The grandiosity of Beirut's architecture doesn't reflect the village feel it has.** In the past two years, the music community has become even more tight-knit, and any competition or jealousy that existed, has been dissolved.*

We have built our fanbase abroad, and people relate to the music, and understand the nostalgia, and hopelessness and anger that we feel, feelings that are universal. This had helped us to stay afloat in terms of funding.

Local institutions like Itijal [an experimental music festival in Beirut] have commission-based funds, where you prepare a piece and get an artist fee. These initiatives are really helpful, however the problem is that none of them are long-term. There's also Beirut and Beyond who offered us a residency to perform at the festival and paid us well. Our primary means of survival is working with NGOs, ads or short movies abroad that pay well.

”

Fadi Tabbal

Nearly every artist I have interviewed over the past months has mentioned working with Fadi Tabbal. Sound engineer, composer and producer, Fadi handles the engineering and production at Tunefork studios. In addition, he has released six solo albums since 2013 and is often referred to as the hardest working man in Lebanon's alternative music scene. He has also been a full time member of several Lebanese bands, including the psychedelic rock band The Incompetents, punk band Scrambled Eggs, the electronic duo Stress/Distress and Interbellum. His newest project The Bunny Tylers veers between drone, electronic and post-rock genres.

“*The creative output of the music scene here is more like a melting pot in comparison to other cities in the region. Most of all, in terms of following the modernization of music it is slightly faster than other Middle Eastern countries. Saying this, in the last ten years Cairo has developed a great alternative scene.*

*We focus more on the hardship of living in the country than evolving a certain tradition, because it has always been cut through wars and there's a **general lack of consensus upon the history**. Everything keeps being renewed all the time in Beirut - which is a good thing because things are happening all the time - but it also means there's a lack of continuity. That's why when people come to the studio and work with us, we always start with a small listening session of the history of other music, primarily post-war until now.*

After the war, being in a rock band was for the upper middle class because you needed gear and equipment. Now music is more accessible, and Hip-hop gave a voice to refugees and marginalized people, who were able to voice their concerns and thoughts in a very minimal costing medium.

Postcards, and Kid Fourteen, the more dream-pop electroclash and electropunk music caught up here locally. There's also the electronic and dance music scene that that has become much more popular, due to our huge nightlife. People know how to have fun and vent, but abroad people can be more uptight about enjoying the simpler things in life. Here you can be eating Mezze on a Sunday for lunch at a restaurant and everyone will be clapping and dancing and singing. ”



Fadi Tabbal, Hajar Ibrahim

“ I remember the first time I got blown away by something was in 1992. I was in Montreal, Canada, back then because we were fleeing the war. I heard ‘Aching Baby,’ the U2 album, and I thought this sounds great, and weird, and futuristic. After that, with time I was always up to date with music. When ‘OK Computer’ came out in 1997, I thought I had to do something with sound, and I began to grasp the importance of sound in music composition.

Music for the Lonely Vol.1 and Vol.2 are albums that don’t belong to a certain narrative that has been compiled over the years. They are stolen moments from when i’m not working, reflecting upon loneliness in big cities.

Predominantly I’m a guitarist, however there has been two albums where I don’t use guitars, I use tape loops, synths, as well as sound design, incorporating samples, field recordings, and Julia’s voice.

Julia’s band, Postcards are special because they didn’t stop. I think there’s only a handful of other people that I have collaborated with that are still working on the same projects, including Charbel Haber (Scrambled Eggs), Youmna Sabaa, Sharif Sehnaoui from Irtijal, Kinematik and Mayssa Jallad. There’s a lot that passed by and stopped making music, and a lot who are only starting now.

”

Sundowner band practicing at
Tunefork, Hajar Ibrahim





Mayssa Jallad in Bourj Hammoud,
Beirut, Hajar Ibrahim

Mayssa Jallad

“ I was part of a band called Safar with Elie Abdelnour, when we won an open-mic competition, Beirut Open Stage. We got to meet Fadi Tabbal and from there started a huge collaboration with him.

The first song I wrote in Arabic was called Wa Namshi with Safar and I realized that when I wrote in Arabic the anger came out and it was a language of political discourse for me. We eventually released 3 EPs and then Ruptured, Fadi Tabbal and Ziad Nawfal's record label, decided to merge them and release an album In Transit. It is a personal take on Western psychedelic folk with pop and rock infusions and references to the Lebanese golden age of the 60s. Unfortunately, by that time both Elie and I had moved to the US, and it became increasingly difficult to write music at a distance, detached from Beirut. From the US, we decided to record our last EP together with Fadi.

Slowly it became more apparent that I could not live without music. **I realized that in New York I was losing the ability to make music. Against all odds and crazy reactions I came back to Lebanon.** It was challenging to get back into the studio immediately. When you are away from Beirut, even for a few months, things change and people live through very difficult things and you were not there with them to even remotely understand it. As someone who is not living here, you simply cannot relate. And so, the music scene has lived a lot of things through these years when I was gone.

Being an architect and a musician have always existed in parallel ways - they never really met until I got this idea that started with my song Madina min Baed. At the time I wrote it I was also writing a paper about Solidiere (the real estate development company) and the heritage that they created and curated which is not 'ours'. It destroyed more buildings than the civil war. It made me think of Downtown Beirut as an inauthentic object, empty, soulless and fabricated. It was built to be marketed.

In the summer of 2021, I got a fellowship with OneBeat and I met musicians I had never known before, and the song came to life. The summer of 2021 undeniably posed so many challenges to our productivity - no electricity, no fuel, the rapid worsening of the financial crisis. There's one song we recorded called Fil Aatma (In the Darkness) and if you hear really closely at the end of the song there's a 'Tak Tak Tak' noise that occurred due to the electricity being cut, and so the song just had to end there. The fellowship came at the worst moment and we had to adapt and change studios because the electricity would not come in the afternoon.

”

“ This year, I am working on a more experimental project that evolved out of conversations with Fadi. I came up with this idea called ‘Marja3’ which is a history textbook about things we don’t want to talk about, putting it side by side with music I produce on the same topic.

When I look at the Lebanese music scene, I realize that we have fully optimized every space available to us, whether its studios, abandoned spaces, live music venues or the nightlife scene. The scene really struggles in its reach in comparison to the Arabic pop scene across the Middle East, but then again this is the underground scene. So I wonder, is there a way to bridge the gap?

People cant live without music here. It keeps them going. It’s part of the culture, it makes things a bit easier, transporting us to somewhere else that’s outside of our lived realities. Sometimes you need to step out of yourself to be able to continue with yourself. I think that’s very important for survival. Have you been to a Lebanese wedding? People are crazy. They love life. ”



Flyers for rooftop concert distributed around Beirut, Hajar Ibrahim



Collective of Lebanese artists at a rooftop concert, Beirut, Hajar Ibrahim

Paō

“
My passion for music began around the age of 13. I was introduced to rock, pop-rock and pop-punk music and it felt ‘fresh’. It inspired me to pursue singing and guitar. Going into high school I ended up picking up the guitar, learning the classic rock songs and getting more into alternative and metal music. I joined my high-school band, ‘Wave in Shock,’ and this really helped me to hone in my songwriting skills. We wrote a few songs and there was a clear evolution over three years in our style from pop-rock to indie rock and surf rock music.

After we graduated, we continued playing several gigs for a year and a half. Once COVID hit I began making music alone. We had our last farewell gig in Quadrangle and closed that chapter. I really wanted to express myself musically without any clashing interests and creative differences setting me back.

My next gig as a solo artist is going to be in Metro Al Madina. It’s the most accessible venue, considering the country’s situation, but also given that it provides a platform for upcoming artists without demanding too high of a price. Pubs can also be good to play at but the sound system is not as good and the crowd is typically not focused upon the musician. It doesn’t have that concert ambiance. People overestimate pubs, they don’t go to really focus on the performance. They go to focus on their time and have the performance as an added value. Whereas a lot of artists that really want to establish themselves and their original music, they need that focus solely on them.

”



“ I also love playing at Quadrangle in Hazmieh, even though it’s a pub, it really enforces a spotlight on the performing bands. There is an actual stage, people can stand like they are at a concert, and we just split the ticket revenue with the pub. Honestly, I have a lot of love for that place, most of my concerts were in Quadrangle.

I also played at AUB outdoors [a summer festival hosted at University] and years back in Summer Fusion [a rock focused festival] with my high school band. It was a fascinating experience. I also used to love playing at Backdoor in Mar Mikhael, but unfortunately it closed in 2019. It used to be one of the best live concert venues, and it really helped me establish myself as a musician within the scene.

For my first single ‘Alive’ I started the process at home with a very modest but sufficient studio set up. I have a Digital Audio Workstation that doesn’t require an amp. I plug in the guitar to my laptop and record everything there. The only mic-ing I use is just for my vocals. So with this digital age, it was very easy for me to get the right guitar sound just through my laptop. Even the drums were programmed in my laptop. I recorded the demo in the span of maybe two to three months. I wrote the lyrics after, and they were based on my death anxiety, and I drew some parallelism to my personal romantic relationship, going back and forth on how each one affects the other. By the end of it I wanted to contact a studio to help with added production elements and mixing and mastering, and then I found out about Tunefork Studios. Their initiative (pay as you like) helped me a lot, at the time of the recording, as it was very affordable.



Paō and the Band performing his single Alive. Photographed by Marco Bazerji

I have faced many obstacles as an artist here, and I can’t help but assume it will be smoother and easier for me once I go abroad. For example, because of the power cuts, sometimes the sound that I record from my Mic is inconsistent. I also have creative spikes at night, however there’s no electricity, at night so I am unable to do that.

I remember at the time when I was recording ‘Alive’ gas and electricity prices were skyrocketing, and I had to be weary about production costs. That’s why I am very thankful for Tunefork. Tunefork has amazing facilities, and their initiative gave me a head-start for my work.

”

“ As soon as the revolution hapopened, before COVID and before the financial crisis really kicked off, I already knew that I had to leave, and there was not really a great shot for me to establish myself in the local scene here. I am going to Berlin for my Master's studies and then Paris. I am trying to establish myself in Paris, I know France well and I am fluent in French. I'll be able to network easily, there's many artists from here that have done the same in Paris.

I have struggled with anxiety since I was a child, but as you grow up these anxieties grow and shift. For me, once I reached my twenties, I started being too sensitive about time running out, growing up and getting old. My therapist actually inspired me to write a song about it and that's how the lyrics came to life.

Recently especially, I am grateful to be leaving Lebanon. My death anxiety has increased a lot, my perception of life slowly got darker given the situation of the country, especially after the explosion. I became more fearful and demotivated, which really harmed my productivity. But also, globally nothing seems to be heading in the right direction, and so my anxiety in general has increased.

I think the scene here also struggles with an ego issue, which can be intimidating to someone starting and building their way up here. Because Beirut is really just a small circle, if you establish yourself just slightly, many people will know who you are. I have to say I disagree with many people about the plenitude of venues for live musicians, especially for upcoming artists. Despite all these opportunities for open-mic, its only acoustics usually, there's usually no space for bands. Here, the clubbing culture means there's not a high demand to invest in live music venues. What is successful here is the electronic scene, particularly techno and RnB, as people love to party from sunset till sunrise. ”

Paö , photographed by Marco Bazerji

Marc Codsí



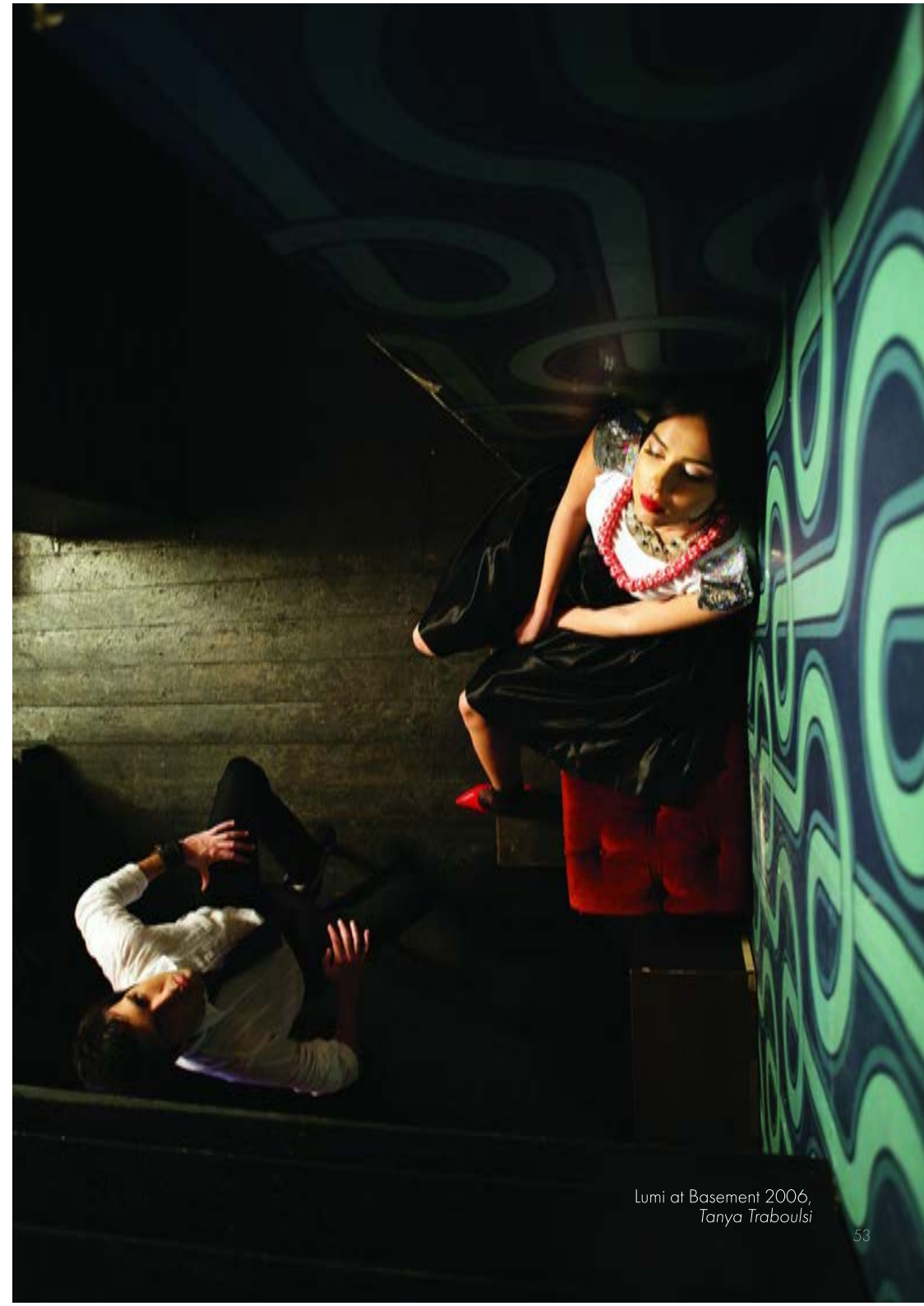
Marc Codsí has been a part of the Lebanese music scene since its inception post civil war. As a composer, producer, and multi-instrumental artist, he has been part of many bands including *Scrambled Eggs*, *Lumi*, and *Zalfa*. He has also worked with Zeid Hamdan, mixed for Mashrou' Leila, and worked with countless other musicians, in addition to his solo work. Codsí has also collaborated with directors on several Lebanese film soundtracks.

“*When I started making music in 2001 it was the first post-war wave of musicians. It felt like everything we created was original, and exciting and new. **There was no memory of anything when we entered the scene, we had to create everything from scratch, including our knowledge of music.** There was no logistics, no sound engineers or recording studios.*

*Even the audience was living again for the first time. To have a concert, to have an album, to do all these things was beyond precious and held a lot of meaning to our post-war society. At the time it still had the mixture of innocence and excitement. Beirut had the spirit of something new coming. **The era between 2001 and 2005 was perhaps the most promising in terms of how quickly the scene grew and evolved.***

***The second phase of the Lebanese Underground came around 2007-2008** (after the 2006 Israeli war). By that time, I had already created another band called **Lumi in 2005**, and the scene was already established. Mashrou' Leila was starting to grow, and Beirut's spirit was heavy partying. With Lumi, Mayaline, Hage and I, we wanted to create a distinct move away from the past and into the future. I left Beirut in 2011, but the city was still in this party era.*

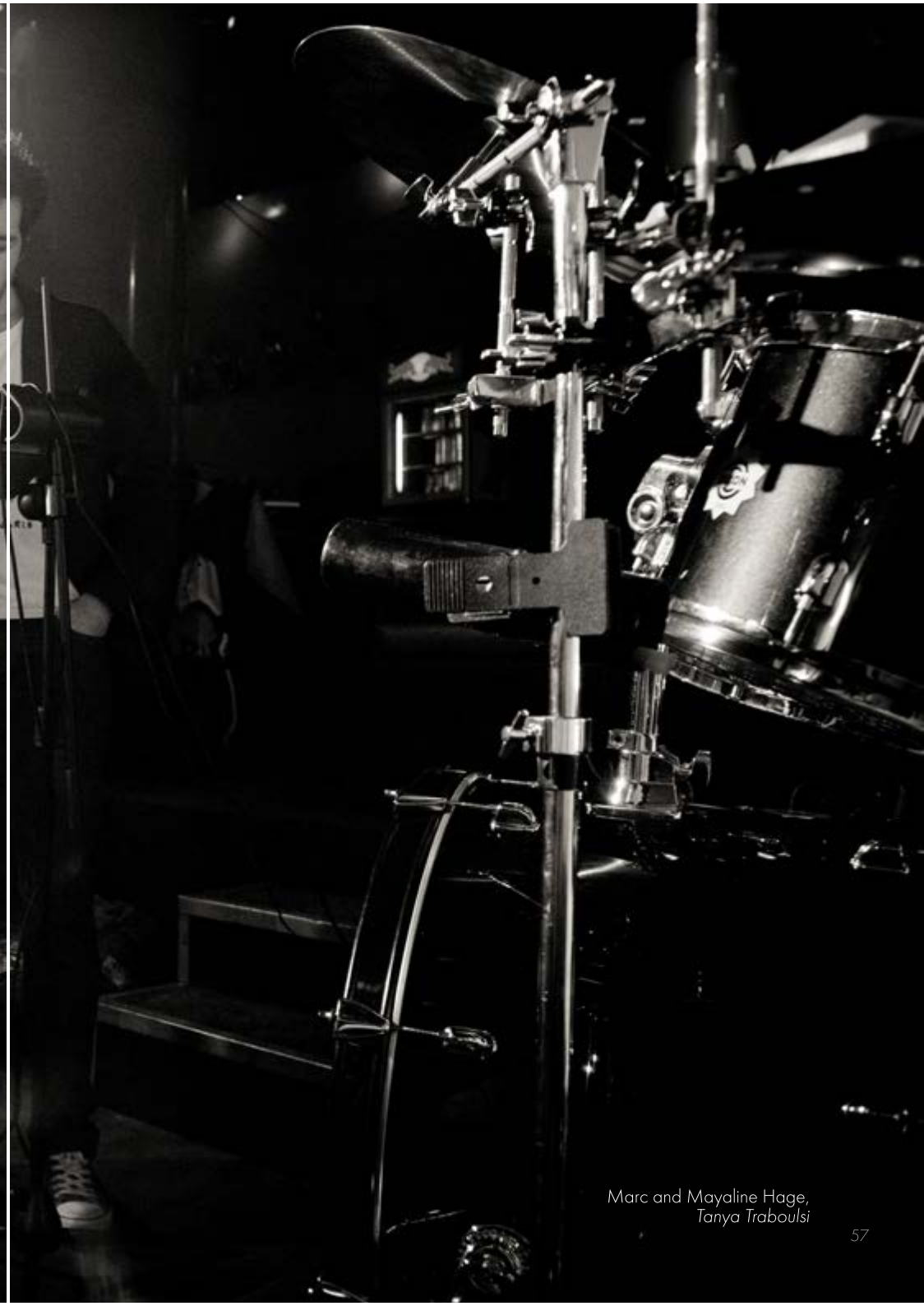
”



Lumi at Basement 2006,
Tanya Traboulsi



Lumi at Ajram Beach 2007,
Tanya Traboulsi



Marc and Mayaline Hage,
Tanya Traboulsi

“ Logistically speaking, there were now studios, managers, and venues everywhere. **Before, there were no venues to hold concerts. We held concerts in alternative venues such as old cinemas, or on the street in Hamra, and once in a shop, once on the highway facing the sea. We had concerts in the egg, the old abandoned cinema, a few times as well.**

I left to Montreal in 2011 and came back from 2013 until 2016. I felt that this whole party movement was going nuts, and that there was a disconnect with reality. As an artist I felt my role was to be more in touch with the real material issues that we are experiencing. People woke up briefly in 2019, but it was only after we had already endured so much. I felt it was too late.

My solo album, *The Silence Between the New World and the Aftermath*, I made over the span of two years from 2019 to 2021. I was back in Beirut during this time, and despite it not being the best place to create, there is so much creative energy here. When I'm in Paris I can process it and translate it musically. This accumulated into my album that was less-so intended as a cohesive album, and more-so a sketch of what I experienced in Beirut during that time.

Zalfa [a collaboration between Marc Codsí and Zalfa] is a project I started around 2012. We wanted to explore pop music with arabic singing and intonation. I loved Zalfa's voice, it is truly dreamy. It is a language of itself separate from words. Our most recent album was in 2019, which was ideal as we both were in Paris, so we could do several concerts. We have another album coming soon as well.

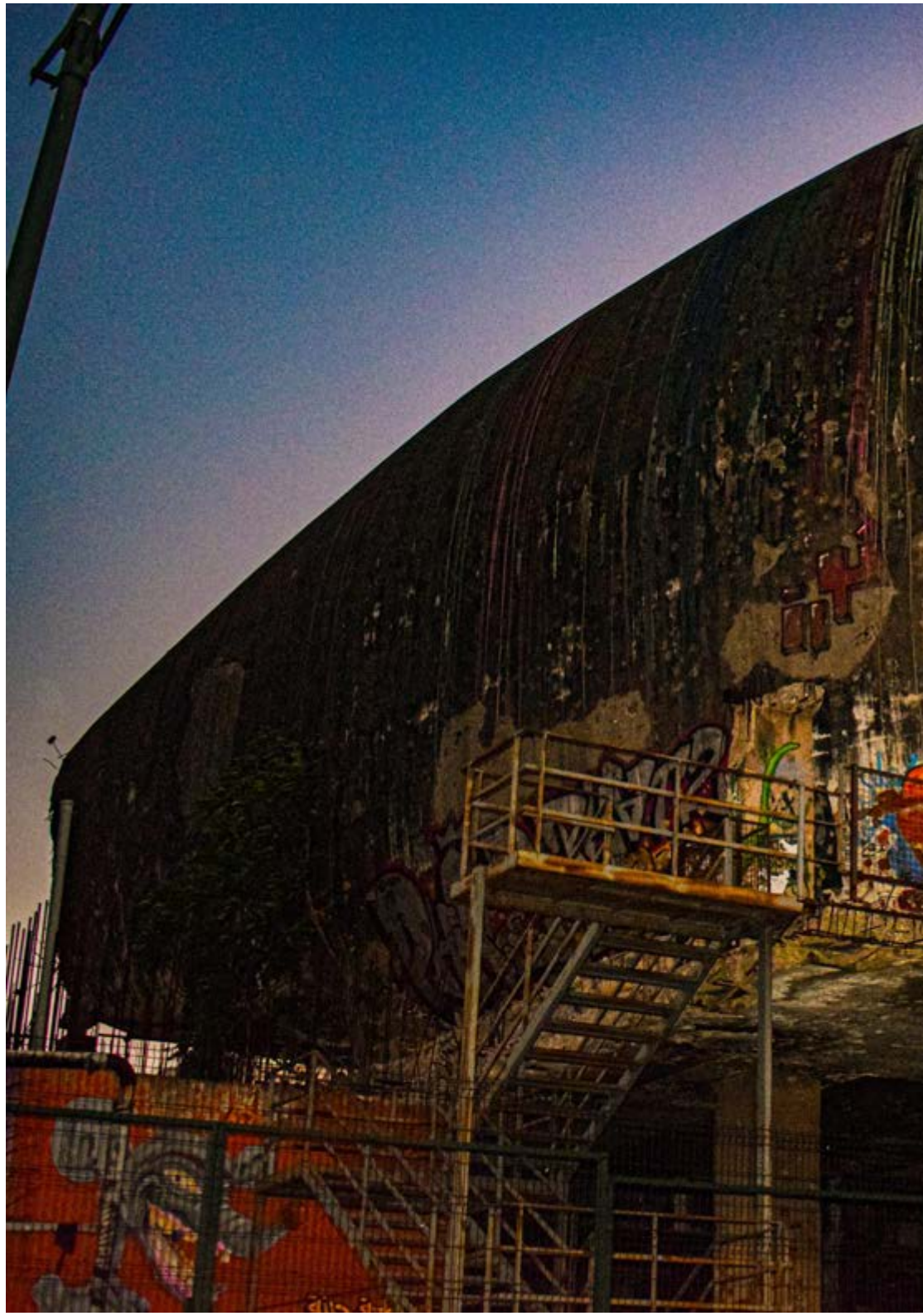
In Paris things are much more organized, everything goes through a system and is well planned. There's a huge Lebanese diaspora that come to our shows, but there are also many Europeans that come and are curious to hear what we have to offer. In Lebanon everyone that comes to our concerts knows us in one way or another, so there's more people singing along, especially when it's in Arabic. **The standard of concerts is much higher, even if it is more freestyle in this sense.**

The scene is visibly very different since the explosion.

August 4th was a complete annihilation of Beirut, and there was mass exodus from the city. Everything that was built in the last twenty years, after the civil war, exploded. I was very scared to come back. The first time that I did was in March 2021, and I was very happy to find that there was still a pulse in Beirut. I wasn't expecting this, especially with the extent of physical and emotional damage that everyone endured. It was touching to experience people still doing music, and committed to staying within the Lebanese music scene. This is truly beyond precious. In my underground scene there's still this burning passion for music and a great will to continue pushing. ”

Lumi at the Egg,
Tanya Traboulsi





The Egg, abandoned cinema,
Hajar Ibrahim

Sandy Chamoun



Sandy Chamoun and her band *Fer'et el Shayaleen*
(*The Great Departed*) performing in Hammana,
Hajar Ibrahim

Sandy Chamoun is a Lebanese experimental producer and singer-songwriter. She is the founding member of the band *Fer'et el Shayaleen (The Great Departed)*, a political satire music project.

“*My music career began with my band Al Rahil El Kebir. I used to be more interested in acting, but the options are limited here and so I found a middle ground between singing and performance through live concerts. Metro al Madina was the perfect venue as it allowed the audience to experience different music styles, and so many bands performed there. It allowed me to test different singing styles, gaining experience of how to interact with any audience, breaking the boundaries of being “proper” and disobeying classical forms of music.*

*The only issue now is that concerts have become a luxury, however Metro’s prices always remain good for the artist and the audience. **Concerts open for the public, like the other day in Hammana, allow everyone to attend with little to no costs.***”

Sandy’s public concert in Hammana, a village in the mountains of Lebanon, showed a huge turnout of people, many driving up from Beirut to enjoy this re-imagination of public space. The beauty of a concert like this was observing how she interacts with the space. Some people eating, some people sitting in the audience, some dancing and clapping and some smoking their Shisha in observation- Sandy Chamoun’s voice intergrates everyone into the space.

Towards the end of the night after some small but interruptive ruckus between people in a parallel street, everyone got up and started dancing to celebrate the show resuming. Energy was heightened, everyone was moving, people sang along, fathers put their children on their shoulders and the elderly clapped and cheered.



Hammana’s audience waiting for the concert to begin, Hajar Ibrahim

“ Everything is political and interwoven into our daily lives. It has always been like this, it's not a recent development... this war then the next and so on for our whole lives. I had a time in my life where I only thought about politics. I love Sheikh Imam and Said Darwish's music, not just how they sing politically, but also how they speak in their music, the composition, how they created a revolution within Egyptian music. They were free: free for how they wrote their music, free for how they sing, **free outside the mainstream.**

Now, it's not that I'm in an apolitical phase, but I no longer want to enclose myself in that space. Once I label myself as just one specific thing, I will keep repeating myself. I'm opening space for new ideas and feelings now.

I came to this realization especially after the explosion, because we all changed from within, as did our city and the spaces we were accustomed to. At that moment you felt you lost everyone, not just the people you know. Now it's impossible to have the same attitude and delivery in my performances as before. Everything had to change.

For example, my current band Sanam is very open for different ways of thinking, and I feel like I am freed from that repetitive cycle. We have an open-minded approach and we avoid doing a fusion. We throw ideas at each other until we record an album with no adherence to specific sounds that traditionally work well together. ”

During the October 17 Revolution 2019, Sandy Chamoun wrote her song Ahlam el Khayal (Imaginary Dreams):

With the revolution, I never had hope that much would change. We don't have the money, we don't have the arms, we don't have medicine, we can't dream that much. But a bit of fawda [chaos], and so many people uniting together and rejecting everything was very important for me. So the song Ahlam el Khayal, came out of **a need to archive this feeling.** This is four months of our lives that we will never live or experience again, even if it didn't reach anywhere tangible. My favourite moments during that time was singing Said Darwish and Sheikh Imam during the revolution.

By 2021, I was thinking 'why am I staying here? There is nothing for me.' It was too heavy of a feeling. **The situation kept deteriorating, and it was hard to continue adapting.** However, when I came back from Berlin after a month, **I realized I could not leave Lebanon again.** Despite this, every now and then I do have to leave to finalise my projects in a place that has electricity and is a bit calmer.

”



Hammana public concert,
Hajar Ibrahim



Ziad Moukarzel

Beirut Synthesiser Centre



Ziad Moukarzel,
Hajar Ibrahim

The Beirut Synthesiser Centre is the first of its kind worldwide. There are now three worldwide: one in Lebanon, one in Germany and one in Czech Republic. This centre is the first in the region and **it remains completely free despite the economic collapse of the country**. It has open hours daily where anyone with any level of experience can pop in to learn how to use the equipment. They also host workshops weekly as well as music events and shows on the roof terrace. Ziad Moukarzel is one of the co-founders alongside Mona Haffar, Hans Manja and Elyse Tabet.

Open hours at
the Synth Centre,
Hajar Ibrahim



Beirut is a small community. After the explosion, the pandemic, and the many crises that ensued (the economic crisis, the fuel crisis, electricity and water crisis), it became very important to have a place to share knowledge. For example, at this center, the machines are donated or lent from companies and local artists. **Ziad explains that the music scene finds its resilience here through the constant act and search for freedom by the people.** Music has become a way to express the inner anxieties and anger in ways that cannot be expressed otherwise.



Artists here help each other out without even realising. **There is no structure to how things work here, there is no government funding or ministry for the arts and music industry. There is no structure for being the artist you want to be, so you must become part of the community.** There's different communities, different genres of music but there are always channels between them. These strong connections and desire for everyone to succeed means that artists shift to different spaces, studios and equipments.

Ziad has Woodwork Sound Studio as well, however the lack of electricity has affected his work and his scheduling. He explains how it has become cheaper to rent out someone else's studio or work from home and then go to Woodwork studio for the final mastering or mixing. There is a strong importance for these channels of communication which then help sprout many projects across many genres.

Funding for the centre from both institutes abroad or anonymous donors help to sustain it for short-term periods at a time. Everything is short term and it becomes impossible to plan ahead until you know where the next source of funding will come from. It costs around 280\$ for electricity to sustain the generator at 10 amps, the machines, the AC's and around the same amount monthly for rent. Timing is very crucial, we cannot plan ahead. They don't know what will happen tomorrow so Ziad explains that they are sometimes forced to make decisions rashly.

Venues closed during the pandemic, many left because of the economic crisis, but it's moving to see that many are opening anew despite the increasing rate of the dollar. University concerts and gigs have also been important to the scene and are slowly returning now. There's always a lot of possible outlets and the lineups are very diverse in terms of genres. **The mobility of sound equipment means that anywhere can be a venue - the only problem is the generator.**



Jana Saleh at Beirut Synth Centre
Norient Sounds event,
Hajar Ibrahim



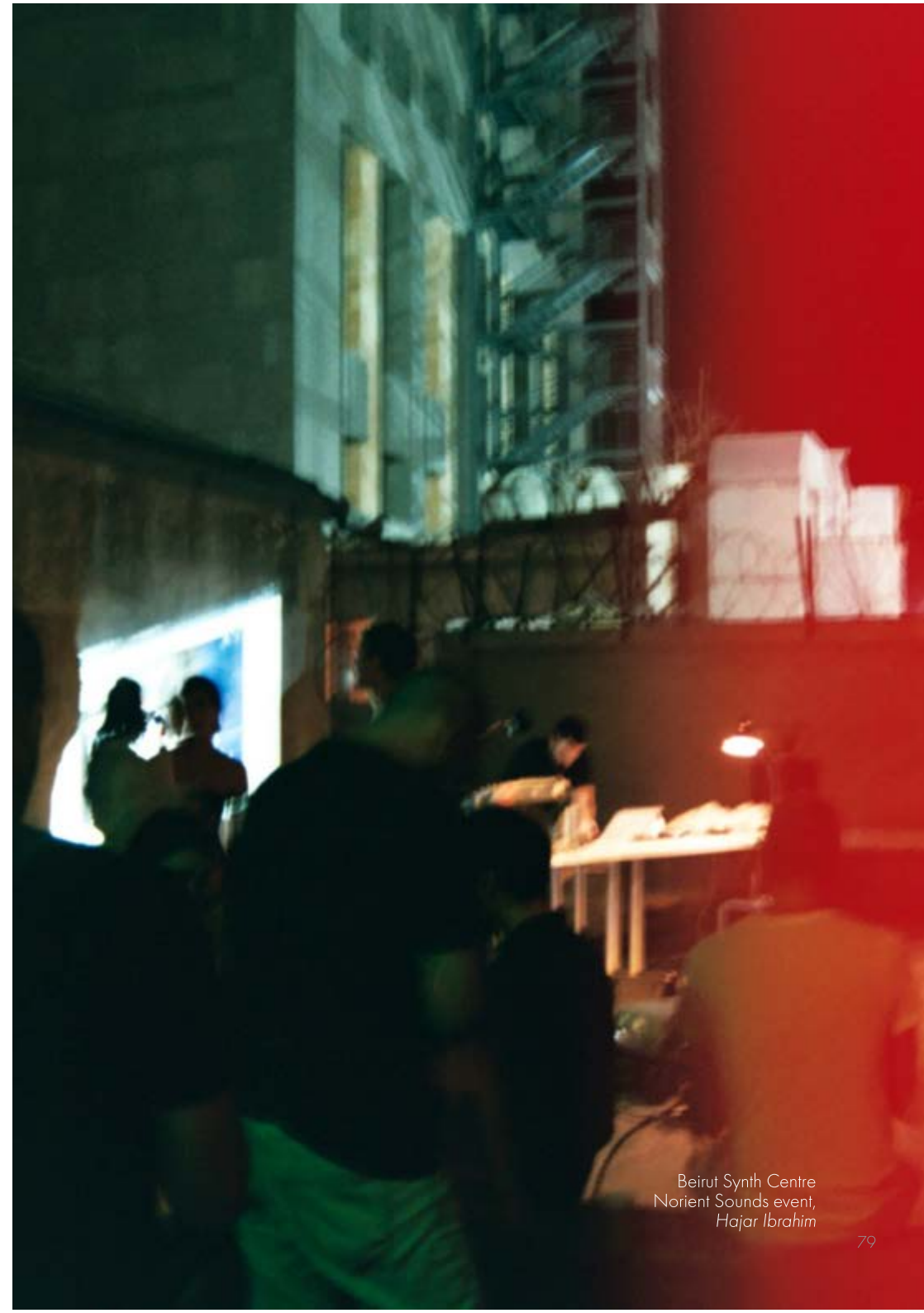
Beirut Synth Centre
Norient Sounds event,
Hajar Ibrahim

“ I have always been interested in technology. When I got a synthesizer and started playing around I found myself going down a certain direction. I realized that **music is not only auditory**. A big component of it is visual, and you don't have to dance or sing along. With time I realized how **music is about texture, and how we can change that texture with different notes or pitch**.

I don't like to use the Western Chromatic Scale. **Middle Eastern music is more about modes than scales. Also, no-one is in agreement which scale is the 'standard', so there's no specific way to do it. It created the perfect environment for this experimental scene.** But in the end it's still a very emotional way of making music.

The pop or mainstream music scene here needs to have censorship and it needs to strive to be authentic. **There needs to be people more into the music than into its business aspects.** However, the underground scene could benefit from having a small concretised business model. Perhaps that would be helpful especially for their experimental scene.

Experimental is a broad term, and anything can be experimental unless it's doing what someone else has already done. **That's what makes the underground scene here special: it's fresh and raw. At the end of the day, experimental music is what opens the door for mainstream music.** Without it, music would not be moving forward, you wouldn't have access to. ”



Beirut Synth Centre
Norient Sounds event,
Hajar Ibrahim



Jana Saleh at Beirut Synth
Centre Norient Sounds event,
Hajar Ibrahim

Tanjaret Daghet



Tanjaret Daghet,
Photo sourced from Tanjaret Daghet

Syrian indie-rock band Tanjaret Daghet came together in 2008. The band is comprised of Khaled, Tarek and Dani, and their 2013 debut album "180 Degrees" was widely received and praised both regionally and globally.

“ **Khaled:** When we were in Syria each of us was playing music separately and we hadn't known of each other. I got to know Dani at the Conservatoire, and then Tarek joined and the band started to take form. When the war started in Syria and we carried our stuff and left.

Tarek: The project started very open and experimental, with a fusion of jazz and other genres. It then changed to songwriting and developing a sound together. This was around 2012. We had started writing in 2009 but we hadn't gotten our sound yet.

Our first album was "180 degrees". And the album after that was in 2016. So now we are getting onto our third album release. Unfortunately we have had many obstacles that held us back from releasing this album. There's several layers to it. We realized that as a band in the Middle East only, we need to be supported, we need a label, we need marketing and many other things so that we can just focus on the music.

We have to do more than just be musicians making music.

Now, were working on our record label, for us and our friends. Were making a compilation under this label, putting everyone together and pushing them forward on a fully independent platform. We wish that it was just about the music as a band, and that we could focus on the writing and then go and tour but this is not the case.

”

“ Is this a result of just being artists in Lebanon, or a universal challenge that musicians face?

Its part of this movement that's happening outside as well, some artists are becoming independent instead of depending on their labels. But unfortunately on top of that living in Lebanon is not making things easier. For example, you need a bank account and you cannot open one here, you need many things that are just impossible here. Its such a sensitive situation right now more than ever.

It was still difficult for us before 2019, but at least we used to have more electricity. If we talk about the fundamentals right now, having electricity gave us time to be productive, to research, to play my guitar, to do anything really. **So when all of Lebanon began to shrink down, we shrunk with it.** We are doing less than half the work we were able to do before, and it is ridiculous. Also in terms of funding, we manage to get some funds here and there but its not enough, when your working on a project you have to look for several funds. The problem is when you find a fund they're going to wire it to your account. We don't have an account. When you don't have an account, how will you do that? We end up having to ask for favours, wire it into someone else's account, or if someone from abroad is returning to Lebanon we ask them.

”



Tanjaret Daghet,
Photo sourced from Tanjaret Daghet

“ When you first moved here, was it a struggle as Syrian musicians to establish yourself in the Lebanese music scene?

Yes that has been a very big struggle. We also need people to speak our language, to understand our dreams, our wishes. For example, one of the biggest struggles were living is that the business model were trying to tap into is not so common in Lebanon, because anyone can rip anyone off. There's no rights, its like a concrete jungle, its beautiful, but nothing feels coherent. Like if you go abroad (i.e. to Europe) people really can live off their music and royalties and gain something that can feed them every month, almost like a stable income - it might not be huge money but at least its stable. Its not like that here. Music is a hobby here, its not seen as a profession.

Another struggle is to be able to travel. For us as a band its so important for our message to be heard outside Lebanon too. I think we have done almost everything we can do being here and collaborated with many different local and international visiting musicians. People here really appreciate it and love it and they're supportive - they've become our friends. But unfortunately this message should not be restricted to Syria and Lebanon. We cannot do our Europe tour because we don't have the right papers for them.

Had you wanted to come to Lebanon?

We had a choice we went to France for a week before we came to Lebanon, it was an invitation from the embassy and we really thought we would always have the opportunity to go to Europe whenever we wanted. This is why we came back. Everyone thought we were stupid. The choice we did not have was whether it was Jordan or Beirut, and from what we had heard Beirut was always where all the fun was, its what we had heard even back home. **It was always like “What's happening in Beirut?”** So, actually Beirut was the best option to move to and the closest. Now we are trying to see if there's any chance for us to get out because I don't know if we can do any more. I don't know if these places need any more music.

”

How do you make sense of the struggle of making music in the aftermath of the many crisis that Lebanon and its people have faced since 2019?

We can't even charge the minimum that we used to charge, 10 dollars is almost like 500,000 L.L. now [this was the black market rate during our interview in the summer of 2022. As of June 2023, 10 dollars is 1 million L.L.]. We did shows in Metro, charged in Lira or you could pay whatever you can, even nothing. **I love what Metro is doing when it comes to these things because they are respecting the right of everyone of have fun.**

State electricity is coming for one hour every four days now for God's sake. And you don't know when it will come. Despite this, you can still feel the appreciation for music. Especially after COVID the fact that we could express ourselves musically was enough. I remember the first gig I went to see after COVID people were dancing on everything, you could tell how much they miss hearing just any frequency coming out of the speaker. Just to feel the music and socialize again. Because pre-2019, Hamra was pumping, Mar Mikhael was buzzing and loud. It was way more loud, it was social it was communal collective fun and partying.

Also the explosion played a big role offcourse. Some people opened new projects, others just left the wreckage there. It really affected the scene big time. When the explosion came it was the fuel on the fire. A lot of musicians decided to end the journey there and had to leave.



“ See someone like **Zeid Hamdan**, he's the person that I always told 'why don't you go to the States, or to Europe?'

He used to say “Man.. I have Lebanon, I have everything here. I can't leave this place, I have Beirut.”

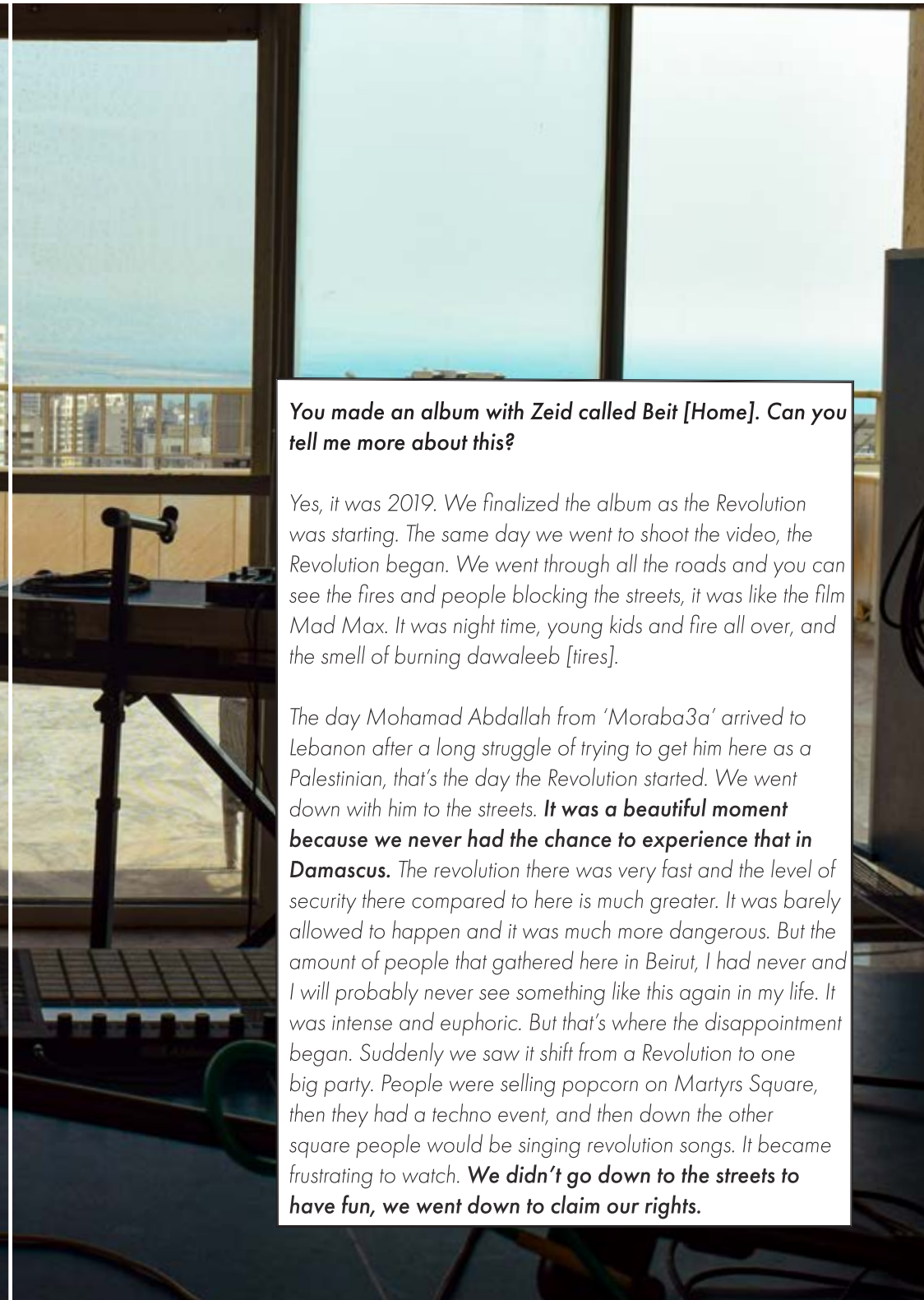
After the explosion, the worst damage possible had happened. Once you lose home, it really is indescribable. For us, we are visitors here, so whatever happens its heavy and its hard to digest, but for someone that was born here that lived here their whole life, I can't even imagine. Its a much stronger feeling.

”

Tanjaret Daghet home studio,
Hajar Ibrahim



Tanjaret Daghet home studio,
Hajar Ibrahim



You made an album with Zeid called Beit [Home]. Can you tell me more about this?

Yes, it was 2019. We finalized the album as the Revolution was starting. The same day we went to shoot the video, the Revolution began. We went through all the roads and you can see the fires and people blocking the streets, it was like the film *Mad Max*. It was night time, young kids and fire all over, and the smell of burning dawaleeb [tires].

The day Mohamad Abdallah from 'Moraba3a' arrived to Lebanon after a long struggle of trying to get him here as a Palestinian, that's the day the Revolution started. We went down with him to the streets. **It was a beautiful moment because we never had the chance to experience that in Damascus.** The revolution there was very fast and the level of security there compared to here is much greater. It was barely allowed to happen and it was much more dangerous. But the amount of people that gathered here in Beirut, I had never and I will probably never see something like this again in my life. It was intense and euphoric. But that's where the disappointment began. Suddenly we saw it shift from a Revolution to one big party. People were selling popcorn on Martyrs Square, then they had a techno event, and then down the other square people would be singing revolution songs. It became frustrating to watch. **We didn't go down to the streets to have fun, we went down to claim our rights.**

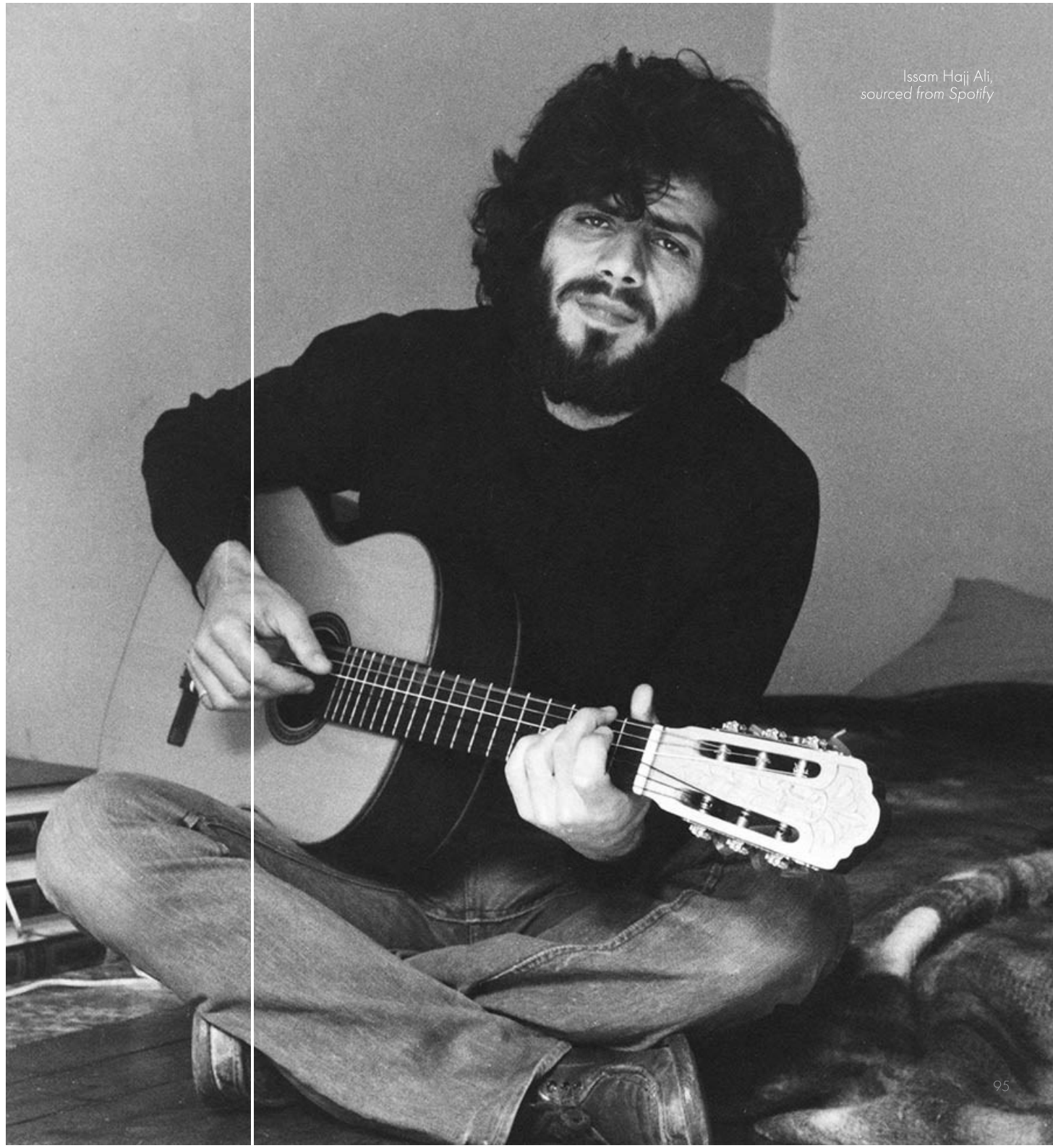
و فیت

كان يا مكان
في الحقول الصغير زرعت احلمني
في الحقول الصغير احلمني
في الحقول الصغير احلمني

Khaled: *I love the pulse of Arabic words, when I was young I used to rap in Arabic, I loved to give the Arabic word its righteousness and its deserved rhythm. If I try to write it in English, the vocabulary to express myself is limited, whereas I can't doubt my capacity to express things in Arabic. And to commit to the original idea, we can achieve it here, and it can still reach out to people abroad, to people in the Diaspora especially.*

“

Issam Hajj Ali



Issam Hajj Ali,
sourced from Spotify

The completely unknown debut album of Issam Hajali (Ferkat Al Ard) fuses jazz and folk with Arabic and Iranian influences. Originally released in a limited run of 75 cassette tape copies. Issam Hajali might be most known for being the singer and main composer of the Lebanese band Ferkat Al Ard. While they recorded 3 albums only their classic "Oghneya" release saw a vinyl release and is probably the most in demand record in the Lebanese record collector scene (A copy changed hands in Beirut this year for 7000\$). Before the band came together Issam recorded a debut album called "Mouasalat Ila Jacad El Ard" in 1977 in Paris.

"It was impossible to find a label which was still operating under the circumstances of war. So, I started dubbing the tapes myself and producing black and white copies at the corner store. Most of the copies of the album were sold or given to friends. One record shop had them on the shelves on a commission basis. But as the shop owner was no fan of the music, she did little to sell them, hiding the tapes behind other releases.

Eventually one of those tapes fell into the hands of Ziad Rahbani, Fairuz's son and a Lebanese musical institution in his own right. Ziad Rahbani liked the music a lot and used to play on most of Ferkat Al Ard's releases. And Issam also played on some of Ziad's recordings and sessions. Nevertheless, **the album was never known outside a very small scene of like-minded individuals and musicians of late 1970s Beirut.** I am fairly certain that less than 100 copies of the tape were made back then in total and **I only managed to hang onto one copy himself, which was archived by Jakarta Records of Habibifunk into an album in 2019.**

Out of nowhere, Jannis (part of Habibifunk) knocks on my door and asks me "are you Issam Hajj Ali?". **He told me he had been looking for me for years and then eventually a street coffee vendor here in Mar Elias had led him to me.** He came looking for one of our vintage records "Oghneya". We had pressed around 100 copies with Zida Records which was a label by Zaid Rahbani and the original owner of **Chico Records** - Katchik Maridrian. Chico was a good guy, he put all his money into the music (See next section for Chico Records).

The person who bought the last record paid 7000\$ for it! I know the person who bought it, he had two records and he wanted to complete the set with third to finish the catalogue. He was a collector.

I begged for him to not pay that much, I said pay 6000 at least. Once he agreed I gave him the address to the guy who owns the 'last copy' and instantly he grabbed his stuff and drove up there and bought it. **This copy then got stolen and was sold on the black market for 1500\$.**

So Janis had heard it somewhere and was coming to look for it. I told him I don't have it! I even gave my copy away.



Issam Hajj Ali's Habibifunk Archive / Re-released Record at Chico Records Shop (see next section for Chico Records) Hajjar Ibrahim

I told him if you want to hear the songs before or after I have them I can play them for him. I had a 'zero copy' of the original. I made him listen to "Moussallalat" and two minutes into hearing it he said: "stop! I want this. We'll talk about Oghneya later".

On the German Rolling Stone chart we reached number 9 on the Top 20. At the time when I originally recorded this song, **I had been in exile escaping political persecution.** During the 1982 Invasion, we kept funding the studio and our own living, but we couldn't afford anything. We continued with it though - we were naïve and genuine. But we never did it for business anyways, I would be ashamed of taking money. **Its impossible for me to accept money for my music when it was part of the resistance. For me, music was resistance. I had taken it, used it and produced it for resistance, as resistance. Throughout the civil war, throughout the Israeli invasion and up and through my exile from Lebanon.**

But then we didn't have money to eat....the essentials: eggs and milk and soap. I used to live with Roger Fakhr (another Lebanese musician). Both of us were so fed up, and he actually ended up leaving on tour to America with the legendary Fairuz. ”



Issam in his Jewelry Store 'Fabrizio' in Mar Elias, Beirut
Hajar Ibrahim

Issam now owns a jewelry shop ('Fabrizio') on an alleyway in Mar Elias, Beirut. In the middle of the summer heat, he runs his shop daily without any electricity. We sat for hours chatting about the many lives he lived in exile and at home, transcending the futile through an exchange of stories and memories of resistance, joy, courage, anxieties and despair.



Chico Records



Diran Mardirian, owner of Chico
Records, Hajar Ibrahim



Diran Mardirian, owner of Chico Records, Hajar Ibrahim

Initially founded in 1964, by his father Katchik Mardirian, Chico Records is Lebanon's oldest still-standing record shop. Surviving 15 years of brutal civil war, Israeli invasions, bombings, and the current financial meltdown and economic collapse, Chico is a story of living history.

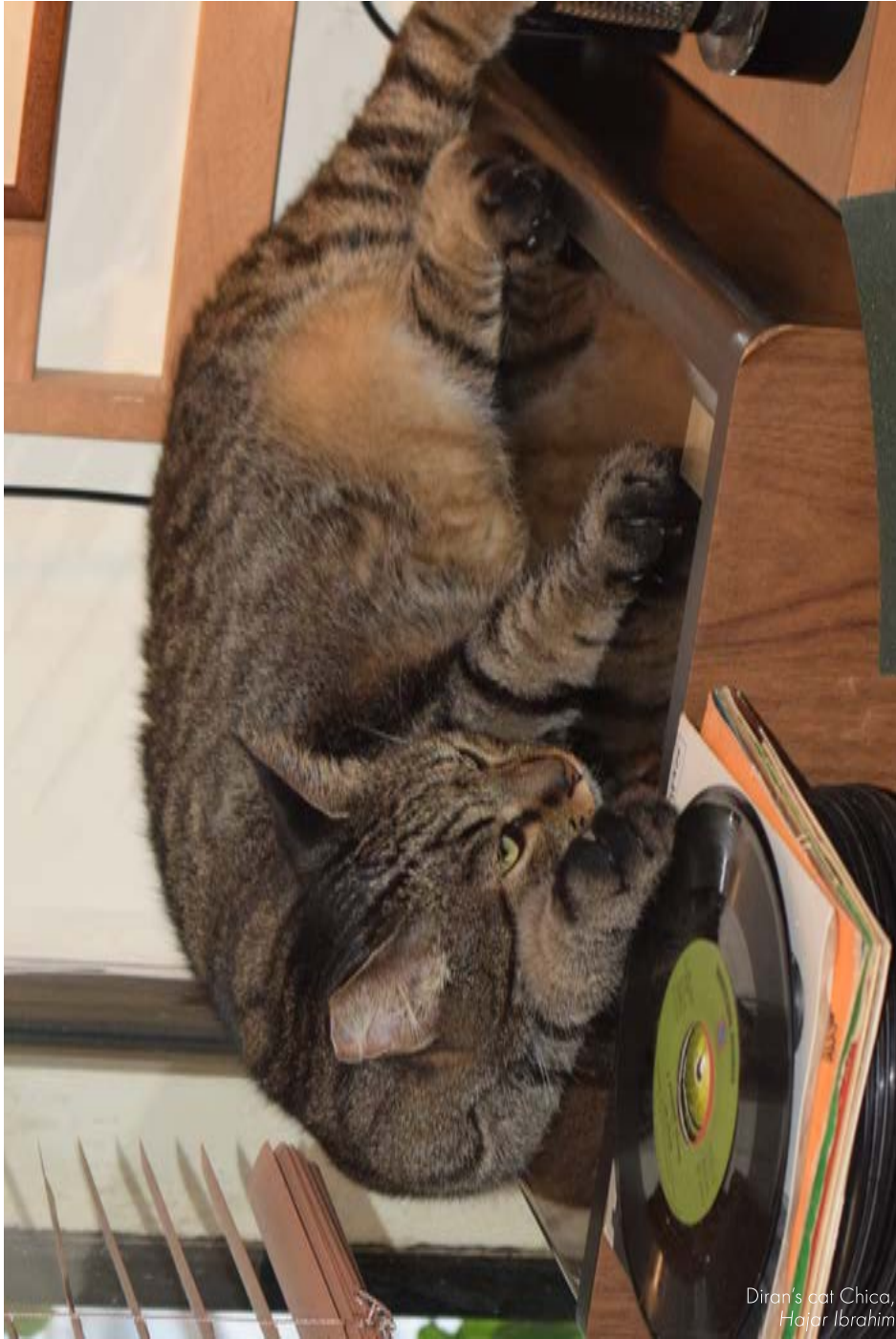
In 1978 **Katchik founded Zida records with Ziad Rahbani** - son of the legendary singer Fairouz, and one of the Arab world's most famous composers - quickly becoming one of the most revered labels of Lebanon's golden era.

Some must-listen-to records off the label Zida Records to immerse yourself with the music as you read this section:

- **Abu Ali** (Ziad Rahbani & many other musicians including Issam Haj Ali)
- **Wahdon** - Fairuz and Ziad Rahbani (1979) - by 1979 Fairuz became known as the Voice of Lebanon. This record marks a transformation in Fairuz's style from folkloric sounds to Jazz and Funk. Unsurprisingly, the song 'El Bostah' on the LP greatly resembles the excellent 'Abu Ali'.
- **Bennesba La Bokra Chou** (1978) - three part live studio recording, combining cinematic introductions, fusions of Bossa Nova groove and Arabic flutes with vocals from Joseph Sacre.
- **Maarifti Feek** - Fairuz, Ziad Rahbani and Joseph Harb (1987) - The most popular song on the record was 'Li Beirut', a melancholic song about the state of Beirut at the time - still extremely popular today and known by all generations, old and young.
- **Oghneya** (1979)- Ferkat Al Ard - (as mentioned in Issam Haj Ali's Section) - Lebanese 70s trio, headed by Issam, this LP of Ferkat Al Ard stands out as one of the greatest musical gems of the Arab world.



Diran Mardirian, owner of Chico Records, Hajar Ibrahim



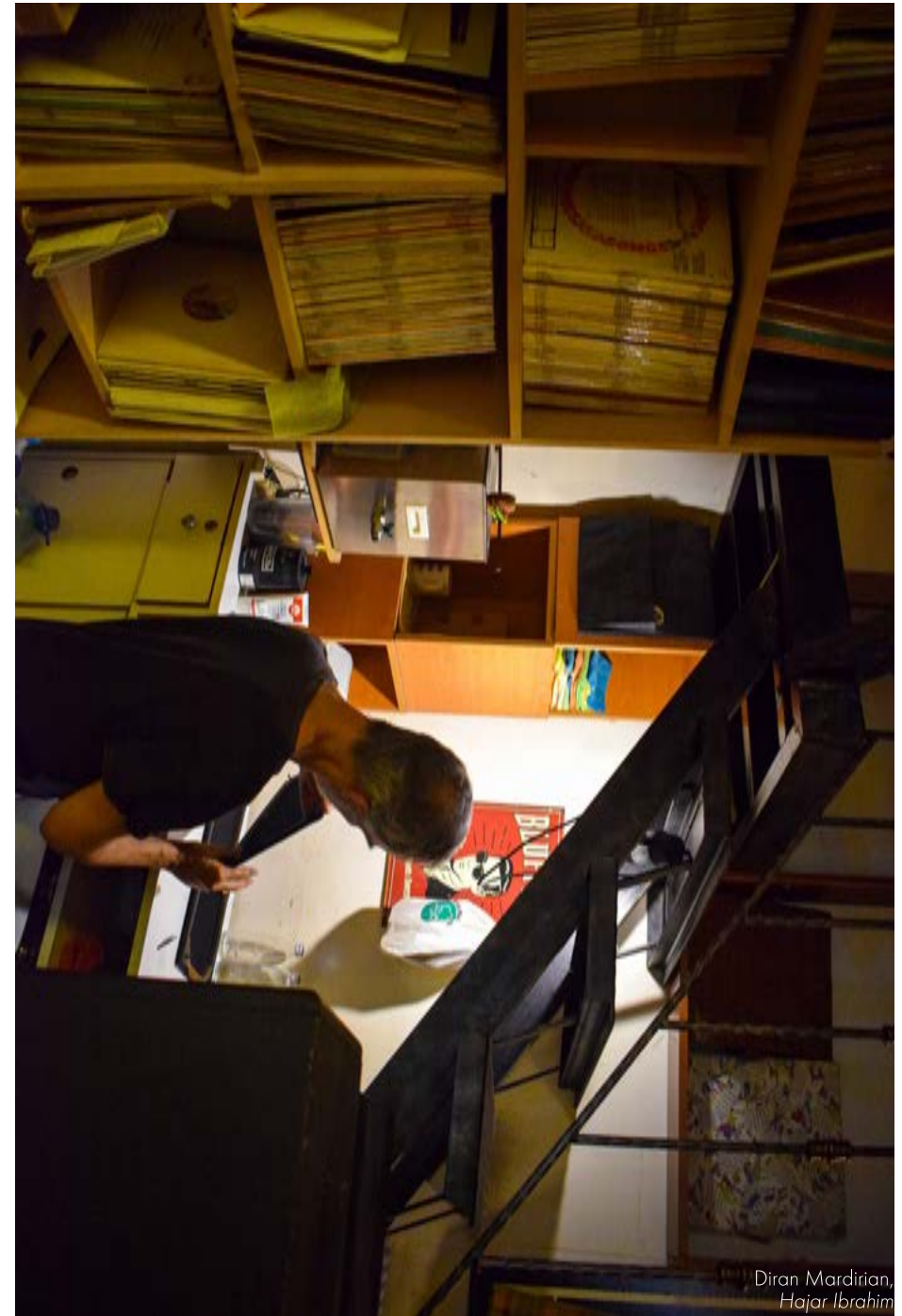
Diran's cat Chica,
Hajar Ibrahim



Home to the largest collection of Middle Eastern records in the world, it has been prolific to the music scene since its very beginning. Also, a couple years ago Chico Records hosted the first ever Boiler Room in the Middle East with Habibifunk and Ernesto Chahoud from Beirut Groove Collective. On top of that, Chico records ranks as one of the top 50 record shops worldwide. When I asked Diran how many records he could estimate he has, he said it would be impossible to ever count! The impressive ability of Chico Records to dually function as an archive and creator of music history cannot be understated.



Diran Mardirian,
Hajar Ibrahim



Diran Mardirian,
Hajar Ibrahim


Walking into Chico Records and chatting with the eclectic Diran; exchanging stories, family histories, and languages, reminded me of Beirut's true essence. To slow down and gently listen to a fine collection of records, is an honest reminder that the beauty of this city comes from the genuine passion for community and music amidst an uncontrollable chaos.



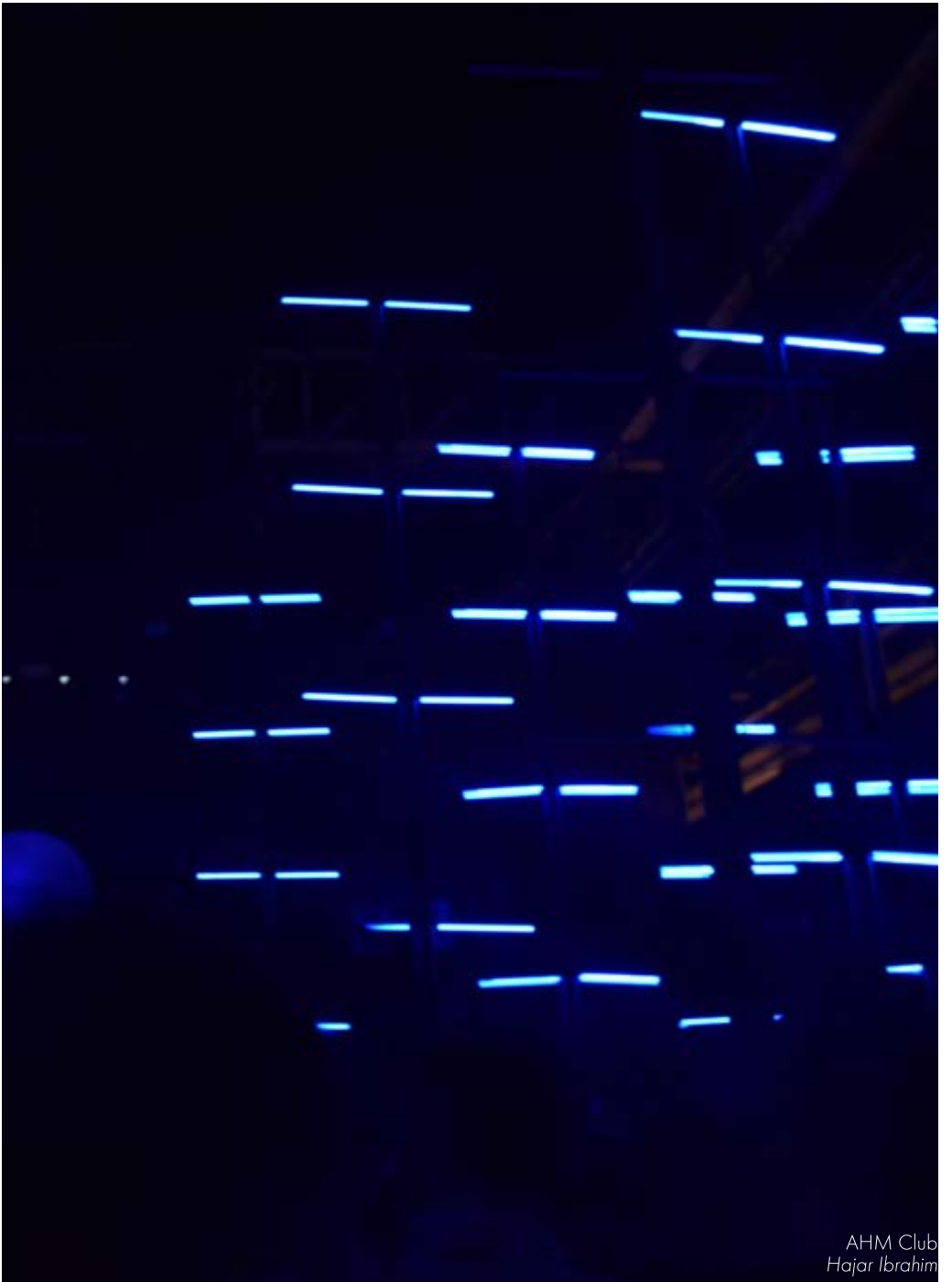
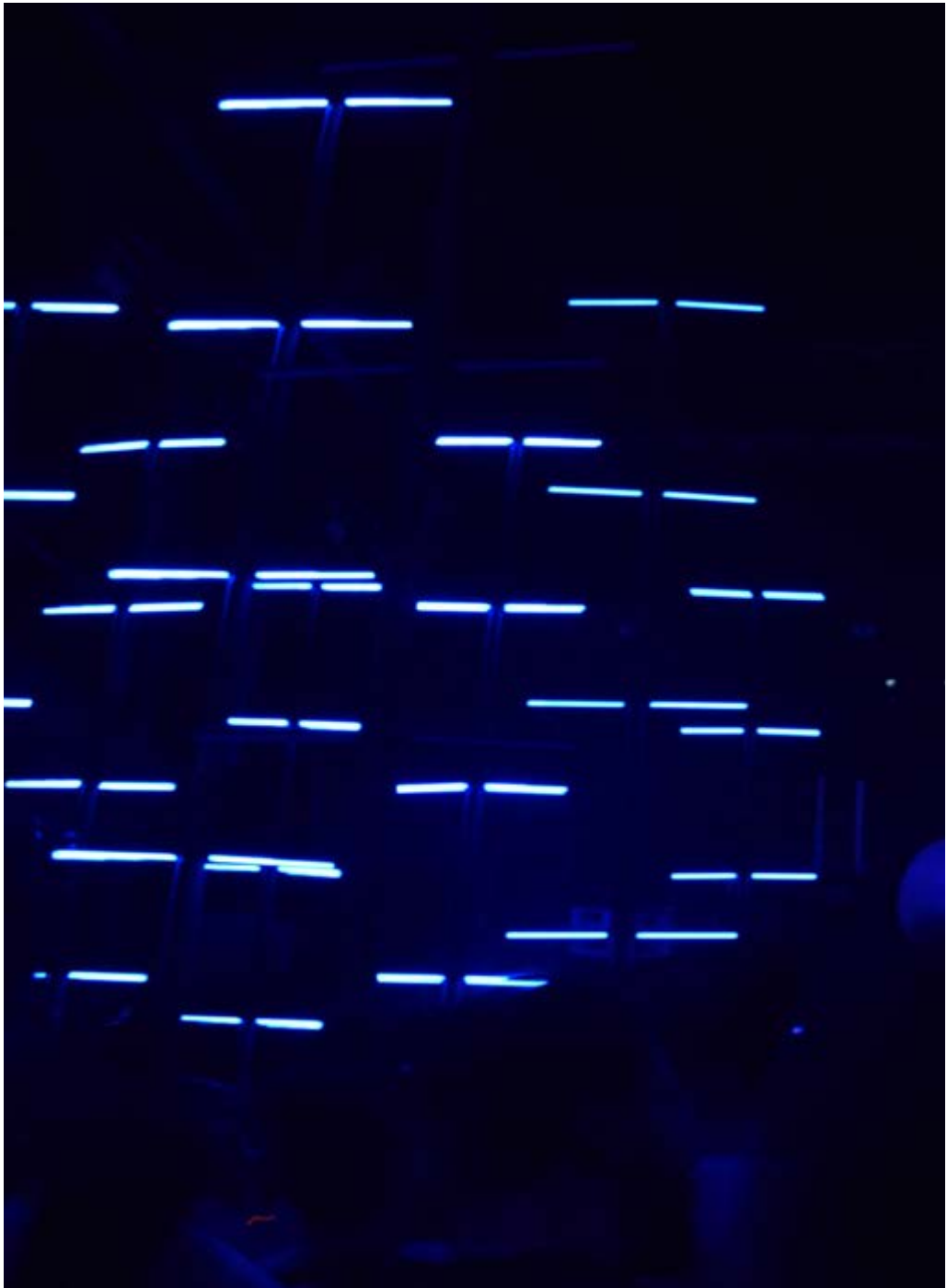
Diran Mardirian on film,
Hajar Ibrahim



Clubbing Spotlight

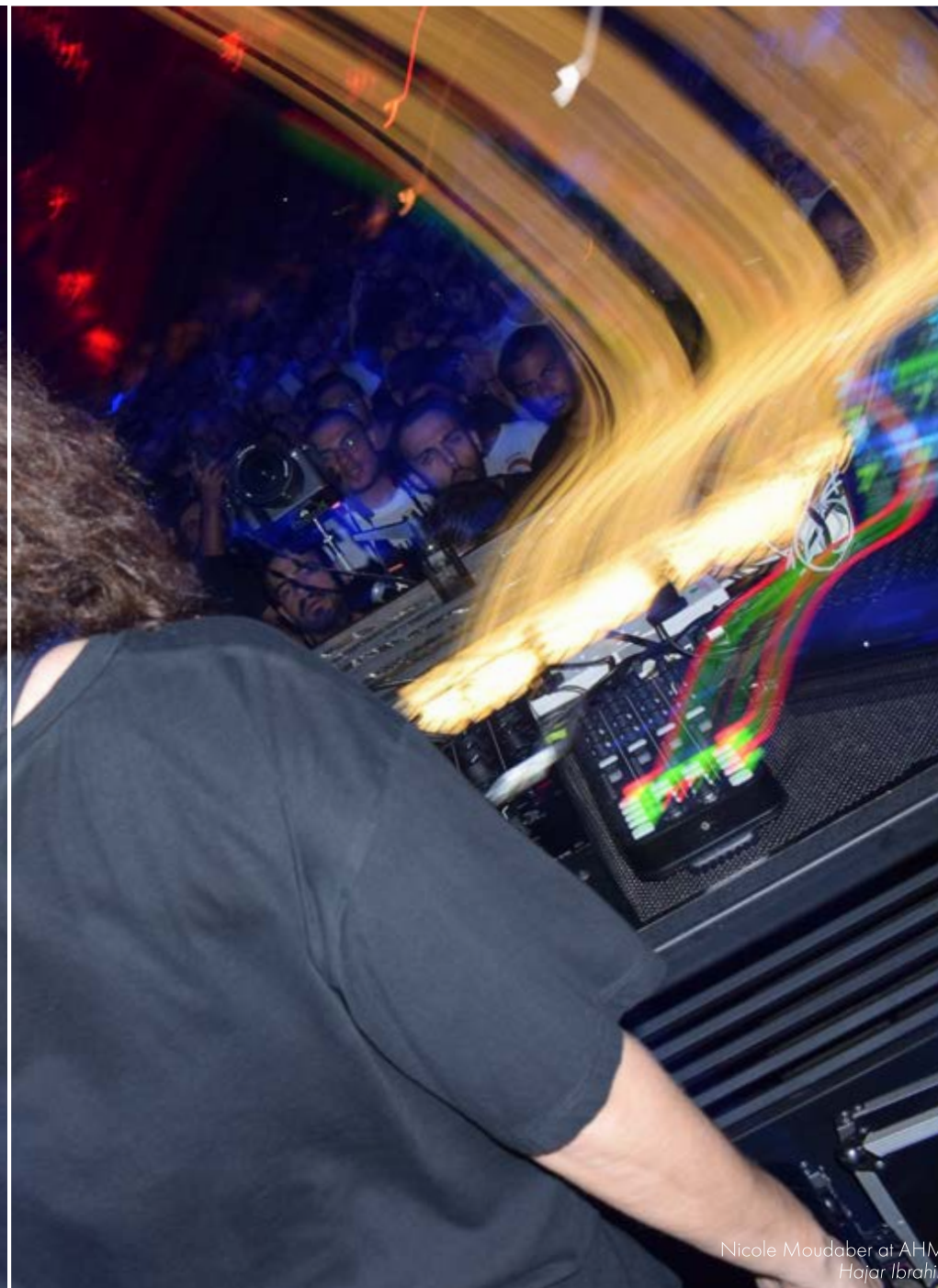


AHM Club
Hajar Ibrahim





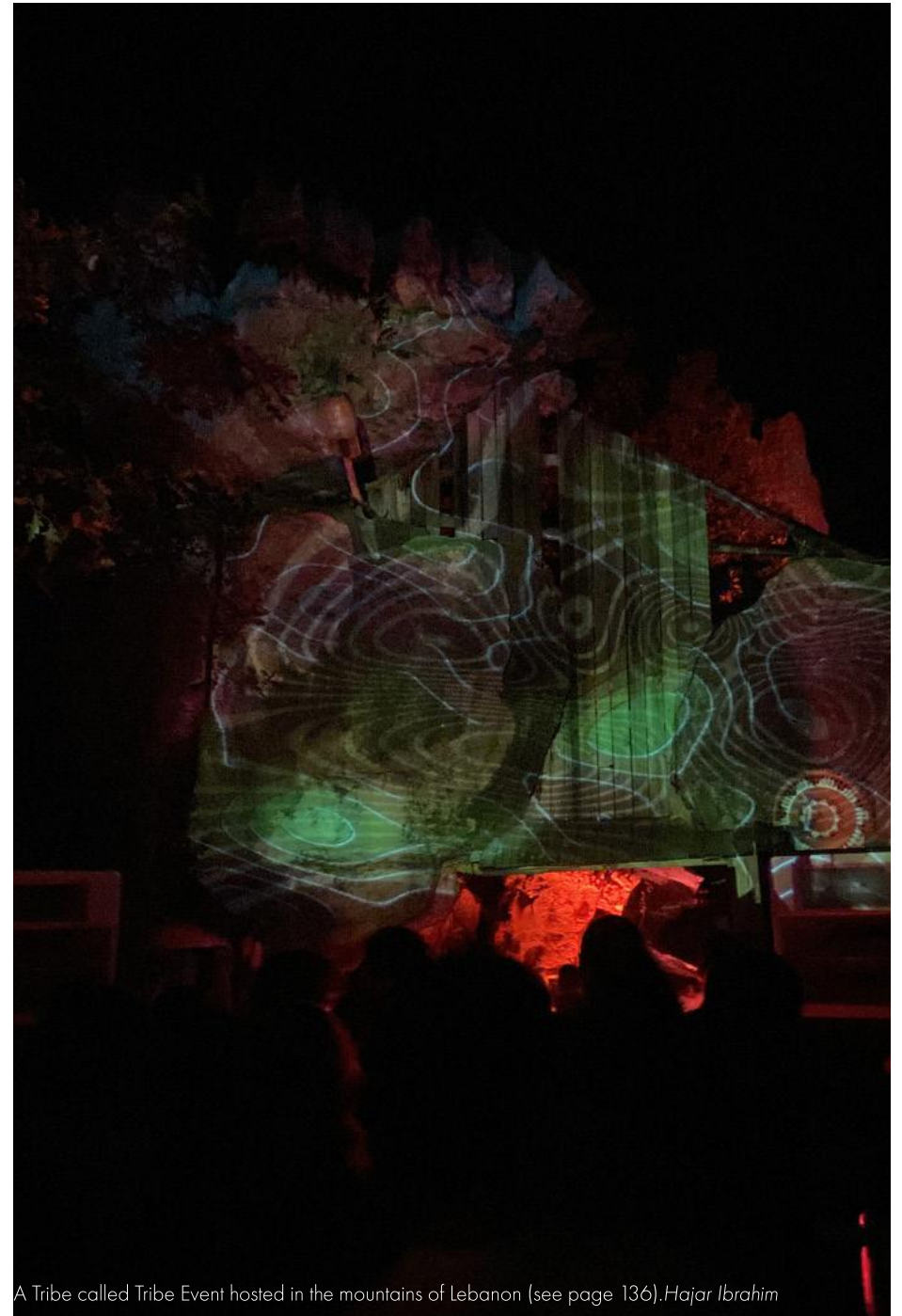
Nicole Moudaberr hosted the first techno raves in the country back in the 1990s, taking the Lebanese nightlife scene by the reigns. She pushed music and social boundaries to the limit, and was consequently briefly arrested in the 90s. Now alongside producing and DJing, Moudaber runs her own record label, MOOD Records, based in London.



Nicole Moudaberr at AHM,
Hajar Ibrahim



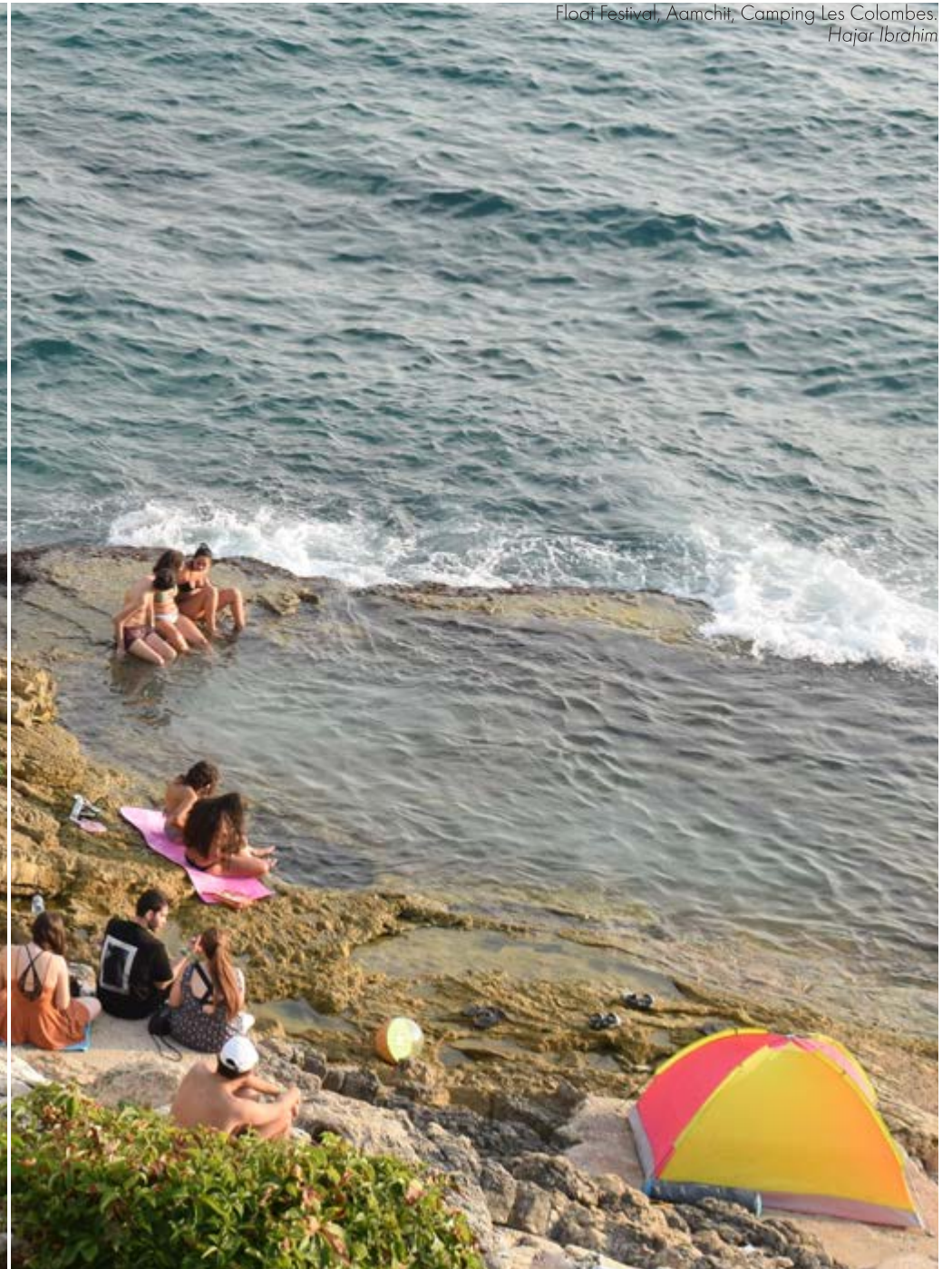
Skylodge event hosted in the mountains of Lebanon.
Photo sourced from friend, Zeena Harres



A Tribe called Tribe Event hosted in the mountains of Lebanon (see page 136). Hajar Ibrahim

FLOAT Festival:





Float Festival, Aamchit, Camping Les Colombes.
Hajar Ibrahim

**Beirut in the
Mix:
Ronin**



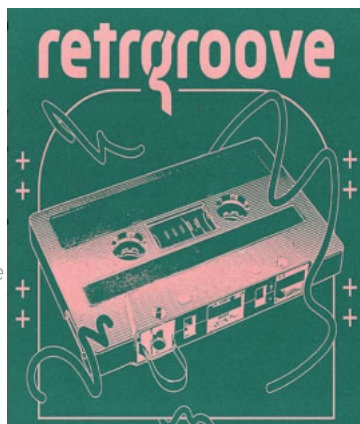
Interview with Resident DJ Ronin from Retrogroove Collective at FLOAT Festival



My passion began in 2006 when I started listening to a lot of other DJ's albums and getting more introduced to electronic music. My passion really came from bringing people together through music. I started hosting my own events and DJing. I think our first party we managed to gather 1500 people. This is how it organically grew. We had our own radio show, we hosted our own events, we opened and closed sets for the big DJs and so on.

And now you DJ internationally as well. How different do you feel it is performing in Lebanon versus abroad? Is there a different way you go about it?

I think when you have a good, solid creative identity for yourself, it is good to stick to it and translate it or slightly adapt it wherever you go. Sure, you are going to adapt based on the crowd, on the space, on how big or small the event is, but your library is always there. Despite that, I won't deny that it's different performing abroad. Here is home. At the end of the day it's about giving people a good time so when you see people smiling, dancing, letting go, and feeling the energy you know you have done your job.



The give and take of energy on the dance floor is the most important, this is what is giving you the whole creative process and the energy towards it. It's very important for me to see this happening here in Lebanon; to see people seizing each day of their life for their happiness and collective happiness. We deserve to feel this.

What is Retrogroove and how was it founded?

Retrogroove is a brand that was founded by Ralph Nasr and his team. I joined in a couple of years after as a curator and resident. **Now the parties are actually moving from Beirut to France, to Egypt, to Dubai, and Abu Dhabi.** It started in Beirut, and then because of the situation here, it pushed us to go around and see who would host us. **With such a large Lebanese diaspora, playing abroad helped us to grow even back home.** Our community keeps growing.

We have created an agency that hosts Retrogroove as a brand, FLOAT as a brand, 'Picnic', and 'Sundays'. Ralph, James and I fully joined forces and are putting all these brands together. Then we present the artists and residents of each brand: James presents Unseen, Ralph presents Retrogroove, and I present Beirut in the Mix. The point is we are working as one team, doing the production, communication, art direction, etc.

It is a small scene, relative to other places. FLOAT started as 50 people gathering between DJs, artists, friends and friends of friends. Now we host 20+ DJs and all the people you see here right now have all become friends. This is how the party grew.

So, can you tell me a bit more about Beirut in the Mix?

*Beirut in the Mix started in 2006. **So it was right after the Israeli war in Lebanon and the city was a storm - people were so down. So it was quite similar to how things are going now.** People were down and they needed an upper, something to refresh their mind, they needed to grow out of that tragedy. This is how we threw the first party. It was back when Facebook first started, we posted an event and very quickly we had 1000 people saying they will attend. It was our first year of University, we went out in front of the main gate to print some flyers and bring them into the cafeteria. In only a few hours the party was sold out. There really was, and there remains a high demand. The party crews and the good parties were scarce, but everyone wanted to party. They wanted something that resembled their personal journey of transformation in a post-war civil society. Afterwards, we got our first radio show, our first residency, bigger gigs as a collective. It has been a wonderful 15 years now.*

How is all of this funded?

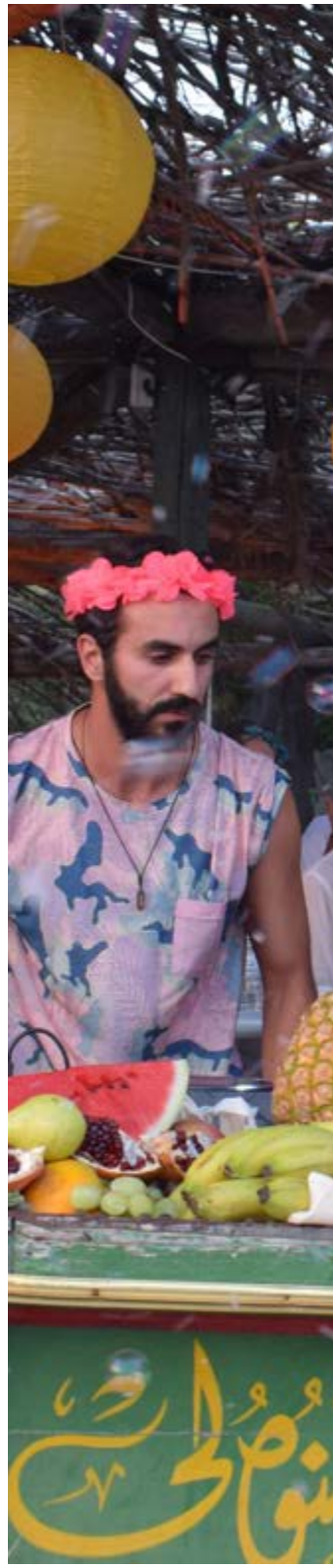
Everything has been self funded for now. We fund ourselves from the events and from the bookings we get. Sponsors help a lot, but unfortunately you cannot get as many sponsors as you used to. FLOAT used to get 30-40% of its funding by sponsors. This is not the case anymore. We are making less money now but maybe we're creating something that will last. Also, we have a lot of events now abroad, which helps us fund events back home.

Over the past three years, with the countless crises' Lebanon is facing artists are undoubtedly struggling to survive off of their work. How has this changed your attitude towards your work?

The straightforward answer is we got hit by the pandemic and got hit by the economic crisis and all of it. As much as possible, I try to see it from a positive perspective. Music is now a haven for people to go and forget about what happened, to escape reality briefly, but to escape it in the most necessary human way - because we have the right to feel alive.

With the pandemic, I had time to dig into new music that I had not considered listening to before. For example, I got into ambient music and breaks, a style that I had never dabbled with before. This forced break pushed me to explore new grounds in music and reassess everything. We were hit very hard, but it will only make our comeback stronger.

**Beirut in the
Mix:
Rea**



Interview with DJ Rea at FLOAT Festival

I have been DJing for over twenty years now. I started when I was 16 and I used to play in bars just to have fun with my friends. A friend of ours used to own a bar, Bardo, in Gemmayze, and I would play on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

Is Bardo still open?

No, it closed unfortunately. But when we were kids it was the only place that played house and trance. We hung out there a lot and eventually decided to get the machine and take over the place every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. This is how it all started. I never thought I would do this in my life.

I am a sound engineer. I studied sound engineering and design in Beirut and then specialized in London. So I was heading towards the direction of concerts, live studio recordings and so on. I love music but I never thought I would do something like this for the rest of my life.

Where was the first time you played?

We played at Sporting Beach in Beirut [one of the most popular beach clubs in Lebanon], I was opening for Archie Hamilton.

As of now there are many events up and coming. A series of parties, with really cool underground DJs, not very hyped, but amazing sounds. It's pushing people to open their ears a little bit and listen to something new. **This is growing parallel to club culture.** At big clubs you listen to big DJs with mainstream sounds that we've been listening to for the past 20 years. Off course its also fun and it's crowd pleasing - but the mainstream scene does not have an evolving sound if compared to the underground scene.

Current circumstances in Lebanon are only making it harder for artists to sustain themselves. How has this summer (2022) been for you so far?

I've never worked as much as this summer to be honest. I quit my job at the radio station [Virgin Radio] where I was working for five years. I was the radio programmer and producer there, and I quit because it wasn't fulfilling anymore. At the time I was there we used to have projects and produce stuff for events and concerts. Now there is no budget anymore so my job there was a bit robotic and automatized. I could not pour my creativity into that. I think I did my time there, so now all my focus is on this. It fulfills my satisfactions by giving me more time to dig deep into music and attend these great parties.

بيروت: انا من بلد الحلم عيب. فاشتم وارقص

This is your second time you play with Ralph Nasr right?

It is, we have been trying to play together for the last three or four years but every summer has been hectic for both of us so it has not happened again until today.

Have you had more opportunities and time to play gigs abroad?

Recently I have played in Greece. But these past two years because of Covid and the crisis I had to take some other gigs other than clubs or parties. Mainly weddings, but really cool weddings. So I took a couple of these opportunity and it was really fun, although at first I was scared of doing that. Weddings the past two or three years have been much less about food and the space and more about music and entertainment.

Given that many venues have closed, and everyone who can leave Lebanon has left and emigrated, in what ways have you been personally affected?

Two years ago the first time that Ballroom Blitz reopened (it was the first club to reopen in Beirut) we went and it was weird. I'm 36, and the crowd was all 18-ish. I didn't know anyone. All my friends left, all the crowd that I had known left, they changed their lives, they left the country, and that shock was scary. Now we have reconnected with a new crowd and they are young, dynamic and crazy. I love them! It just took us a gig or two to connect.

Do you feel like the Lebanese Music Scene is unique in comparison to other places you have played?

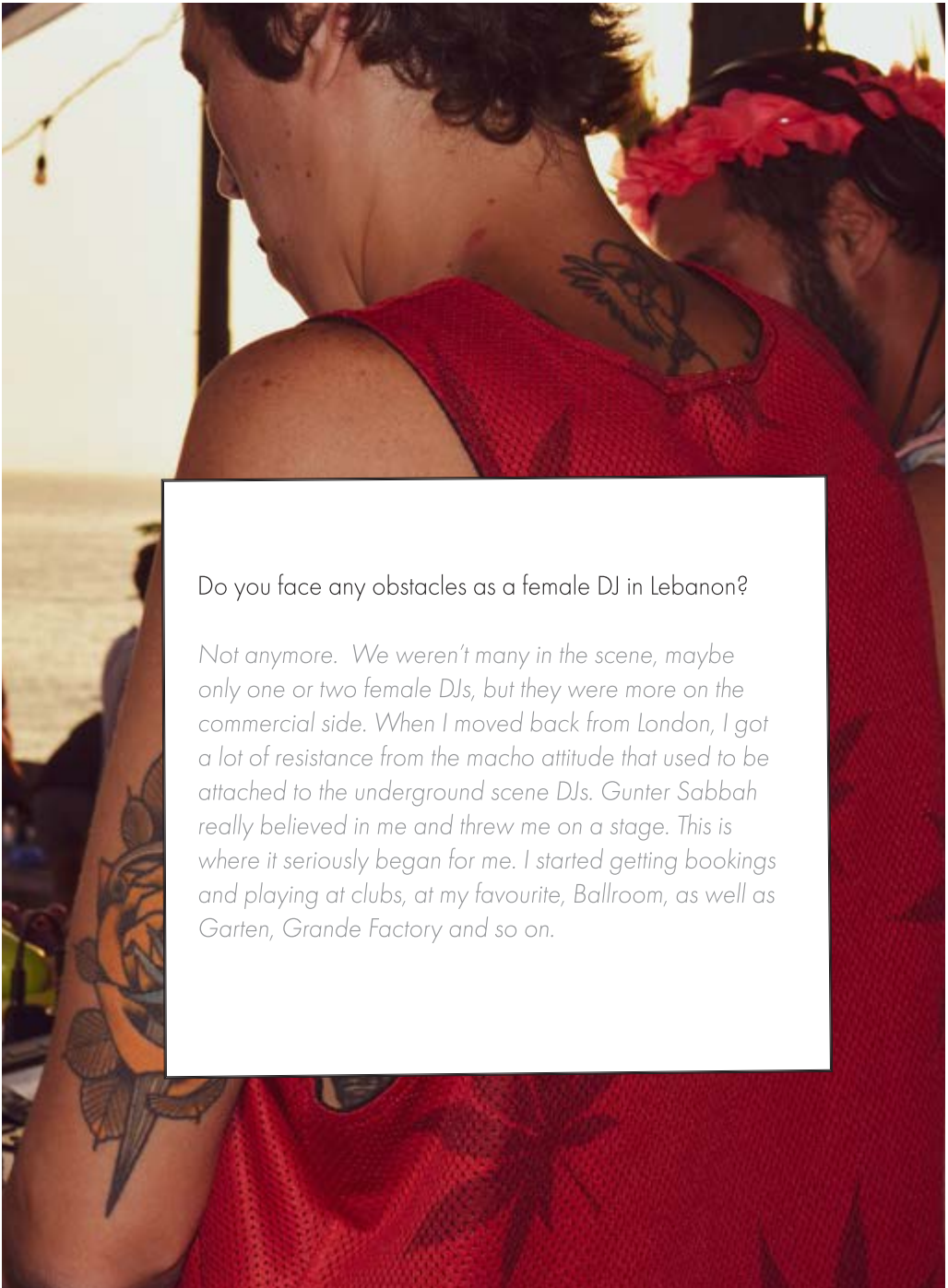
I have met a lot of crazy people everywhere, but there is something unique here. The craziness here, there is something genuine about the fun and dancing here. The party's here ever so often give me goosebumps. Its a big community and its home after all. Plus, it's the local DJs that make you feel like home, it's the nice venues like the one we are at today - it is home, and it makes me proud. Also, everyone just wants to dance and let loose all the way until the morning. Everyone was caged indoors, and now all the craziness is being released. And everyone else in the world was also in this cage during the pandemic, but we had our own circumstances.

This financial crisis for the past two or three is like an early sample of what will happen and ripple throughout the to the entirety of the world. I truly feel that at some point, when this ugliness multiplies and ripples, we will become the safe haven. In the sense that I feel we are almost there. We have to continuously adapt to the deteriorating circumstances, but now we are unfortunately used to this and making the most out of it in every avenue we can.

Many people have gone abroad, they've moved their stuff, and they set up everything from scratch. I'm 36, at this stage I cannot see myself starting over elsewhere. Its really exhausting just thinking about it you know. We have already been through and stood past so much.



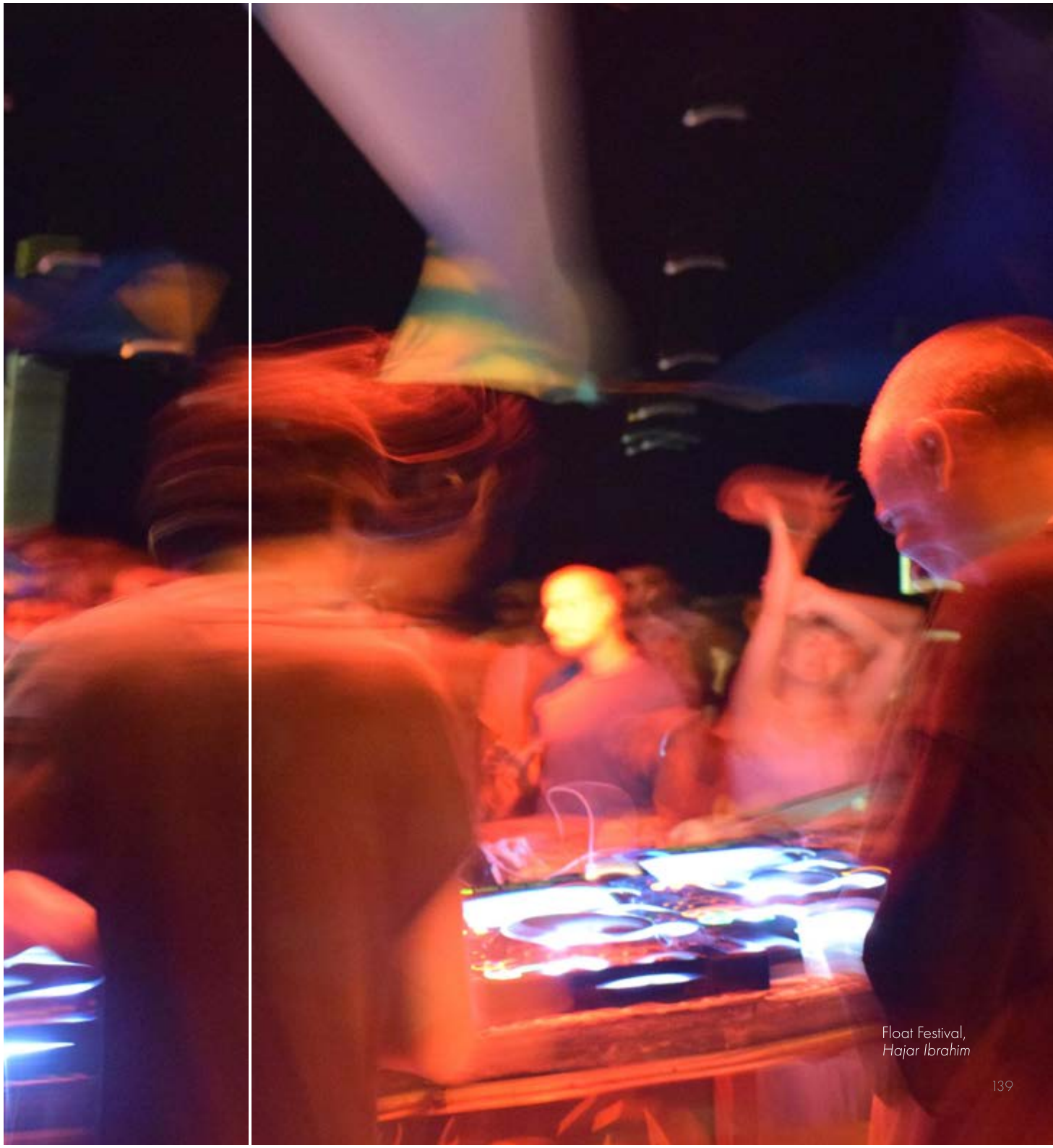
Float Festival,
Hajar Ibrahim



Do you face any obstacles as a female DJ in Lebanon?

Not anymore. We weren't many in the scene, maybe only one or two female DJs, but they were more on the commercial side. When I moved back from London, I got a lot of resistance from the macho attitude that used to be attached to the underground scene DJs. Gunter Sabbah really believed in me and threw me on a stage. This is where it seriously began for me. I started getting bookings and playing at clubs, at my favourite, Ballroom, as well as Garten, Grande Factory and so on.

A Tribe Called Tribe: 3LIAS



Float Festival,
Hajar Ibrahim

Interview with Elias Merheb at FLOATs 10 year anniversary

When I DJ, I improvise completely. I never prepare my sets beforehand. There's no specific structure, it's more free and easy-going this way. I decide which tracks to play based on the mood, space and timing.

I have played in many places abroad. From Canada to Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and even Eastern Asia. Currently, I feel like there's nowhere else more important to me than here and this region to focus on. There's no scene in the world that looks like the other. There are different landscapes, cultures, people and contexts for every nightlife scene. I believe we have a special scene and you cannot find it anywhere else. **What is praiseworthy about the scene here is that it is very genuine.** You can see its authenticity in observing people's interactions, the way they dance, and the energy they naturally have.

I have always believed in collaboration because that is what builds the scene.

It shows the world there's a scene in Lebanon and it's not just one guy. There's many great producers here in Lebanon. **I had the chance to be one of the first producers here**, along with two other artists. I use this to give exposure to people and help them out. I collaborate with young and upcoming artists to share what I know. Life is about sharing all we know. This is how we came to build the collective A Tribe Called Tribe. It is for everyone.

Elias' set in Orient Express Bar,
Badaro, Beirut.

The electricity cut during the
middle of the set, before
resuming again half an hour
later.

Hajar Ibrahim



How have the past few years been for you as a DJ?

The DJs stopped working because of COVID, and with the explosion everything got destroyed. At the same time, promoters like FLOAT, A Tribe Called Tribe and Fointaine du Nuit were able to launch pop-up events to get the crowd back and it went right back to the roots of the electronic scene. There's always been the good and the bad in every circumstance, every thing, and every person.

I saw that you have done a live performance in an abandoned power plant?

A collective called Railway Station, with Eli Atala, Rollbac and others, approached us about playing in a power plant. It was very spontaneous and just sprung out of the blue. My friend, Ziad, who is my mentor in music continually shifts my entire perspective on music. Ziad and I became friends when I went to his studio intending to buy an analog machine off him. I didn't end up buying any machine, but I also never left the studio since then. We have this natural vibe when we are together, so, we decided to do a live act together - Atomic Circus - no computer involved, fully analog and fully improvised. **It is completely instinctive and cannot be replicated.**

The Story of the World Renowned Club: B018



Photo from VICE News article: How an Underground Bunker in Lebanon Became One of the World's Best Clubs



In the midst of the Lebanese Civil war in the 80s, Naji Gebran believed in the importance of music and the age-old Middle Eastern tradition of dancing the night away as a means to relieve stress and remember that there remains a deserved right to enjoy life. Gebran began organizing parties at his place outside of Beirut. Bethan Ryder writes in his book "Bar & Club" that the Gebran's parties quickly gained popularity and called B018, because of its location 18 kilometres north of Beirut. In just a couple years, the parties became too overcrowded, **"we used to do this for peace" Gebran told CNN**, "they used to come because of the music, to forget about the war". By 1993, Gebran relocated to a warehouse in the industrial area of Sin El Fil in Beirut. B018 hosted popular nights with the primary focus of maintaining the traditional nights of Arabic music, soul, funk and blues mixed with contemporary Acid Jazz and experimental sounds.

Five years later, Bernard Khoury began his architectural plan for a renewed B018. Working with Gebran, they built B018 in Karantina - a district in East Beirut that witnessed some of the most horrific atrocities during the war. The architectural vision for the club was to accommodate and express remembrances of the war, rather than reimagine a utopia wherein the 'new' and surreal annexed the historical and destroyed. B018 is a bunker, inspired by Beirut's long-standing "war architecture." Sunken underground, B018's macabre design, akin to a grave, with a circular iron plate ceiling which opens outwards throughout the night, transforming it into an open-air discotheque beneath the starry sky. Since B018's opening it has been one of Beirut's most popular discotheques, as well as "one of the best clubs worldwide" as ranked by the Wallpaper Magazine. B018 rejuvenated a vibrant nightlife, bringing Beirut back to life after dark, and accommodating Beirut's lust for life and 'seize the moment' attitude. Not only does this reflect a long-standing tradition in the mantras and lifestyle of the citizens of the Mediterranean port-polis, but also a culture with capital in nightlife, a "national asset" as some have coined. **Clubbing in Beirut is not, and was not, only for the younger generation. Its very usual to see a wide age-range of people and even families spending their nights together dancing away. Parents eager to recapture their lost youths join along their children.**

In 2006 with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the scene moved to the mountains. As seen with some of the photos in this section, Beirut's are known for making use of space in their attractive natural surroundings. **Whether that means moving the party up to a cave in the mountains, above the clouds, or to the shores of the Mediterranean, there is no pretence of permanence and stability; adaptation and mobility are as much a part of the scene as any other aspect of life in Lebanon.**

B018 has been mentioned in both academic discourse and in a fiction novel. In two lectures given by Bernard Khoury on "New Wars in Progress" and "Combat Architecture" at MIT University, Khoury discusses the coffin-style bunker architecture of the club, its renaissance in recent years, and the importance of its location historically in the Karantina district. In the novel, The Cyclist, Viken Berberian writes about B018, describing the smell, the deserted area surrounding it, and the industrial architecture of the club.

Sources: Dezeen "Bernard Khoury gives Beirut B018 nightclub darker upgrade", CNN's "Beirut: the Middle East's Party Capital", www.bernardkhoury.com, www.webarchive.org/b018, and Vice News "How an underground bunker in Lebanon became one of the Worlds Best Clubs"

Concluding Remarks

*“There is no entry into the heart except through the antechambers of the ears.
Musical tones, measured and pleasing, bring forth what is in the heart and
make evident its beauties and defects...*

*Whenever the soul of the music and singing reaches the heart, then there stirs in
the hearts that which preponderates it. ”*

- Ghazali in *Ihya 'ulum al-din*

In a world where cultural expression is sanitized for mass consumption, the Lebanese underground scene necessarily challenges the status quo with an uncompromising ethos. Dismantling and reconstructing established notions of sound and music, they redefine the contours of music in the Middle East.

As Albert Hourani writes in a “History of the Arab Peoples” (p198), sounds were understood as echoes of the music of the spheres. Sounds of music represented celestial movements, they represented all movements beneath the moon. Music accompanied professional female dancers, non-professional dancers - men and women - in line or circle formation, most importantly as a group dance. Poetry was sung to instruments; to the lute, reed-pipes, flutes, tabla, oud,

rababah and one-stringed fiddles. Sounds were organized according to fixed modes, but there is always room for improvisation, ornamenting and variation in between. Every strata of society, every tribe of peoples, the desert, the mountains, the countryside, the city, the seashores, has their music for their specific occasions; from war, to harvest, to marriage, to migration, dwelling in the dunes, and work.

There remains a huge gap between what is actually happening in our vibrant cities and what is being documented, archived and broadcasted. Beirut [and Cairo] was and is, the main centre of book publishing, music and theater in the Middle East. The disturbance of the spirits observed over the past several decades following European decolonization,

and the gradual withdrawal of political freedom, suppression of dissent and intellectual inquiry has created a vacuum for vocalizing artistic expression. This is why the underground scene has been particularly reflective of old taboos being broken and greatly representative of freedom of speech. The scene has also given today's protest movements, in the wake of the Arab Spring and the October Revolution of 2019, a massive psychological advantage: a language, that in the absence of an ideological programme, allows underground artists to express common grievances and struggles across the Middle East.

Music controls the randomness of Beirut's instability and unexpected moments. The audience remains receptive and interactive with the music, reducing the distance between the self and the world, emphasizing community reconciliation. It brings a regularity to life that is otherwise unavailable in Beirut (especially over the past three years). The audience and the artist are part of the same feedback loop.


I am the audience, archiving stories and memories of musicians in the scene to highlight to you the importance of acknowledging this cultural capital. As we begin to acknowledge reality less, we end up isolating our artists and pushing them to the peripheries - to the diaspora.

We find that in the peripheries, across the seas and oceans, their Art is acknowledged by foreign institutions and foreign people who have yet to connect to the meaning of our Music, our Dance and our Celebration of Life.

Music is emotional and messy - unlike science, there is no rational and constructive method. Through music we return to our natural state. Where the essence of the human has come to be completely separated from his natural state, music allows us to go beyond the body and the material, lifting the musician and the listener away from the rigid structures of our modern social fabric. Music allows people to emancipate themselves.

In pursuit of the truth, the importance of free will and free life must be prioritized. If we are indeed enchanted by the concept of a free life, Nietzsche says “we have art in order to not die of the truth.” Therefore, I hope to transmit my gratitude for the underground music scene onto you. Our artists continue to inform culture in a day and age of modernity where culture has come to be seen as superfluous.

**We do not speak of resilience here,
we speak for the right to live a free
life where you are not applauded for
surviving death.**



■■■ HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
BEIRUT
Middle East

2022-2023