

## **“More Powerful than Politics”: Affective Magic in the DIY Music after Egypt’s 2011 Revolution**

### **Abstract**

With a return to authoritarian rule only a few years after the initially successful 2011 revolution, some Egyptian DIY musicians have made it a point to avoid the political. These musicians consider the ordinary politics of discursive critique and public protest to be ineffective and have opted to continue the revolution by appealing to the ineffable properties of listening as a less ideological way to produce social change. This article explores how and why the sonic ineffable is believed to be a more utopian form of politics. It argues that mobilizing magic is a particularly-positioned solution to political failure that obscures the relations of power it perpetuates. Building from 30 months of ethnographic research conducted in Egypt among DIY musicians between 2010 and 2017, it avoids a romanticization of the ineffable, showing instead how the ambiguity between the conscious and subconscious aspects of sonic experience is a political tool not removed from power.

**Keywords:** Affect, Egypt, Politics, Revolution, DIY

In mid-2012, just one year after Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak’s (r. 1981-2011) monumental ouster, seemingly everyone in Egypt was talking about politics. It was the year of Egypt’s first presidential election, in which citizens were meant to elect their leader for the first time after over fifty years of military dictatorship.

Yet, I was struck by the number of artists, especially, who were making it their mission to avoid the political. I found this avoidance to be more than an artistic rebelliousness or aversion to trendiness; rather, it stemmed from a painful realization that the ordinary politics of discursive critique and public protest had already failed. These artists critiqued the flourishing, at the time, artistic expression that espoused an overt political ideology. Songs that doubled as protest chants and that directly addressed the failings of political leaders, for instance, proliferated during and immediately after the 2011 revolution. In the words of one friend, a thirty-three-year-old bass player and “do-it-yourself” (DIY) rock/metal musician,

It’s very important: if art cannot convey, *imply* a political message then no fucking way [laughing] we can deliver the message. With our music, what we want to say politically is: okay, we want a country that is this relaxed, and this organized, and this beautiful . . . if we couldn’t do this with pure music, pure music, then okay people can talk forever. (emphasis added)

For him, politics in the form of discursive critique was just idle “talk.” He favored instead what he called “pure music,” music without political lyrics and often without lyrics at all.

As Egypt moved from revolution against military dictatorship back to military dictatorship in 2013, “pure” music became not only a countercurrent but seen by some as the most viable option. Prominent revolutionary leader and independent musician Ramy Essam perhaps best summarized these sentiments when he told Tom Rollins of *al-Monitor*, “Of course I want people back out in the street chanting against the system, but our best option now is art” (Rollins 2014).

These statements suggest the belief that “art” can continue revolutionary action both in the face of overwhelming powerlessness and in ways that ordinary politics, which I take to mean

public protest and discursive critique, cannot. One artist, who has organized street arts projects for over two decades, told me that “we are doing art, not awareness, not enlightenment, not anything like those big words. We are doing art, and art has its own magic. This is what art is. You can pass anything you want through art.” The privileging of “art” over “politics” as a “magical” solution to political failure indicates a privileging of the ineffable as the most effective way to produce social change.

My goal is not to decide whether Egyptian DIY music is in fact a magical force that produces social change. As Simon Frith argues, “The significance of magic is that people believe in it” (1981, 159). Instead, I analyze why the ineffable is believed to be a more utopian form of politics. In post-revolutionary Egypt, musicians experienced hearing independent music in the public street to be a type of healing “therapy” that could form inexplicable senses of community. This is because musicians treated musical experience as largely subconscious—it was “magical” precisely because it was an affective experience that supposedly pre-empted cultural or ideological interpretation. This community formed, however, through the marked exclusion of the working-class public culture already dominant in public space. Significantly, because musicians considered sonic experience to be an inexplicable, subconscious phenomenon beyond their control, they viewed the working class as the primary agents of their own exclusion. Mobilizing discourses of magic, then, is ultimately a means of absolving the speaker from perpetuating social and ideological divisions, which, in the Egyptian case, some attribute to the revolution’s failure. I argue, then, that mobilizing magic is a particularly-positioned solution to political failure that obscures the relations of power it perpetuates.

Scholars and activists, in a variety of fields/contexts, have looked to the ineffable as an alternative way of acting politically because they believe it bypasses relations of power by engaging the senses directly. Egyptian independent musicians’ approach resembles what feminist theorist Lauren Berlant calls “post-public sphere politics,” for instance. Looking at the waning of the American dream in the United States, she describes what she calls the “desire for the political” in which artist-activists bypass the normal public sphere of discursive critique and protest while still seeking, nonetheless, to maintain its political potential (Berlant 2011, 230). These practices eschew classic discursive communication in favor of the “visceral immediacy” that such communication rationalizes, inducing “new sensual routes for political potentiality from the place where consciousness meets knowledge.” It thus mobilizes what Berlant calls “political affect,” in which “practices of politics might be invented that do not yet exist” (2011, 229). Similarly, young Egyptian artists consider the arts “the best option” because they were widely believed to act as a sort of “therapy” that could cultivate public community without fueling the social hierarchies and ideologies that had fractured Egyptian society. This approach holds such wide international currency in part because it views the ineffable as an autonomous object, a largely biological, pre-cultural phenomenon that preempts conscious interpretation or cultural specificity (see Massumi 2002).

There is a long and complex debate among scholars pertaining to the nature of affect, and space does not permit me to provide a thorough account here.<sup>i</sup> With most scholarly approaches viewing affect as either a pre-cultural *or* culturally-situated phenomenon, there has recently been calls to consider how these two aspects are instead intertwined (Becker 2004; Hofman 2015; Gill 2017). For the purposes of this article, I define “affective magic” as the political utilization of the ambiguous space between the pre-cultural and cultural aspects of sonic experience. Considering both these aspects together through ethnography demonstrates why this “politics in emergence” falls short of its utopian aims.

At the same time that the ineffable cultivates a communal experience in Egypt, musicians' mobilization of magic also conceals what it excludes: the working-class cultural forms currently ubiquitous in public space. These DIY musical genres, known as *mahraganat* and *sha'bi*, are strongly associated with counterproductive affective registers. Spread throughout the city via public transportation, they are widely believed to detract from revolutionary sensibilities through high volume, aggressive dance, crass lyrics, and harsh timbres that many independent musicians interpret as "violent." In contrast, the DIY artists known as "independent" musicians advocate performing specifically independent music in the street as a means of directly engaging—and ideally transforming—the embodied sensibilities and faculties of the working-class subject. They thus sought to foster community but by "uplifting" the working class to the embodiment of modernist middle-class values. Discourses of magic are thus a means of advancing a particular ideology without acknowledging ideology's presence. If the musician is a mere "channeler of energy," as some suggest, social change lies firmly within the seemingly voluntary actions of the listener. Most broadly, then, looking at discourses of magic ethnographically reveals that the ineffable is not the solution to the failings of politics that some feminist theorists, such as Berlant, have hoped for. Even as sonic experience necessarily engages the subconscious realm, its embodied consequences—to be socially meaningful—must still be interpreted through available cultural codes.

Before examining these practices, it must be stated at the outset that discussing notions of magic in an Egyptian context must be done with caution. Orientalist longings and fascinations have long viewed Arabs and Muslims through a Western gaze that associates "the Orient" with enchantment, exotic beings, and remarkable experiences. As Edward Said has famously argued, the concept of the "Orient" was a European invention manifesting what they considered "exotic" or in opposition to themselves (Said 1978, 1-2). In many ways, Egypt, with its ancient architecture, language, and monuments, has been a central site in this imaginary (Muhlestein 2004). Rather than only a bygone colonial fantasy, however, associating the "East" with the unfamiliar and magical are powerfully operative today. In their contemporary writings, Arab artists and intellectuals have often carried the burden of continually pushing back against the persistence of orientalist narratives (as only a few examples see Racy 2016; El Zein 2016; Abu-Lughod 2013; Zaru 2017).

As ethnomusicologist and preeminent scholar of Arab music A.J. Racy notes, however, music's ability to "charm" is familiar in the West. It appears, for instance, in Greek mythology when Orpheus uses the lute to charm the gods of the underworld (2016, 200; see also Goodwin 1986). Musicologist Blake Wilson has likewise demonstrated that affect has been a concern of Western music theorists as early as the late 15th century (Wilson et al. 2012). And, as Frith's study of rock music similarly shows, the view of music as "magical" still operates in more contemporary Western genres (1981). The "East's" particular association with magic in the Western imagination, then, has more to do with the West's strategic self-positioning vis-a-vis its others. It has allowed the Occident to position itself in contrasting terms of progress and reason, for instance, relegating the East to a supposedly pre-modern, bygone way of life (Racy 2016, 202; Said 1978).

Given this troubling history, approaching conceptions of magic in this context must be done with care, and I strive here to emphasize that appeals to the ineffable have international currency as well as cultural-historical specificity. Such an approach is particularly appropriate because Egyptian musicians' mobilizations of magic not only engage Islamic beliefs. Unsettling notions of Arab/Muslim essential "difference," affective magic draws from eclectic aesthetic and

ideological influences, emerging from the international nature of the DIY music that drives its conception. DIY music is made by urban Egyptian youth who, marginalized from mainstream media and production outlets, use low-budget home studios and Internet software to produce and disseminate innovative music forms. Since it is delineated by production process rather than musical genre, it encompasses a variety of styles. This essay focuses on two loosely conceived approaches to DIY music within Egypt.<sup>ii</sup> The first is referred to locally as “independent music,” *al-mazika al-musteqilla* or simply by the English word “independent.” It is primarily associated with middle-class youth who may draw from Arab art music aesthetics and diverse genres including rock, hip-hop, jazz, electronic, and Nubian to name only a few.<sup>iii</sup> The second is known as *mahraganat* (festival music), a style newly emerging in the early 2000s that is strongly associated with working-class male youth. It draws heavily from American hip-hop and urban Egyptian popular music (*sha’bi*).<sup>iv</sup> The majority of DIY musicians in both these realms are secular in political outlook and actively alarmed by the Islamic resurgence as a *political* force, which they believe is stifling of free and creative expression.<sup>v</sup> A major difference in these two styles is that whereas *mahraganat*’s primary space of mediated and live performance has always been the urban street itself, independent music was long isolated from this space until the 2011 revolution.

Rather than perpetuating notions of Arab/Muslim fundamental “difference,” DIY musicians can be viewed as drawing from rock, jazz, and hip-hop influences as much as ones typically read as specifically “Arab” or “Muslim.” In other words, musicians entwine various ideologies on the ineffable nature of listening, expressing the aesthetics and values of their social positions and generation. This essay thus demonstrates the malleability of the concept of “magic” to entwine seemingly disparate currents and the ways it can empower while obscuring the very relationships of power it enacts. It thus seeks to avoid a romanticization of the ineffable by teasing out the tension—or perhaps, more importantly, the compatibility—between the cultural and pre-cultural currents of affective experience as they are rendered in actual practice.

### **The Ineffable Qualities of Listening and Performing**

The inexplicable has long been strongly associated with performing music and listening in the Arab world (Dols 2004, 88). Scholars have noted that in contrast to a Western privileging of vision, for instance, listening in dominant strands of Islamic thought has held a privileged position over other faculties. In this view, ideas both secular and sacred are acquired through hearing. Hearing, or *sama’*, implies an interiorization (acquisition) of knowledge (During et al. 2010, 552-53). In more mystical currents of Islamic practice, especially, *sama’* is believed to elevate one to a higher state of consciousness, bringing the listener in union with God (During et al. 2010, 554; Shannon 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Shiloah 1995, 40). Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind’s study of the Islamic resurgence in Egypt demonstrates the continued primacy of listening among some urban Egyptian Muslims. Listening to Islamic sermons on cassette tape, for instance, serves as a sort of “ethical therapy” in contemporary daily life because hearing is believed to bypass cognitive functioning, going straight to the senses to cultivate ethical dispositions. In this view, Islamic preachers have not traditionally been authoritative figures, but mere channelers of divine messages—it is up to the agency of the listener to hear, and thus embody, divine truths (Hirschkind 2006). In this tradition, the ineffable is not pre-cultural but divine.

Engaging many of these principles, the merger between music and affective transformation in the secular realm is known as *tarab*. Commonly translated as “musical

ecstasy,” *ṭarab* refers both to a genre of urban art music (*al-mūsīqa al-‘arabiyya*) and to the enchanting effect music has on performers and listeners (Racy 2003, 5-6). Manifesting through a feedback loop, the performer’s transformed emotional state that results from exploring pitch, rhythm, and timbre is conferred upon the audience, whose expressive feedback during the performance further heightens the performer’s own altered state (Racy 1998). A related concept, *sulṭānah*, is “the ‘magic’ that momentarily lifts the artist to a higher ecstatic plateau and empowers him or her to engender *ṭarab* most effectively” (Racy 2003, 120).

In these accounts, music (or its vibrations) is sometimes attributed with having its own agency. Certain melodic modes are believed to “impose” themselves at certain times of day in ways described as “mystifying and compelling” (Racy 2008, 100). *Sulṭānah*, for instance, is attributed to forces, such as the cosmos, outside the artist’s control. Performers sometimes report being compelled toward certain melodic modes (*maqāmāt*) based on the position of the stars (Racy 2003, 139). Musical astrology is not unique to Arab-Islamic belief but exists in a number of belief systems, including classical philosophy. The ancient Greeks likewise viewed music as a type of cosmic therapy, for instance (Racy 2003, 4).<sup>vi</sup>

With regards to the ineffable nature of music and listening, it is clear that the sacred and secular domains just mentioned are not distinct spheres but deeply intertwined (see also Gill 2017, 68).<sup>vii</sup> More significantly for my purposes here, Arab/Islamic philosophies of listening are likewise not entirely distinct from interpretations of musical experience elsewhere. As only a few examples, some prominent Black avant-garde musicians performing in New York in the 1960s and 70s used a language of “energy” and “vibration” as part of their radical music practice (Baraka 2010; Heller 2016). And, in more “mainstream” American currents, 1990s public anxiety regarding the relationship between metal music and anger, depression, violence, and/or suicide likewise demonstrates the latent belief that music can have profound emotional and psychological effects on individuals, and especially on vulnerable populations such as children. Exploring a variety of cultural contexts around the world, prominent ethnomusicologist Judith Becker has argued that musical practices leading to altered states of consciousness are “universal,” with all societies having some kind of ceremonial or ritualized practice (2004, 1). What these distinct yet related phenomena suggest are varying degrees of desirability for interpreting sonic experience as affective. Whereas there is a long history of interpreting a variety of Arab musical/sonic styles through affective experience, it is only somewhat recently that scholars writing in English have begun to take seriously the affective nature of listening and performing in Western contexts (see for example Frith 1981; Pieslak 2008; Gitzen 2013; Gray 2013; McCann 2013; Tatro 2014; Garcia 2015; Siddall and Waterman 2016). Such recent scholarship demonstrates the fallacy of an East/West dichotomy with regards to the affective nature of musical experience.

Yet an East/West dichotomy with regards to the nature of listening is often upheld in accounts of Arab music, with Western influence being strongly associated with music’s affective decline. In comparing contemporary Arab music with that of the early 20th century, for instance, it is a common assumption that its ecstatic nature has waned as a result of modernization efforts, the influence of Western popular music, and neoliberal reforms. As the story goes, with the changing of popular tastes, recording technologies, and political/economic influences, so too did the small ensembles deemed most suitable for *ṭarab* fall out of style in favor of larger, more orchestral ones that offered less improvisation to a supposedly more passive audience (see Racy 1977; el-Shawan 1980, 1982, 1984). Social and political changes also transformed the nature of performance from an event that happened regularly in open street cafes and markets to the more

private realm of venues and official institutions (van Nieuwkerk 1995). Likewise, new recording technologies also put mediated distance between performers and audiences, limiting the opportunity for an improvised feedback loop and for extended improvisation (Racy 1977; el-Shawan 1982).

These gradual transformations stemmed from state-led efforts to “modernize” and “rationalize” society that began in the 19th century and intensified in the 20th as the urgency to compete with Western imperialism increased. Trends toward more superficial listening are especially considered to have intensified following Egypt’s neoliberal restructuring, known locally as *al-infitah*, “opening,” in the 1970s. The early 1980s marked the emergence of Arab pop music produced by multinational music companies such as Rotana that would come to dominate the Egyptian market. These songs rely heavily on electronic sounds neatly packaged into three- to five-minute tracks that afford little room for melodic exploration or improvisation.

It is in part this “loss” of the ineffable that has allowed it to seem so revolutionary—so utopian—in the present moment. As Hirschkind reminds us, modernization is an impartial and incomplete process. Although it has transformed in some ways the terrain upon which listening takes place, it has also opened new spaces for alternative practices (Hirschkind 2006, 32). The example of Egyptian DIY music demonstrates that some young musicians today use new technologies, Western musical influences, and electronic sounds in order to *affect* listeners and in particular ways. As the next sections will demonstrate, it may not be that contemporary Arab music is entirely less affective but that the language and ideologies used to give meaning to musical experience have transformed, not only to meet the needs of contemporary realities but also to stake certain claims to power.

### **Affective Magic as Healing in Conditions of Powerlessness**

Thirty-one-year-old Sammy Sayed, the lead singer and creator of the band Procession Towards the Unknown, considers his music to be a form of “art therapy.” The band’s performances are held in the small, intimate spaces typical of independent music, and it features live art (usually painting) and uninterrupted group improvisation. The band only performs at most once a month—the night of the full moon—because on this night Sayed believes the “energy” is “right.” For each performance, the band comprises of completely new members (besides Sayed and the keyboardist). They do not rehearse beforehand, using the course of the performance to “find themselves.” Sayed’s vocal lines are less melodic than they are rhythmic and timbral. He often performs vocables, clicks, drones, and sings in what he calls “ancient languages.” Attending a handful of their performances between 2015 and 2016, Sayed often closed the performance by asking his audience, “how did that make you feel?”

Talking with me about his approach to music as a form of “therapy,” Sayed told me that he often goes into a deep state of trance during performances and cannot remember what he did. Describing this experience, he went on to say that

We can use our mind and our body as a tool to channel stuff, not like spirits and stuff to start talking in tongues, which I have no idea if that is real or not. I believe in the subconscious mind so much as the link to ideas and inspirations . . . I believe that I am channeling, not just me, all of us as musicians, we are channeling *not from a spirit* [said in a mocking tone] . . . we are channeling the thought forms and the energies that are left hanging around us.

In his performance practice and discourse, Sayed engages multiple epistemologies of listening. He views his performances as a form of “art therapy,” in which the musician is a mere

“channeler” of “energies” and “thought forms” already in circulation. In his view, listening is a practice that links the human with the cosmos. Yet, he uses a markedly different vocabulary from that of the Arab/Islamic traditions describe above. Mobilizing English words such as “energy” and subtly mocking belief in “spirits,” he positioned himself positively within a seemingly more modernist discourse, attributing his experience not to emotion or the occult but to subconscious “thought.”

“Spirits” or *jinn* are fundamental to Islamic cosmology. Unlike in pagan and Christian ideologies that have attributed misfortune to the work of evil suprahuman agents such as demons, *jinn* in contrast are not entirely evil or inhuman but a third category of beings. They are often whimsical and are even attributed with inspiring musicians and poets (Farmer 1929 [1973], 7; see also Dols 2004, 89; El-Zein 2009, xv). In cases when *jinn* do negatively affect the human world, *zar* is a musical practice that can heal the afflicted through inducing trance. In this transnational practice that extends from the Persian Gulf to North and sub-Saharan Africa, *jinn* are not “exorcised” but reconciled with their human host via drummed and sung music and dance that leads to a state of trance (El Hadidi 2016). Often coinciding with the anxieties of major life-cycle events (puberty, marriage, birthing, menopause), scholars attribute trance-inducing rituals such as *zar* to experiences of powerlessness (Boddy 1989; Morsy 1993; El Hadidi 2016). Not only limited to an Islamic context, the turn to the ineffable coincides with what scholars have found in instances of powerless and precarity in a variety of cultural contexts, including in the West (see for example Taylor 2001; Luhrmann 2004).viii

Although belief in *jinn* today remains an important way some Egyptians make sense of the contemporary world, for others it has come to have negative associations. State modernization efforts and Islamic fundamentalists have worked together in attempts to do away with what it views as a “premodern” and “unorthodox” practice, rendering those who continue to engage *zar* to be associated with lack of “proper” education, be it Islamic or secular-modernist. By using the terminology of “energies” and “thought forms,” Sayed distances himself from the practices surrounding *jinn* and thus enacts a sensibility more in line with a cosmopolitan and educated middle class. At the same time, however, his musical practice primarily centers around transformations in feeling and cognition that he understood to be subconscious. Sonic experience connected him to the cosmos and transformed his and other’s states of consciousness through channeling “thought forms.” He told me that such performances helped him “feel better” in a society that he largely experienced as “depressed.”

Feelings of despair and powerlessness in Egypt intensified after the 2011 revolution when the Egyptian state went quickly back to a military regime only two years later. The “new” regime of military-general-turned-president Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi is largely regarded to be more repressive than that of its ousted predecessor Hosni Mubarak. His regime recriminalized public protest and has enacted stricter censorship of public discourse. Some human rights organizations estimate that 60,000 people have been imprisoned since al-Sisi took power (*Al Jazeera* 2017). In this context, the hallmark political actions of discursive critique and protest that are supposed to have led to democratic transition have not produced their promised outcomes. Politics have failed. As one young Egyptian writer, describing life and public feeling under the “new” military regime, put it, “It’s like you died, and God said ‘I will show you heaven’ and then as soon as you put one foot in, he grabs you by the scruff of your neck and takes you to hell. We really saw heaven during the 18 days [of initial protest], and then we went to a terrible reality, worse than where we were before” (Antoun 2017). If the experience of military dictatorship before the revolution was “death,” the feelings following revolutionary failure, “hell.” It is the emergence

of a new, crueler experience of powerlessness than what Egyptians had grappled with for over thirty years under Mubarak's rule.

Feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and despair can have real physical consequences, making "art therapy" increasingly meaningful. Ahmed, for instance, is a well-known violinist from Alexandria with whom I have worked closely since 2010. During one of my recent residencies in Egypt, he tells me that he started suffering from panic attacks in 2013. They are triggered, he says, by witnessing or imagining violence in the street. During 2013, there were many demonstrations calling to remove then-president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, and clashes between those pro- and anti-Morsi would often erupt.

This public violence had a profound effect on Ahmed, "These were civilians against each other—not the police—this was a wholly different kind of violence for me." Living in Bahari, one of Alexandria's most historic neighborhoods nestled near the citadel and the sea, he began to imagine that people would break into his house to kill him and rape his mother. After being hospitalized in 2013 for a few days due to his anxiety, Ahmed's psychiatrist prescribed him anti-depressants, but he says they made him feel numb. After two years, he stopped taking the medication, and the panic attacks returned.

At home one winter's day in 2016, as he felt the onset of an attack, he picked up his violin and dug the bow into the strings, "I was not making music," he tells me "I was surviving." Instead of thinking about music, he focused on exploring "the energy of the strings" and the "energy" that lies within the patterns of vibrations, "I tried to hold on to one sound, my own sound, in the middle of this hell of outside sounds. When I am alone and close to death, I would rather play on one string and just keep resonating this one string. It is a way of getting into trance." Disregarding what he called "the rules of music," he sought to get inside the violin's sound "to reach its energy," entering a state of trance to mitigate his panic attack without the aid of medication. Shortly after this episode, Ahmed composed and recorded the violin piece "Reversing Mental Confusion as Means of Curing Depression" (2016) as a recreation of his experience during this attack.<sup>ix</sup> To record the piece, he put his laptop on his bedroom dresser, and recorded using its low-quality built-in microphone. He decided to upload it to YouTube "to express through sound the state I was feeling for myself, but I also had the crazy idea that it might hit some other human being's psychological state, so that they too can feel what I'm feeling."

Ahmed's experience demonstrates the extent to which directly engaging the ineffable and subconscious aspects of sonic experience has become a means of surviving for some. On a most personal level, it mitigated a panic attack caused by social fragmentation. By uploading the track online, however, Ahmed made appeals beyond only himself to engage a larger public. Expressing a feeling through sound (or what he called "vibrations"), Ahmed felt he could potentially connect with others. A sense of "connection" was significant in a social context that he experienced as alienating and fragmented.

Using a language of "vibration" and "energy," Ahmed's appeal to the ineffable as a form of healing engaged the transformative power of listening beyond only Islamic and Arab belief systems. Listening to sound to embody what he called its "vibration" was a means to mitigate the physical effects of social and political problems that he experienced as outside his control. Although Ahmed has dabbled in Sufism, he did not appeal to Sufi practices nor directly to God in his moment of crisis. Likewise, Sayed's active dispelling of any musical connection with "spirits" separated his approach to music as "therapy" from *zar* and other occult practices associated with Islamic practice. If appealing to "*jinn*" as a form of healing is the "magic" of



particular classes, using the nomenclature of “magic” sheds its negative connotations of superstition and opposition to artistic enlightenment. Most DIY musicians, alarmed by the political power of what has become known as the “Islamic resurgence,” distance themselves from overtly religious discourse. Neither did these musicians use the language of *tarab*, which for many urban youth today represents the aesthetics of an older generation and a deep rootedness in Arab culture and aesthetics toward which some urban youth today are averse.

Instead of adopting language that would culturally situate their conception of magic, they use words such as “energy,” “vibration,” and “thought forms” to suggest a more subconscious—and thus pre-cultural—understanding of the ineffable. These terms are also not neutral. Although they suggest a closer orientation toward Enlightenment rationality and could be traced to the state’s modernization efforts, they belie the wholesale adoption of modernist ideologies by nonetheless privileging the inexplicable and intersubjective. “Magic,” then, is a logic that blends these various ideologies in a way that expresses the particular sensibilities of the urban middle class. It reveals a particular valuing of that which they deem pre-cultural, subconscious, and universal.

### **“Not Politics”: Magic as Community**

The political upheaval that began in 2011 inspired some independent musicians to use the ineffable nature of sonic experience to heal not only themselves but what they experienced as a fragmented, depressed, and anxious society. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution, dozens of artistic projects made the public street their primary stage.<sup>x</sup> Many of these projects began as public celebrations of the revolution’s victory but slowly evolved into practices that were believed to continue the revolution itself. The burgeoning of independent music in public in the revolution’s wake can best be understood as a reaction to processes of modernization and state repression that removed certain types of arts, namely those that would become associated with the middle class, from public space. Although post-revolutionary street projects emerged from diverse ideologies and practices, many were oriented toward social “uplift” and fostering a sense of community.

Far from a novel practice, using art as a socially transformative tool was once an important facet of Egyptian state policy. Through state institutions founded in the 1950s, the state sought “to reconstruct a system of cultural values based on a progressive humanism from a synthesis of national and universal cultures” (el-Shawan 1980, 118; for television see Abu-Lughod 2005, 10-11). In so doing, it upheld the secular-educated, upwardly mobile middle-class citizen as a national ideal. The arts, then, were a primary means of cultural “uplift” for what it considered an uncultured and uneducated masses (Winegar 2006, 137-74).

These processes of modernization, which had initially begun much earlier in the 18th century, likewise contributed to the removal of certain types of creative practice from the street and daily life. With the gradual institutionalization of the arts in state entities, and with the Mubarak regime’s criminalization of public gathering, those who performed music in the street were largely associated with the lower classes, premodern practices, and/or criminality (van Nieuwkerk 1995). Whereas middle-class independent musicians did not have access to the street as a site of performance due both to modernist values and to state policing, *mahraganat* musicians, in contrast, primarily performed at street weddings in low-income neighborhoods. These areas of the city have largely remained outside state control and reform (Grippio 2007, 2010; Bayat 2010 [2013]; Swedenburg 2012).

With the state's adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1970s, it gradually abandoned its modernist-socialist project, shifting its focus from the citizen to the consumer (Abu-Lughod 2005). The charge of uplifting the masses through "culture" thus fell squarely onto the shoulders of artists themselves, who, prior to 2011 at least, had unequal access to the street and the mass media as means of engaging a public (Rizk 2010). The project of using the arts as a pedagogical tool became all the more urgent following the successful ouster of Mubarak in 2011. With the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as the first post-revolutionary president in 2012 followed by a swift return to military rule in 2013, many middle-class urban youth, especially, began to feel that the problem wasn't the government but "*us*." In other words, what was needed was a transformation in what they called "culture" as a prerequisite for long-lasting political change. As the independent musician mentioned at this essay's opening said: "Our aim is to get people out of their homes and involve them in culture. Uniting the people around culture is the most important." In many post-revolutionary street arts projects, "uniting" people was primarily achieved through the ineffable nature of listening as an intersubjective experience. This culture around which all people should unite, however, was one distinctly defined by particular values that privileged the middle-class subject.

Music in the street was believed to expose the public to new ideas by transforming one's affective state. One street concert organizer told me that he always begins his concerts by playing popular local favorites such as Umm Kulthum (b. 1929 d. 1975), considered one the most masterful *tarab* singers in modern Arab history (see Racy 2003; Danielson 1998; Lohman 2010). He begins his concerts this way because "You have to play something nostalgic, or something that [allows] people to relate to you . . . I am a good musician, but this man won't feel it if I play jazz. Transform (*tetmezig gedan*) people with your Umm Kulthum and after that play jazz as you want. Then they will accept your jazz, but only then. Before then, no." Musicians thus utilized listeners' collective nostalgia and in some cases transformative states of *tarab* as a means of making them more receptive to unfamiliar types of music, such as jazz. Beyond only widening their musical palette, however, exposing listeners to new musical genres through independent music was believed to transform one's worldview, what some musicians called "mentality" or "culture," more generally, making certain bodies more receptive to new ideas and people. For instance, another musician told me,

Music in the street just wasn't a part of Egyptian culture. People were so stuck in their way of doing things, but the revolution opened new doors for people to imagine new possibilities. Music in the street has this power to change people's consciousness, to get people used to new things—new ideas, new people.

It was independent music's ability to calm, transform, and expand people's "consciousness" that made it an ineffable yet revolutionary force.

Street performances were experienced as highly transformative for many of those who participated in them. In one instance, a female performer told me that the emotional transformation inspired by her performance stopped her male audience from sexually harassing her (see Sprengel forthcoming). A female journalist who attended a different street concert supported this account, writing that the fact that there was no harassment of any kind made her believe more in the saying that "*al-musiqa tehzi bilnefs*," music disciplines the soul. Among the middle class, sexual harassment is widely attributed to working-class men, who are believed to embody a more aggressive masculinity (Amar 2011). Another street musician recounted a time when a Salafi man, recognizable by his style of dress and facial hair, did not interrupt the music by walking through the performers or audience. Instead he walked around the event, treating the

performance area as a sacred space. The artist was deeply moved by this display of respect from an Islamist, who DIY musicians widely regard as opposed to their values. For these musicians, such instances signaled the cultivation of community, public unity in a society that was rife with social and political fragmentation.

These examples demonstrate that this community was one that included those deemed outside independent culture, namely the working-class “masses” and Islamists. In the words of one street concert organizer, street concerts were especially needed after the revolution because of what he called,

Social political cultural diffusion. Because the Salafi guy can see people who voted “no” on the constitution change and that they are playing good music and that they are good people. It is important because people meet each other. The time we spend together as a community is the time we spend in the street. So this time we need to be less tense, because everything is tense and chaotic but music calms it down. And we need it. To more accept each other. You know? . . . How could we ever see something like this otherwise? [At concerts] there is no harassment and there are no feelings of alienation (*ghorba*). The Salafi is standing next to the liberal is standing next to the girl with her hair visible next to the boy with long hair.

Boys with “long hair” is a common aesthetic among independent artists. It is a style that sets musicians apart and often makes them subject to ridicule by those not involved in independent culture. Most broadly, a sense of community was significant because it meant feelings of belonging and security. As one musician told me, “This is why it is important. Because people feel they are safe,” specifically among those whom they consider different from themselves. This sense of community was experienced as quite profound given the class disparities and clashing ideologies that had been driving social turmoil in the years following the 2011 revolution, instability that some ultimately attribute to the revolution’s failure.

Significantly for the musicians involved, forming community by performing independent music in the street was understood to be *non*-political. In contrast to the ineffable, pre-cultural power of music, politics was ideological and counterproductive to their social aims. According to one organizer,

We are trying to keep this all about society and doing good and staying away from politics. Because if we bring politics into it, it is going to destroy the whole concept . . . As soon as they are going to say that we are getting people to go down and do the revolution all over again, it is going to go into a legal dilemma and we are never going to get out of it. We are trying to do something good, not complicated in this.

He viewed “doing good” and “doing” politics as mutually exclusive. Similarly, another street concert organizer in Alexandria considered politics to be counterproductive, “We shouldn’t politicize the cultural work in the street . . . everything in Egypt is politicized, and this is exhausting . . . We want this to end, and we can’t get rid of this. Nothing is being accomplished, everything is going as it goes.” The notion that politics only produces the status quo was pervasive among the artists I spoke with. To them, politics belonged to state bureaucrats and military officials who could produce, at best, “idle talk.” The inefficacy of politics was most poignantly demonstrated in the failed revolution—even widespread discursive critique and a popular uprising that involved millions of Egyptians could not unseat military rule.

In contrast to politics, the public performance of independent music was understood to be an experiential model of social change not predicated on shared ideology, discourse, or even words. It was the intersubjective experience of listening, music’s ineffable qualities, that

rendered social change possible. As the founder of one project told me, the goal is “to create social impact, not just social awareness.” Whereas social awareness was achieved through discursive critique, a pillar of public politics as conceptualized in much social theory, social impact in this case was to collectively *experience* the desired alternative in the present. As my bassist friend, whose quote opened this essay, said, he wanted to create a society that is “this relaxed, and this organized, and this beautiful” through the collective experience of what he called “pure music.” These artists believed that similar to the way music could heal Ahmed’s emotional and psychological state, it could likewise perform therapeutic work through “social political cultural diffusion,” intersubjective public listening, on a broader social level. If listening subconsciously transferred energies, vibrations, and thought forms, this experience in public was given broader implications in the context of social strife. Public listening transformed public feeling and public consciousness, bringing a divided society into momentary communion. In other words, street concerts were a form of art therapy for the masses.

### **“Not *Mahraganat*”: Magic as Power**

Significantly, it was this *interpretation* of the arts as magic that differentiated it from politics. Independent musicians specifically chose songs that did not have political lyrics—their only mission being to “beautify” the public soundscape. In so doing, they were believed to be unimposing of any particular message. Discourses of magic were thus a distancing mechanism from ideology. They located social transformation in the listener. If a listener should be moved to transform behavior and/or thought, it was an act of the listener’s own agency. This view resonates with some treatments of listening in Islamic philosophies, which view the listener as the primary agent who must realize divine truth (Hirschkind 2006). They likewise align with approaches to sonic experience as primarily pre-cultural, viewed through seemingly innocuous and universal terms of “energy” and “vibration.”

Although celebrating the non-political power of the ineffable to cultivate community, independent musicians founded public music projects on the premise that the street did not already have music and that it had not been a space of performance. In reality, however, the urban Egyptian street has had music in abundance. *Sha’bi* (folk or popular music, literally “of the people”) and *mahraganat* (festival music), for instance, are urban working-class DIY genres that emerged from street weddings in low-income neighborhoods. Although ignored by most mainstream media outlets, their sound has become almost ubiquitous in public space by spreading through street weddings and via public transportation (Grippio 2007, 2010; Swedenburg 2012).

Independent musicians did not associate the music already circulating in public space with social change or cultural “uplift.” One organizer of street concerts told me, for instance, that he did not value all music equally for its ability to spread positive energy in public space:

There is music for the soul and it doesn’t have to be one genre. It’s just a matter of taste whether you like it or not, but it is music for your soul. When you listen to it you can just sense the energy of the person who is playing or writing it. You can feel it . . . And then there is music that is just there for people to move to. Which has nothing to do with the soul.

He admitted that some people who “dance their soul away,” referencing *mahraganat*’s association with celebratory wedding culture and boisterous dance, can be positively affected in the sense that the act of dancing makes them happy; however, he viewed this happiness as

entirely different from what results from the independent music he presents through his street music project. In contrast to independent music,

*Sha'bi* and *mahraganat* . . . [are] just about having fun in a different way. It is not about healing. It is not about feeding your soul. Because there is sophisticated music that when you listen to it, I feel it makes you smarter. Smarter as a human being, not just mentally as a GPA. It makes your soul smarter. I don't know how to explain it. But it's just a feeling you get.

The idea that hearing “makes your soul smarter,” overlaps in some ways with the privileging of listening in Islamic lines of thought in which knowledge is attained through the internalization that hearing facilitates. It also indicated that its positive effects, the “healing” that post-revolutionary society needed, pertained to only certain types of music.

When I asked another organizer if *mahraganat* could ever be performed in his street concert project, he seemed disgusted by the question and without a smile told me “*mahraganat* is not music.” Another critiqued some foreign journalists’ positive treatment of *mahraganat* as a “local” music, telling me: “Yes, it may be local, but teachers physically abusing school children is also a ‘local custom,’ that doesn’t mean we should respect it.” Those outside *mahraganat* culture disliked the genre because of its supposed potential to perpetuate violence, sexual harassment, and a problematic working-class masculinity. *Mahraganat* was widely considered, in the words of one Egyptian friend, “a form of violent expression.”

In her recent analysis of public beautification projects in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, anthropologist Jessica Winegar similarly found that post-revolution projects primarily promoted modernist values and aesthetics that privileged the middle-class subject. Among the projects’ many goals was to beautify the street through citizen-led cleaning initiatives and regulate public behavior in it to cultivate a “non-threatening public space” (Winegar 2016, 611). These aims echo many of the sentiments expressed by some musicians, who used independent music to produce a public atmosphere that was “this relaxed, and this organized, and this beautiful” and who associated the working-class culture currently dominant in the street with violence and aggression. Winegar concludes that the aesthetic ordering perpetuated by these projects reproduced the civilizing, exclusionary tendencies of the state that idealizes the middle-class citizen as exemplary. They presented “such judgements as true, pure, and universal” even though they were founded upon a bourgeois emphasis on what she calls “sensory containment” (Winegar 2016, 611).<sup>xi</sup>

Considering the sonic nature of public projects indicates that this is not the complete adoption of bourgeoisie sensory containment predicated on rational liberal subjectivity, however. The public music projects championed by independent musicians targeted an intersubjective experience and the ineffable as the primary drivers of public healing and social change. Viewing independent arts as the primary vehicle to “uplift” the masses and actively excluding genres such as *mahraganat*, however, indicates that this was a desire for intersubjectivity that privileged the position of the middle-class subject. Hearing was such a magical alternative to ordinary politics because it located agency in the listener. It was not the independent musician who acted, but the working-class listener who raised him/herself to the embodiment of supposedly middle-class ideals. Discourses of magic thus allowed independent musicians to view listeners as the primary agents of working-class exclusion. Listeners’ social transformation, from once desiring *mahraganat* to now desiring jazz, was seen as an agentive act initiated via the inexplicable. Discourses of magic worked to obscure these relations of power at the same time as they perpetuated them. My findings do not contrast with Winegar’s but demonstrate how

intersubjectivity was desired even among those who perpetuate modernist, rationalist ideals so long as it involved the agentive “uplift” of other listeners to embody middle-class respectability.

That these changes were believed to come on the volition of the listener was clear in many of the musicians’ statements above: “When they hear this music you can see and feel a change in *them*” (emphasis added). *They* are the ones who change. Drawing from the belief that the ineffable is subconscious and thus pre-cultural, listening is a way of inculcating in the working-class body new knowledge, ideals, and “consciousness.” It supposedly made them more open to new ideals, people, and cultures, such as jazz music and the “long-haired” independent musicians who played it. It was through hearing independent music that the Salafi man was believed to respect difference, for instance.

Whereas Egyptian artists understood politics as necessarily perpetuating hierarchical relationships of power that fanned existing social tensions, they believed that music, in contrast, avoided these relations by locating agency in the receiver. They treated the listener, not the performer, as the primary agent, whose self transformation facilitated affective bonds in public. These bonds cultivated a new sense of community centered specifically around independent culture and values. Discourses of magic were thus an idealized response to the very real experience of political failure. Yet, it belies underlying assumptions that the working class are the problem, that they need certain kinds of art and culture because their own creative expression is “violent” and thus counterproductive to revolutionary goals. It conceals the fact that the so-called masses must always be “uplifted” *to* somewhere.

## Conclusion

Not all street arts projects are the same. Some independent artists are keenly aware of the politics of working in less privileged communities. Artists working in these projects more often reported that it was the independent artists—not the audience—who were transformed in the process. As one organizer told me, performing in the street teaches artists “humility,” “they learn that we are one, with the same problems.” Thus, street arts projects are not a uniform practice; yet, many of those emerging in the wake of the 2011 revolution mobilized the ineffable to suggest a utopian alternative to politics in a way that located change, and the subsequent formation of community, in the voluntary transformation of a supposedly uncultured listener.

A key tension in theories of affect has been negotiating affect’s supposedly pre-cultural, universalizing nature but also its difference- and boundary-making potential (Hofman 2015). Scholars and activists that highlight the utopian nature of the ineffable often foreground its pre-cultural aspects by drawing from biological, textual, and/or philosophical analysis. What an ethnographic approach highlights, in contrast, is how the pre-cultural and the cultural aspects of the ineffable cannot truly be separated. Ahmed’s experience of mitigating a panic attack through sonic vibration indicates the lived efficacy of what are considered biological, subconscious aspects of sonic experience. As Judith Becker’s work on trance has demonstrated, much what sonic experience can do to the physical body lies outside of cultural codes and scientific analysis, it simply cannot be explained (2004). Yet, for the ineffable aspects of sonic experience to do the work of politics, it must also be rendered meaningful. It is exactly this ambiguity between the pre-cultural and cultural, object and experience, that makes “magic” such a desirable form of politics. Appealing to affective magic allows one to locate change in the pre-cultural even while interpreting the consequences of this change through particular social and historical conditions that make such transformations politically meaningful.

The musicians at this article's opening were critical of music espousing an overtly political ideology because such artistic expression bulldozed over this delicate ambiguity that made art so (politically) powerful in the first place. Returning to my bassist friend's conviction that "If art cannot convey, *imply* a political message then no fucking way we can deliver the message," suggests that individuals can be resistant to direct ideology, especially when some aspects of that ideology may reproduce the state's historical privileging of the middle-class subject. Additionally, in the context of revolution and eventual revolutionary failure, it was ideology that compelled people to violence. His statement likewise reveals that even musicians critical of ordinary politics still sought to sonically communicate *something*. Independent musicians involved in street music projects located communication in a mystical, subconscious realm, even accessing it through appeals to the soul, the cosmos, or *tarab*. While this means of communication is less easily subject to the authoritarian state's censorship, even treatments of sound as energy and vibration were given meaning as therapeutic, communal, and *not* distinctly situated in Arab/Islamic ideologies of listening. In this particular case, listening to independent music was rendered politically meaningful in light of the Egyptian state no longer providing "uplift" through patronization of the arts and, especially, as a counter to the public depression following the revolution's failure. Thus the subconscious and the conscious, the pre-cultural and the cultural, are not hard binaries but deeply intertwined. Even through many aspects of magic must necessarily remain inexplicable, it is important to remember that desires for the ineffable, and its utilization as a political tool, are always culturally and historically situated.

My intention has not been to debunk the myth of music as magic. As the first half of this essay has demonstrated, listening to and performing certain types of music has inexplicable empowering social consequences and tangible physical effects. Instead it has been to show how the ineffable, when used as an alternative—and more ethical—model of politics, is not removed from power. It is thus not the utopian ideal that some activists and feminist writers have longed for. Or, if it is, it provides further evidence of how utopias are always exclusionary (Winegar 2016, 620). It is instead the marginalization of ineffable experience, whether through processes of modernization in the West or in Egypt, and the failure of ordinary politics to make us feel better, that has allowed it to seem so revolutionary in the present.

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- i These two approaches have been thoroughly examined elsewhere. For an excellent explication see Hofman 2015.
- ii This article is not meant to be comprehensive in its representation of Egyptian DIY music, an impossible task given the diversity of the scene. It is instead limited to those artists who viewed their music as a type of social activism.
- iii Not all independent musicians are middle class. Ahmed, for example, is a prominent independent artist and is from a low-income community. Regardless of the socio-economic status of individual musicians, the scene is primarily associated with values and aesthetics commonly attributed to the urban middle class.
- iv For the remainder of this essay, I use the English word “independent” because it is the nomenclature most often used by the musicians themselves, indicating their facilities with the English language. I likewise use the Arabic word “*mahraganat*” because it was the term used by those involved in the genre.
- v The Islamic resurgence is the modern revival of Islamic practices, values, and beliefs as indigenous sources of knowledge and social organization. It is largely seen to counter and contrast with foreign dominance and influence, which proponents argue has resulted in the diminished role of Islam as the primary social, political, and cultural system of modern Arabs.
- vi In classical philosophy, for instance, cosmic spheres (planets) were attributed with producing certain sounds, which could affect the soul, with some believing it is what raised the soul from the body in death or filled the body at birth (Goodwin 1986, 3-52).
- vii Many of the most sensitive musicians, for instance, are also described as pious or as attaining their musical proficiency through studying Qur’anic recitation and/or religious song (Racy 2003, 128; Danielson 1998)
- viii In the secular realm, ethnomusicologist Timothy D. Taylor likewise found that the increased popularity of Goa/psychedelic music in the US in the 1990s was a means for some fans to “subsist while languidly carrying on everyday life” under neoliberal capitalism in the West (Taylor 2001, 184).
- ix To maintain anonymity, I have changed the names of the artist and composition. The composition name given here expresses the original’s meaning in Arabic.
- x These projects included al-Fann Midan (Art is a City Square), StreetBeats, al-Rasif (Sidewalk) festival, Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), Backstreet Festival, Pick a Street, and Mini Mobile Concerts, to name only a few.
- xi The privileging of sensory containment appeared, for instance, in the wearing of masks and latex gloves to clean public space. Such accoutrements signaled modern cleaning methods that distanced middle-class bodies from dirt in ways that distinguished them from working-class cleaners (Winegar 2016, 617).