

A Jihad Called Heavy Metal

Musician and social historian Mark LeVine, author of “Heavy Metal Jihad,” is convinced rock music has a major role to play as a Middle East peacemaker. ● While Iran continues to ban music and root out rock, Lebanon and Egypt have gradually grown more tolerant. ● Even some Islamic clerics have stopped seeing the cross-pollination of musical trends as a threat. ●

by **Farian Sabahi**

“In a way, music and Islamic radicalism are two sides of same coin, because the anger and frustration you put into playing a guitar or shooting an AK-47 exist on the same plain. I met a number of young Islamic extremists who grew up as metal-heads, and as they got older they channeled their anger and rebellion into more normal avenues, such as religious activism. While violent religious beliefs are ultimately nihilistic and negative, the music itself is positive and transformational. In that sense, music is jihad in the best sense.”

American scholar Mark LeVine teaches Middle East history at the University of Irvine (California). LeVine, widely considered a “new generation” historian, is the author of the acclaimed “Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam,” published in 2008, which explores the relationship between heavy metal, hip-hop, rock and punk musicians and in the context of the religiously conservative Muslim world. “The Economist” magazine has praised LeVine’s unusual mixing of history and cultural anthropology, saying his work provides such “a wealth of statistical detail that even the most gung-ho advocates of IMF and World Bank programs must pause for thought.”

Why has heavy metal music become such an important part of the Islamic world?

For two reasons primarily. First, heavy metal music became a kind of independence music, if not at a political level then certainly at a personal one — like reggae or rap or 1960s music. At first glance it might seem that extreme metallica, especially death metal, is nihilistic and death-obsessed. But plenty of Middle East metal-heads have told me that for them music about death actually affirms life. It’s cathartic. It represents what people live.

I also think of what Reda Zine told me. He founded the Moroccan metal-head scene and now lives in Bologna. “We play heavy metal because our lives are heavy metal.” He’s an amazing musician, director and activist. When you live in a place where it’s hard to hope for a better future and where corruption, oppression and war are the norm, heavy metal becomes the perfect music for young people. It’s not just relief or resistance, but also helps bring together young people in a community setting that isn’t monitored by police or co-opted by state and moral entities, which happens with other forms of rock.

Secondly, metal is a global phenomenon. If you become a metal-head in Egypt or Iran you’re suddenly part of a global tribe. It’s what Bruce Dickinson of Iron Maiden once told me: “Our fans are a big family even though they’ve never met.” This is crucial in countries where young people are marginalized and feel like they don’t belong to anything but their music.

How would you characterize regional government response?

In the 1990s and the beginning of this century Satanism

The lead vocalist of Pakistani rock band Janoon, Ali Azmat (center), performs during a July 2005 Islamabad concert marking International Music Day.



came up often. Musicians and fans were arrested and in some cases tried and sentenced as Satan worshippers. The accusations were absurd, but to some extent understandable given the reputation metal-heads had in the West, linked to sex, drugs, drinking.

But the metal bands that typified that kind of behavior, for example Motley Crue and Poison, never really became popular in the Middle East. Bands with more “political” overtones took off instead: Cannibal Corpse, Death, Napalm Death, Slayer, and so on. They were popular because their music was more serious and skillful. Same with hip-hop, where artists such as 2Pac got a following, while “bitches and ho’s” and the “gangsta rap” movement went nowhere because it was completely disconnected from local lives and culture.

What about more recently?

Governments have gradually become more tolerant toward heavy metal, even in Saudi Arabia. They don’t see the music as a threat to public order, morality and religion. They have other headaches. Consider Egypt, where the government’s busy trying to keep the Muslim Brotherhood at bay. They’re less interesting in chasing down young people on cultural issues. Even Islamic religious extremists figured it out. Until a decade ago, radicals challenged metal-heads in Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon. Now, they’ve more or less backed away from trying to regulate musical interests.

The more important underlying question is what happens if metal is accepted. Does it lose its meaning and political power by becoming part of the system? Too early to tell, but I’m fairly sure that as long as you have repressive, corrupt governments, metal will continue to thrive as a form of political resistance and a way of laying out a vision of an alternative future. I should also point out that Iran still bans heavy metal. You’re not going to find public concerts in Yemen or Afghanistan...

One of chapter of “Heavy Metal Islam” deals specifically with Iran. How do musicians get around Islamic Republic restrictions? Do they leave the country?

Who says they *want* to leave? Sure, some may have fled to Europe or the United States. At the same time, I think it’s extremely important to understand Iranian metal-heads, musicians and fans alike, like most people who produce and nurture culture, want social change,

greater openness and democracy. The idea isn’t to leave but to stay and help build a better future. Naturally, when government crackdowns get bad, some opt out, at least temporarily.

At the same time, the Iranian metal-heads scene remains among the richest in the region, notwithstanding bans. The artists there aren’t just imitating or copying American and European sounds but also create amazing hybrids that are producing metal subgenres. Who knows, maybe the next Black Sabbath or Led Zeppelin will come out of Tehran, Cairo or Karachi!

Tehran and Beirut are capitals of two Shiite-majority countries. How do you see their similarities and differences?

Good question. The difference responses to rock music by the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian regime is proof positive that in discussing religion and culture it’s foolish to generalize. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is compelled to operate in a pluralistic context when it comes to politics and culture. Starting several years ago its leadership decided to be tolerant toward influences from other cultures.

You can walk through a neighborhood controlled by Hezbollah in southern Beirut and see scantily-clad women without headscarves, which surprises my Egyptian friends. Not to mention the fact that Hezbollah even has its own orchestra that produces and performs music. In general terms Hezbollah’s policy is that if music isn’t explicitly anti-religious, anti-Islamic or immoral, it’s not going to get involved.

And in Iran?

Compared to Lebanon, Iran is a very powerful and deeply conservative state whose bureaucracy totally dominates the public sphere. For years, authorities have monitored everything people say and do in public. But not in private. What that means is that many Iranians behave in public but do drugs in private. Metal, and music in general, is a community undertaking. The government will intervene when it finds out about a “secret” concert because it’s worried these kinds of events can break down

A Lebanese boy jumped on stage to take a photo of himself with Deep Purple’s Roger Glover during a concert by the British rock band at the Baalbek International Festival held in July 2009 in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.

of the barrier between the public and private sectors.

Obviously a lot has changed since the recent presidential elections and the wave of protests that followed, which changed the national mood. It’s hard to foresee what’s ahead for Iran. One thing’s certain: Iranian authorities are more repressive than ever.

In Pakistan, terrorism and extremism are two extremely serious ongoing problems.

Tell us about the music scene there.

In Pakistan, music is jihad in the best sense of the word, as my friend Salman Ahmad wrote in his new book “Rock’n’Roll Jihad.” He’s the founder of the Pakistani rock band Junoon [Junoon is a Sufi rock band from Lahore, that Ahmad founded in 1990].

Music isn’t strictly forbidden in the Koran, and the majority of the hadith (sayings of the Prophet) that are used to suggest there’s a ban are unreliable. Young people who love all forms of music should challenge the mistaken belief that Islam bars music. They need to adopt a more critical and open attitude toward religion. That’s important both for Islam and for other cultures. At the same time, Pakistan is full of paradoxes. The best record store in the country is Peshawar, the northwest provincial capital controlled by the Taliban. The reality is a lot more complex than we think!



Can the proliferation of music in the region help build a better future?

First, the music makes us understand that the “us”-“them” divide isn’t as wide as we think. I called my book “Heavy Metal Islam” because people just can’t imagine Muslims liking metal. But they do. They also like other forms that are considered part of Western culture.

Second, when you think the origins of heavy metal you come to realize it has roots in the Islamic world. Just think of the Blues. That music came from African slaves, most of them Muslim. Blues melodies are intertwined with Islamic prayer calls. There’s also the influence of Dick Dale, the Lebanese-American who’s considered the father heavy metal guitar. He created the so-called surf-rock sound, the reverb twang; he played the electric guitar like an Oud, applying Middle Eastern and Arab riffs. Sooner or later you come to realize that music can unite people.

I remember attending the Rock for Peace Festival in Istanbul (Barisarock). There was a fantastic Iranian progressive metal band fronted by guitarist Farzad Golpayegani. The percussionist was an Iranian Azeri who told me his dream was to see Muslims, Christians and Jews working together to bid for peace. When the 22-year-old bass player opened up a blues funk jam, 35,000 people went wild. I can’t even begin to explain it. That’s the power of music. It brings people together and creates solidarity. Afro-beat legend Fela Kuti once said, “Music is the weapon of the future.” He was right. If people take the power of music seriously, putting aside rage, weapons and war and using music to open new horizons, we’ll all be better off. American, European and Middle Eastern, doesn’t matter. All of us.

A final question. You made an album of music from the bands cited in “Heavy Metal Islam” into an album “Flowers in the Desert.” Why that name?

The album compiles the work of a number of artists I mentioned. The name was based on something an Iranian musician told me. “The arrival of the metal in the 1980s, in the middle of the war against Iraq and during the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini, was like a flower in the desert.” Those were his words. That’s the case with all great music. The album is an effort to make other people aware of some of these stories, to help the flowers bloom, to plant seeds across the planet — always in the hope the birth of new ties will make people see this amazing world. ●