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Sonic Acts of Care: Friendship-based Networks and Grassroots Activism in Beirut

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SONIC ACTS OF CARE: FRIENDSHIP-BASED NETWORKS AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM IN BEIRUT

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Abstract | The article examines a Beirut-based network of self-funded, independent musicians that translate memories and their emotions into artistic and activist practices. Drawing on musical albums created since the 2020 Beirut port explosion, the article explores the social and emotional impact of artist-run spaces for music production. Focusing on a friendship-based network around the collectively-run recording studio Tunefork Studios, it examines how care, trust, and solidarity with Lebanon's citizens and music producers are translated into both their creative practices and their production and distribution strategies. I argue that Beirut-based musicians increasingly thematise the emotional toll and personal investment in political, infrastructural and humanitarian crises in their creative practices since 2019. This crucial moment in time is marked by events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2019 Uprising, Lebanon's economic crisis, the 2020 Beirut Port explosion and Israeli warfare targeting Lebanon and neighbouring Palestine. Analysing the lyrical content and sonic composition of the song *Home is So Sad* (2021) by the dream pop band Postcards, this contribution seeks to reveal the way in which collaborative music making and songwriting can be used as a way of healing, processing, and preserving its sentiments to create sustainable cultural infrastructures. Drawing on digital in-person fieldwork conducted in Beirut, alongside scholarly work from the field of social anthropology, ethnomusicology, and liner notes on the music platform Bandcamp, the article employs a methodological approach that draws on anthropological inquiry and artist-led storytelling that link sound interventions and grassroots activism.

Keywords | sound, independent music, grassroots activism, emotions, Lebanon

Résumé | Cet article examine un réseau de musiciens indépendants et autofinancés basé à Beyrouth qui traduit leurs souvenirs et émotions en pratiques artistiques et militantes. En s'appuyant sur des albums musicaux créés après l'explosion du port de Beyrouth en 2020, cette contribution explore l'impact social et émotionnel des espaces de production musicale gérés par des artistes. Elle se concentre sur un réseau d'amitié autour du studio d'enregistrement Tunefork Studios, géré collectivement, et souligne comment l'attention, la confiance et la solidarité entre les citoyens libanais et les producteurs de musique se traduisent à la fois dans les pratiques créatives et les stratégies de production et de distribution. Cet article soutient que les musiciens basés à Beyrouth thématisent de plus en plus la charge émotionnelle et l'investissement personnel dans les crises politiques, infrastructurelles et humanitaires dans leurs pratiques créatives depuis 2019. Ce moment crucial est marqué par des événements tels que la pandémie de Covid-19, le soulèvement de 2019, la crise économique du Liban, l'explosion du port de Beyrouth en 2020 et la guerre israélienne ciblant le Liban et la Palestine voisine. En analysant le contenu lyrique et la composition sonore de la chanson *Home is So Sad* (2021) du groupe de dream pop Postcards, cette contribution cherche à révéler la manière dont la création musicale collaborative et l'écriture de chansons peuvent être utilisées comme moyen de guérison, de traitement et de préservation de ses sentiments pour créer des infrastructures culturelles durables. Cet article utilise une approche méthodologique qui s'appuie sur une enquête anthropologique et des récits d'artistes qui établissent un lien entre les interventions sonores et l'activisme de la base. Il s'appuie sur un travail de terrain numérique réalisé en personne à Beyrouth et sur la plateforme musicale Bandcamp où j'ai examiné des notes de pochettes, ainsi que sur des travaux universitaires dans les domaines de l'anthropologie sociale.

Mots clés | son, musique indépendante, activisme populaire, émotions, Liban

Introduction

This article examines contemporary music from Beirut and the social and political landscape of practicing musicians after the port explosion on 4 August 2020. Through an analysis of the work of producer and musician Fadi Tabbal and singer Julia Sabra, it investigates the role of friendship, care and expressions of solidarity in collaborative music making. The focus lies on forms of advocacy that are sonically and socially produced in Beirut-based recording studio Tunefork Studios through music production and collective actions. It seeks to highlight the links between creative labour, musicians' productive capacities and affective approaches to songwriting as ways of making sense of emotional ambivalence and distress. These sonic acts of community- and self-care can be traced in the production and circulation of music which help navigate everyday life in the Lebanese capital amidst a polycrisis.¹ Presenting a case study of a friendship-based network of musicians, I argue that (a) creative practice and activism are interlinked practices of care; (b) ambivalent feelings towards everyday life in Lebanon are reproduced in the recording studio in lyrical content and sonic elements; (c) empathy-based creative strategies inform the circulation of sound and its economic impact to generate funding; and (d) musicians challenge Eurocentric narratives of Lebanese independent music by highlighting its postcolonial baggage, funding restrictions and changing class structures amidst the economic crisis.

The organisation of grassroots initiatives by the managerial body of Tunefork Studios serves as a compelling example that sheds light on the strategies and values of the network of creatives which were chosen for this case study on urban Beirut. In doing so, the article seeks to highlight the role of music making as a creative practice that cannot be separated from the context in which sound is produced. Drawing on scholarly work that explores the role of creative practice and emotions in social movements², I argue that the social spaces and networks in which music is produced act as social anchoring points for musicians and a place to generate strategies on how to navigate a polycrisis on a social, economic and emotional level. Thus, this contribution aims to shed light onto the affective potential of using songwriting and music production as a way to come to terms with, and mobilise, sensorial aspects of everyday life in the region.

1- TOOZE Adam, *Shutdown: How Covid shook the world's economy*, London, Penguin Books, 2021.

2- DELLA PORTA Donatella, TUFARO Rossana, « Mobilizing the Past in Revolutionary Times: Memory, Counter-Memory, and Nostalgia During the Lebanese Uprising », *Sociological Forum*, vol. 37, 2022, p. 1387-1413. HOFMAN Ana, « The Romance with Affect: Sonic Politics in a Time of Political Exhaustion », *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 61, no 2-3, 2020, p. 303-318. SPRENGEL Darcy, « "'More Powerful than Politics': Affective Magic in the DIY Musical Activism after Egypt's 2011 Revolution' », *Popular Music*, vol. 38, no 1, 2019, p. 54-72. MORNINGSTAR Natalie, « Critique refigured: art, activism, and politics in post-recession Dublin », *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 30, 2024, p. 608-626.

Tunefork Studios

Tunefork Studios is a recording studio in Bourj Hammoud, a small town and municipality with a majority Armenian population east of Beirut. The studio was founded in 2006 and operates as a collective involving sound artists, musicians, composers, and sound engineers, including Julia Sabra, lead singer of the Lebanese dream pop band Postcards. Since 2021, Sabra has also been a member of the duo Snakeskin with producer, sound engineer, and musician Fadi Tabbal. The latter created Tunefork Studios after returning from Montreal as a workspace that aims to serve the regional music scene, offering low-cost and community-focused services. The recording studio is considered a vital bridge between artists across popular and experimental music as, was explained to me during my fieldwork in Beirut in April 2023. Notably, encouraging local musicians to work together, studio owner Fadi Tabbal initiated cross-genre explorations, an effort that has intensified since the 2020 Beirut port explosion. A pertinent example of the studio's focus on networking across social groups in Beirut is the 2022 performance of the pop band Postcards at Irtijal, the oldest festival for free improvised and experimental music in Lebanon. After visiting Irtijal in 2010 upon Tabbal's recommendation, the band began to explore free improvisation, shoegaze, and ambient music, eventually performing at the festival themselves and extending the sonic profile of the event towards popular music.

During fieldwork in Beirut in April 2023, Julia Sabra explained that friendship-based relationships between musicians around Tunefork Studios often formed during the recording process, reflecting the core values of the team to create an inclusive space for both established and emerging artists. The role of trust between sound engineer and recorded musicians, as well as the emotional exhaustion as a result of high levels of social commitment, was frequently highlighted during conversations during fieldwork:

“With Fadi it’s more human and emotional as opposed to business. He gets us interested in each other and points out people you might not have heard of in the scene or abroad, it doesn’t matter. He’s amazing, but he’s exhausted, emotionally exhausted that I can tell you, he’s the best, he’s my best friend, he’s the best person ever, honestly. If anyone talks shit about Fadi it means they are a bad person, that’s a rule, you can write that down! If you speak to anyone and they badmouth Fadi, it means they are a shit person, and I had proof to that throughout my life. There is like 3 people, but yeah. He’s literally a sweetheart”.³

During my fieldwork in Lebanon, which aimed to explore the social dynamics within a network of experimenting musicians in Beirut, the words ‘care’, and ‘friendship’ resurfaced frequently in conversations, specifically in the context of artists speaking about the record producer. Throughout the 20 interviews I conducted, musicians consistently identified Fadi Tabbal as a source of emotional

3- Julia Sabra, Interview, 10 April 2023, Beirut.

support; singer and architect Mayssa Jallad, for instance, referred to him as “the local superhero.” Interestingly, musicians describe Tabbal’s emotional investment and care for the scene as maternal, rather than paternal, stressing the nurturing nature and sense of safety that stands in contrast to patriarchal authority in the creative industries that reinforce male gatekeeping and hinder access to the regional labour market.⁴ As Julia Sabra explains:

“Fadi is like ‘the mother’ of the scene, he wants everyone to listen to good music and to support each other and he encourages other people to discover other bands, he’s always trying to build these bridges. And anytime a band needs a bassist he puts people in touch and mixes two worlds together.”⁵

Community Support

When I spoke to Fadi Tabbal in April 2023, he explained that there is no pre-assessment of the credibility of each musician wanting to record at the studio with him. In the words of the studio engineer, “we trust, then we see; this is kind of the motto of Tunefork.”⁶ The trust and openness, he explains, ensured that musicians can enter places for music production more easily. This approach aims to prevent gatekeeping of resources amidst growing limitations for cultural funding since 2020.⁷ Describing himself as an introvert, Tabbal outlines that trust is the only way to “take people into the scene that are normally not able to push themselves”. Importantly, the values and mission of the recording studio challenge selection processes based on relational merit in which musicians become visible or audible merely because they know someone already established in the scene. He explains: “There are some people that are clearly shy, and unsocial and introvert which is me. They’re no preconceived ideas of everybody. We always find the time to listen to the records people send us and find time for new faces and new trials.”⁸

Drawing on their research on recording studios, the ethnomusicologist Eliot Bates demonstrates that “studios can be redesigned in ways that fundamentally alter the potential kinds of social and musical interaction that can transpire within”.⁹ Moreover, Allan Watson and his co-authors describe studio environments as “local anchoring points in the cultural metropolises of the global urban network.”¹⁰ Drawing on this line of thinking, the collective running Tunefork Studios established not only close relationships with venues and organisations

4- GIZ, Cultural and Creative Industries Gender Study Executive Summary [online], 2023, Available at: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/cc8cef9784690358cfe4eda77bb85f84-0460012023/original/GIZ-Cultural-and-Creative-Industries-Gender-Study-Executive-Summary.pdf> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

5- *Ibid.*

6- Fadi Tabbal, Interview, 6 April 2023, Beirut.

7- UNESCO, Navigating Lebanon’s Financial Collapse [online], 2020, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374307> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

8- Fadi Tabbal, Interview, 6 April 2023, Beirut.

9- BATES Eliot, « What Studios Do », *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, vol. 7, no 1, 2012.

10- WATSON Allan, HOYLER Michael, MAGER Christoph, « Spaces and Networks of Musical Creativity in the City », *Geography Compass*, vol. 3, no 2, 2009, p. 867.

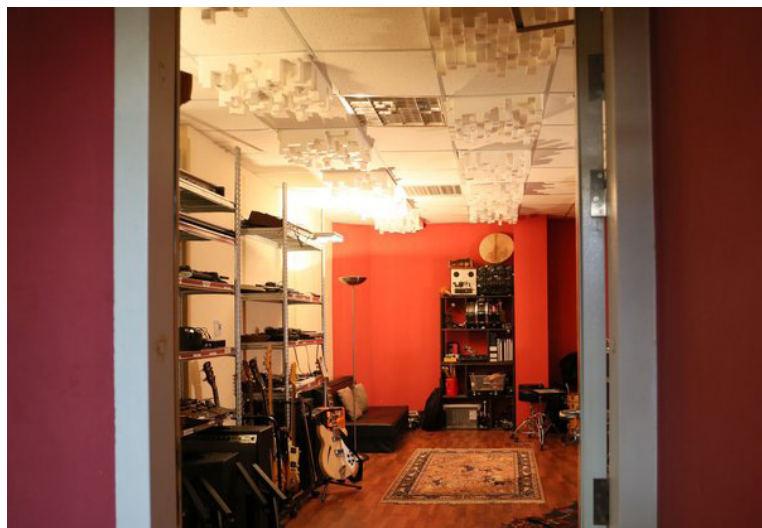


Fig. 1: Inside Tunefork Studios, image used with permission of owner.

across Beirut, but venues outside of Lebanon due to shared networks of musicians leaving Lebanon for Europe and North America.

Since its inception, Tunefork Studios has offered productions free of charge and on a “pay as much as you want” basis due to the economic crisis and, most recently, the complications and financial hardship faced by many musicians since the 2020 Beirut port explosion. This is due to the reliance on international funding and recent cuts in foreign aid that further impede on local reconstruction efforts.¹¹ In the way the recording studio is run and funds itself, it becomes clear that offering free services amidst the economic crisis is a way to support the community of experimental and independent musicians in the city. Tabbal explains:

“Since day one, productions are for free at the studio. Why? Because we believe that knowledge is free, so the concept is to pass and take information and knowledge on. And it’s like a collaboration, so we never took 1 dime for any production. We have more than 300 productions since 2016 and we used to take studio fees for hourly fees until 2019 when we decided for local artists is zero to “pay as you want” because the situation is catastrophic, a lot of people left, and the artists that are here are still struggling. So, the place is open to them. How do we get by? We do a lot of shitty jobs. All of us in the collectives are full time musicians. And we are not into grants or anything, we had one grant in 15 years - the one after the explosion. We have corporate jobs in the Emirates, Saudi, and stuff, and we are using that money we do projects here.”¹²

11- CHEAITO Hossein, *Priced Out of Recovery: Lebanon Between War and Reconstruction* [online], 2025, Available at: <https://timep.org/2025/04/24/priced-out-of-recovery-lebanon-between-war-and-reconstruction/> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

12- Fadi Tabbal, Interview, 6 April 2023, Beirut.

These actions could be considered a form of effective altruism, in which evidence and reason are used to “figure out how to benefit others as much as possible, and taking action on that basis.”¹³ The concepts of Self-sufficiency and commercial side hustles enable musicians to act relatively independent from local NGO funding and foreign aid. Financial difficulties impact bands and are seen as a result of a lack of sustainable cultural funding and corruption since the economic crisis which decreased public confidence in Lebanese institutions¹⁴ and considered a result of post-war political economy.¹⁵ As Sabra states, “there is no government, so you have to find ways to function on your own”. Using the language of social justice, Sabra explains the use of commercial work and multiple jobs to support music making as a “Robin Hood mentality” to give back to the local arts scene and provide low-cost production services in the region.

The development of alternative income streams is an important development marking the way this network operates the economic landscape of arts funding in Lebanon. During fieldwork, artists explained that they feel “not authentic enough” to qualify for regional arts funding through the Arab Arts and Culture Fund (AFAC) or embassy-funded programmes such as the Goethe Institute. An example is the use of English over Arabic as a result of postcolonial legacy in the Lebanese education system which fails to provide an audible local identity marker. Outlining this as a lack of complexity in the representation of regional music practices, Tabbal explains:

“The problem is that they all want some sort of Arabic heritage thing, almost all the time, as in, first degree, like a voice in Arabic or an Arabic instrument. They don’t understand that, say, Postcards, on paper a dream pop band that are a perfect example of pop versus experimentation and actually get to the core of it. And in terms of the form, it’s the heaviness versus the sweetness, sang by a woman that lived in Beirut all her life... but this is what it means... that’s what we are. They don’t go that far, and that’s disappointing. They want a quick sparkly thing that sounds Arabic.”¹⁶

Raised in a middle to upper-class household, Julia Sabra is multilingual and sings in English as her preferred language, which is commonly associated with better social and economic status in Lebanon. The way speakers switch between Arabic, English and French is an integral part of the linguistic trauma and colonial legacy of Beirut in which “multilingual speakers negotiate varied linguistic backgrounds with competing nationalist and religious ideologies and

13- MACASKILL William, « Effective Altruism: Introduction », *Essays in Philosophy*, vol. 18, no 1, 2017.

14- FRANCE Guilherme, Lebanon overview of corruption and anticorruption [online], 2022, Available at: https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/kproducts/Lebanon-overview-of-corruption-and-anticorruption_U4-reviewed_PR_19.09.2022.pdf (Accessed June 19, 2025).

15- DAHER Joseph, Lebanon, how the post-war’s political economy led to the current economic and social crisis [online], 2024, Available at: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/entities/publication/cf414565-6748-5a00-8d26-52664beaf99e> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

16- Fadi Tabbal, Interview, 6 April 2023, Beirut.

postcolonial perceptions about the ‘prestige’ of speaking a foreign language.”¹⁷ Importantly, this phenomenon can be understood as a product of Euro-American education fostering, as Sabra points out, a “mentality to leave” the country for international universities and job opportunities. Singing in English allows Sabra to express herself with precision, capture nuances of the language, and play with familiar words to convey emotion and “angst,” as the singer puts it. This is reinforced by the stark difference between formal Arabic (*fusha*) and colloquial Arabic (*ammiyah*). In English, she feels “technically in between” these poles. Outlining that her choice is not merely for the consumption on the Western market or an assimilation to European styles, but a desire for authentic self-expression, she explains:

“Singing in English is the best way to express myself most genuinely. And it’s a very hard thing to explain to the West because they think we are just ripping someone off and that’s not true. I was growing up listening to this music, I feel very comfortable writing in English, and I studied literature as well so it’s like, how else am I going to say it. And it’s not... I have this existential crisis where I think, you I stop everything and invest in Arabic? But it would take me so long because, a language is not just... I know how to speak it and how to write it, but it’s the baggage, the tone, the in-between- the-lines, the poetry. In English, I know what I want to say, and I say it, and in Arabic, I don’t have it as much because I don’t read enough and haven’t been exposed to the music for decades. Whereas in English, I know when something is cheesy, I know where the fine line is, it’s hard to explain, but there is so much beyond the language itself that comes with writing that’s why I do it’s in English. I don’t want to change that, feel like that’s also part of Lebanese identity, it’s the f*****-up Lebanese identity were our identity is completely lost, completely scattered and they raise you to learn Arabic as a foreign language. Our music, regardless of how western as it may sound at first glance, it does sound like us, and it does sound Lebanese.”¹⁸

The complexity of language use in regional music projects illustrates the evolving “local” of postcolonial modes of performance in urban Beirut that introduce new tools for emotional meaning making. Lynn El-Hussami and Thomas Burkhalter’s work outlines the class dimensions of the independent music scene as a product of an urban middle-class with access to higher education who consume Euro-American media.¹⁹ However, the representation of alternative music from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region sung in English are commonly flattened to debates of social class and privilege divorced from psychological

17- MOGHABGHAB Emma, « (Re)writing the Middle East: Tension, engagement, and rhetorical translanguaging », *Composition Studies*, vol. 49, no 3, 2021, p. 165-170.

18- Julia Sabra, Interview, 10 April 2023, Beirut.

19- EL HUSSAMI Lynn, *Music Consumption and Distribution During the Lebanese Civil War*, PhD Thesis, American University of Beirut (AUB), 2023; BURKHALTER Thomas, DICKINSON Kay, HARBERT Benjamin J. (eds.), *The Arab Avant-Garde: Music, Politics, Modernity*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

and colonial trauma. At the same time, independent music is frequently labelled subversive, underground, or creative rebellions against the state.²⁰ This can lead to problematic fetishisations of resistance and protest narratives that reinforce orientalist binaries of religious and the secular, progressive and traditional, backwards and modern. Rather than focusing on the underlying power dynamics and foreign policy interventions in the narration of war in the region, they focus on Lebanon and Palestine as conflict-ridden areas.²¹ These representational issues are deeply entangled in the creative industry landscape and highlight the need to represent the complexity of regional cultural expressions and its entanglements with international politics.²²

Rebuilding beirut's sonic infrastructure

Following the 2020 Beirut explosion, which resulted in more than 200 fatalities, 6000 casualties, and widespread destruction of urban infrastructure, Tunefork Studios set up the Beirut Musicians' Fund to replace lost and damaged instruments for local musicians.²³ As part of the fundraiser, Tabbal put together a list of affected practitioners that the Beirut-based NGO Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) used to distribute funds from their Lebanon Solidarity Fund. The same fund also awarded a grant to support Tunefork Studios to rebuild parts of the studio space that were partly destroyed during the explosion. The appeal, which is available on the Tunefork website, reads:

“As you all know, our entire community is shaken by the horrific explosion at the port of Beirut on August 4th. Reasons: the incompetence, negligence and corruption of our own government. Countless lives lost. Countless houses destroyed. We are hurt, both physically and emotionally. Fortunately, amid the chaos, everyone rushed to help. So, we took it upon ourselves to contact musicians, producers and sound engineers living in the blast area and to inventory all music gear, instruments and recording equipment that were destroyed. The damage so far adds up to USD 38,255 (the extensive list of damaged gear is available upon request). All donations will be managed by the studio team and divided proportionally between those affected”.²⁴

20- NOOSHIN Laudan, « 'Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishisation of Resistance' », *Popular Communication*, vol. 15, no 3, 2017, p. 163-191. SPRENGEL Darci, « Reframing the 'Arab Winter': the importance of sleep and a quiet atmosphere after 'defeated' revolutions », *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 61, no 2-3, 2020, p. 246-266.

21- MATAR Dina, HARB Zahera (eds.), *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image, and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine*, London, IB Tauris, 2013.

22- TOUKAN Hanan, *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2021.

23-TUNEFORK STUDIOS, Beirut Musicians' Fund [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.tuneforkstudios.com/bmf> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

24- Ibid.

The anger and frustration expressed in these words were transmuted into action as he raised 73,267 US dollars in total, replacing equipment for 28 musicians and engineers - including 77 pieces of music production gear in what he called the “first phase”. After the initial goal was reached, Tunefork Studios started to utilise the funds to sponsor musical lessons in a local music hub for the next year “due to shifting priorities and a worsening economic crisis”.²⁵ These included the rebuilding of a local music venue in the Beirut district of Achrafieh, free Oud lessons for Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and the support of a local buzuq maker and his business; moreover, the structural support for Beirut Synth Center, an artist-run space offering open sessions for non-traditional instrument users to increase the well-being and cultural sustainability of the regional arts scene.

The Beirut Musicians’ Fund was followed by international fundraisers, organised by Lebanese expats in Europe, and other creative initiatives that outlined the crucial role that civil society have played since the economic crisis and pandemic in rebuilding “a sense of hope, solidarity and unity”.²⁶ The 2024 album *Land 01 أرض ٠١: A compilation for the displaced in Lebanon*, presented a joint work by local and diasporic artists from the region to address the impact of the violence and displacement of citizens from Southern Lebanon as a result of Israeli airstrikes since 2023.²⁷ Sold on the music distribution platform Bandcamp for 15 US dollars, it raised funds for winter clothing, heaters, blankets, mattresses, and pillows before donating its proceeds to the Lebanese Red Cross.²⁸

A sense of social responsibility and civic commitment emerge as a driving force of the communication, marketing and circulation of these musical productions since 2019. Described as grassroots initiatives by the organisers, these actions make a case for creative practices and activism as linked practices of care. As Natalie Morningstar argues, art and activism can be “two different strategies for critiquing the same ‘political conditions’” while art bears the potential to unpick, expose or “anatomise” problematic institutional processes and power dynamics.²⁹

As creative practices reveal the postcolonial legacy that influences the way sound and language are used, make it clear how emotions enable artists to not only

25- *Ibid.*

26- UNESCO, *op. cit.*; KIRN Peter, “In Beirut and Abroad, Critical Aid for Lebanon: Music, Events, Interview.” *Create Digital Music*, 31 Oct. 2024, cdm.link/in-beirut-and-abroad-critical-aid-for-lebanon-music-events-interview/.

27- UN NEWS, Lebanon crisis: health workers and facilities “targeted or hit” [online], 2024, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155546> (Accessed June 19, 2025); WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO), Attacks on hospitals and health workers jeopardize provision of health in Lebanon [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/16-10-2024-attacks-on-hospitals-and-health-workers-jeopardize-provision-of-health-in-lebanon> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

28-TUNEFORK STUDIOS, For the Displaced [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.tuneforkstudios.com/forthedisplaced> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

29- MORNINGSTAR Natalie, « Critique refigured: art, activism, and politics in post-recession Dublin », *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 30, 2024, p. 618.

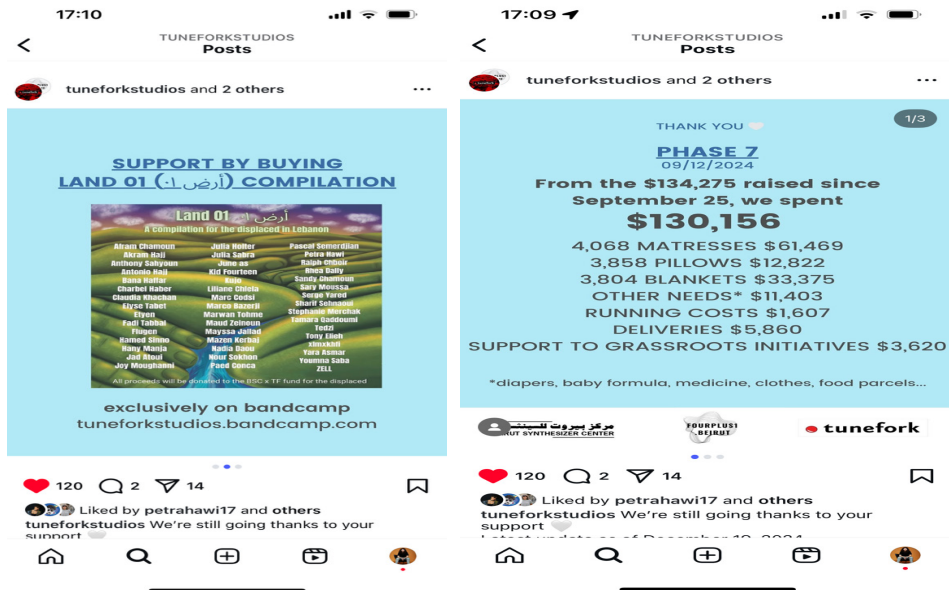


Fig. 1: Inside Tunefork Studios, image used with permission of owner.

make sense of their political claims but allow for collective identities to build.³⁰ The same emotions, skill sets, and collective strategies rooted in dissent are likewise mobilised in fundraising initiatives. They directly improve the infrastructure of sound production in Beirut while bringing to light the very emotions that derive from political ambiguity and exhaustion.³¹ Organised by the friendship-based network around Tunefork Studios, the recording studio is not merely a place for music production detached from “doing politics” in the street, but provide the place and community to reconfigure political strategies that benefit direct action and activism.³² These care and empathy-based practices position the experience of despair and failure as a political resource for imagining otherwise, as can be traced in the recent history of Lebanese protest movements.³³ However, as Ana Hofman highlights, scholarly approaches can both repress and romanticise affect in political movements.³⁴ While emotional and affective capacities of music can become a tool for “grasping the broader shifts in the very understanding of what is political today”, they can stand in dangerous competition with the affective fuel that drives the power structures they are embedded in; especially

30- DELLA PORTA Donatella, TUFARO Rossana, « Mobilizing the Past in Revolutionary Times: Memory, Counter-Memory, and Nostalgia During the Lebanese Uprising », *Sociological Forum*, vol. 37, 2022, p. 1407.

31- SPRENGEL Darci, « “More Powerful than Politics”: Affective Magic in the DIY Musical Activism after Egypt’s 2011 Revolution », *Popular Music*, vol. 38, no 1, 2019, p. 54-72.

32- MORNINGSTAR Natalie, « Critique refigured: art, activism, and politics in post-recession Dublin », *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 30, 2024, p. 615.

33- MUSALLAM Fuad, « “Failure in the air”: activist narratives, in-group story-telling, and keeping political possibility alive in Lebanon », *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 26, 2020, p. 30-47.

34- HOFMAN Ana, « The Romance with Affect: Sonic Politics in a Time of Political Exhaustion », *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 61, no 2-3, 2020, p. 303.

if they lack concrete political impact, stay in the realm of utopia, or normalise exhaustion. Instead, Hofman calls attention to affect as a “*need or a quest*” with powerful political potential.³⁵

Home is so sad (2021)

A poignant example of music capturing the affective aftermath of the port explosion is evident in the band Postcards’ 2021 song ‘Home is so sad’.³⁶ It highlights how musicians make sense of ambivalent feelings towards Beirut as a ‘home’ while displaying acts of care that helped navigate the emotional dimensions of the songwriting process. As explored by Hanan Toukan, post-war creative practices often use personal narratives and counter-memories to historical events as a site for negotiating dissent and documenting power imbalances that shape access to, and participation in, Lebanon’s public spaces.³⁷ From archival interventions in the performing arts to sensory approaches to storytelling in creative writing and textile art, they make visible ambivalent feelings of personal safety and the cross-generational experiences of violence across 20th century Lebanese history.³⁸

Postcards formed in 2012 with Julia Sabra on guitar and vocals, and cousins Marwan Tohme (guitar) and Pascal Semerdjian (drums) contribute significantly to Beirut’s musical landscape. The title of the song draws inspiration from Philip Larkin’s poem, which Sabra’s cousin shared with her on Instagram. The lyrics were written shortly after the Beirut explosion which injured Semerdjian, Sabra’s husband and the drummer of the group. In an interview with Lebanese producer Ziad Nawfal, Sabra noted that “home” has multiple meanings, representing the damage to her partner, their home, and her city.³⁹ Describing the writing process of the album shortly after the explosion, she explains:

“There is a lot of anger, noise and aggression that needs to come out within that softness. That’s a product of living in Beirut obviously. It’s like the way you’d imagine someone living in Hawaii their whole life playing guitar and that makes sense for them, *bas enno*, I can’t be making that music, it doesn’t make sense for here, I need to find something that reflects my feelings here.”⁴⁰

Unable to play the kick drum with his leg, Semerdjian shifted to snare instead, thereby creating a persistent military-like beat that creates the rhythmical

35- *Ibid.*

36- YOUTUBE, Postcards - Home is So Sad (Official Video) [online], 2024, Available at: <https://youtu.be/QdPQCv4wRJ4?si=MeK-MMnozPo4U5v6> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

37- TOUKAN Hanan, *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2021.

38- ZIADÉ Lamia, *My Port of Beirut*, London, Pluto Press, 2023. See also *Safe Space* (Ayah Haidar, 2024, Lebanon/United Kingdom).

39- NAWFAL Ziad, Postcards [online], *Beehype*, 29 May 2021, Available at: <https://beehy.pe/postcards-home-is-so-sad-lebanon/> (Accessed June 19, 2025).

40- Julia Sabra, Interview, 10 April 2023, Beirut

backdrop upon which the lyrics are built. Sabra described the sound as having a “violent feel with no release.” Occasionally, the acoustic drums clash with the electronic samples, creating an uneasy tension throughout the song. Sabra wrote music non-stop during this period, using songwriting to process this period of her life. She expressed a deep attachment to Beirut, stating, “Even with all the bad things that’s happening, it feels like home, and I’ve gotten weirdly more attached to it, it’s like a Stockholm Syndrome or something, or when you’re in love with the toxic kidnapper.”⁴¹

Philipp Larkin: *Home is so Sad* (1958)

*Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft
And turn again to what it started as,
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.*

Postcards: *Home is so Sad* (2021)

*You were lying where
You had cut my hair
Right beneath the table
Where we eat the bread you make
Home is so sad
Home is so sad
Glass in our coffee
Towels on trees
Blood from your nostrils
Blood from your ears
Soil splattered on the walls like drops of blood
oHome is so sad
Home is so sad
There’s a hole
Where your knee should be
But I am not afraid
I am not afraid*

⁴¹- Ibid.

Home is so sad
Home is so sad
Home is so sad
Home is so sad

It stays as it was left
As it was left

Unlike the Larkin poem, Postcards' notion of a home remains relatively underexplored. Rather, the lyrics display a visual description of a scene of objects splattered, shattered, and thrown out, "towels on trees, blood from your nostrils, blood from your ears, soil splattered on the walls like drops of blood." Sabra describes the details of what has happened to her and her husband as the domestic interior vanishes in the explosion. It becomes invisible and lost as a product of a safer past. The home suddenly appears scary, unhomely and unsafe. The list of objects that Larkin used in his description are a blueprint of a home, a place of permanence, material comfort and belonging. For Postcards, items are physically absent but emotionally present in ways that leave a permanent mark on the singer. The listener is invited into a scene of violence and uncertainty which yet remains a place filled with memories and acts of care such as, bread making. Ambivalent expressions about the singer's "home" position Beirut as both a psycho-social and physical space to feel home in the uncanny.⁴²

Postcard's lyrics reflect their lived experience of the Beirut explosion and its aftermat, with both the psychological and material damage that it caused to the musicians themselves and citizens of Beirut. They likewise express their ambivalent feelings towards home by way of signifying both acts of care between lovers and the emotional ambivalence towards the city they rebuilt. Rather than mobilising these emotions as is the case in their grassroots initiative outside the recording studio, sound here serves as a way of processing and making sense of unpredictability, uncertainty and ambivalence in the face of a poly-crisis.

Conclusion

As can be seen in Tunefork Studios' organisational dynamics, and local grassroots initiatives, empathy-based practices of care and solidarity are important tools to build conditions for sustainable cultural practices in Beirut. Mobilising emotions such as, anger and despair in songwriting and music distribution, artists highlight creative practices and activism as linked practices of (self)care. They likewise reflect the productive capacities and personal stories of those who produce it. In doing so, Tabbal and Sabra challenge the notion that contemporary sound and art from Lebanon must either adopt Western aesthetics or be overtly political by making audible the stories of people on the ground who experienced

42- CLACK Brian R., « 'At home in the uncanny': Freud's account of das Unheimliche in the context of his theory of religious belief », *Religion*, vol. 38, no 3, 2008, p. 250-258.

the explosion and economic crisis. As these interlinked practices emanate from a friendship-based network of artists around Tunefork Studios, I analysed how spaces for music production can become places of social and emotional significance. They can generate community impact and direct aid that reaches beyond the primary purpose of producing and circulating music; specifically, when utilising skills and networks in collaboration with cultural workers and funding bodies. Together, these sonic acts of care make both visible and audible an emotional investment in the regional independent music networks, the exhaustion of those who support it, and the inspiration that can be drawn from musicians who link creative labour with collaborative strategies for community support. This demonstrates the role that music and emotions play in navigating current geopolitical crises, economic dependencies, biopolitical events and warfare that shapes contemporary music practices in Lebanon today.

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ملخص | شهدت بداية القرن الحادي والعشرين صعود الإنترنت وتقنيات الهاتف المحمول، فضلاً عن توسع المجال الرقمي وظهور موسيقى "افعلها بنفسك". وفي الوقت نفسه، شهدت هذه الفترة تغييرات كبيرة أعادت تشكيل المشهد الفني والثقافي بشكل عام، وإنتاج الموسيقى بشكل خاص، في جميع أنحاء بلاد المشرق. وقد تميزت هذه الفترة بمأسسة إنتاج الفنون والثقافة ونشرها. وشهدت تشكيل منظمات "وسيطّة" عربية وإقليمية مثل "المورد الثقافي" و"الصندوق العربي للفنون والثقافة"، بالإضافة إلى إنشاء شركات إنتاج صغيرة واستوديوهات تسجيل ومجموعات أسسها الموسيقيون أنفسهم. قدمت هذه المنظمات دعماً مالياً للإنتاج والتوزيع، بالإضافة إلى برامج للفنانين والممارسين الثقافيين.

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى فهم جوانب الإنتاج الموسيقي في بلاد المشرق، خاصة بين عامي ٢٠٠٣ و٢٠٢٣، مع التركيز على لبنان، حيث توجد معظم المنظمات الفنية والثقافية المختصة، وتستكشف المقالة مساهمة هذه المنظمات في المشهد الموسيقي في بلاد المشرق، والأنواع أو الأساليب التي تمولها، ودورها في تشكيل المشهد الموسيقي. وتستند النتائج إلى تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها من هذه المنظمات، بالإضافة إلى مقابلات مع موسيقيين ومنتجين موسيقيين أجريت بهدف توثيق نتائج تحليل البيانات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: | المشرق العربي، الموسيقى المستقلة، المنح، الإنتاج، المنظمات الفنية والثقافية.

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