

## Subverting the monopoly: new music labels in the Middle East

Jacques Attali wrote in his essay on the political economy of music: “With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion”(1). Nowadays the diffusion of music is controlled by a handful of labels that distribute roughly 80% of the music in the world. This monopoly brought about to a standardization of music that not only concerns Western countries but also many developing nations. Nevertheless, some attempts to jeopardize this close market have been undertaken by small independent labels that not only try to create a niche market, but also aim at diffusing lesser known artists and genres in order to diversify the offer and reinvent the production. This article will focus on the Middle Eastern area and will present an overview of the music industry in the region, and three case studies of innovative music labels launched by young Arab entrepreneurs.

The giant Rotana dominates the media market of the Arab world, and especially the music industry. Rotana is a huge pan-Arab media conglomerate that includes TV stations, radio stations, a film production company, a magazine and Rotana Records. Rotana Records owns around 80% of the rights of the music produced and distributed in a region that includes all Arabic speaking countries, from Morocco to Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Palestine. The music offer proposed by this label focuses on synthesizer-based pop, but also on nostalgic songs from the 1950s-1960s. In an interview published on Forbes website in January 2010, the owner of Rotana Prince al Waleed bin Talal stated “we have around 45 per cent of all the movies and we have around 80 per cent of all the music in the Arab region, and we are using technology to advance our causes there. We are a very dominant force in the music and the movie industry in the Arab world through Rotana”(2).

Despite this monopoly, and the diffused idea that nothing new arises in the area, some small labels are flourishing and they are specializing on independent and lesser-known Arab artists. Not only these initiatives are innovative because of their isolate position in a field largely dominated by one company, but also because of their choice of avoiding popular main stream artists and genres. Indeed, this means that novelty exists in the field of Arab music and courageous young entrepreneurs are venturing in it. As it has always been the case in the region, Cairo and Beirut are at the forefront, being the leading cities in which new independent music labels are based and settling the rules of tradition and novelty. All the following examples are self-funded and do not receive any support from the public bodies.

Among new labels, three are particularly interesting: Eka3, Forward Music and 100copies. Eka3(3), which means rhythm, is a relevant example for three reasons: it is based in three different key cities, namely Beirut, Cairo and Amman; it mainly produces young engaged artists and less popular genres of music; and the music is available on digital supports as well on CDs. Tamer Abu Ghazaleh, a young musician of Palestinian origins based in Amman, founded this label in 2007 with the intent of nurturing the independent musical scene of the region. Six people, two in each city, compose the team and directly organize events in order to diffuse artists' works. This label aims at creating a network in the region with a marketing strategy that focuses on targeting specific audiences. Tamer says, “We didn't start from a single place because the real problem was to find a way of giving the region the necessary exposure. We are catering to a niche market that doesn't go to all the shops and areas in a city. They go to particular cafes, theatres, cultural centres... We made an effort to go directly to those places and ask them to stock our releases because we felt that their customers would be interested”(4).

So far, the most successful example of new independent music label is the Beirut-based Forward Music

that was founded in 2001 by the musician Ghazi Abdel Baki. This label represents the huge variety of the country, as it produces and diffuses very different genres and artists: from classical Arab music to contemporary fusion and jazz. Its distribution not only covers the whole region, but also some European countries. Since its birth, Forward Music successfully associated with the concert venue Democratic Republic of Music in Beirut, with the intent of diffusing its artists in one of the most famous venues of the city. The label's music is available on 120 platforms worldwide, which indicates the degree of success and diffusion of Forward Music.

Finally, a further successful new label is 100copies from Cairo(5). This label was founded in 2006 by the musician Mahmoud Refaat. It mainly produces electronic and experimental Egyptian music and it aims to be a platform and a network for independent experimental musicians. A considerable importance is given to the instrumental composition, even though from an electronic perspective. Refaat underlines, "the musicians of 100Copies use a lot of acoustic instruments, not only computers and samplers. I know it is important for people to see the musicians producing this kind of music live"(6). Each CD is produced in a limited number of copies – thus the name – and some additional copies are made for sales outside the country. An open-air festival is organized by the label's team every year. Refaat underlines that "in the past, there was never this concept of young, small labels that produced some kind of strange amount of CD's, and then some kind of interest grows slowly from smaller things"(7).

To conclude, it is important to stress that though Rotana's monopoly still exists, courageous attempts to break this monopoly have been made by young Arab musicians-entrepreneurs in order to produce and diffuse alternative genres and artists. These efforts are having a further important impact in the contemporary context of socio-political turmoil in which the youth has been playing a leading role. If Attali was right, these subversive actions are part of the fight. *Courage!*

## Endnotes

(1) Attali J., *Bruits*, PUF, Paris, 1977

(2) [http://www.forbes.com/2010/01/23/pandit-citi-hon-eymoon-intelligent-investing-alwaleed\\_2.html](http://www.forbes.com/2010/01/23/pandit-citi-hon-eymoon-intelligent-investing-alwaleed_2.html)

(3) [www.eka3.org](http://www.eka3.org)

(4) Allami K., Dispatches from a New generation, *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 39, No. 3. (Sep 2010), pp. 82-95-1

(5) <http://norient.com/stories/100copiescairo/>

(6) Id.

(7) <http://www.afropop.org/wp/2028/100-copies-interview-with-mahmoud-refat-and-hassan-khan/>



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