# University of Alberta

## The Free Improvised Music Scene in Beirut:
## Negotiating Identities and Stimulating Social Transformation in an
## Era of Political Conflict

by

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**Abstract**

Although free improvised music (FIM) originated in Europe and the United States in the 1960s, it has come to possess meanings and roles unique to its individual contexts of production in today's transnational scene. By focusing on the Lebanese free improvised music scene which emerged in Beirut in 2000, my study aims to address the gap in scholarship on Lebanese expressive culture, particularly music, as a tool to negotiate identity. My thesis addresses the way FIM in Lebanon allows four musicians of the "war generation" (Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui, Bechir Saade, and Raed Yassin) to express their individual identities as well as their complex relationship with conflict. I propose that, in a society still coming to terms with the atrocities of civil war and constant political instability, the practice of FIM may have a role in reflecting conflict, facilitating inter-cultural dialogue, as well as breaking aesthetic, socio-economic, and sectarian barriers.

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# Introduction

## *The aim of my study*

Improviser and scholar George Lewis states that at the end of the 1950s, European jazz was experiencing an "identity crisis." This resulted in European free improvised music (FIM) not only growing out of American free jazz in the 1960s, but also "[breaking] away from American stylistic directions and jazz signifiers" (Lewis 2004). This process was considered so significant in music history that it was referred to as the "European emancipation" from American cultural hegemony by Joachim Ernst Berendt (Lewis 2004). According to Berendt, FIM's major contribution to musical development at the time was its assertion of freedom from "the tyranny of regularly accented meter, functional harmony, symmetrical cycles and phrase endings" (quoted in Lewis 2004). On the socio-political level however, Lewis reads the emergence of FIM in Europe as follows: "With the Cold War still producing a divided Germany and a Balkanized Europe, as well as the first effects of the postcolonial condition, the new European free music could be read as asserting the desirability of a borderless Europe – if not the decline of the notion of the unitary European nation-state itself" (Lewis 2004). In connection, Rzewski sums up FIM's socio-political significance in the 1960s in the following manner: "In the 1960s, in radical circles of the 'free music' movement, *freedom* was an ethical and political, as well as an aesthetic, concept. Free music was not merely a fashion of the times, and not merely a form of entertainment. It was also felt to be connected with the many political movements that at that time set out to change the world – in this case, to free the world from the tyranny of outdated traditional forms. Free improvisation was viewed as the possible basis for a new form of universal communication, through the spontaneous and wordless interaction of improvising musicians of different traditions" (Rzewski 2004, 268).

It is evident that European FIM emerged out of a long history of continental musical development and interaction with the United States. More

importantly, this musical practice possesses powerful connections with historically and culturally-specific narratives of freedom and "emancipation" that have direct associations with *European* socio-political and ideological developments. Bearing that in mind, how does such a musical practice end up in a remote place like Beirut, Lebanon, with seemingly no logical pre-requisite in musical history? Of course, globalization these days renders the transportation of the most unlikely cultural products across continents in seconds; this explains the transnational scope which FIM has gained today. However, this does not justify the creation and continued operation of MILL (Musique Improvisée Libre au Liban) since 2000. Founded by a small group of Lebanese musicians born at the beginning of the civil war (around 1975), MILL is an association which until today remains the primary instigator and promoter of FIM in Lebanon. In other words, how could FIM be relevant in a country like Lebanon? In what way are Lebanese FIM musicians identifying with such a musical practice which at first glance, does not seem to have a historical, social, or political connection with their country of origin?

My aim in this study is to discover the reasons behind Lebanese musicians' affinity for this music, its role in negotiating identity, as well as the socio-cultural, economic and political underpinnings of FIM's arrival and survival in post-war Lebanon. This is based on the premise that a musical practice, especially when uprooted from its historical origin, will necessarily develop meanings which are unique to its new socio-cultural context(s). After all, as German trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff stated in 1963 in reference to European musicians' appropriation of jazz: "A jazz musician in Europe should not demand of himself to play like a colored musician in New York or Chicago; he should not try it and one should not expect it of him, because his problems are different and his surroundings are subject to other circumstances" (quoted in Lewis 2004).

## *Defining free improvised music (FIM)*

"Free improvisation is […] a mode of listening, an evaluative framework that allows individuals to parse the unfamiliar and make considered (and considerate) aesthetic judgements…

Listening is the way identities are narrated and negotiated and the way differences are articulated or […] 'woven together.'"

——— Jason Stanyek[1]

Cox and Warner state that FIM "is more distinctly European and modernist in origin [than free jazz], reflecting the dual musical influences of jazz (e.g. John Coltrane,[2] Eric Dolphy,[3] Albert Ayler[4]) and the classical avant-garde (e.g. Anton Webern,[5] Karlheinz Stockhausen[6], John Cage[7]), and loosely connected to anarchist and Marxist political theory. In comparison with free jazz, improvised music is often more sober, dispassionate, and informal, guided less by musical expression than by sonic exploration" (Cox and Warner 2004, 252).

"Western 'classical' music demands a solution to most of the technical problems of making music *before* the music can be performed. Whereas – although most improvised musics demand a high level of technical competence – the elaboration of a theme, on a chord sequence or the direct response of musical dialogue, demands the application of 'problem-solving' techniques *within* the actual performance… In improvised music there is a creative and inter-active dialogical relationship between performers, whereas a composed work acts as a medium between the various instrumental components. The relationship between musicians loses its social significance; lessened by the agency of an external element, e.g. the composition."

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1. (Stanyek 1999, 47)

2. A famous American jazz saxophonist who was at the forefront of free jazz

3. A well-known American jazz alto saxophonist, bass clarinetist, and flautist who contributed to free jazz

4. An American jazz saxophonist famous for his contributions to free jazz

5. An Austrian composer and conductor who was known for his use of the twelve-tone technique

6. A great German composer known for his work in aleatory music, serial composition, and electronic music

7. A famous American composer known for his creation of the "prepared piano" and his work in chance and electronic music

———Eddie Prevost[8]

"I'm attracted to improvisation because of something I value. That is a freshness, a certain quality that can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get by writing. It is something to do with the 'edge.' Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means, but it is a leap into the unknown."

———Steve Lacy[9]

In addition to the ideals of musical and political freedom, problem-solving on the spot, and interaction between musicians, FIM strives to eradicate the traditional hierarchy of instruments by promoting egalitarianism among musicians (Cox and Warner 2004, 251-2). FIM practitioners also value exploration to the extent that they utilize "extended" techniques. For instance, "wind players employ, few fingerings and ways of blowing to produce microtones, chords, harmonics, and vocal elements such as pops and growls; percussionists strike or rub their instruments in unorthodox places and ways, and often incorporate found objects; string players prepare their instruments with nuts, bolts, and other gadgets to drastically alter their sonic characteristics" (Cox and Warner 2004, 251).

## Situating my study

Scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, and political science have frequently tackled the impact of civil war on processes of identity formation within Lebanese society (Aber and Macksoud 1996; Assal and Farrell 1992; Barak 2007; Faour 1998; Haugbolle 2005; Khalaf 2001; Kreidie and Monroe 2002; Nagel 2002; Oweini 1998).  Besides the literature on musical improvisation in general (Bailey 1993; Benson 2003; Durant 1989; Gould and Keaton 2000;

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8. An English drummer and percussionist well-known on the FIM circuit and co-founder of famous group AMM; quoted in Cox and Warner 2004, in the quotations preceding the *Improvised Musics* section

9. An American jazz saxophonist and improviser; quoted in Cox and Warner 2004, in the quotations preceding the *Improvised Musics* section

Heble 2000; Monson 1996; Nettl 1974 and 1998), the ever-growing body of work on FIM provides a wide range of approaches which address historical issues (Belgrad 1998; Borgo 2002), aesthetic principles of freedom, chaos, and imperfection (Borgo 1999; Hamilton 2000; Lewis 2004; Litweiler 1984), as well as the ideal of inter-cultural dialogue through music (Stanyek 1999 and 2004). On the other hand, most studies on Lebanese music have tended to focus on religious, folk, and nationalistic contexts (Chouairi 2006; Habib 2005; Hood 2006; Racy 1985 and 1996; Stone 2008), with the exception of Thomas Burkhalter's current research on Beirut's alternative music scene (Burkhalter 2006 and 2007).

By focusing on the Lebanese free improvised music scene (FIMS), my thesis aims to address the gap in studies on Lebanese expressive culture, particularly music, as a tool to negotiate identity. In the process, I will be looking at the way FIM in Lebanon allows four musicians (Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui, Bechir Saade, and Raed Yassin) to express their individual identities as well as their complex relationship with conflict. In addition to the individual meanings that these musicians ascribe to FIM, I will explore the broader social significance which this musical practice may possess in a post-war and continuously unstable country such as Lebanon.

## *Personal interest in this project*

Growing up in Beirut in a post civil war society, I have always been troubled by questions of cultural and individual identity. And having discovered a passion for music at an early age, I have recently realized that my identity struggles have most vividly been manifested in a constant search for a distinctive musical identity. My exploration of music began at the age of eight with private Western classical piano lessons which lasted eleven years. By the time I was fifteen, I began questioning the value of purely performance-based musical studies; I felt the need to express my individual personality through the composition of original music. That is when I started writing rock songs on acoustic guitar and performing within university and music festival contexts. In an

effort to improve my vocal technique, I turned to vocal jazz improvisation lessons at a private music school, which led me to take jazz theory and piano lessons as I became interested in jazz. My involvement in Beirut's music scene finally led me to discover FIM, which I could not relate to until I participated in German trumpet player Axel Dorner's FIM workshop during the 2006 Irtijal festival.

It is then that I began questioning the extent to which "music" or sound constitutes intention or is imposed on the performer by the broader "soundscape" which may *itself* be considered a living organism. For instance, in a collective FIM session, are individual identities shed in order to accommodate and highlight a collective identity, or a *lack* of it? The year 2006 was undeniably a turning-point in my life, as graduating from university with a Business degree collided with the devastating Lebanese-Israeli July war as well as intensified my personal identity exploration process. I believe this to have been the impetus for my pursuit of a career in ethnomusicology, as it was then that my concern for identity struggles as well as the cultural, sociological, and economic contexts of music began to crystallize.

Since I was utterly mystified by my experience in Dorner's workshop, I decided to dedicate my Master's thesis to the investigation of Beirut's FIMS. After all, Dorner's workshop had completely shattered my previous understanding of "music" and the role of musician or improviser, as well as proposed the possibility of an individual, non-cultural musical identity. Consequently, my main research questions were directly instigated by this workshop, which proved to be a culmination of my continuing lifelong search for an individual musical identity.

## *Research questions*

MILL is an association which was founded in 2000 for the development of FIM in Lebanon. Over the last decade, a small but active FIMS has emerged in Beirut, featuring an annual international festival called Irtijal (Arabic for *improvisation*), as well as continuous collaborations with musicians within the transnational FIMS. In my thesis, I aim to understand the individual and social

significance of FIM in post-war Lebanon by studying the way it is used to negotiate identity. I therefore propose the need for scholars to consider expressive culture, and music in particular, as a tool for understanding social conflict, reconciliation, and transformation.

More specifically, I intend to address the following questions:

What does FIM mean to participants in the Lebanese scene? How does FIM negotiate identity both individually and within a group? How might FIM reflect, mediate and resolve conflict? What motivates musicians to create in this style? What is uniquely "Lebanese" about this musical scene? Is there a distinctive Lebanese style of FIM? What is the typical musician profile (socio-economic-cultural-religious) and why? Who is excluded, as musicians or audience members, and why? How do musicians control their own identities and the expectations of representing the Arab or Middle Eastern world when performing for an international audience? How does FIM function as a communicative and transformative medium in Lebanese society?

## *Definition of terms*

I would like to define two terms borrowed from popular music theory which will be widely used in my thesis. First, I will utilize the term "music scene" as defined by Will Straw: "that cultural space in which a range of musical practices co-exist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" (Straw 1991). This term is particularly helpful in my discussion of the Lebanese *alternative* music scene, as it allows me to designate a multi-faceted musical entity which draws together *people* (musicians, audiences, music producers, festival/concert organizers and promoters), *venues* (for performance, recording, or practice), *musical performances* (live or mediated), *funding institutions* (record labels, governmental institutions, cultural operators, private investors) and *promotional material in popular media* (TV or radio advertisements, newspaper or magazine articles, websites, online social networks,

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etc.). Throughout my thesis, I will attempt to highlight and analyze the economic aspect of the FIMS; I believe that recognizing this scene's economic dimensions will allow us to better understand the logic behind its members' projects, as well as the broader ideologies which provide the impetus for the existence of such a scene in this specific locale. Second, I will use an extension of the concept of "subculture" (Hebdige 2002 and Slobin 1993) when referring to the social stratum which constitutes the Lebanese alternative music scene. My use of the term aims at identifying a specific group within Lebanese society whose members possess privileged socio-economic and educational backgrounds and thus share a cosmopolitan lifestyle wherein they resist the mainstream popular culture and seek alternative, more individualized modes of identity construction.

## *Methodology*

In order to address these research questions, I conducted ethnographic research during three field trips to Beirut within a one-year period (May 2008-April 2009). My fieldwork methodology consisted of the following: attendance and audio-visual recording of public and private FIM concerts, attendance of private dinners and after-parties hosted by Irtijal organizers for visiting musicians, in-depth interviews with four Lebanese musicians, as well as casual conversations with FIM musicians and audience members (both Lebanese and non-Lebanese).[10] Moreover, I utilized current literature, non-scholarly articles and CD reviews from magazines and newspapers, CD liner notes and tracks, websites, blogs, online forums and facebook groups.[11]

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10. It must be noted here that my transcription of interviews involved extensive translation from colloquial Lebanese Arabic to informal English, and some of my informants were kind enough to communicate in English with me instead of their usual French.

11. Refer to my bibliography for a complete listing of these sources.

## Scope

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on four male musicians (Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui, Bechir Saade, and Raed Yassin) who play an important role in the Lebanese FIMS today. The reader will inevitably wonder whether the gender of the musicians under study is of any significance; in fact, the only female FIM musician in this scene seems to be Christine Sehnaoui who was a MILL founder. Unfortunately, I have not been able to include her perspective in my research as she seems to have permanently settled in France, and she has not been in Beirut during any of my visits. Since Christine is the only female musician, this may indicate that female musicians are generally not interested in FIM in Beirut; however, the overarching alternative music scene's general domination by young men may point to the influence of societal trends and gender roles as well as a disparity in opportunities provided to each gender. At the same time, since the Lebanese FIMS comprises only about seven regular musicians, and the audience seems to be mixed, one may also posit that this scene is too minute at the moment for gender counts to signify any definite trends.

Although my portrayal of the Lebanese FIMS may appear to be one-sided, I deliberately concentrated on the musicians' (as opposed to the audience's) perspectives because I was mostly concerned with the meaning of FIM for the former, the way they are constructing individual identities through this music, and the representation and perception of their identities by the international *online* audience. Although beyond the scope of my current project, future research on other Lebanese FIM musicians as well as audiences would undoubtedly contribute to a more representative picture of the scene.

## Opportunities and constraints

My fieldwork on the Lebanese FIMS was facilitated by having grown up in Beirut. Besides being bilingual (Arabic and English), I am familiar with the city, its socio-cultural norms, and its alternative music scene, and already had connections with some of the musicians before commencing my fieldwork.

Moreover, the particular music scene I am researching is strongly associated with socio-economically privileged, well-educated, urban, cosmopolitan (and possibly elitist) musicians who are very familiar with interviews and are actually eager to be the subject of scholarly research since they themselves may be considered social critics.

However, I must also acknowledge some of the constraints I faced during my fieldwork. First, as many scholars have noted, although an "insider" (such as myself) may provide extremely valuable insight into her culture, she may also experience difficulty in dissociating herself from that culture in order to make more critical observations and conclusions. This is precisely one of the obstacles I faced, despite the fact that I was actually an "outsider" to the FIMS's subculture itself. For instance, few days after my arrival in Beirut for my first round of fieldwork in May 2008, Beirut was taken over by fierce street fights between the Sunni political party Al-Mustaqbal and Shi'ite opposition parties. This week-long siege of Beirut was even referred to as a "mini civil war" by some. In addition to its more serious consequences for civilians, this conflict obstructed my fieldwork as I could not meet with one of my primary informants as previously planned. However, more importantly, I must admit that although this conflict ended after a couple of days, my disposition was seriously affected as I found myself in the midst of violent political clashes yet again. In fact, I was so depressed and demotivated that I could not bring myself to conduct any fieldwork for almost a month afterwards, as I had been "reduced" to a Lebanese civilian *yet again*, helpless in the face of attack. This was a state I had known all too well in my previous 22 years in Lebanon, a state that had finally driven me out of the country in 2006. It is therefore unsurprising that I would find it difficult to take a step back and analyze a society and a country in which I still possess too many personal interests, memories, and concerns.

In addition to the obstruction of my fieldwork by political conflict, there were also less dramatic limitations; for instance, the four musicians I worked with would travel more than once every month, which sometimes made it difficult to

arrange meetings with them. Moreover, some musicians in the FIMS, such as Raed Yassin, were actually living abroad throughout the year and only visited Beirut during the Irtijal festival; therefore, I had to make it a priority to return to Lebanon *before* my semester ended in order to interview them. Finally, although the four musicians themselves were very cooperative and helpful, I generally found it challenging to fit into the broader FIMS, perhaps because of its arguably elitist, musician-exclusive nature, as well as its possible domination by Francophone males.

Consequently, besides the informative in-depth interviews with the musicians, it seems like I was only able to catch *glimpses* of a subculture which I could not easily penetrate with the constraints of time, gender, language and lack of FIM experience.

## *Chapter overviews*

In Chapter 1, I provide a brief overview of Lebanon's recent history, focusing on major political conflicts, the country's contested national identity, and the current trend towards individualism within Lebanese society. Chapter 2 discusses the emergence of Lebanon's FIMS, its activities and economic structure, as well as introduces FIM musicians' "war generation" identities. Chapter 3 aims to show how FIM allows four Lebanese musicians to negotiate individual identities through the unique musical projects they undertake and the invention of personalized improvisational techniques on their instruments. This concept is extended in Chapter 4 into an entire worldview, where each of these musicians' personal principles in FIM translates into specific social dynamics within collective improvisation. In Chapter 5, I take identity negotiation one step further in the case of "Starry Night," as I propose that FIM supports a wide spectrum of potential interpretations and thus leads to a complex process of representation and politicization in Lebanon. In Chapter 6, I foreground barrier-breaking – a concept so dear to these improvising musicians – and investigate whether this principle is being applied within the sectarian and linguistic

constitution of the Lebanese FIMS and its audience. Finally, Chapter 7 elaborates on the related issues of inclusion and exclusion, extending the focus beyond the musicians' own subjectivities and interactions with each other and onto their interactions with their audiences. This chapter is crucial in understanding the broader social significance of FIM in a Lebanese context, as it tackles specific projects (involving Arab pop culture and civil war radio) which aim at challenging and redefining the boundaries between "serious" ("high") and "popular" ("low") art, as well as making this music more accessible and socially meaningful to Arab and Lebanese audiences.

# Chapter 1: Background

## *Early missionaries and foreign intervention*

Lebanon only became a separate entity with its present political boundaries in 1920. In order to understand its social, political, and cultural characteristics at present, one must look back at the history of that area, focusing on its social constitution, as well as its internal and external alliances and conflicts.

According to Mahmoud Ayoub, Mount Lebanon has been a place of refuge for religious, tribal, and political groups escaping persecution in other parts of the region since the seventh century, these communities namely being the Maronite Christian, the Druze, and the Shi'ite Muslim ones. Ayoub goes on to emphasize the Maronites' "gradual turn toward Rome" and their eventual alliance (if not assimilation) with the West, especially from the 12th century onwards (Ayoub 1994, 242). However, Ayoub claims that "Maronite interest in cultivating close relations with the Roman church, and subsequently with France, was primarily motivated by the geopolitical exigencies of the struggle among European and Muslim powers for control of the Middle East – not by religious or cultural loyalties" (Ayoub 1994, 242-3). In addition, the Maronites undoubtedly benefitted extensively from this Western economic and educational patronage. However, Ayoub argues that the Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries not only transformed the Eastern character of the Maronite church, but also participated in a long process of acculturation, with the assistance of French schools which were established by the 17th century in Mount Lebanon.  This, according to him, "increasingly obscured [the Maronites'] identity as a community with its own rich religious and ethnic heritage" (Ayoub 1994, 243).

Interestingly enough, Ayoub claims that under stable Ottoman rule, different religious communities in the Lebanon region were able to coexist and work together towards common goals (Ayoub 1994, 243). This was especially evident with the emergence of a silk trade (starting in the 17th century) which

provided a socio-economic link and mutual benefit for the Christians in Mount Lebanon and the Sunnite Muslims in the harbour town of Beirut (Salibi 2003, 163-4).

Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi states that in the early 19th century, as Beirut became a centre for Syrian trade with Europe, Protestant missionaries from the United States and Britain made their way to the town, where American missionaries later established (in 1866) the Syrian Protestant College in Ras Beirut, now known as the American University of Beirut. Protestant missionaries subsequently moved to the mountains where they were resisted by the Maronites and the Greek Catholics, but welcomed by the Druzes (Salibi 2003, 161-2). This led to the establishment of schools by the Protestant missions in the Druze areas of Mount Lebanon, thus extending Western influence to that religious community as well. Although these missions did not make any "religious headway" with the Druzes, the latter did turn to Britain for friendship (Salibi 2003, 162), as the Maronites had done earlier with Rome and France. Therefore, Salibi states that in Lebanon – unlike elsewhere in the Arab world – "the so-called 'impact of the West' arrived not all of a sudden, but by slow and gradual degrees, and by peaceful rather than economically ruthless or militarily violent means" (Salibi 2003, 164).

Without a doubt, the causes of Lebanon's present social and political conflicts are numerous. However, as Ayoub argues, foreign intervention in the religious, political, and cultural life of different communities in the Lebanon area has contributed largely to the presently narrow sectarian loyalties, mistrust towards the Other, and resultant civil conflict. In fact, Ayoub states that foreign intervention was particularly detrimental "during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when European colonial powers, competing for strategic footholds in the Middle East, further entrenched the principle of divide and rule in the region" (Ayoub 1994, 244). Political scientist Sandra Mackey echoes Ayoub with the following statement: "Lebanon has always been a battleground for someone. And each conqueror has deposited something of itself with a segment of

the population, creating a people fragmented into groups possessing *no common identity with the whole*" (my italics) (Mackey 2006, 18).

## *Lebanon's political developments in the 20th century*

After its defeat in World War I, the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, which led to the division of its Syrian provinces among the British and the French, with the present territory of Lebanon falling under the French mandate. As the Maronites were the historical allies or "friends" of the French, the latter responded to the Maronites' pressures in 1920 by adding Beirut and other territories of former Damscus to the Lebanese Mutesarrifate (Mount Lebanon) in order to create the State of Greater Lebanon. In 1926, this state was transformed into the Lebanese Republic, which finally gained its independence from the French mandate in 1943 (Salibi 2003, 17). Throughout these political developments, Salibi claims that Lebanese citizens never identified with or showed signs of allegiance to a larger political entity beyond the one which, according to Faour, constitutes the traditional social institutions of family and ethnic community (Salibi 2003, 2; Faour 1998). In fact, these political developments towards a distinct Lebanese nation were welcomed by the Christians alone (Salibi 2003, 2).

In 1958, the Christians and Muslims "were at each other's throats" over pan-Arab unity which was led by President Nasser in Egypt, and this was followed by more political and ideological clashes over whether the Palestinian revolution should be allowed to operate in and from Lebanon. It was mostly that last thorny issue which led to the eruption of the civil war in Lebanon (Salibi 2003, 2), almost bringing the country to a state of complete destruction in terms of casualties, infrastructure and internal unity. The complexity of this war also lay in its multifaceted nature; the primary contenders were the Maronite Christians, the Shi'ite Muslims, the Druze, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, as well as the Israeli and Syrian armies, and the alliances among parties shifted unpredictably throughout. By the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of people were killed, permanently disabled, or displaced, and a large number emigrated permanently.

Since then, Lebanon has undergone an intensive process of reconstruction; however, the price that was paid during the war has entrenched deep emotional wounds within Lebanese society and further mistrust towards the Other that new infrastructure could never repair.

Moreover, the country continues to be engulfed in instability and violence from Israeli and Syrian forces, in addition to internal political conflicts and struggles for power among the various ethnic and religious groups. One major shock was the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005, followed by a series of assassinations targeting political and journalistic figures. In addition to car bombings that injured or killed civilians, riots regularly broke out among different political parties. In May 2007, one of the most violent internal clashes since the civil war erupted when the Lebanese Army fought against radicals from a guerilla sect known as Fatah-al-Islam which was hiding in Nahr-el-Bared, a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon. But perhaps it was the events of July 2006 which really shook up the country, reminding civilians of a period they were trying hard to forget: actual war. For on July 12, 2006, Israel launched a 33-day war on Lebanon known as "Operation Just Return" after two Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers were captured by the Shi'ite political party Hizbollah on the border with Israel in South Lebanon. In a matter of weeks, close to a million people were displaced, thousands of civilians were injured or killed, and civilian homes as well as infrastructure were severely damaged or completely demolished. This war continued until the United Nations was able to negotiate ceasefire on August 14, 2006. However, the war had added to the existent internal schisms in Lebanon, which climaxed in May 2008, when Beirut witnessed the most violent sectarian clashes since the civil war.

## *Multiple histories, contested national identity, and individualism*

Being caught amongst a myriad of opposing cultural influences and foreign intervention, it is unsurprising that Lebanese citizens would possess conflicting definitions of national identity. In fact, Salibi argues that political

conflict in Lebanon is strongly intertwined with opposing visions of *collective identity*; "the Christians identified themselves in terms of Lebanese particularism [with a non-Arab Phoenician connection] and the Muslims with pan-Arabism" (Salibi 2003, 2). Salibi states that consequently, there are "diametrically opposed Christian and Muslim theories of Lebanese history [which underlie] the ongoing political conflict in the country" (Salibi 2003, 3). With multiple Lebanese histories being acknowledged in public discourse, it is not surprising that the project of post-war reconstruction, rehabilitation, and construction of a national identity continues to face numerous obstacles.

In his book, "The Silent Revolution in Lebanon: Changing Values of the Youth," Lebanese sociologist Muhammad Faour examines the changes in the family, ethnic, religious, and political values of Lebanon's youth, specifically college students, before and after the civil war. Published in 1998, Faour declares that Lebanese society reveals both continuity and change: "Through the eyes of college students, one visualizes the normative structure of the Lebanese society in its continuity and change... Students have painted inter-sectarian relations objectively and vividly, producing a realistic political map of coalitions and antagonistic fronts that religious sects have forged. Sadly, this map reveals the continuity of sectarian politics as a major divisive force in Lebanon" (Faour 1998, 152-3). In his review of the book, Eyal Zisser points out that the end of the civil war (following the Ta'if Agreement of October 1989) reflected "the victory of 'Lebanonism,'" a concept on which the Lebanese state was established in the first place. This concept dictates that "the Lebanese state is to be a weak framework of, or mantle over, the traditional social institutions – the family and the ethnic community, which continue to play a major role in the life of the individual, the ethnic communities and the state" (Zisser 2001).

It may always be difficult to determine the compatibility of a nationalistic project for a country with Lebanon's ethnic and religious constitution; however, Faour points to an interesting trend which will largely inform my own study of the FIMS in Beirut: *individualism*. Zisser proposes that the trend towards

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individualism among students may imply that "the family has become for its members what Lebanese society is for its components – a weak framework within which each person enjoys *freedom* and *autonomy*" (my italics) (Zisser 2001). Both these concepts – freedom and autonomy – will also play a significant role in my own study, as I attempt to explicate Lebanese musicians' strong affinity for and use of FIM (which thrives on principles of freedom, autonomy, and even anarchy) as a tool to negotiate *individual* identity. Finally, Zisser raises an important question regarding the applicability of this trend towards individualism to all youth in Lebanon; he points out that Faour's study was restricted to college students, a group which will represent "a social elite" in the future (Zisser 2001), and thus may hold values different from those of Lebanese society as a whole due to their socio-economic and educational backgrounds and capabilities. Since my study focuses on youth from that same socio-economic stratum, the issue of whether such individualistic values are unique to that relatively elite stratum will also emerge in my study.

# Chapter 2: Characteristics of the Lebanese free improvised music scene (FIMS)

Two decades ago, the very thought of a vibrant alternative music scene in Beirut would have sounded preposterous, let alone a FIMS! How was it possible then for such music to emerge and develop in Beirut, and is it a viable endeavour in a country like Lebanon?

In the last decade or two, technological progress in music and video production as well as television satellite networks have played a significant role in the creation of a pan-Arab popular music market. The Arab popular music industry has been catering to what appears to be the region's mass market tastes by pumping out "sexy Arab pop divas" (Butters 2007) singing catchy formulaic Arabic songs with Middle Eastern and Western influences as well as targeted local dialects (such as Lebanese, Egyptian, and Khaliji).

Standing in stark contrast to the mainstream pan-Arab pop music industry, or *superculture* as defined by Mark Slobin (Slobin 1993), are alternative music scenes in several Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. In Lebanon for instance, a small but vibrant alternative music scene has emerged in Beirut since the end of the civil war, drawing together socio-economically privileged musicians who operate within transnational networks while critiquing their own society; Burkhalter – following Beck et al (1994) – calls such musicians "reflective actors." Performing an array of Western musical styles with occasional Middle Eastern influences, Burkhalter states that this alternative scene comprises Beiruti "rappers, rock, death-metal, jazz, electro-acoustic musicians, free improvisers, Arabic singers, oud-, qanoun- and riqq-players" (Burkhalter 2007, 3). In fact, he proposes that this scene may be divided into five different categories: first, FIM, sound design, and musique concrete; second, classical and modern Arabic music; third, rock, heavy metal, death metal, and gothic music; fourth, rap, electro, and trip hop with oriental flavours; and fifth, jazz (Burkhalter 2007, 8). Burkhalter goes on to say that, with the exception of jazz and oriental jazz circles where the musicians belong to different generations, all other circles

mostly comprise musicians born during the Lebanese civil war or at its advent (between 1975 and 1983), and may thus be referred to as "the war generation" (Burkhalter 2007, 6). For the purposes of this thesis, I shall be using the term "*alternative* music scene" to refer to the broader scene to which FIM belongs in Beirut. This is done purposefully to distinguish my field of study from Burkhalter's more broadly defined *sub-cultural* music scene which also includes jazz and oriental jazz musicians of an older generation. Thus, I define the alternative music scene in Beirut as that which draws together musicians of the "war generation" who counter the mainstream Arab pop music industry by producing *original* Western-influenced music, as opposed to covering older hits.

## *Musicians of the "war generation"*

In light of the country's conflict-ridden history, one cannot seem to discuss many modern Lebanese cultural manifestations without inadvertently mentioning war, bombings, protests, sieges, and political turmoil. Often, it seems like art and conflict have a complex relationship in Lebanon where they are intertwined almost beyond recognition. For example, besides practically *defining* themselves as "post-war" musicians and being labelled as musicians of the "war generation" by Burkhalter (Burkhalter 2007), many members of the alternative music scene in Beirut constantly seem to be negotiating and contesting their musical identities in relation to their violent locale.

While some Lebanese FIM may be considered a reflection of the past fifteen-year civil war, other music shows direct relations to the country's current political unrest, uncertain future, as well as recent crises such as the July 2006 war. Whether overtly political or not, the music is a direct testament to these times, capturing the reverberations of political turmoil within a society fraught with internal and external conflict. Butters notes that such musicians represent a minority of Lebanese youth who, unlike the partying nightclub majority, evoke rather than deny the instability of their lives (Butters 2007).

**The Lebanese civil war (1975-1991)**

It is evident that a fifteen -year civil war could seriously limit a country's artistic life, besides shattering the very infrastructure on which that society was initially built. A term which emerged as a natural by-product of this period was "post-war," and this might well be a suitable term to describe the alternative music scene under study. But why "post-war?" After all, as a Lebanese child born five years before the end of the civil war, I had grown up expelling ideas of sectarianism and political affiliation, not to mention denying the existence of the Green Line which had physically partitioned the capital into Muslim-dominated West Beirut and Christian-dominated East Beirut. If I did not believe in political and sectarian conflict, then why should I acknowledge its existence? That is how I naively trudged through my "post-war" childhood, turning the blind eye to my family's ignorance of East Beirut's streets, and a deaf ear to my 14-year-old classmates' debates over Lebanese nationalism versus pan-Arabism. Of course, I rationalize now that the war was over before I was old enough to understand the concept. But what about those who were born at the outset of the civil war and later became musicians? To what extent could their childhood in a war-torn country have impacted their music, their sense of identity, and their ascription of meaning to musical practices such as FIM?

On the one hand, some FIM musicians seem to confront their childhoods during the civil war on an everyday basis, and actually value music as a medium to explore their traumatic memories and psyche. For instance, FIM musician Mazen Kerbaj harbours an interest in civil war sounds from his childhood and seems to take advantage of every opportunity to explore the intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and social impact of a war-torn childhood on his music and participation in collective improvisation.

On the other hand, some FIM musicians attempt to downplay the impact of civil war on their music at present. For example, Sharif Sehnaoui admits that a child growing up in wartime learns to listen very closely to sounds, thus developing a heightened sense of sonic meaning. After all, one's experience of

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war as a civilian child is purely through sounds – sounds of explosions, shotguns, the radio, and silence. However, Sharif stresses that he is personally not interested in consciously expressing war in his music (interview with the author, June 2008).

**Ongoing political conflicts**

I will now turn to the way Lebanon's continuous instability manifests itself in alternative musicians' work, in addition to affecting the Beirut's music scene, its capabilities, initiatives and successes.

It was probably the Lebanese-Israeli war in July 2006 which impacted alternative music the most, perhaps because the whole country was paralyzed for over a month, and the aftermath proved to be just as tragic as the war itself. During this period, the music scene in Beirut was severely stricken, as were all facets of Lebanese life. Most civilians stayed home, fixated on their TVs or listening to their transistor radios for the news if the electricity had been cut in their neighbourhood. Schools and theatres opened their doors to thousands of displaced families which sought refuge after their homes had been bombed and destroyed. The streets were empty and quiet, except for the occasional air raids.

Such a crisis unsurprisingly produced a wealth of art, of which alternative music played an important role. On the FIM and sound art circuit, Mazen Kerbaj produced a poignant track entitled "Starry Night"[12] which circulated online as an mp3 file all throughout the war and even afterwards. The concept of this six-and-a-half minute track was particularly striking because it comprised a trumpet "duet" with the Israeli Air Force; Kerbaj actually improvised over the sounds of airplanes shelling Beirut (see Chapter 5 for a detailed case study). Another example is double-bassist Raed Yassin's track entitled "Day 13,"[13] a unique collage of real-life sounds which accompanied civilians during the war – sounds of the radio as one switched between stations. With the lack of electricity and the

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12. To listen to some of Mazen Kerbaj's music, including "Starry Night," check his MySpace account: http://www.myspace.com/mazenkerbaj.

13. To listen to "Day 13," check: http://www.porestsound.net/yassin/; more of Raed Yassin's music is available on his MySpace account: http://www.myspace.com/raedyassin.

need to take shelter in basements or seek refuge in schools or theatres, the radio played a pivotal role in the lives of many civilians during July 2006 (as it did during the previous fifteen -year civil war); sometimes it even represented the only means of communication with the outside world as it provided news on the latest air raids and the progress of the war.

As a final comment, it seems that many Lebanese alternative musicians concur that the country's chaos and crises are a double-edged sword for the art world; on the one hand, turmoil always offers material for art, and on the other, it creates barriers that frequently prevent artistic initiatives from being carried through. Therefore, musicians in Lebanon are constantly in a state of struggle.

## *MILL's activities*

In 2000, guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui, saxophonist Christine Sehnaoui Abdelnour[14] and trumpet player Mazen Kerbaj founded MILL, an association for the development of FIM in Lebanon. These Lebanese musicians had been performing FIM for a couple of years by then; however, according to an online interview with Sharif, their exposure and knowledge of this music came largely from listening to CDs of American and European improvisers such as AMM,[15] Cecil Taylor,[16] and Evan Parker[17]. They soon became known in the media as the "pioneers" of FIM in Lebanon and even the Middle East. In the aforementioned interview, Sharif Sehnaoui declares: "Our main purpose was to hold an [annual] festival now called 'Irtijal.' It seemed like a crazy idea but we had to take this first step in a country that had almost never seen anything like it before in terms of music. Free improvisation in Europe and the U.S. has followed major evolutions in the fields of jazz and classical music – it has inscribed itself as an opening

14. To listen to some of Christine Sehnaoui's music, check her MySpace account: http://www.myspace.com/christinesehnaoui.

15. A well-known British FIM ensemble established in the 1960s

16. An American pianist known as one of the pioneers of free jazz

17. A British saxophone player known as one of the pioneers of European FIM

within free jazz and contemporary classical music from John Cage to Ornette Coleman. But Lebanon had skipped this phase of the history of music and fifteen years of civil war had erased all traces of movements in that direction. So we were coming out of nowhere in a city that had no such thing as an alternative, contemporary or experimental music scene."[18]

This is echoed on the website for Mazen Kerbaj's independent label Al-Maslakh (Arabic for *The Slaughterhouse*), which was created in 2005 in order to document new projects within the Lebanese FIM scene: "Back in 2000, after 15 years of civil war and a decade of post war rehabilitation, the situation of alternative art and especially music was very poor in Lebanon. From Arabic pop songs to hard rock bands, passing by new age and techno beats, everything you could hear in Beirut was most likely a bad 'arabised' copy of old or new western musical fashions. The jazz scene for instance was mostly interested in playing standards, be-bop or fusion. Things began to change around 2000 with the arrival of a new generation of musicians, born at the beginning and during the war, more interested in experimental art forms than in fame or glory."[19]

Besides being the largest festival of its kind in the region, its proponents claim that Irtijal has quickly become an indispensable platform for dialogue and exchange for both Lebanese and international musicians in improvisation, free jazz, contemporary composition, noise music and alternative rock.[20] Although Irtijal focuses on FIM, Sharif states that this music strives to encourage inclusion; thus, since its inception, the festival has featured "concerts of free jazz, contemporary classical music, concrete music, performance art, hybrid folk improvisation, contemporary jazz and post-rock in an attempt to open new ways for the audience to understand sound & music."[21] Furthermore, Christine

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18. http://www.furious.com/perfect/lebanonmusic.html

19. http://www.almaslakh.org/about.php

20. This information was taken from Wilson-Goldie 2005 and the Al-Maslakh website: http://www.almaslakh.org/about.php.

21. http://www.furious.com/perfect/lebanonmusic.html

Sehnaoui says that Irtijal is driven by the "laboratory" principle. In other words, its organizers believe that improvisation knows no disciplinary boundaries and thus feeds into all contemporary art forms, which is why Irtijal strives to "include shows that stem from neighbouring fields like improvised dance, performance, sonic poetry, installations, video, real-time fine arts or multidisciplinary shows that include all these forms of [expression]."[22]

Ten years after MILL's inception, double-bassist, video artist, and tape performer Raed Yassin, nay player and clarinettist Bechir Saade, guitarist Charbel Haber, and electro-acoustic artist Jassem Hindi have added new instruments as well as intriguing musical approaches to MILL and allowed for the creation of Moukhtabar (Arabic for *laboratory*) Ensemble, a Lebanese collective for large-group improvisation.[23]



**Figure 1. "The Moukhtabar Ensemble in concert in Oslo" (taken from: http://www.anothertimbre.com/bechirsaadeinterview.html)**

In addition, MILL attempts to complement Irtijal's annual performances with workshops led by significant musicians in the transnational FIMS such as

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22. http://www.the-lebanon.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=81

23. http://www.furious.com/perfect/lebanonmusic.html

Wade Matthews,[24] Michael Zerang,[25] and Axel Dörner.[26] As Christine Sehnaoui says, these workshops serve to mediate between musicians and the public and transcend "the basic equation of production/consumption."[27] They also allow the participants to explore individual ideas and techniques within a group while receiving guidance from well-respected practitioners in order to enhance their improvisatory skills.

The number of Lebanese FIM musicians has only grown to about seven *regular* performers in ten years, which in other circumstances may indicate an extremely limited presence and rate of growth; however, I argue that the growth of the Lebanese FIMS must be measured against the following local considerations. First, Beirut's alternative music scene is relatively small, which is demonstrated by the overlap in band members and musical genres performed. For instance, guitarist/vocalist Charbel Haber goes back and forth between playing in the post punk/experimental rock band Scrambled Eggs and collaborating with musicians in FIM.[28] Second, Irtijal festival's audience size has grown considerably since its inception and includes regular attendees which might even be referred to as a *subculture*; this indicates that there exists a loyal local following for the Lebanese FIMS, although its size is still relatively small in comparison to audiences of more popular music. However, one must keep in mind that FIMSs around the world have relatively limited audiences as the music is not considered very accessible aesthetically. Third, local FIMSs (such as the one in Beirut) seem to be unique in the sense that they are merely nodes in a larger *transnational* network of FIM, which is reinforced by the powerful connections Lebanese FIM musicians maintain with other scenes in Europe, the US, and

24. An American FIM musician whose main instruments include bass clarinet, alto flute and software synthesis

25. An American percussionist who is known for his work in FIM

26. A German trumpet player and composer who has worked extensively in FIM

27. http://www.the-lebanon.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=81

28. http://www.virb.com/scrambledeggs

Japan. Moreover, Irtijal festival plays a crucial role in attracting international musicians to collaborate, record, perform, and hold workshops for Lebanese enthusiasts, whether beginners or experienced improvisers. Therefore, although admittedly "nascent"[29] still, the Lebanese FIMS is more than just a few Lebanese musicians; I would argue that it is as much about collaboration between local and international FIM musicians (in various media) as it is about dialogue and influence of FIM on Lebanese musicians practicing other musical genres.

## *The FIMS's economic structure*

### Funding

It is common knowledge that all around the world, musicians can seldom rely on their art for financial stability, and there always seems to be less government funding available for the promotion and development of the arts than for other sectors. However, in Lebanon especially, cultural operators continuously complain about the lack of government support in cultural or artistic initiatives, and this might well be due to the corruption within the government's infrastructure. In Lebanon, some art organizations such as The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts – Ashkal Alwan occasionally funds sound installation projects, and few artistic grants are provided by European and American institutions such as Centre Culturel Français, Goethe Institut, the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, the American Embassy, as well as the Ford Foundation and the Department of Culture of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences.

Therefore, although many Lebanese musicians and artists wish they could focus on their art, Raed Yassin probably captures the reality best in saying that it has become rather clear that art is not a profession in Lebanon. As a full-time FIM musician, one would need to play about 200 concerts a year to make ends meet. Raed adds that it is quite difficult to find a part-time job in Lebanon; therefore,

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29. http://www.almaslakh.org/about.php

many artists usually cannot dedicate enough time to artistic initiatives in addition to their day-jobs, which is why their relationship with art becomes somewhat unprofessional (interview with the author, April 2009).

In the absence of any consistent financial support, Beirut's alternative music scene functions on a relatively independent basis. Essentially, this music scene has taken charge of both the creative and financial aspects of music production, distribution, concert/tour organization, as well as promotion and advertising. At this point, it is important to note that although independent musical operations represent a rather common phenomenon in the Western world, they are not as widespread in the Arab world, and are rather unique to a few cities such as Beirut, Ramallah, and Cairo. This feature in itself serves as an example of the Western cultural influence which Beirut continues to be exposed to.

**Self-production**

Since the inception of Beirut's alternative music scene, artists have resorted to self-production as a means of overriding customary channels of production and dissemination. Over the last couple of years, several independent record labels have sprung up in Lebanon, in an effort to "fill voids on the [musical] spectrum," as Charbel Haber puts it (Wilson-Goldie 2005). For example, the record label Al-Maslakh was Mazen Kerbaj's brainchild since 2000 and finally became a reality in 2005. Al-Maslakh continues to document the burgeoning FIMS in Beirut by exclusively recording Lebanese musicians or international artists' projects in Lebanon.[30]

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30. http://www.almaslakh.org/about.php

**Figure 2. Al-Maslakh's second release entitled "ROUBA3I5" (Rouba3i is Arabic for *quartet)* featuring Mazen Kerbaj (trumpet), Christine Sehnaoui (alto sax), Sharif Sehnaoui (electric guitar), and Ingar Zach (percussion), recorded on August 23, 2004 in Bustros Residence in Beirut (photograph taken from: http://www.almaslakh.org/catalog_mslkh02.php)**

On the other hand, the "more punk powered and electronically fuelled" Those Kids Must Choke[31] is the brainchild of Scrambled Eggs and is headed by band member Charbel Haber (Wilson-Goldie 2005). In addition, it seems that new labels are always surfacing. For instance, Charbel Haber informed me back in April 2009 that he had "messed up" a lot with Those Kids Must Choke over the last five years. Thus, he is looking forward to launching an experimental, avant-rock label called Johnny Kafta with Sharif Sehnaoui and Mazen Kerbaj, in the hopes that it will be more organized and successful than the aforementioned (conversation with the author, April 2009). Sound artist Raed Yassin also launched his own new label in 2009 called Annihaya (*The End* in Arabic) Records.

With a market so small and chances of profit almost nonexistent, many Lebanese alternative musicians' goals become restricted to purely artistic ones. As such, the issue becomes one of collaboration, documentation and critical assessment, as well as one of freedom and resistance. For instance, Those Kids Must Choke claimed to be a record label awakening at the same time as the

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31.The website for Those Kids Must Choke: http://thosekidsmustchoke.com/

experimental music scene in Lebanon, one namely influenced by "lo-fi, experimental rock and the electronic laboratories of free improvised music;" it aims at providing a means for experimental musicians to produce their work, collaborate with foreign musicians, as well as document their trials.[32]

Lebanese FIM musicians, like most if not all musicians in the transnational FIMS, seem to value musical interaction with similar scenes abroad. Therefore, not only does their annual Irtijal festival provide a platform for international discourse and exchange of ideas (Wilson-Goldie 2005), but Al-Maslakh complements these efforts by recording multinational collaborative work and documenting the FIMS in Beirut. According to Mazen Kerbaj: "The idea of a label was becoming more and more urgent because whenever I travel people ask me about the music scene and I always have to say it in words. I can't say, 'Here, listen to this.' So it's really a label to document what's happening" (Wilson-Goldie 2005). For MILL, therefore, a large part of the motivation behind starting an independent label seems to be the need to form ties with foreign scenes by communicating and sharing ideas.



Figure 3. Two collaborative albums between a Lebanese and non-Lebanese musician, produced in Lebanon by Al-Maslakh in 2006: Cover of Raed Yassin's (double bass) album with Gene Coleman (bass clarinet) entitled "The Adventures of Nabil Fawzi" (left; photograph taken from: http://www.almaslakh.org/catalog_mslkh04.php), and cover of Sharif Sehnaoui's (acoustic guitar) album with Tom Chant (soprano saxophone) entitled "Cloister" (right; photograph taken from: http://www.almaslakh.org/catalog_mslkh05.php)

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32. http://www.thosekidsmustchoke.com/presentation_tkmc.html

However, that is not the *only* incentive. In a way, self-production is a type of resistance; resistance to a capitalist system, market trends, and commerciality. Regarding starting new labels, Charbel Haber says the following: "It's an act of resistance. I mean, it's still in a bourgeois milieu. It's still done with a dose of hypocrisy, as is anything else. But now it's moving along." Charbel predicts that, with time, the issue will become "how to survive financially in this mess" (Wilson-Goldie 2005).

On the other hand, Mazen Kerbaj says that in the future, his label may expand to incorporate "everything unpublishable," referring to something he likes that other publishers would refuse to distribute. Back in 2005, Mazen's aim was to release four CDs a year, limiting each to 500 copies and selling them exclusively at La CD-Theque[33] and Espace SD[34] in Beirut, and at a few other venues in France and the UK (Wilson-Goldie 2005). This example clearly portrays the limited extent of production and distribution that an experimental independent label in Lebanon can – or wants to – reach; however, one can surely recognize that such self-production is merely one manifestation of a larger struggle for artistic freedom. Mazen explains: "This kind of self-production is the only way for an artist in Lebanon to be free and do what he wants" (Wilson-Goldie 2005).

**Self-promotion**

Besides self-production, Beirut's alternative musicians promote their music through personal websites, blogs, MySpace profiles, and Facebook fan groups. Moreover, they distribute their albums to a few local and international retail outlets – the owners of which take personal interest in supporting Lebanese or alternative artists – such as La CD-Theque. Albums may also be purchased from the independent labels' websites or during the musicians' concerts. As for performances, these musicians usually perform in trendy pubs or clubs (such as

33. A local music, movie, and book retail outlet in Beirut which supports local and international alternative art

34. An art exhibition and performance space in Beirut

The Basement), public festivals (such as La Fete de la Musique, Freykeh Festival, Deir el Qamar Festival), cultural centres (Centre Culturel Français, Goethe Institut) and independently managed performance spaces (such as Espace SD, Beirut Art Center and Zico House), as well as private apartments or houses, public beaches and even amusement parks.



**Figure 4. Beirut Art Center's interior: The exhibition space during the exhibition "Closer" which was being held in January 2009 in conjunction with "They've Got a Bomb!" concert (left), and view of the bookshop with cameraman covering the event (right) (photographs by the author)**
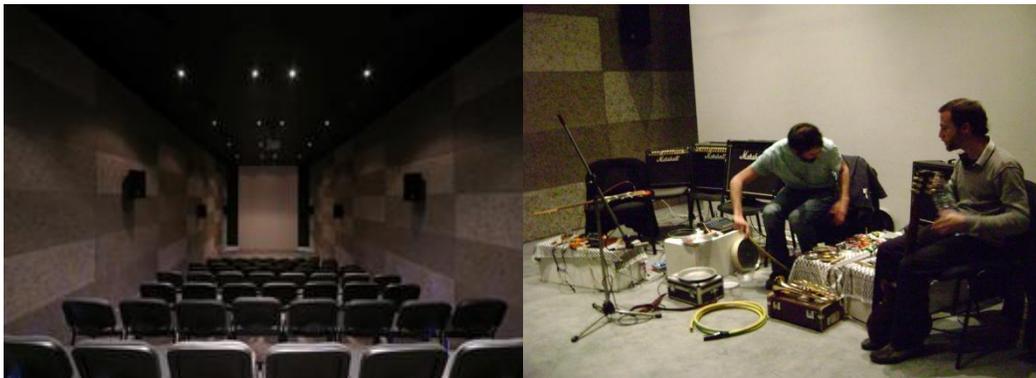


**Figure 5. The auditorium in Beirut Art Center (left; photograph taken from: http://www.beirutartcenter.org/presentation.php#), and Mazen Kerbaj with Sharif Sehnaoui setting up their instruments and found objects before the "They've Got a Bomb!" concert in January 2009 (right; photograph by the author)**

The musicians mostly advertise these irregular performances themselves through diverse channels such as posters, flyers, online mailing lists, Facebook event invitations, and L'Agenda Culturel, a booklet which publishes a listing of cultural events in Beirut at regular intervals. Although these promotion channels

seem to be effective, they are targeted at the alternative subculture itself, which ultimately ensures the exclusivity and closed nature of such a scene. However, it is understandable that such promotion channels would be limited; after all, the musicians only have access to certain outlets, and the music scene has little chance of expanding its audience without more serious media coverage locally.



**Figure 6. An Irtijal festival concert in April 2009: Festival attendees waiting in the lobby of Masrah Al-Madina's smaller underground theatre (left), and a packed theatre of FIM enthusiasts that same day (right) (photographs by the author)**



**Figure 7. CDs for sale in the Masrah Al-Madina lobby during Irtijal festival in April 2009, including FIM CDs by MILL musicians, their collaborators, and international musicians performing at the festival (photograph by the author)**

It is important to note that, in addition to a small local following, Lebanese FIM musicians have also earned international recognition through their frequent performances and collaborations with foreign musicians in Lebanon, the United States and Europe. As Sharif Sehnaoui recounts, they have been invited to perform in renowned international music festivals including Moers, Transonic and

the Transmediale in Germany, as well as Sound Field and High Zero in the United States. He adds that, through their performances, they have been able to spark some interest in FIM in parts of the Arab World such as Syria and Egypt.[35] Another significant indicator of MILL's international recognition is the fact that their albums get reviewed frequently by renowned international music magazines such as "The Wire."

In summary, it seems like the only thing keeping the Lebanese FIMS functional is its members' and small audience's strong interest in keeping it alive. In addition to the irregular (perhaps dwindling) arts funding from Europe and the United States, the scene survives mostly on the individualized production and promotion efforts of the musicians' themselves, with the support of few local art connoisseurs who offer performance venues and sell FIM CDs in their stores. However, it seems that through their exposure to continuous political and financial instability, Lebanese citizens have developed a skill for strong recovery and risk-taking which one might find incredulous. This is why I believe the FIMS in Lebanon will very likely continue to endure as long as there is serious interest from a few individuals within.

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35. http://www.furious.com/perfect/lebanonmusic.html

# Chapter 3: Negotiating identity through personal FIM techniques

## *FIM as a tool to negotiate identity*

I must admit that upon first contact with FIM, I was fascinated by the seemingly non-idiomatic nature of this music, which I equated with a lack of associated cultural identity at the time. At twenty years of age, I was struggling as an amateur musician to find a musical practice which would simultaneously challenge and appeal to me, without having to deal with the guilt and identity politics which accompany playing "another culture's" music. On the one hand, I did not feel comfortable taking on a musical identity which was not rightfully mine somehow, and on the other, I did not strongly identify with any particular social, cultural, religious, or even linguistic group. Hence, I was attempting to find a unique musical identity which would set me apart from any socio-cultural groups which I did not feel part of.

Since I was initially attracted to FIM because it seemed to lack any particular cultural associations, I was very curious to learn whether my Lebanese informants who practiced FIM professionally or semi-professionally had also entertained that idea. Interestingly enough, I received very similar responses from Mazen Kerbaj and Sharif Sehnaoui regarding this issue while conducting separate interviews with each of them.

> Mazen: "I wanted to play free jazz or jazz in the beginning. But for me, I always felt like I was missing something; I'm not African American, and I could become a good jazz player... but jazz is very rooted in that culture, like Oriental music... there will always be something missing, in the education, upbringing etc. But the good thing about [FIM] is you can take it wherever you want in the world and totally make it your own. It has zero identity. Its identity is your identity as an *individual*, not even as a Lebanese" (interview with the author, August 2008).

Sharif: "One of the reasons I like this music is because it has no clear identity. You cannot say this is British traditional music, or this is a part of British culture, [for instance]. It's not; it's random [...]. It can start anywhere and everywhere... It could have started in Lebanon – it didn't, for obvious reasons... but why not? It could start anywhere within the modern world. It's new tradition and new subcultures of the modern world. So wherever you have [...] urban landscapes, cities, cars, traffic, a huge cultural scene, concerts everywhere, music, you should have free improvisation. And I think this was also crucial for me in moving out of jazz, because jazz has a culture, it has an origin. There are jazz people around the world who cannot forget that the roots of jazz are an Afro-Latin-American culture. It has a history which is contextual and cultural. But [FIM], anyone can take it and just make it his own. I don't feel I'm playing someone else's culture – I'm playing my *own* culture. This is very important... You create your own identity which is not traditional, which is individual" (interview with the author, June 2008).

At this point, the reader might be wondering what kind of identity construction process, if any, Lebanese citizens of the "war generation" were subjected to, and why the issue of finding a musical practice which they can individually identify with seems to be so crucial for them. Interestingly enough, my own inability to call any musical practice my own may be related to a wider social issue which Lebanese youth are faced with at present: lack of a unifying national, cultural, or linguistic identity. As my fieldwork has shown, a wide stratum of Lebanese society seems to be caught amongst a fluid set of cultural influences which constantly push for a redefinition of boundaries and identities. For instance, between American imperialism and French post-colonial ties, many cosmopolitan musicians had grown up identifying more strongly with Western musical culture, while regarding Middle Eastern music as somewhat inferior.

Disregarding the obvious political slant which Ayoub assumes, the following passage provides a useful portrayal of the complexity of Lebanon's

identity struggle, especially with regards to the Arab/Muslim/Eastern and Lebanese/Christian/Western binary, which although over-simplistic at times, seems to lie at its root.

"One myth that most Lebanese have come to accept is that Lebanon, as it exists today, has always been a country or distinct sociopolitical entity […]. Several other historical and ideological misconceptions follow from this myth. The first is that Lebanon is part of the Arab East in geography only, that historically and religiously it is a unique country belonging to the West and subscribing to similar secular values. A second misconception is that Lebanon has always possessed a Christian history and character. In order for this unique Lebanon to be totally severed from the history of the region, a Phoenician past was invented from which Lebanon moved (magically it seems, ignoring more than a millennium of intervening history) to a Christian and Western identity. These misconceptions have led most Lebanese, regardless of their religious or sectarian affiliations, to nourish a false pride in this fictitious past – their invented national identity – and to *imagine themselves superior to other peoples in the region*" (my italics) (Ayoub 1994, 242).

Besides foreign intervention and influence from Europe and the United States leading up to the 19th century, it is evident that Western influence continued to impact Lebanon both socially and culturally all throughout the country's political developments in the 20th century. For instance, the French mandate led to the modelling of Lebanon's educational and governmental systems after France's counterparts (Khatib 2008, 10). Ayoub even adds that "although France's direct colonial interests ended with Lebanon's independence in 1943, Lebanon remained essentially a sectarian entity dependent – culturally, politically, and even spiritually – on the West, particularly France" (Ayoub 1994, 245). This can be seen, for instance, "with some Lebanese citizens referring to their former colonial power as 'our mother France,' speaking French rather than Arabic in everyday life, and with the French educational system still being the country's most popular model" (Khatib 2008, 10).

If one were to examine the Lebanese colloquial language, one would find that, besides the customary variation in dialect from one Lebanese region to another, the country's identity "crisis" is clearly portrayed in many people's seeming inability to construct a sentence without code-switching[36] between Arabic, English and/or French. Furthermore, while cultural groups which strongly identify with France communicate exclusively in French within their factions, those who identify with the United States (usually students of American schools in Lebanon) seem to do the same with the American accent of the English language. In fact, in my experience of American schools in Lebanon which have separate bilingual programs (English/Arabic and French/Arabic), each of the aforementioned groups calls the other "Americanized" and "Frenchie," respectively.

Returning to the subject at hand, it would be interesting to study Lebanon's musical development along this English/French cultural axis over the last century or so, in order to distinguish the embedded cultural influences and resultant identities. Burkhalter outlines a cultural dichotomy by tracing two separate traditions for popular music which took shape in Lebanon since the beginning of the civil war. According to him, West Beirut's music scene was led by the likes of Ziad Rahbani, Marcel Khalifeh, and Khaled el Haber; these leftist musicians fused Arabic and Western musical styles (such as jazz and rock) while strongly promoting leftist ideologies.[37] On the other side of the Green Line, East Beirut became home to numerous rock, heavy metal, and death metal bands which exclusively *covered* Western songs. Although this statement may require further

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36. Code-switching is defined here as "the use of two [or more] languages in the same sentence or discourse" (Marasigan 1983, 7).

37. Although Ziad Rahbani, Marcel Khalife and Khaled el Haber were born into Christian families, they were adamant leftists who did not publicly identify with any religion. Therefore, the West/East Beirut axis should only be taken as a rough framework of Christian/Muslim residence during the civil war as opposed to a strict dichotomy.

evidence, Burkhalter claims that the aforementioned musical division between West and East Beirut still exists today (Burkhalter 2007, 4-5).

This is where FIM comes in, presenting a valuable tool for toying with different aspects of identity. Derek Bailey[38] states that FIM "suffers from – and enjoys – the confused identity which its resistance to labelling indicates" (Bailey 1993, 83). In connection, Mazen Kerbaj notes that this music's name does not reveal anything about the *outcome* of the musical practice (for instance, as the label of "rock" reveals about the sound of the music), but rather focuses on the *means* of making it (interview with the author, August 2008). Bailey also claims that, paradoxically, the most consistent characteristic of FIM is its diversity; he states that in FIM, there is neither a prescribed style nor a specific idiomatic sound. Bailey further explains that "the characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it" (Bailey 1993, 83).

## *Identities and improvisational techniques of four musicians*

Keeping Bailey's statements in mind, this section will address the following questions: How is FIM being utilized by Lebanese musicians, and to what extent does this musical genre allow for the negotiation of *individual* identities? This will be done through the exploration of the identities and individual improvisation techniques of four important actors in the Lebanese FIMS: Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui, Bechir Saade, and Raed Yassin.

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38. An English guitarist well-known on the FIM circuit

**Mazen Kerbaj**





**Figure 8. Mazen Kerbaj playing his trumpet with the various found objects he uses for extended techniques (left; photograph taken from: http://www.highzero.org/2005_site/the_musicians/index.html) (right; photograph taken from: http://www.almaslakh.org/artists_kerbaj.php)**

*Musical biography*

The son of famous stage actor Antoine Kerbaj and renowned artist Laure Ghorayeb, Mazen was born in Beirut in 1975, at the outbreak of the civil war, and has been living there ever since.[39] After finishing his French Baccalaureate program, he studied at ALBA (Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts) where he earned his degree in Graphic Arts and Advertising with an emphasis in illustration. Mazen then started working as a free lance illustrator for magazines, newspapers and advertisers, in addition to teaching graphic design and advertising courses at Lebanese universities. He has also published several illustrated books, short stories and comics, and his art has been displayed in personal and collective exhibitions in Lebanon, France and the United States.[40]

Mazen first developed an interest in free jazz and FIM in his early twenties, after being exposed to the recordings of landmark figures such as John Coltrane and Evan Parker[41] (Burkhalter 2006). He had picked up a spare trumpet

39. http://www.kerbaj.com/infos.html

40. http://www.kerbaj.com/CVenglish.html

41. A British saxophonist famous for his work in FIM

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from his friend Sharif Sehnaoui in 1996, and it was Mazen's interest in playing free jazz which led him to take music lessons with a jazz trumpet player who taught at the Lebanese Conservatory of Music. However, Mazen discontinued those lessons after incessant arguments with his teacher regarding "what is music and what is not" (interview with the author, August 2008). In 2000, Mazen started performing live after switching to saxophone, and his first concert, which he claims was "probably the first improvised music concert in the Middle East," comprised a duo with Lebanese saxophonist Christine Sehnaoui at Strike's Pub in Beirut.[42] In 2002, he revisited the trumpet on his first album "A" which he recorded as part of "A Trio" with Sharif Sehnaoui and Raed Yassin; by then, his focus had shifted from free jazz to FIM. In an interview, Mazen explained to me how, up until 2004, he had been fascinated by the saxophone's wide range of textural possibilities and rather frustrated with the "austerity" and limited nature of the trumpet's lone three valves. However, he says he finally dropped the saxophone and committed to the trumpet as he discovered the latter's full potential in terms of preparation (interview with the author, August 2008).

Besides co-founding MILL in 2001, Mazen himself has been very active in the FIMS, collaborating with Lebanese and international musicians through performances, recordings and workshops in countless venues in Lebanon, Syria, France, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, UK, and the US. He has also held several concerts on his own and recorded the solo album "Brt Vrt Zrt Krt" on his independent record label Al-Maslakh.[43]

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42. http://www.kerbaj.com/infos.html

43. http://www.kerbaj.com/infos.html

**Figure 9. Cover of Mazen Kerbaj's solo trumpet improvisation album entitled "Brt Vrt Zrt Krt," released by Al-Maslakh in 2005 (photograph taken from: http://www.almaslakh.org/catalog_mslkh01.php)**

*Improvisational techniques*

Mazen is known for his creative use of the trumpet, as his performances involve the employment of every conceivable part of the instrument, in addition to external accessories. His innovative production of sound incorporates the use of the trumpet's surfaces, its keys, different mouthpieces, mutes, and rubber hoses, to name a few (Wilson-Goldie 2005). His performances also integrate blowing through a long tube that is wrapped around his stomach, placing his trumpet vertically between his legs or a tin can on the bell (Burkhalter 2006), and even filling the instrument with water to create bubbling sounds (Burkhalter 2007). These methods all contribute towards an expansion of the aural-producing capabilities of the instrument, especially when accompanied by an array of blowing, sucking and percussive techniques (Burkhalter 2006).

In an interview, Mazen states that each musician has a personal technique or set of techniques which characterize his improvisation. He believes that a good, experienced musician must master his instrument(s); for instance, he should know what kind of sound will be produced with the use of a certain extended technique even *before* he plays it. In other words, during improvisation, the musician must produce premeditated sounds which are neither random nor part of a trial-and-error process (interview with the author, August 2008).

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When I asked Mazen to unveil the process behind the development of his elaborate set of techniques on trumpet, he told me that the process largely resembles the creation of a language. He explained that it involves two major phases: first, creating a vocabulary, and second, consolidating a grammar and sentence structure. In this case, vocabulary development entailed the creation of new sounds on his trumpet by using different blowing, sucking, or breathing techniques as well as preparing the acoustic instrument in order to generate electronic sounds and expand its rhythmical scope. Mazen always concocts new techniques of preparing (or not preparing) the trumpet; however, they all fall under four main categories. The first category is unprepared trumpet in which he has developed about twelve to fifteen different techniques. The second involves playing the trumpet with different mouthpieces such as a saxophone mouthpiece or a toy whistle adapted to the instrument in order to expand its pitch range. The third category entails the use of a long balloon which allows Mazen to play rhythmically as well as produce extremely high and low-pitched sounds. Finally, the fourth category involves the addition of a long tube with a tenor saxophone mouthpiece which emits a bass sound; moreover, placing the instrument between the legs and blocking it with all kinds of plates results in percussive sounds (interview with the author, August 2008).

According to Mazen, he could easily play different sounds and techniques back-to-back, but the real challenge was developing a certain grammar which would enable him to consolidate these sounds in a meaningful way, transition in between, and most importantly, make *music* out of them. Although such a grammar requires infinite refinement, Mazen asserts that he can now play a whole collective improvisation concert with a tube on the trumpet (for instance) because he has created the appropriate rules for phrase construction and transitions which save him from changing preparation every time the music varies in texture or gets faster, louder, etc. He believes he has developed a grammar which allows him to adapt to any situation which might occur without repeating himself or breaking the musical thought (interview with the author, August 2008).

*The impact of civil war*

  Mazen Kerbaj had been practicing FIM for some time when a friend of his, Austrian trumpet player Franz Hautzinger drew his attention to the fact that his trumpet sounds are very similar to the sounds of war machines. For example, in the hissing, grunting and gurgling sounds of Mazen's solos on the CD "Brt Vrt Zrt Krt," Burkhalter claims that one can discern the sound of machine gun volleys in the piece "Tagadagadaga" and the clatter of helicopter rotors in "Taga Pf Daga" (Burkhalter 2006). Ever since Hautzinger made his remark, Mazen has become interested in collecting sounds of the Lebanese civil war such as rifles firing and bombs exploding.[44] In addition to his desire to explore the extent to which war sounds from his childhood could have *subconsciously* influenced his music today (Burkhalter 2006), he was aiming at improvising with them in order to explore the aesthetic compatibility of such sounds with trumpet improvisations (interview with the author, August 2008).

  Born at the outset of the Lebanese civil war, Mazen says the following about growing up in a war-torn country: "It's sad to say, but I'm nostalgic of this time – it sounds harsh. And I'm happy that the war is over. But when peace came I was 16 years old. I had spent my whole life in war. To me, war was normal and peace was an abstract concept" (Burkhalter 2007).

  Khalaf explains that this lengthy, horrific civil war continued for so long because it was normalized and routinized by Lebanese citizens. He adds that such an atrocious war became inoffensively known as *ahdath* (Arabic for *events*), a "sanitized" label which actually "permitted its hapless victims to survive its ravages" (Khalaf 2001, 205). Khalaf also emphasizes the following: "The most dismaying development, no doubt, is when those grotesque features of war begin to envelop the lives of innocent children. All their daily routines and conventional modes of behavior – their schooling, eating and sleeping habits, playgrounds, encounters with others, perceptions, daydreams and nightmares, their heroes and role models – were inexorably wrapped up in the omnipresence of death, terror

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44. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lcgou7kkdk

and trauma, even their games, their language and their cognitive and playful interests became warlike in tone and substance. Their makeshift toys, much like their fairy tales and legends, mimicked the cruelties of war. They collected cartridges, empty shells and bullets. They played war games by simulating their own gang fights. They acquired sophisticated knowledge of the artifacts of destruction just as earlier generations took delight in identifying wild flowers, birds and butterflies" (Khalaf 2001, 206).

Having spent his entire childhood during the war, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mazen would go so far as to question whether those "nostalgic" sounds of civil war might have led to his affinity for free jazz and FIM, especially to John Coltrane, Evan Parker, and Peter Brötzmann's[45] album "Machine Gun" (Burkhalter 2006). In an interview with the author, Mazen takes care to emphasize the non-political nature of his war sound collection project, claiming that he was working with sounds from an "old war" which did not have any particular immediacy. He claims he was merely trying to confront his youth with music (interview with the author, August 2008) while conducting "artistic research" (interview with the author, January 2009). As Burkhalter puts it: "[Mazen's] music making was very much about rebelling against classical trumpet playing; today it's about finding out about himself" (Burkhalter 2007). Thus, in a way, Mazen's project seems to be an endeavour to understand his identity and psyche through the rediscovery and exposure to the horrific stimuli that encapsulated his entire childhood.

Furthermore, in an interview with Burkhalter, Mazen confesses: "I [...] have a special relationship to silence. Although silence is synonymous with peace, it was always ominous as well – waiting for the next hail of bombs" (Burkhalter 2006). Although he believes that producing sounds which may resemble those of war machinery is not restricted to Lebanese musicians, Mazen believes that those who grew up in Lebanon might have a more significant fear of silence because "it

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45. A significant German free jazz saxophonist and clarinetist

has never been innocent." Having learnt from a young age that silence or peace does not last forever, silence becomes even more frightening than bombing since it represents the *unknown*; at least when you hear a bomb, it means that you are still alive and therefore may have time to take shelter. Mazen claims that this is an unconscious soothing mechanism which Lebanese people, and children in particular, had developed in order to cope with the civil war (interview with the author, August 2008). This hypothesis will be especially helpful in understanding Mazen's music-making during the Lebanese-Israeli war in July 2006 (refer to Chapter 5).

**Sharif Sehnaoui**



**Figure 10. Sharif Sehnaoui: playing his electric guitar (left; photograph taken from: http://www.almaslakh.org/artists_ssehnaoui.php), and playing his acoustic guitar (right; photograph by Tanya Traboulsi)**

*Musical biography*

Sharif was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1976 and started taking classical piano lessons at an early age just like all the children in his family. Shortly afterwards, his lessons were halted as his family was displaced during the civil war, first to the town of Mansourieh for a couple of years and then to Cyprus for a year; therefore, he switched to rock instruments such as guitar and drums upon his return to his home country around the age of twelve. In 1996, Sharif moved to Paris where he discovered jazz; however, it was not until he got his hands on John Coltrane's album "Ole" and listened to Eric Dolphy's solo on transverse flute that he decided that jazz was what he was searching for all this time. Thus, Sharif enrolled in a "high-level, alternative" jazz school in Paris where he could learn to

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play jazz on guitar, but it was not long before he got into a dispute with the school since he refused to use the pick. Eventually, the school moved him to classical techniques which would enable him to play jazz with more proficient finger technique. Fostering a preference for free jazz, his interest in FIM gradually mounted as he watched the likes of saxophonist Evan Parker and bassist Barry Guy's[46] impressive extended techniques live in concert (interview with the author, June 2008). As he was pursuing philosophy studies at the time, Sharif was doubly interested in FIM's novel, challenging way of looking at music and time, as well as the extremes of sound therein.[47]

Sharif was a founding member of MILL, Ivraie ("an improvisation orchestra in residence at Instants Chavirés"), and Topophonie ("an association for public space performance").[48] He has collaborated with numerous Lebanese and international musicians, in addition to widely touring Europe and the US within FIM festivals. Having moved back to Beirut after over a decade in Paris, Sharif is now involved in the promotion of FIM and new music in Lebanon through the organization of Irtijal and regular collaborations with musicians in concerts and recordings.

### Improvisational techniques

Sharif stresses the importance of developing individual techniques and a unique style in playing one's instrument. Although he *could* adapt another guitarist's technique to his own set, he still has to invent a personal language and have a unique sound for his instrument; he says that one cannot go through life playing like Keith Rowe,[49] for instance. During our interview, Sharif recalls

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46. A British composer and double-bass player who works in contemporary composition, jazz, and FIM

47. This information was obtained from Sharif's interview with the author in June 2008 and the following website: http://www.creativesourcesrec.com/artists/s_sehnaoui.html.

48. http://slought.org/content/11306/

49. A British FIM musician who works with tabletop guitar

AMM member Edwin (Eddie) Prevost's teachings from his book "No Sound is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention Meta-Musical Narratives Essays" which was published in 1995. Sharif tells me that this book is essentially about recognizing that each person is an individual and "has his own language." According to Sharif, although each improviser is bound to slip and adapt to another's language, eventually, he will find his own and realize that each of the musicians' unique languages may coexist within an ensemble. This is what Prevost considers true communication since the musicians are being true to themselves instead of merely attempting to find a common ground for discussion. Sharif says that AMM is probably his favourite group because one can hear this principle applied in their music; each member plays in his own language without reacting to the other and rather moves in parallel. According to Sharif, this shows that the musicians are listening closely to each other while maintaining their individual characters, and this is what makes each of their sessions "a totally new creation." Sharif adds that if they were to find a common ground, their records would all sound the same (interview with the author, June 2008).

Sharif states that he had personally switched from electric to acoustic guitar around 2004, and he finds both the sound and physical experience of playing totally different between the two; he says that electric and acoustic guitars are almost two completely different instruments. As he returns to electric guitar, Sharif believes he will have to develop yet *another* new sound since he now possesses new materials as well as new mental relations to sound which allow him to execute a multitude of sounds in a linear, textural, minimal, or dynamic fashion, to mention a few (interview with the author, June 2008).

**Bechir Saade**



**Figure 11. Bechir Saade playing his nay (left; photograph taken from:**
**http://www.almaslakh.org/artists_saade.php) and his clarinet (right; photograph taken from:**
**http://www.bechirsaade.com/info.htm)**

*Musical biography*

      Bechir Saade is a Lebanese wind instrumentalist who teaches clarinet, flute, and nay privately, as well as political science at the American University of Beirut (AUB) (interview with the author, June 2008). He began playing blues and rock guitar at the age of fourteen, then switched to wind instruments at seventeen and learned to play the nay, flute and clarinet.[50] Having studied traditional Arabic repertoire as well as jazz styles, Bechir now focuses on the nay and bass clarinet as he collaborates with musicians in FIM formations. In addition to participating in the annual Irtijal workshops and concerts since 2002, Bechir has performed with Moukhtabar Ensemble and recorded with Lebanese and non-Lebanese FIM musicians. Bechir also spent a year in London (2006-2007) where he participated in percussionist Eddie Prevost's FIM workshop, as well as performed in festivals including "Freedom of the City" and "Back in your Town."[51]

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50. http://www.anothertimbre.com/bechirsaadeinterview.html

51. http://www.bechirsaade.com/info.htm

*Improvisational techniques*

In an email interview with Simon Reynell in February 2008, Bechir is asked whether his playing style differs among bass clarinet, flute, and nay. Bechir replies that, although his favourite-sounding instrument and thus his focus is the nay, its textural capabilities within FIM are limited. This is where the bass clarinet comes in to "fill the gap" with its larger, thicker body which can produce more sound possibilities. However, Bechir does note that he utilizes the nay's traditional blowing techniques on the bass clarinet most of the time.[52]

Bechir's website is an excellent resource as it reveals several of his personal techniques on nay which allow the production of a vast array of textures within FIM settings. First, Bechir points to the importance of mastering the nay's chromatic possibilities so that "perfect glissandos" may eventually be achieved. He adds that the nay may be said to imitate the human voice; thus, the mastery of a multitude of "effects" on this instrument may very well be able to "capture the subtleties of the human voice." Bechir then moves to the nay's polyphonic possibilities, which he claims are abundant, especially when combined with "a whole array of whistle tones or voice effects." Finally, he proposes interchanging the Arabic and Persian methods of blowing in addition to the use of "slapping [...], voices and other mouth sounds, using objects such as to block the end of the nay, using mouthpiece from the saxophone or other wind instruments, moving the nay in the air, etc."[53] It is evident from the above that Bechir is attempting to adapt techniques to the nay which are usually utilized on a range of Western and Middle Eastern wind instruments. And although he is aware of the difficulty of transferability between instruments, Bechir's primary concern seems to be expanding the textural-producing capabilities of the nay, which has rarely been used in FIM ensembles up till now.

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52. http://www.anothertimbre.com/bechirsaadeinterview.html

53. http://www.bechirsaade.com/nay.htm

**Raed Yassin**



Figure 12. Raed Yassin at the Irtijal Festival in April 2009: playing his double-bass with additional props (left; photograph by the author), and manipulating his electronics and video projections (right; photograph by Tanya Traboulsi)

*Musical biography*

Born in Lebanon in 1979, Raed Yassin's initial pursuit of the arts began with writing and publishing Arabic poetry in Lebanese newspapers at the age of fifteen. Afterwards, he started taking flute and double-bass lessons at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique Liban (Lebanese National Conservatory of Music), but stopped the flute six years later and continued lessons with the American double-bassist Jack Gregg who was residing in Lebanon at the time. At the age of sixteen, Raed began working in theatre while playing jazz and fusion, and he had already published three short poetry books by the time he started university in 1999. Since the Lebanese University (LU) was the only institution he could afford, Raed decided to enroll in its theatre program although he was more interested in video art installation which the LU did not offer (interview with the author, April 2009).

In 2001, Raed decided to play with Mazen Kerbaj on double-bass, tapes, and electronics after listening to one of Mazen's solo FIM pieces, and Sharif Sehnaoui shortly joined their duo to form A Trio which is still active until now (interview with the author, April 2009). Since then, Raed began to co-organize

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Irtijal and participate in its concerts after graduating from the Theatre Department of the Institute of Fine Arts at the LU in 2003; he had decided it was time to commit fully to the pursuit of his true passions – "video, performance, music and audio/visual arts." His works include performances such as "Black Pepper" and "Variations on a Face," videos such as "Beirut," "Antenna Sonata," and "Featuring Hind Rostom," as well as recordings with A Trio (entitled "A") and Gene Coleman ("The Adventures of Nabil Fawzi").[54] Raed has also exhibited his work in the Middle East, the United States, Europe, and Japan.[55] Currently, he is concluding a prestigious two-year artist residency at "de Ateliers" in Amsterdam, an initiative funded by the Department of Culture of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, in order to provide artistic development for young, talented artists from all around the world.[56]

*Improvisational techniques*

Raed claims he has developed a technique on double-bass which is completely different from anything he has ever learnt with his bass teachers (interview with the author, April 2009). Considered a "master of extended techniques" by The Wire magazine's Andy Hamilton,[57] Raed says he uses his instrument as "a sound-machine" instead of merely playing notes (interview with the author, April 2009). In addition to regular bowing and finger techniques, he employs "woody thumps and percussive string strikes."[58] I have also seen Raed utilizing found objects such as a metal sheet or a bent fork which he places between the bass's strings in order to modify the sound and create new textures.

However, Raed is more known for his interesting work with tape manipulation, electronics and turntables as he has been experimenting with radio and music tape sounds over the last couple of years. For instance, in a review of

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54. http://www.xanaduart.com/nafas%20beirut/raed.html

55. http://www.beirutartcenter.org/parallel-events.php?exhibid=52&statusid=2

56. http://www.de-ateliers.nl/index.cfm?chapter_id=24

57. http://www.almaslakh.org/catalog_mslkh04.php

58. http://www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/3505

the collaborative album "Cedarhead," Bill Meyer claims that Raed's greatest skill may be attributed to his work with tape and electronics. Meyers further describes this sound artist's technique within his duo with percussionist Michael Zerang as follows: "Yassin tugs tape over playback heads, obtaining stuttering sound bites with the facility of a hip-hop turntablist. He adroitly mixes snippets of radio broadcasts with synthetic swooshes and whistles to create a dizzying ride."[59]

### Raed's Arab pop culture project

For the past five years, Raed has been working on an extensive multimedia research project which allegedly aims at deconstructing Arab pop culture. In an interview, Raed tells me that he is very intrigued by the Arab World's so-called "pop culture," and specifically how sound and image are developing through mass production, which he says is very different from the production of "art." He is particularly interested in looking at the development of Arab pop culture between 1950 and 1990, a period during which the Arab world witnessed significant technological development, especially with regards to Western-imported recording and filming techniques. These technological changes led to the development of a vibrant Arab pop culture with two central poles of production – Cairo and Beirut (interview with the author, April 2009). Consequently, Raed has been collecting audio and visual samples from the Arab world's "TV, radio, pop songs, feature and documentary films"[60] from that period, in an attempt to study the development of sound and image in that area. His main objective is to manipulate, deconstruct, and reconstruct this material through the production of audio-visual collages (interview with the author, April 2009).

Raed's latest project is a solo album which involves the use of turntables and records produced in Egypt and Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s (interview with the author, April 2009). In addition, Beirut Art Center (BAC) recently hosted Raed's video and music performance entitled "Horror is Universal

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59. http://www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/3678

60. http://www.beirutartcenter.org/parallel-events.php?exhibid=53&statusid=3

(The End)" on August 5 and 6, 2009. BAC's website describes Raed's performance in the following manner: "This new piece, in its live version, is a milestone in his evolving work. Although composed, it requires his presence and energy for the multiple layers of information to blend in. Soundwise, a combination of turntables and electronics, microphone for singing, a collection of vintage hard to find LPs of popular Arabic music. He does not merely mix the sounds, he performs them, twisting every sample with a style that has become his own. On the screen, a video mixture of extracts from Egyptian films, reshaped and rearranged, abstracted, recurring such as musical elements to create a loose progression towards a final point. With Horror is Universal (The End), Raed Yassin sets a very high standard for all those interested in the *plunder* approach to all the mass media that have shaped our youth."[61]

In fact, Raed has produced several works revolving around the theme of Arab pop culture, such as his installation entitled "The Best of Sammy Clark" (referring to a Lebanese pop singer famous during the 1970s and 1980s), "Meeting the President," as well as other pieces for his duo with Paed Conca[62] within Praed.[63]

### Raed's civil war radio archiving project

Although he doubts he has the necessary means for such an extensive project, Raed's ultimate aim is to create a pop culture archive for the Middle East. However, his pop culture project all began with his collection of sound files from the Lebanese civil war archive. Raed tells me he was not interested in the war itself, but rather in the way it affected pop production and the sound of pop during that period. He explains that in addition to technological developments, Lebanese pop culture was largely influenced by Western cultural imperialism during the 1980s. According to Raed, this caused the emergence of "a strange musical mix

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61. http://www.beirutartcenter.org/parallel-events.php?exhibid=53&statusid=3

62. A FIM musician who plays bass, clarinet and electronics

63. http://www.beirutartcenter.org/parallel-events.php?exhibid=53&statusid=3

which was Western-influenced but Lebanese-produced in the context of a civil war." Thus, he is interested in all the sound material which was produced during the war, but particularly that which has been lost or forgotten, such as radio news segments, jingles for radio programs, advertisements, and pop songs (interview with the author, April 2009).

As mentioned earlier, the radio played an essential role in Lebanese people's everyday lives during the civil war. Each militia broadcasted its own updates to listeners, usually concerning strategic moves, casualties, as well as road blockades; there were allegedly around 200 local radio stations operating during the war (Burkhalter 2007)! It is therefore unsurprising that the first audio-visual collage Raed produced from the civil war archive contained many of these everyday sounds, from political speeches by military or clan leaders, sounds of explosions, and news broadcasts, in addition to commercials, radio jingles, jazz-rock, and synthesizer pop (Burkhalter 2007). This 23-minute collage was entitled "Featuring Hind Rostom," in reference to one of Egypt's most seductive cinema actresses of the second half of the 20th century.

Raed tells me that he encountered some problems while he was collecting civil war material for his project (interview with the author, April 2009). In an article, Burkhalter claims that the radio and television stations were reluctant to hand over such tapes due to their traumatic memories of the war. He says that those archives represent aural recollections which many Lebanese people would rather erase completely from their minds instead of reliving them (Burkhalter 2007). Although this statement is true on some level, I believe it tends to overlook the complexity of Lebanese people's relationship to the war, both past and present. For instance, Raed says that his use of civil war material has inescapable political connotations, which is probably why he was suspiciously interrogated by some: "Where are you from? Why do you need this material?" (interview with the author, April 2009). In other words, which religious group and political party are you affiliated with? The fact of the matter is that, no matter how hard Lebanese citizens try to forget the civil war, many of the militia leaders of that period are

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still around today, fighting old battles through their active participation in Lebanese politics. People in Lebanon today are not so much trying to forget the brutality of an old war as much as they are attempting to prevent the landslide into a new civil war through withholding the facts and reinforcing what has been referred to as "collective amnesia"[64] by Sune Haugbolle (Haugbolle 2005). Returning to Raed's radio archiving attempts, he says it was most difficult for him to get a hold of political speeches by militia leaders, although these speeches are well-known and supposedly cannot be hidden from the public. He explains why they might be considered problematic: "These speeches were made from all sides, and it is obvious from them that [militia leaders] are the ones that destroyed this country" (interview with the author, April 2009).

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64. This is in reference to the expression coined by Lebanese historian and political journalist Samir Kassir.

# Chapter 4: FIM as a worldview: Putting values into practice

In an effort to begin comprehending the meaning(s) that FIM might hold for people in Lebanon, I decided to turn to the four aforementioned Lebanese musicians who have contributed significantly to the music's development in this country. Depending on the musicians' personal backgrounds, experiences, and interests, each would emphasize certain aspects of FIM which are most important to them; however, one can clearly observe a set of commonalities in their responses as well. Consequently, this chapter shall compare and contrast the four musicians' answers to the question of musical meaning as well as social interaction within collective improvisation.

## *Personal principles behind the practice of FIM*

In this section, I will highlight the reasons behind each of the four musicians' affinity for FIM. It is interesting to note how each of their distinctive artistic and musical backgrounds as well as their current occupations influence their definitions of the genre and their articulation of the discourse around it.

### Mazen Kerbaj

Mazen's aesthetic ideals and philosophies about artistic creation within illustration and music-making seem to influence and inform each other as they engage in continuous discussion. Moreover, it seems that these ideals emerge from a knowledge of Western music history and even more so of Western *art* history.

First, he declares that FIM appeals to him largely because it offers a context within which an artist can "cheat" the least. Mazen says that whatever happens while one is improvising – whether one plays a sound by mistake, or the sound one produces does not turn out as planned, or "one of the musicians drops dead" – one is obliged to accept the error (or turn of events) and deal with it. Because of the real-time nature of improvisation, one needs to transcend the

notion of right and wrong because one can never refine or correct a "mistake." Mazen is attracted to the concept of improvisation because it places the musician in "constant danger," thus forcing him to stay alert and ready for anything. He declares that, for him, the most important aspect of FIM is the anticipation which both improviser and audience feels in such an un-staged, uncertain situation where no action can be corrected or glossed over. Since his discovery of FIM, Mazen says he has transferred this way of thinking to his illustrations; he has been sketching with ink instead of pencil for the last ten years so as to force himself not to correct his errors (interview with the author, August 2008).

Mazen goes on to say that failure is yet *another* aspect of FIM which one has to be prepared for. In fact, he considers failure as much part of the music as anything else. In order to clarify, Mazen refers to a personal hero – one of the most renowned figures in 20th century art – Pablo Picasso. According to Mazen, Picasso says that everything an artist does is good because *he* did it. If he draws badly one day, it means that that was the best he could do then; but it is still part of what he is, therefore it is just as important as any of his "best" work because it is these "mistakes" that lead to good work later. Mazen also says that it is very important for an artist to accept and even *cherish* failure instead of rejecting or comparing it to success. This discussion clearly foregrounds the value which Mazen places on *process* rather than *product* in his understanding of FIM. He says: "Sometimes I [see] bad concerts, and a lot of times I [play] bad concerts, but even a bad improvised music concert (as opposed to concerts of pre-composed music) has its good parts because you are seeing people suffering to try to get out from this bad concert. And sometimes they don't manage for the whole concert, but they are here! They are *live* people in front of you trying to get out from this hole they jumped in! And you *see* them and you *feel* with them... Even if you don't like the music, there is something creative happening now. They cannot lean back and relax. They are in nowhere, and they have to count on themselves to get themselves out [of] this. And this sense of danger and the fact that failure is

*always* possible – and is *not* to be rejected – is what makes improvised music so important for me" (interview with the author, August 2008).

Mazen later addresses the argument which labels FIM as "elitist and intellectual" by saying that he believes this music to be totally "primitive" since it relies on notions which preceded the emergence of musical elements such as pitch, melody, rhythm, and harmony, as well as musical theory and compositional guidelines. He further indicates that FIM is "primitive" since it lacks any concrete elements such as melody or rhythm, and it is devoid of any functional or contextual meaning such as celebration, mourning, work, etc. According to Mazen, it is this freedom from "prejudice" or associated meanings which enables FIM to speak directly to the emotions, thus conjuring up an infinite array of images, experiences, and interpretations among improvisers and audience members alike (interview with the author, August 2008).

In a video interview entitled "Art during Wartime," Mazen declares that "improvised music is maybe a step ahead in the sense it's really pure sound – working on sound as music." He further indicates that the notion of producing *sound* rather than *music* is comparable to visual artists' realization that "the line and the stain of color" can be considered as a painting in itself; "you don't need to represent something to call it a painting."[65] Interestingly enough, Mazen does assert that if man were not intellectual, he would not have been able to reach a stage where he could accept such "primitive" things. However, he says that humans had to pass through all this art history in order to reach a point where they can accept things for what they are (interview with the author, August 2008). Again, one can easily trace the influence of his visual art education and practice on his musical philosophies, as well as the constant dialogue between these two significant facets of his professional life.

Although many people do not understand the value of FIM and criticize it for being noise rather than real music, Mazen explains that another characteristic

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65. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lcgou7kkdk

which attracted him to this music was its chaotic nature and the absence, or near absence, of any rules. However, Mazen does point out that having such elaborate freedom actually makes things more difficult for a musician since he is faced with infinite possibilities and absolutely no direction. Mazen also believes that FIM grants the musician an opportunity for personal expression which can rarely be found in such a capacity, especially not in art musics. For instance, according to him, one can only identify one "musician" in a symphony orchestra – the composer – but he does not qualify as a true musician since he is not playing music and is usually not even present. Mazen further explains that the "musicians" present in the orchestra are merely interpreters of a pre-composed piece, and therefore cannot be considered musicians either! Here, he is obviously lashing out on our modern definition of the term "musician" and demanding a distinction be made between "real" musicians and mere interpreters who are "paid to play music like machines" (interview with the author, August 2008). Mazen's statements clearly reveal his view that a true musician is one who invents musical ideas *as well as* performs them; in other words, he believes that the existence of separate composer and interpreter roles creates an unnatural rupture in the process of musical production.

**Sharif Sehnaoui**

As for Sharif, when asked what FIM means to him, he found it important to emphasize the distinction he finds between FIM and "music." According to him, FIM is an experience of "sound," a concept he defines – similarly to Mazen – as material one works with artistically as color on a painting. He even ventures to say that he does not consider himself a musician per se, since music is a popular cultural product which possesses elements such as harmony, melody and rhythm. Instead, Sharif believes he is making "art." According to him, if one were to find the equivalent of abstract painting in the realm of music, it would be contemporary music, free jazz, and FIM, since the focus is on forms, colors, and textures as opposed to the representation (or imitation) of reality. Before becoming an artist, Sharif was largely interested in philosophy and thus pursued

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his studies in that area. However, he believes that art also allows people to question themselves and society without being philosophers, scholars, or researchers, which is why he considers his shift to music quite natural (interview with the author, June 2008).

Sharif goes on to describe different styles of improvisation, such as free jazz (free form jazz), noise music (loud and chaotic), free rock (improvisation with a rock sound or feel), and minimalistic improvisation (which started in Europe but is now more widespread in Japan). Within acoustic FIM itself, Sharif says that there are numerous schools of thought, categorized according to their country of origin. For instance, he points to two well-known British schools of thought: "plink plonk" which involves constant interaction among sounds, and its opposite, best represented by the ensemble AMM, which encourages each musician to develop his own sound that moves in parallel with the others' and never *reacts* but rather *coexists* with them. Sharif also mentions the German school which is "more abstract and intellectual" and the French school which is very textural. He then states that there is constant discourse among FIM musicians regarding different schools of thought, and they frequently decide to play according to one or the other. Moreover, Sharif says that FIM musicians may have different *periods* during their musical careers; for example, he himself was very minimalistic in the past, but today he is interested in playing more expressive textural pieces (interview with the author, June 2008).

**Bechir Saade**

Possessing a strong background in jazz, blues, and Middle Eastern music, all of which focus heavily on melodic elements, Bechir declares that the discovery of FIM constituted a "revelation" for him. He claims that he had been getting extremely frustrated by the aforementioned genres' emphasis on tones and thus found FIM's textural concerns refreshing: "[I] found it much more interesting to go back to one of the reasons why music resonates in us, and which has to do with

the nature, the texture of the sound."[66] This is why he switched to the nay in which each single note has the ability to produce a large array of textures (interview with the author, June 2008).

When asked whether his style of playing the nay in FIM formations has been influenced by traditional Middle Eastern music (which is heavily based on improvisation), Bechir reveals the following: "Of course. Traditional Arabic music (and to some extent Turkish, Persian, etc) is mostly based on improvisation. You have centuries of thinking improvisation when you enter this door, thinking texture of sound, intensity, silences, etc. Arabic music for example is modal and its tonal structure is much more complex than today's Western music. Middle Age European music may resemble it more in structure because tonal intervals are not the simplified 12-note chromatic scale that you use today and on which modern 'harmony' is built. But this has a lot to do with this new development in music which is 'composition', especially in its written form. The more you move to a composed form of music (written vs oral) the more you lose the subtleties related to everything that comes with the sound. It is interesting to see how contemporary western music struggles with these forms after having several centuries of the predominance of composition. Alas, Arabic music has fallen prey to European 'standards' and has struggled to 'write' its music and thus is losing much of its potential. The power of the oral tradition brings improvisation to the forefront."[67]

As he possesses a formal musical education and experience in various styles, Bechir admits that he cannot help but compare *free* improvisation to more traditional forms of improvisation. In this regard, he constantly finds himself questioning the former's *seriousness* as a musical genre and the degree to which it could be accepted by the general public. He believes that musicians such as Mazen Kerbaj may not suffer from this "complex" since the only genre they have

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66. http://www.anothertimbre.com/bechirsaadeinterview.html

67. http://www.anothertimbre.com/bechirsaadeinterview.html

ever focused on is FIM.  Furthermore, Bechir says it is quite tricky to discard his overpowering background in pitches and intervals, and he finds that the scales he learnt in different musical idioms are so ingrained in his musical memory that they regularly creep into his improvisation if it is melodic to some extent. On another level, Bechir states that it is equally difficult to overlook the riveting intervals of the traditional *maqams*[68] which he believes create the state of *saltana*[69] (interview with the author, June 2008).

Bechir believes that in FIM, musicians truly progress once they find a unique style which they can start developing and specializing in. That being said, Bechir thinks he has reached a relatively stable stage in his own FIM "career," where he has decided to combine both textures and pitches in a *dialogue* between two improvisational forms which originated in different regions and times: (European) FIM and traditional Middle Eastern improvisation. He adds that his ongoing nay-shakuhashi collaboration[70] with shakuhashi player Clive Bell is the first project which is leading him closer to the music he would like to play. Bechir says this is because both instruments are wind instruments, which allows the production of very textural sounds with the wood as well as the occasional appearance of Japanese and Arabic melodies which creep in freely (interview with the author, June 2008).

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68. Middle Eastern musical modes

69. A concept found in traditional Middle Eastern music; it refers to the desirable overpowering effect which music may create for a listener.

70. This collaboration resulted in the release of an album entitled "An Account of my Hut" in 2007.
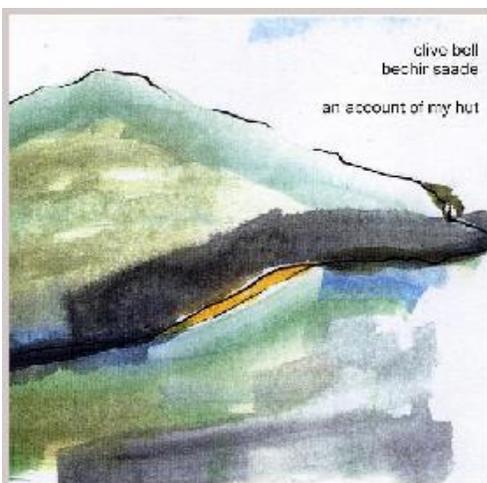
**Figure 13. Cover of the collaborative album between Bechir Saade and Clive Bell entitled "An Account of my Hut," produced in 2007 by Another Timbre (photograph taken from: http://www.anothertimbre.com/accountofmyhut.html)**

**Raed Yassin**

Although Raed does not elaborate on the meaning of FIM to him as much as the other musicians, he does mention that he is drawn to the absence of clear guidelines for "right" and "wrong" sounds or actions. Raed seems more concerned with the social dynamics within an ensemble, for he is drawn to the fact that this music does not succeed without the musicians' mutual respect for each other's ideas; and even then, each member must take equal responsibility for the music's success or failure (interview with the author, April 2009).

## *Social dynamics within collective improvisation*

Since it was the large ensemble workshop with Axel Dorner which had initially sparked my interest in FIM, I found it indispensable to discuss the act of *collective* improvisation with my informants. I was thoroughly intrigued by the processes of preparation for a performance, verbal and non-verbal communication among musicians, as well as group dynamics or power relations within the ensemble during collective improvisation. Do musicians set any guidelines or a specific direction before a performance? Is the length of the performance or the number of sets chosen before-hand? Do musicians communicate during improvisation and if so, how? What kind of power structure governs the

relationship between ensemble members? Do they interact with audience members in any way? Do they give each other feedback after the concert?

**Before the performance**

In terms of preparation for collective improvisation within the context of a performance, Mazen says that musicians rarely discuss anything in advance (using words) since the improvisation session in *itself* is supposed to be a discussion. Mazen even provides the following example: sometimes, when he meets a musician he has never played with before, the question of whether to play one long set or several short pieces arises, and the answer on either end is usually "Let's play and we'll see" (interview with the author, August 2008).

On the other hand, Bechir states that musicians may agree on certain things before the concert, such as a certain "soul" or general mood, and even specific sounds or formulations; however, he adds that the specifics remain unknown, and there may be surprises. At the same time, Bechir says: "One shouldn't play something completely unrelated. The mere act of playing with someone you know implies that you're expecting something specific since you both know how the other plays. No matter how uncertain it may be, there's still your musical memory [about your partners' habits] to guide you" (interview with the author, June 2008).

I must admit that initially, I had taken the stark contrast between the two musicians' responses to indicate disparate levels of experience with FIM and/or different levels of dedication to the principles of this music. In retrospect though, that assumption largely conflicts with the very concept of FIM; as mentioned before, Bailey states that the most consistent characteristic of FIM is its *diversity* (Bailey 1993, 83), and Sharif demonstrates that by volunteering a long list of different and even opposing schools of thought within this musical category (interview with the author, June 2008). These differences in the musicians' principles and practices of FIM will be tackled further in chapter 7.

**During the performance**

Having watched numerous Lebanese musicians improvising within ensembles in Beirut over the last four years, I have noticed that once the improvisation begins, there is practically no eye contact among musicians or between musician and audience. In fact, the musicians are usually consumed with their own instrument(s) so as to concentrate on their unconventional extended techniques which may frequently require switching among an array of found objects. Therefore, I was interested in learning about the musician's mental process while improvising as well as the way one might verbalize collective musical dialogue in such a context.

*The musician's mental process*

With regards to the musician's mental process, Mazen states that the improviser is constantly choosing from an infinite number of possible sounds and techniques, while taking into consideration the other musicians' actions, the overall soundscape or music, as well as the audience and the venue itself (interview with the author, August 2008).

On another note, Bechir acknowledges the contradiction in most FIM musicians' on-stage interaction; for although they are supposedly participating in *collective* improvisation, their actions prove very *individualistic*. For instance, he states that musicians usually close their eyes and focus on the sound instead of maintaining some eye contact and having fun as in other improvisatory styles (interview with the author, June 2008).

On the one hand, could this lack of direct interaction through regular visual or verbal cues be an indication of the complexity of communication within such a free, non-idiomatic improvisatory music? Or is it, as Bechir claims, a reflection of the extremely individualistic nature of FIM? On the other hand, could this decentred, indirect communication not be considered a by-product of the egalitarian, non-hierarchical structure of a FIM ensemble?

*Musical interaction among musicians*

In FIM, the alternative to verbal and visual cues seems to be "discussion" through sound production and reaction to other sounds. Mazen claims that this is actually very similar to the way people discuss with words: "Sometimes you agree with the guy, sometimes you don't agree. You give counter arguments, sometimes you shout at him or he shouts at you, sometimes you end up beating yourself... You get lower or higher, sometimes you listen, sometimes three are talking at the same time... it's really as a dialogue or a discussion. And there's no meaning for sure – the meaning is the music in itself. So let's say I'm playing with Sharif [and Raed] and they're doing something very low [in volume], and I'm doing nothing, I can just come with something very high [in] volume for ten seconds and stop. In this situation, the normal, direct thing to do for a not very experienced improviser is to go with me and react totally. And actually, when you play a lot, you discover that no, you can continue, totally erased by this guy for ten seconds. And he goes very high volume and you are going continuously with this very small sound... You know at some point he will stop and yours will go up. If he is a good improviser, you know he will not erase your sound for the whole [piece]; otherwise he is crazy and you cannot play with this guy. So you don't react to him violently – no, you continue with your idea for some time, then he stops, and it makes a good contrast... If you don't go with him, you answer him. You realize he is the only one very high [in] volume, then when he stops, he sees that you are continuing on the same idea... So there is "give-and-take" (interview with the author, August 2008).

Bechir seems to agree with Mazen's guidelines for collective improvisation, for he states that one of FIM's best characteristics is that musicians are expected to be patient, open-minded and tolerant. He demonstrates: "If someone is playing something you don't like, you can't think that you don't like it; instead, you have to try to do something with what he's giving you. He might have a certain purpose behind that idea – let's continue with it to see" (interview with the author, June 2008).

In addition, Bechir draws attention to some of the difficulties a FIM musician may face as he recounts one of his own collective improvisation experiences. He says that the problem with this music is that sometimes, nothing interesting happens in the concert – it rarely happens that most or all of the performances within a FIM festival are good. For instance, he describes his on-stage duo with a clarinettist in 2008 as follows: "I was playing, and I just felt like putting my instrument on the floor and leaving. It just didn't work [...]. I did not feel anything, and the clarinettist and I did not connect. We had rehearsed in a certain manner and had found a common ground, but the guy played something that had *nothing* to do with what we had rehearsed. So I got lost. Now Sharif tells me that I was in the wrong since I should have adapted. I guess he's right, but at the same time, I got upset during the concert and got a mind block. I could not feel it, and frankly, I did not like the sounds he produced" (interview with the author, June 2008).

It seems that at least with Bechir, the success of a collective improvisation session is largely dependent on his mood during performance. He explains that adversely, in other musical genres, even if one is not happy with what is happening, there remains a distinct structure or platform on which his performance can be based. Bechir adds that even during jazz improvisation, one's solo might not be very impressive if he is not in the mood, but at least the music continues to move along. However, he says that in FIM, there is no point of reference whatsoever, thus the entire improvisation session will not work out if the musician is not happy with what is happening (interview with the author, June 2008).

### Egalitarianism and humility

I was particularly interested in learning about group dynamics and power relations among musicians during collective improvisation, and Mazen was able to offer helpful insights on the matter. As before, his point of reference seemed to be Western classical music in which a pre-composed score guides the musicians or "interpreters," and the conductor leads the ensemble using hand gestures. In

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contrast, Mazen states that ideally, FIM ensembles do not have a designated leader and as such, lack "the tyranny of the composer;" instead, the music is the leader, and all members share equal amounts of responsibility within the ensemble. Mazen adds that in theory, FIM is about the *simultaneous* expression of individual and group. For although the individual may express himself freely, he must also learn to live with the others' expression and be aware that his own ideas may not erase those of the ensemble's but instead must join them to produce a larger group expression (interview with the author, August 2008).

Mazen tries to clarify further by drawing a "caricature" of the socio-political situation in Lebanon and using it as an analogy for successful (or unsuccessful in this case) collective improvisation; this has interesting implications regarding his political ideologies as well as his values within collective improvisation. He asks me to consider the whole – Lebanon – and the constituent parts - its 18 recognized religious (and thus political) communities such as the Christian Orthodox, the Maronites, the Sunni, the Shi'ite, the Druze, etc. According to Mazen, Lebanon cannot succeed as a whole in its present state since each community believes it is more important than the others and wants to improve its individual situation *before* improving that of Lebanon (interview with the author, August 2008). I found Mazen's contrast between citizens' patrimonial allegiances in Lebanon and musicians' loyalty to the whole within a FIM ensemble very illuminating, especially since this political view is echoed in the work of many scholars. Khalaf, for example, says the following regarding the so-called "crisis of identity" in Lebanon: "As long as the social structure remains predominantly ascriptive and particularistic in character, the Lebanese citizen will derive greater satisfaction and security from his kinship and communal ties than from his involvement or participation in purely rational or ideological associations. It is still largely within these traditional networks that he derives and sustains his sense of identity… Kinship, fealty, and confessional loyalties still supersede those of the nation, state, or party. Accordingly, a Christian is first a

Christian, a member of a given family, and from a specific region before he is a Lebanese" (Khalaf 1987, 118-9).

Mazen adds that collective improvisation does not work when each ensemble member is concerned with his own success before that of the overall group; the music would simply not be that good. However, although ideally, collective improvisation advocates egalitarianism and community, Mazen says that sometimes there are "egos" who think they can make decisions for the rest of the group (interview with the author, August 2008).

Mazen says there are no specific "rules" when it comes to collective improvisation; however, he proceeds to share some guidelines and tactics he has learnt over the years that have helped him achieve the aforementioned ideal group dynamics. First, he explains that improvising within a group requires a fair amount of humility, a quality he all but lacked as the sole "creator" of illustrations and comics (where he made all the decisions *and* took "all the glory"), but one which he had to acquire when he began improvising ten years earlier. Mazen declares that, thanks to this music, his "megalomaniac" tendencies have been subsiding, and his outlook towards his illustrations has been altered accordingly. Next, he refers to the guidelines which trumpet player Axel Dorner proposed during his workshop within the Irtijal festival in April 2006. Mazen says: "It's like in the workshop of Axel when he tells you 'Don't play a sound unless you feel that if you don't play it, the music will be shit – unless you feel it's *totally* necessary that you play this sound... And if you stay 20 minutes on a piece and never feel that your sound would have made it better, don't play a sound'" (interview with the author, August 2008).

In other words, if the music is already good without you, you should just leave it as it is without trying to ornament it or make it more "beautiful" (interview with the author, August 2008). Judging from my few personal experiences with collective improvisation, I believe this piece of advice is invaluable since I understand the pressure which inexperienced improvisers may feel to contribute to the soundscape within an ensemble. The key is to realize that

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less can be more in this context, and *silence* is just as important as *sound* in a FIM piece.

Finally, Mazen turns to renowned drummer John William Stevens who provides two pieces of advice which serve to reinforce the importance of humility and respect as a path towards group success. Stevens first says that if you cannot clearly hear all the musicians that are playing, then you are playing too loudly; you must play in a lower volume until you can hear them. And second, if all the musicians are in one place and you are in another, then *you* are in the wrong. Mazen sums both of Stevens' statements in the following manner: there are no rules, but if something does not work, you must not blame it on someone else – it is always your fault. He admits that this is by no means an easy task; however, he believes that accepting it actually helps one to overcome the difficulties of playing in a large ensemble (interview with the author, August 2008).

## *The importance of "listening"*

Sharif demonstrates the importance of concentration during collective improvisation by describing one of the most common blunders which occur within this music: not listening closely or not reacting quickly enough to fellow improvisers. Sharif asks me to imagine a FIM quartet performing at a concert. Supposing that all four musicians are producing a certain common soundscape, then three of them *stop clearly*, while the fourth keeps going and finds himself "trapped in a solo." According to Sharif, this constitutes a huge problem, as it usually means that the out-of-sync musician was not listening closely or is just not experienced enough to react as quickly as he should. Sharif adds that such a move is acceptable if it constitutes a *conscious* decision to oppose the other musicians and start a solo; however, more often than not, it is all too clear that the "soloist" is carrying on with the exact same material and possesses no concept for a solo – he merely continues, hoping the others will come back in. This usually forces the other musicians to come to his rescue by returning to the soundscape and helping him to change the material (interview with the author, June 2008).

Obviously, with enough experience, a FIM musician would start to coordinate with other ensemble members with regards to stops, transitions, and general synchronization. However, one might wonder how a musician would *realize* that the others are "stopping clearly" if there are neither verbal nor visual cues employed, or even any overt sonic signals! In response to this, Sharif explains that the slowing down of a "fundamental sound" – usually a constant buzzing sound which everyone is playing in relation to – is generally a clear indication that the musicians need to stop or transition into something different. And although not stopping or changing when you "should" during collective improvisation is very aggravating for all members of the ensemble, Sharif declares that it is a common problem that occurs even with experienced musicians. He says that sometimes, a musician hears everyone else stopping, but he cannot do the same since he is too stressed or afraid of the impending silence; apparently, this fear is almost "pathological," but eventually one learns to control it. Sharif says that, at any rate, each musician is expected to take initiative at some point during the improvisation, and although this is not always the case, it should be evident *who* is taking the initiative at any point (interview with the author, June 2008).

Speaking of quick reactions, Raed describes the difference between playing with regular musical partners and playing with new ones. He remarks that since he plays with Sharif and Mazen frequently in A Trio, he has come to know which sound will be produced when each musician places a certain object on his instrument or uses a particular extended technique. In his opinion, this is what makes the trio's sound homogeneous. In contrast, Raed says that when playing with new musicians, there is constant internal tension as one attempts to listen very closely to their sounds as well as react in a quick manner (interview with the author, April 2009).

### *Difficulties in large-group improvisation*
Unfortunately, I got a disappointing tug back to reality after Sharif very practically explained why I had gotten overwhelmed by a trance-like experience

during each of the two four-hour sessions within Axel Dorner's workshop in April 2006. Although my experience might have emerged from a blatant misconception, I must admit that it forced me to seriously question the very *concept* of music and music-making for the first time.

I had never been exposed to the principles of FIM in an ensemble, neither in literature nor in practice. Thus, I believe that the enveloping body of sound produced, coupled with the musicians' complete concentration on their individual instruments and lack of visual or verbal cues or any eye contact, all led me to believe that each musician was solely interacting with (and contributing to) the soundscape instead of the group. And although I had attended a couple of FIM concerts at Irtijal 2005 and 2006, I believe that the sheer size of the workshop ensemble and its seating in a circular shape, the absence of an audience, and my proximity to the other eleven or twelve musicians (or sound sources), all contributed towards my experience of a powerful, trance-inducing soundscape which seemed to envelop the medium-sized music room.  I was struck by the guidelines Axel Dorner gave to the group, particularly the following: "Don't play a sound unless you feel that its existence is crucial for the sake of the music." As I was participating in the workshop with absolutely no previous knowledge of FIM, the aforementioned guideline, along with the powerful soundscape produced, drove me to infer that the musicians were contributing to this soundscape only when absolutely necessary for the overall *living, breathing* body of sound to be sustained in its *natural* form. In other words, I believed the musicians were merely the *medium* through which the music – having a life of its own – materialized and took shape.

Evidently, such an experience shattered all my preconceived notions about the meaning of music, the role of the musician, the power structure between musician and soundscape, and the experiential component of collective improvisation. Over the next two years, these issues haunted me incessantly, as I tried to find a practical explanation for this unique, puzzling experience. During my first Masters seminar in musicology, I endeavoured to draw connections with

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20<sup>th</sup> century composers such as John Cage, whose post-tonal work could be described as an attempt "to give up the desire to control sound, clear [the] mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories of expression or human sentiments" (Cage 1961b, 10). In this case, does the "musician" become a mere medium for the manifestation or existence of music (or sound), as opposed to the music being the "musician's" medium for personal expression?

When I finally communicated this issue to my informants during my fieldwork in Beirut, Sharif in particular provided me with an explanation which illuminated but somehow trivialized the intense experience I had had. According to him, the reason I had the impression that the workshop musicians were interacting with the soundscape itself instead of each other was because I had encountered a very unique *problem* which occurs during the rare case of collective improvisation in a very *large* ensemble. Sharif goes on to describe this problem which has yet to be solved: "As the number of musicians increases, the number of sound sources increases, and the musician's individual listening capacities decrease" (interview with the author, June 2008).

He adds that it is already challenging to listen to and distinguish all the sound sources in a *quintet*; therefore, in groups of ten or even twenty, it becomes virtually impossible to keep track of all the different sounds being produced simultaneously. Eventually, each musician ends up reacting to certain sounds by making decisions which in turn are interpreted differently by each of the others; thus each musician might go in a totally different direction, leading the group into confusion and chaos. According to Sharif, this explains why Axel Dorner was attempting to "clean up" the soundscape by suggesting that only a trio or quartet improvise concurrently and insisting that people not play a sound unless they feel it is absolutely necessary for the music. Sharif concludes that the difficulties within large-group improvisation are an indication of this music's complexity, both in individual technique and collective improvisation skills (interview with the author, June 2008).

**After the performance**

According to Sharif, it is the "micro-events," or small actions and reactions among musicians within a performance, which lead to individual reflection as well as discussion among the ensemble members afterwards. Thus, besides the non-verbal musical dialogue which occurs *during* a performance, he states that musicians take part in an elaborate discourse after each concert by commenting on what was played, analyzing their failures and successes, debating which combination of sounds worked and why, and why they were or were not "collective" (synchronized) at certain points, etc. Sharif adds that sometimes, they even get into heated arguments: "Why did you go against the others? Were you not listening? Or did you do it on purpose?" (interview with the author, June 2008)

Whether the feedback is positive or negative, Sharif emphasizes the importance of communication and debate among ensemble members as the group can only improve through constant constructive criticism (interview with the author, June 2008). At the same time, he *does* suspect that this excessive love for debate may be a purely Lebanese cultural trait, and he goes on to demonstrate what a typical post-concert discussion among Lebanese and non-Lebanese musicians might sound like:

"Some musicians often tell us (Lebanese FIM musicians) that they never speak about [these concert micro-events]. But as Lebanese – and this is very cultural – we *cannot* shut up. We have to speak... Often we fight. For example, take me, Mazen, Christine, and a guest on percussion – this is our quartet "Rouba3i;" when the concert ends, it's a good concert, everybody's happy and we're like:

-   'Yeah, thank you, thank you...'

And then the [percussionist] noticed we were fighting: Christine is insulting Mazen, Mazen is insulting Christine. He's like:

-   'Yeah, it was really good!'

And they're like:

- 'No, it was not good at all!'
- 'No, it was good!'
- 'Why did you do this at this moment?!'

The [percussionist] is like:

'Shit! It must have been a *very* bad gig! Why are they fighting??'

And then we have to explain to him:

- 'No, no, this is regular.'

Or for example, one says:

'It was too dull, it was too dull! No one took initiative, no one came across, we were always in a kind of mezzo forte feeling throughout the [set], we should have had more fluctuations, it was too flat...'

And then it [turns into] a discussion:

- 'Yeah, but flat is *good*; it's nice to do things that are flat!'
- 'No, flat is not good!'
- 'Yeah, I know what you mean. It's true, maybe this time we were too dull... I was tired.'" (interview with the author, June 2008)

**Figure 14. Charbel Haber, Mazen Kerbaj, and Sharif Sehnaoui (from left to right) having a verbal discussion at the "They've Got a Bomb!" concert in Beirut Art Center, January 2009 (photograph by the author)**

Following such an elaborate account, I was curious to know how Sharif would actually *define* a good concert! He says there is usually a reasonable chance that it was a good concert when any or all of the following had taken place: everyone was listening closely and was quick to respond or react, the transitions between phases worked fluently, the group was producing a common sound and diverse-sounding phases, the musicians did not encounter any difficult moments, and no one took the others in a direction they could not follow. But most importantly, he says that one knows it was a good concert when the musicians enjoy playing together, and when both musicians and audience are smiling afterwards. Having said this, Sharif assures me that it is rare to have consensus among ensemble members regarding the way the concert had gone, and there is constant debate around this issue (interview with the author, June 2008).

In fact, even if most people think a concert went well, you can never be certain; but this, according to Sharif, is part of the nature of improvisation (interview with the author, June 2008). Here, Sharif echoes Mazen's previous

comment by saying that this is all part of the risk one takes by choosing to practice FIM, and thus lacking a "safety net" of any kind:

"You are really never so sure, it's always possible you were wrong. And that's part of improvisation, of the risk you are taking by choosing to do this, and never have a safety net under you – if you fall, you fall. You hit the floor... It's part of the risk, and it's similar to life. So that's why sometimes I think we are kind of like *honest* musicians because we're not pretending to be better than what we are. This, for me, is a very important part of improvisation – to be honest and humble in a way. Humankind is made of failures, success, [...] good times, bad times... Dialogue between people is made of agreement, disagreement, a moment when you're nonsensical [...], a moment when you are making sense and saying things that are coherent [...]. Language is really a very difficult tool to work with... so full of misunderstandings. And I feel that all these levels are present in our music, and this is something that actually makes me very happy to play this... One of the purposes of art is to express life, [and in free improvisation,] I feel we are expressing life better than people who play beautiful, [pre-composed] music [...]. If the band plays well, then every gig will be good, and it's *security*. And life is not like this. For me, this is a very important point: to really express a human being without lying... for example, 'Look at me, I am beautiful. I can play all these beautiful solos, all these beautiful chords and harmonic progressions [...].' I'm exaggerating of course; musicians are not like this. But, in a way, there *is* this level, and this level we don't have it in improvisation. We are constantly just human beings, capable of failure at any moment, and capable of success at other moments [...]. An American improviser and composer living in Madrid called Wade Matthews used to say, 'This music is at the scale of man.' Most of the ideas I am telling you come from discussions with him 'cause he's really a total intellectual of this music. So you are not pretending to be bigger than what you are or better

than what you are. You are just this... *man.*" (interview with the author, June 2008)

# Chapter 5: FIM and the politics of representation: "Starry Night"

So far, I have attempted to demonstrate the diverse set of meanings FIM may provide for the Lebanese musicians themselves, both individually and in a group, as well as this music's potential to provide a framework for identity negotiation. Taking this postulation one step further, I will now present a case study on Mazen Kerbaj's "Starry Night," proposing that this type of improvised music, with its rich symbolic capacity, supports a wide spectrum of potential interpretations, and thus can be used as a flexible means of identity construction. At the same time, this music's flexibility allows for its interpretation in ways which may deviate completely from and result in misunderstandings of the artist's intention. In fact, this case study resonates with Mazen's own declaration that it is FIM's freedom from "prejudice" or associated meanings which *favourably* enables it to evoke an infinite number of interpretations among audience members (interview with the author, August 2008).

Since the 2006 war started, it became evident for Mazen Kerbaj that recording live improvisations with the falling bombs would be better than working with pre-recorded samples of war sounds in the studio, as he had been doing earlier (interview with the author, August 2008). As gruesome and politically incorrect as it might seem, a new war was just the right material for such a self-explorative project. Mazen recorded a total of nine hours of his trumpet improvisation with live bombs from his apartment balcony in Sin el-Fil, a suburb north-east of Beirut. What might have possessed Mazen to do this? After all, one would think that the natural reaction for a civilian would be to take shelter while his city is being shelled! Since 2008, I have had the opportunity to speak with Mazen about the experience of music-making during wartime and the unique considerations which accompany both the creative and interpretive processes, rendering conventional musical analysis inadequate in such a context.

## *"Starry Night's" wide online circulation*

As an illustrator, Mazen carries sketchbooks with him wherever he goes, and he had wanted to post that material on a blog for years, but he claims he had always been too "lazy" to do it. When the first bomb exploded in Beirut on July 12, 2006, Mazen was bombarded with over a hundred emails from concerned friends around the world, asking what was happening. That is when he knew he did not have an excuse anymore; he started posting his drawings online every day as a means of communication with the outside world.[71]  After all, Mazen, as most Lebanese citizens, had suddenly found himself stranded in Beirut as the country's infrastructure was blown to pieces and its international airport was bombed. His journal-like blog http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/ became known for displaying artwork reflecting the anger, confusion, depression, hopelessness, and fear felt by many citizens during the war, as well as cynical commentary on the situation in Lebanon.



**Figure 15. Drawings by Mazen Kerbaj during the July 2006 war entitled "We Resist" (left) and "54" (right) (images taken from: http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html)**

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71. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lcgou7kkdk

One day during the war, Mazen mentioned on his blog that he was recording music, and many people were curious about this, so he decided to upload a six-minute excerpt from a 40-minute track he had recorded with the Israeli shelling on July 15 and 16, 2006 (interview with the author, August 2008). He was only able to upload six minutes – which he entitled "Starry Night" – because of the commonly slow dial-up internet connection in Lebanon (interview with the author, January 2009). On his blog, Mazen acknowledges the Israeli pilots as "sound artists" (Burkhalter 2006) since the bombs they drop contribute generously to the "soundscape" in the piece. After getting posted on a couple of blogs, "Starry Night" seemed to take on a life of its own as it was copied from one website to another by people all across the world (interview with the author, January 2009).

The excerpt kicks off with dead silence, seemingly peaceful to the unsuspecting soul, but immensely threatening to one who knows what awaits. And sure enough, the silence is no sooner felt than perturbed by the sound of hovering airplanes for a couple of seconds. Suddenly, a bomb explodes and is accompanied by a series of loud, repetitive bellows from the trumpet, striking a chord in the listener before gradually decreasing in intensity. This is followed by another startling explosion and an ominous silence for a few moments, after which a car alarm is set off, and an ambulance siren is heard. Kerbaj then enters with gurgling and hissing sounds on his trumpet, offering a layer which integrates with the background of field recorded war sounds during the night. A single tap on a metal surface, then ominous silence again. Two startling back-to-back explosions are heard, and more car alarms are set off. A dog barks... This is followed by shuffling, swishing noises then short and quick percussive sounds which are probably produced by blowing through a trumpet while muting the bell. Kerbaj also incorporates fast gurgling sounds where you can hear the breath resonating in parallel to the trumpet sound itself. Afterwards, one can simultaneously hear creaking as well as piercing sounds which sometimes waver in intensity whilst yet another bomb explodes. In "Starry Night," Kerbaj utilizes a

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range of sounds with contrasting tones, timbres and dynamics. Since the instrument in use is a trumpet, the mere production of sound involves manipulation of *breath* on the player's part, which in my opinion allows him to communicate the deepest human emotions with the same immediacy and urgency of taking a breath.

## *Emotional and mental processes*

During my interview with him, Mazen attempted to explicate the complex process, both emotional and mental, which he engaged in while improvising with the bombs. He claimed that he was very stressed, not necessarily because he was personally in danger, but because the explosions signified people being killed. After all, he was 99% confident that Israel would not be targeting Sin el-Fil because it is largely a Christian area; the Hizbollah constituency which was being targeted on the other hand, is mainly located in Dahieh, a suburb *south* of Beirut. This was precisely why Mazen felt like he had to be active during a situation where the only reason he was relatively safe was his religious affiliation. Here, Mazen is highlighting his position regarding the absurdity of living in a country where geographical communities are still relatively closed and divided according to religious affiliation, and I would add, where allegiance to political parties (such as Hizbollah in this case) is inherited through religious and sectarian affiliation. At the same time, Mazen stated that the balcony was not necessarily more dangerous than the inside of his apartment as the shelling could blow up an entire building as opposed to hitting a particular spot like a sniper would during the civil war (interview with the author, January 2009).

**Figure 16. View from Mazen Kerbaj's apartment balcony where he recorded his trumpet improvisation with live bombs during the July 2006 war (Sin el Fil, January 2009) (photograph by the author)**



**Figure 17. Mazen Kerbaj's books, CDs, and personal artwork displayed in his living room at his apartment (Sin el Fil, January 2009) (photographs by the author)**

Regarding the actual process, Mazen states that playing music while a bomb is exploding makes you think of the bomb differently; he does not deny the fear one is bound to feel, but he says that it is easier to improvise instead of sitting and passively listening to the bombs (interview with the author, January 2009). He also claims that this exercise forces the musician to think about the explosion as just another musical component or part of the environmental soundscape (interview with the author, August 2008). In an interview with online Lebanese magazine Now Lebanon, he describes this experience in the following manner: "It was very clear for me that if I play music while the bombs were falling, my brain

will shift from fear to action, and I end up analyzing the bomb as a sound like any other that you have to work with and around."[72]

For a FIM musician especially, one may compare this process to collective improvisation where the individual is part of an ensemble in which he must react to fellow musicians' sounds. Although Mazen *did* get frightened with each explosion, he told me his brain would immediately ask how he can establish equilibrium with the sound; for instance, should he be minimalistic or react with a more powerful sound (interview with the author, January 2009)? At one point he writes: "i recorded two hours of bombs + trumpet from my balcony yesterday night. Some bombs were really close (what kind of mouthpiece do the Israeli pilots use to have this sound?). the tension you get in your playing is incredible […] but having regards for what is […] a good music track drives me crazy. i cannot stop saying after a bomb: 'yeah, this one was huge. i'll leave a long silence then make a small sound to balance the track.' this is totally crazy!"[73]

As Mazen puts it, for an artist, this is the only way to stay sane in such madness; in a sense, it saved him from other things, and it was a good therapeutic exercise (interview with the author, August 2008). Mazen's account of this period suggests that playing music during the shelling was able to provide a diversion from the terror as well as artistic release for his frustration and anger with the war, thus allowing him to maintain some emotional stability during that month.[74] However, I additionally propose that playing a "duet" with the Israeli Air Force might have served as a means of *humanizing* those air-bound instruments of terror and reducing them to the status of a common improvising musician who just happens to be producing enormous sounds which Mazen can actually respond to. This mechanism might have diminished his feelings of helplessness in face of attack. I would also like to return to Mazen's assertion that Lebanese musicians of the "war generation" have a special relationship with silence, where silence

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72. http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=8713

73. http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006/07/still-alive-and-well-and-living-in_18.html

74. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lcgou7kkdk

becomes ominous as it is associated with the possibility of another hail of bombs. I question whether his need to play music during the 2006 war might relate to his fear of silence and a need to break it with sound. Could his improvisation represent a means of exercising some control or agency – although not necessarily "genuine" – within a situation civilians normally have no control over?

Mazen claims that his initial intent was not to produce an original or aesthetically pleasing recording; rather, he had wanted to see whether he would "have the guts" to improvise with a bomb's sound, especially when it was exploding live. He even states that, because of his abnormally high level of stress then, these recordings are "bad, unfocused music" compared to his previous work. Furthermore, Mazen never listens back or considers releasing a CD from that material, as he believes the only interesting thing about the recordings is the *context* in which they were recorded and what they *signify* (interview with the author, January 2009). Here, one might wonder why a recording which possesses contextual and socio-political significance might not qualify as material for a CD. Mazen's rationale will become more apparent in the following sections relating to the politicization of art.

## *The online politicization of Mazen's work*

Now I will turn to the way Mazen's artistic and musical works during the war were received by the global online community.

Mazen attributes much of his present worldwide recognition to the material posted on his blogspot during the war. He claims that before this period, "googling" his name would retrieve a maximum of 2,000 results, whereas this number increased to 120,000 due to the war-related drawings on his blog during July 2006. He also notes that this number decreased to about 35,000 in 2008 and 28,000 in 2010, which he believes indicates how powerful people's "exoticization" of war can be in triggering "fake celebrity" (interview with the author, August 2008). As one blogger writes: "Truth be told I'd never heard of Kerbaj or his music until I recently received a link to his site where he has been

chronicling the events of the past week via some amazing drawings and more recently with written commentary."[75]

Furthermore, during the war, people all over the world started checking Mazen's blog daily for updates on his personal situation as well as the state of the country, to the extent that he received close to 10,000 comments from blog visitors within the first few weeks.[76] However, Mazen was not too happy with the onslaught of harsh "political" comments from many of these visitors. In fact, growing weary of constantly deleting offensive political comments, Mazen decided to post the following request on his blog one day:

> "PLEASE DO NOT POST ANY POLITICAL COMMENT ON THIS BLOG.
> THIS IS BLOG DEDICATED TO ART.
> AND AS SUCH, IT VOMITS ON ANYTHING CALLED POLITICS."[77]

During the war, Mazen insisted that mazenkerblog is a *non-political* artistic blog and said the following in an interview with Now Lebanon a year later: "I [...] try to avoid passing political messages in my drawings. However, it is very challenging to do this. There is nothing there but politics, and the pressure of actuality cannot be avoided, especially during war and political conflicts. My drawings are thus influenced by the overall political situation."[78]

Following is an excerpt from another blog where visitors, including Mazen himself, have commented on mazenkerblog and the issue of politicizing art. It is interesting to see how Ted's perspective on the matter changed significantly after closely following the July war for one week on the blogosphere:

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75. http://blog.wfmu.org/freeform/2006/07/mazen_kerbaj_tr.html

76. http://www.union.umd.edu/gallery/beirut/index.shtml

77. http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html

78. http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=8713

*Comment 1:*

"I don't mean to sound antagonistic but I got pretty peeved when I read the statement that it is not a 'political blog' yet statements are made all over it by Kerbaj that, I am guessing, he would like to remain unchallenged by his readers. He tells us that he has to 'block comments' that explain the why of what is happening and it looks like the case as all I can find is praise and best wishes in the comments sections. Color me unimpressed."[79]

*Comment 2:*

"It seems like he means the history and reasons. I think he just wants to to deal with what is happening and how he is dealing with it, and not why it is happening.
That was my take anyway."[80]

*Comment 3:*

"dear ted and dear all,

i was redirected to this page by a friend who read it. it is nice to know that the improvisers community is not forgetting us.

i am posting this comment just to make some clarifications about all this political issue. i am actually refusing to get into politics (unless in my drawings) for 3 main reasons.

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79. Ted, comment about "Kerblog" (Mazen Kerbaj's blog), The Bagatellen Website, comment posted July 22, 2006, http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001307.html (accessed January 22, 2010).

80. Damon Smith, comment about "Kerblog" (Mazen Kerbaj's blog), The Bagatellen Website, comment posted July 22, 2006, http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001307.html (accessed January 22, 2010).

one is that i do not have time to argue with people on whether israel is right in its war against hizbollah or not. it takes too much time already to keep the blog going (with my dial up connection) and answer the huge amount of emails i am receiving each day. and meanwhile, the massacre continues...
the fact is that kids are burned easily these days, in a total worldwide indiference. i want all this madness to stop now.
i am as you can imagine against all fundamentalists in the world and this war makes me vomit. it is really a war of fundamentalism versus imperialism. it is totally surrealistic. especially that, like always, other's war is happening on our land.

the second reason is that most of the people trying to post their views on the subject use very childish and manichean arguments (it is the fault of the hizbollah and israel is doing nothing but freeing lebanon from them, etc.). i cannot argue with such brainwashed/brainless people. i mean it is like convincing a guy from the hizbollah that all israelis are not bad, that all israelis are not zionists, that all jews are not zionists (yes, even this is weird for them i suppose), etc. it is useless. the guy had his brain washed with acid when he was 5. i mean in his head, an israeli is a green guy with antennas.

last reason would be that i see what is happening on some other lebanese friends blogs. it is a second war happening. people are not there for the blog any more but to fight in the comments section. i am trying as much as possible to avoid it.

all this makes the comments on the blog totally cheesy, apart of those from friends. i am thinking of stopping the comments at some point. it is useless. but it seems that people like to leave comments on a blog (it is my first experience ever with blogs).

anyways, i felt i should answer yorur post just to make it clear. also, i do not have problems to talk politics if you wish. you can even email me at mazen{at}kerbaj{dot}com and we can discuss politics as much as you want.

i'd rather discuss music though.

all the best from beirut,
mazen"[81]

*Comment 4:*

"At first, the blog didn't interest me much and I was surprised by all the praise. The drawings seemed simple-minded and not at all as deep and provocative as others were making them out to be. I do like the drawings I've seen for the Hopscotch covers, by the way. I was hoping more from the comments section because I was looking to learn more about the situation and hear opinions that I thought would have a good place on the blog. That is mainly what bothered me at first. But, after sifting through some other blogs, I was disgusted by what I read. One fan of Kerblog, Boris From Vienna just drove me up the wall. The banter on his site is pathetic and frightening. So, now I understand the desire to remove that rhetoric, on whatever side it is on, from the blog. Now it is a different story. I don't read the comments section anymore and the drawings have started to mean something to me. Basically, I just check in to make sure Mazen is still alive. Over the past couple of weeks I've created some sort of relationship with Mazen in my head and his struggles with interviews and his sort of five-minutes is also really interesting to me. I really don't care to talk politics on this issue. I was just trying to listen for myself so I was upset that I was being cut-off from hearing something that I thought might mean something to my forming of an opinion.

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81. Mazen Kerbaj, comment about "Kerblog" (Mazen Kerbaj's blog), The Bagatellen Website, comment posted July 28, 2006, http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001307.html (accessed January 22, 2010).

Unfortunately, when I hear the attitudes and the rhetoric of both sides, I am so overwhelmed with hopelessness over the situation that I only want to turn away."[82]

**Figure 18. Caricature by Mazen Kerbaj during the July 2006 war entitled "The 'A trio' aLIVE in BEIRUT" (image taken from Mazen Kerbaj's flkckr account: http://www.flickr.com/photos/72795424@N00/199125398/)**

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82. Ted, comment about "Kerblog" (Mazen Kerbaj's blog), The Bagatellen Website, comment posted July 30, 2006, http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001307.html (accessed January 22, 2010).

## *Political dimensions of "Starry Night"*

Now I shall discuss the political dimensions of "Starry Night," differentiating between the artist's intent and the public perception of the piece. In my conversations with Mazen, he has always claimed that he had no political intentions behind improvising with the bombs or even posting "Starry Night" on his blog. In fact, he says the following: "I consider myself as a totally *apolitical* guy, I'm not political at all, and I'm totally not into the idea of 'engaged art' – I don't believe in engaged art at all" (interview with the author, January 2009).

One might argue that Mazen's improvisation piece is clearly politically or socially engaged, because of the dangerous political context and symbolic process in which it was produced, in addition to the interface through which it was disseminated and the audience it reached. However, in Mazen's opinion, he was merely an artist caught in times of war, and although he might have creatively conveyed the situation in the country, he believed he was only relating his day-to-day life. In order to better understand the unmistakable discrepancy between the artist's intent and the public's perception, I believe it is first necessary to distinguish between the mainstream academic discourse on "politics" and the more partisan colloquial understanding of what it means to be "politically engaged" for Lebanese citizens. Moreover, my experience reveals that Mazen's claims towards political neutrality may actually reflect a common sentiment among many Lebanese people. I would further like to explore whether members of the generation born at the outset of the civil war, such as Mazen, have more of a tendency to shy away from political discourse *because* they have witnessed first-hand the horrific effects of political and sectarian conflict in a nation. This artist claims he was mainly concerned with the fact that bombs were falling on children, adding that it makes no difference who is throwing them (interview with the author, January 2009).

The following excerpt is from a video interview which was conducted during 2007 in the midst of internal clashes between the Lebanese army and Fatah-al-Islam, as well as constant political assassinations and bombings. The

italicized section reveals how deeply intertwined war and political partisanship are in the Lebanese citizen's mind, and how members of the "war generation" in particular, who have known nothing but war and conflict, would be so intensely fixated on political neutrality.

"It is very very bad in a sense that you don't know what is happening at all, and everybody is expecting something to explode at some point; a war... a civil war. [...] You cannot be angry against anything anymore, it's all the Lebanese people fighting together, and you feel it's more the time where you have to decide which side you are, and this is something I'm really afraid of since a very long time, and *I think it's the only thing that will let me fly out of Lebanon – I mean, having to decide again if you are with those or with the others, and I think I'm totally against this way of thinking.* But in a civil war, it becomes a very different thing, and this, we experienced for fifteen years in our youth; I'm not ready at all to go back into this situation. [...] It's not courageous to stay; you know, it's just normal to stay where your house is, your family, your friends, your books, your CDs, your everything, your toothbrush... You don't want to go to Paris or to anywhere else and see the war on TV; it would drive you crazy. I think being [in Lebanon] makes you be less worried than if you follow the war from an outside city... at least for Lebanese for sure because it's our country (my italics)."[83]

## *Different interpretations of the piece*

Although Mazen improvised with the bombs for purely aesthetic and therapeutic reasons at the time, it seems that the controversy and popularity that ensued has led him to give the experience more thought ever since. Today, he even states that "Starry Night" may be interpreted on multiple levels, one of which communicates very powerful political messages of resistance and even "propaganda." On the one hand, the piece represents the dichotomy of life and death during war since a bomb explosion indicates that people are being killed,

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83. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lcgou7kkdk

while trumpet sounds symbolize a live musician who is actually breathing or blowing into his instrument. As Mazen points out, this metaphor in itself is a rather potent sign of resistance to the Israeli Air Force. On the other hand, the Israeli pilots are an interesting case in point as they were unconsciously participating in this "FIM ensemble" through the act of killing people! However, as Mazen states, the irony of the situation lies in the fact that the pilots were also indirectly taking part in their own self-critique or "bad publicity" (interview with the author, January 2009). Furthermore, David McNeill adds yet another layer of metaphor to "Starry Night" as he construes it in the following manner: "This is an adroit work because it does more than exemplify the refusal of the Lebanese population to be cowed by their numerous belligerent neighbours; it also plays on the notion of 'collaboration' so dear to improvising musicians. The Israeli pilots were unwitting partners in the production of a cultural artifact that bears witness to the indomitable nature of Lebanese culture, thereby inverting the more common understanding of the term "collaborator" as one who conspires against his or her own people. Here, it is the Israeli pilots that betray their masters by assisting Lebanese resistance to their own attempts at intimidation."[84]

## *Resister or opportunist?*

Although at the time he was happy that his work was drawing attention to the horrifying situation in Lebanon, Mazen resents the "false image of heroism" with which he was represented abroad. In an interview with Now Lebanon, Mazen describes the misguided image which he feels has been ascribed to him by international audiences: "Being a success, the blog motivated me to go on. However, I hated the false image of heroism that was portrayed about me outside Lebanon. I was seen as a hero resisting from Lebanon, while I consider myself anti-nationalistic and a-political, and it was clear for me back then that the only person I could save with my drawings was myself. My work is very personal and

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84. http://www.cacsa.org.au/cvapsa/2008/8_kerbaj_sabsabi/Kerbaj+Sabsabi.pdf

portrays my own experiences. I did not stay in Lebanon out of heroism, but because I just refuse to be forced out. That's Lebanese stubbornness, probably."[85]

Mazen also told me that everyone in Lebanon was experiencing the war, but he was privileged to have the resources to express himself and access a worldwide audience online. In fact, he believes that the notion of fighting war with art is very naive, especially since an artist is just as helpless as any other civilian when confronted by a plane throwing bombs. Of the people encouraging him to persevere with his blogging during the war, he says: "They would see me as a guy defending the country [...] with my art. For me, it was totally ridiculous; it was very difficult to save myself..." (interview with the author, January 2009).

In addition, Mazen's blog post excerpt shown below portrays the truly complex emotions and vacillating state of mind which an artist during wartime may experience:

> "music and drawing are the only things keeping me going these days.
> i always said that i regret not being adult during the war to see if you can
> do something in these situations. now i feel bad to draw or play music while
> people are burning. i convince myself by saying it is my only way to resist.
> that i have to witness. that it is very important.
> but i am not really convinced. i try to be a fucking witness. to show a
> little bit what's happening here. in my own way. but having regards for what
> is a good drawing or a good music track drives me crazy." [86]

Furthermore, Mazen feels like he is still paying the price for being recognized internationally for the "wrong reasons." For example, since the war, people have been approaching him after concerts asking if he is selling his improvisations with bombs on CD. Unfortunately, once he informs them that he is

85. http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=8713

86. http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006/07/still-alive-and-well-and-living-in_18.html; Posted on July 18, 2006, this blog post excerpt was taken from an email Mazen Kerbaj sent to one of his friends in Germany during the July war.

not, they just leave without showing any interest in all the other CDs available which do not address the war (interview with the author, August 2008).

In addition to the tremendous support he received, Mazen was attacked by some people who felt it was opportunistic to use the war as "material" for artistic purposes; in a telephone interview with the BBC, he was asked if it were not "of questionable taste" to make music out of the shelling of Beirut.[87] Following is Mazen's response to such remarks as well as the constant requests for interviews he received:

"'i am sorry to decline your proposition'

stop!

that's it!

i can't anymore!

nein!

please do not contact me for any interview anymore.

i am beginning to freak out repeating 5 times a day the same things. if your interested in what i am doing, please write yourself a story about it (it's easy, you'll see).

anyways, everything i am asked is already on the blog. or worst, on tv.

i should by the way keep record of these interviews, some are incredible. i was asked twice so far: 'don't you think that your piece of music and bombs is of a bad taste?'

i answered twice: 'do you think that it is of a good taste to throw a bomb on a bus with civilians escaping their village?'

it is incredible that some people, listening to this piece in their living room in london or in paris, ask themselves if they like it or not. i think that some people should never stop seeing cnn and fox news. it is made for them. it is 'good taste' news."[88]

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87. http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/listenagain/listenagain_20060728.shtml

88. http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html
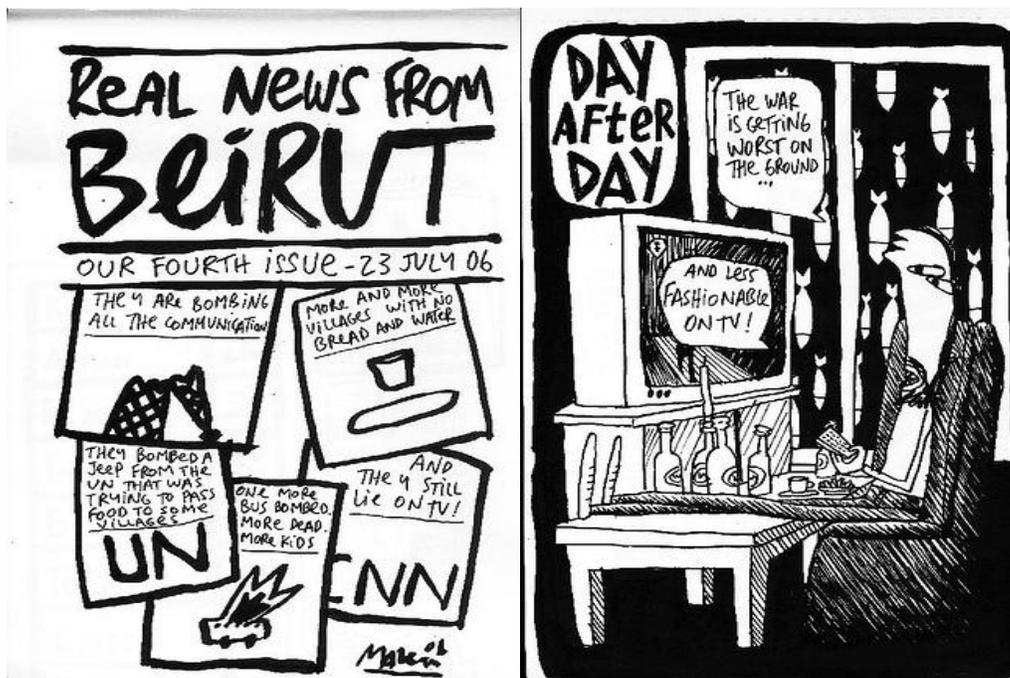
Figure 19. Drawings by Mazen Kerbaj during the July 2006 war entitled "Real New from Beirut/Fourth Issue" (left) and "The World is Sleeping" (right) (images taken from: http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html)

## *The politics of representation: Labelling as a form of violence*

It is likely that war is being utilized as part of some Lebanese alternative musicians' image and marketing approach since the "exotic" nature of a violent context seems to appeal to the international imagination. However, it also seems like some Lebanese musicians are being *unwillingly* categorized in the same manner by external audiences.

For instance, Raed Yassin has worked on projects which focus on radio sounds during Lebanese wars; however, he considers my hypothesis about Lebanese improvisers' affinity for FIM due to their experience of war "a very European" way of looking at things. Perhaps he is referring to his experience with an overriding European perspective which tends to exoticize war and thus has an interest in connecting artistic creation with it, especially when it might seem to an outsider that the only thing which sets Lebanese FIM apart is its violent locale. Raed makes a point out of saying that there is no perceptible difference between a

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FIM CD produced in Lebanon and another produced in France, for instance (interview with the author, April 2009). However, the stark reality is that many European and American music critics foreground war in their reviews of Lebanese FIM, making it inevitable for Lebanese improvisers to be pigeon-holed as war artists. One example is the following excerpt from Ken Waxman's review of the album "Cedarhead" in CODA Issue 336: "The resulting CD is not only a fascinating document of a little-heard musical scene, but also *proof that provocative sounds can arise in an isolated, war-torn country* (my italics)."[89]

Furthermore, as the case study on "Starry Night" shows, Mazen does acknowledge the possible symbolic significance which may be attached to the image of a Lebanese musician improvising with Israeli bombs. However, he is clearly enraged by the international tendency to exoticize war while pigeon-holing Lebanese musicians into post-war categories and essentializing Lebanese identity. Raed even goes so far as to say that there is "war tourism" involved; he declares: "People are not treating Lebanese artists as artists anymore, but as artists from a war-torn area!" (interview with the author, April 2009)

But why should this be so problematic for Lebanese musicians? I believe one issue is the resultant victimization of Lebanese people and thus Lebanese art, where the latter is no longer judged according to international standards but taken to be a class on its own which deserves special treatment. In such a case, the only thing a Lebanese artist may ever look forward to is being considered outstanding within the bounds of Lebanese art, the art of a nation whose identity he might not even relate to!

Another issue pointed to me by Raed is the fact that, due to these externally-imposed labels, Lebanese artists cannot break into the international market without producing some war-related work. In other words, the international imagination does not seem to accommodate Lebanese artists except if they fit the post-war category!

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89. http://www.almaslakh.org/catalog_mslkh06.php

Mazen points out that external audiences' continuous bombardment with images of conflict in the Middle East and Lebanon gives them a one-sided, essentialist and unrealistic portrait of that region. At some level, I believe that the argument of it being "of questionable taste" to play music while people are dying is a manifestation of the fact that international spectators are burdened and perhaps even paralyzed by those images – or sounds – of war, wherein they are forced to take an ethical standpoint.

However, returning to the issue of identity, it must be noted that Lebanese musicians such as Mazen resorted to FIM *because* of its near lack of cultural associations and focus on individual identity. So it is rather ironic that even they could not escape the international tendency to label them according to the Lebanese facet of their layered identity. In addition to showing how FIM may be a double-edged sword, I believe this case study speaks strongly to the power of the international imagination (facilitated through new media) in constructing the "Other's" identity by imprisoning it in categories that are themselves violent in their imposition.

# Chapter 6: Musical collaboration within FIM: Breaking or reinforcing sectarian and linguistic barriers?

## *Inter-cultural dialogue within FIM*

There seems to be a general consensus that FIM, as a transnational scene, has paved the way for inter-cultural musical dialogue which has never been achieved in such a capacity before. For instance, in his discussion of Evan Parker's 1996 "Synergetics" recording with a diverse group of FIM musicians, ethnomusicologist Jason Stanyek argues: "The injection of the sensibilities and traditions of performers from outside the West into the discourse of free improvisation opens up room for the realization that free improvisation isn't just about spontaneity or non-idiomatic playing. Indeed, *Synergetics* shows that free improvisation's most salient characteristic may well be its ability to link disparate perspectives and world views" (Stanyek 1999, 44).

This view is shared by members of the Lebanese FIMS. For instance, Raed Yassin agrees with Derek Bailey's assertion that FIM is one of the few pros of globalization. In fact, Raed highly appreciates the transnational social network which FIM has been able to create; after all, the paths of musicians from diverse cultures frequently cross during the course of their careers as they travel from one festival to another around the world (interview with the author, April 2009). Theoretically speaking, and within the confines of an artistically-inclined and educated (if not elitist) urban subculture, FIM seems to provide a sonic space for musicians to meet and engage in dialogue which transcends any cultural, political, or language barriers. For instance, Mazen Kerbaj claims that it is not even necessary for musicians improvising together to speak a common language for good music-making to occur. He recalls at least two experiences where he has successfully improvised with musicians who spoke none of the languages he can communicate in: Arabic, French, or English. For instance, Mazen recounts the time when he was performing in a festival with an Indonesian musician: they played together for *two days* without being able to communicate verbally at all;

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however, Mazen declares that it was as if they had known each other for ten years and were great friends! In fact, the only direct communication which took place between them was a thumbs-up and a hug after the concert to signify that it was great playing together, in addition to the single word "Cheers" while drinking (interview with the author, August 2008).

It is true that the very concept of inter-cultural tolerance and dialogue seems rather utopian; however, it appears that these Lebanese improvisers value the ideal as most FIM musicians around the world do. And although this is beyond the scope of the project at hand, it would be useful to look into MILL's inter-cultural collaborations within the transnational scene in order to better understand the way Lebanese musicians are engaging with this music's socio-cultural principles on a wider scale – across cultures, languages, and geographical borders.

In the upcoming section, I would like to address specific incidents and initiatives which reveal the way such a utopian concept of communication and harmony is being approached practically and *locally* by Lebanese FIM musicians. I question whether local societal (socio-economic, sectarian, and cultural) barriers are actually being broken or further reinforced in the Lebanese context.

## *Religious and linguistic affiliation in the FIMS*

### The past: Francophone Christian

I must admit that my initial encounters with FIM events in Beirut led me to suspect that the scene largely consisted of a Francophone Christian constituency. The first clue regarding linguistic affiliation was the acronym MILL itself which is French: Musique Improvisée Libre au Liban. Moreover, the founders' first communication about a FIM performance was exclusively in French, as the following poster shows:

**Figure 1. Poster for the first festival of improvised music in Beirut (in miniature version), taking place on August 13, 2000 at Strikes pub in Hazmieh at 8 pm (photograph taken from: http://www.irtijal.org/TheMill/2000.html)**

Throughout my fieldwork, I had also observed that the three founders – Mazen, Sharif, and Christine – were Francophone Christian. Moreover, on several occasions such as a private Butoh dance and FIM performance featuring Atsushi Takenouchi, a private dinner in honour of the Japanese Butoh dancer's visit to Lebanon, and a private party after the Irtijal 2009 festival, I noticed the absolute dominance of the French language in all communications, unless visiting artists or guests were unfamiliar with it. All aforementioned events took place in Sharif Sehnaoui's family house, the magnificent Bustros Residence which is located in the Christian-dominated Ashrafieh area of (previously East) Beirut.

**Figure 2. Private Butoh dance and FIM performance in Bustros Residence gardens (Ashrafieh, June 2008): Hiroko Komiya (voice and object sound) (left) and Atsushi Takenouchi (Butoh dance) (right) (photographs by Bilal El Houri)**



**Figure 22. Bustros Residence in Ashrafieh: View of its exterior in June 2008 (left, photograph by Bilal El Houri), and close friends and musicians dancing during the private party held in the living room after a successful Irtijal festival in April 2009 (right, photograph by the author)**

Although it was difficult to define the religious-cultural affiliation of FIM audience members, those initial observations revealed that the musicians' immediate entourage was largely Christian and Francophone. Perhaps this subculture's characteristics were particularly evident to me because I belonged to neither of those linguistic or religious groups. Although my informants were personally very accommodating and helpful throughout my fieldwork, there appeared to be some linguistic and cultural barriers which I could not overcome within this music scene without a longer duration of fieldwork and more fluency in French.

In an interview, Raed Yassin explains that it is natural for such non-mainstream music with Western origins to first appear within a closed group of people in Lebanon (interview with the author, April 2009). But why was this group *Francophone Christian*? Could a FIM collective in Beirut just as easily have been founded by any other cultural or religious group? I believe that the reasons which are impeding MILL's access to a broader audience today are the same which allowed Francophone Christian musicians in Beirut to be the pioneers of FIM in the Arab world. In other words, it is not a coincidence that this particular constituency was the first to "import" this musical practice from Europe; in fact, I doubt FIM would have entered Lebanon through any other channel.

As Bechir Saade puts it, FIM emerged in Beirut because of a Lebanese upper class's connection to the "capitals of rich countries;" these ties facilitated this class's exposure to certain cultural and artistic worlds, eventually leading it to this music (interview with the author, June 2008). Thus, it seems that in Bechir's mind, FIM and the upper classes of society are inextricably linked. Although this might ring true on a certain level, I believe that the issue is slightly more complex in Lebanon's case. For instance, if we were to look at the musicians who founded MILL in 2000, we would notice that their *Francophone Christian* background represented an important factor in their consequent creation of a FIMS in Beirut. As mentioned earlier, due to the religious commonalities, this constituency has historically developed strong post-colonial ties with Europe and France in particular; of course, this is not to say that all Christians in Lebanon today are Francophone, or that Christians are the only Francophone constituency in the country. However, there seems to be a strong association between the two in Lebanon, and as previously mentioned in Chapter 1, there is historical evidence which points to France's exclusive support of the Christians in Lebanon. At any rate, in addition to Beirut's "cosmopolitan" nature which ensures the availability of imported cultural products, the French linguistic ties allow Francophone culture to permeate Lebanese – and particularly Christian – education through French

missionary schools and media (books, magazines, CDs, movies, TV channels, etc...). I believe it is through these channels that Francophone Christians in Lebanon are instilled with certain French values which stress the *vitality* of philosophy, art, and Bourdieu's definition of culture (Bourdieu 1984) in daily life, all being intellectual engagements which are *generally* considered inessential – and definitely not a realistic career option – within Lebanese mentality and mainstream culture.

Furthermore, not only have post-colonial ties facilitated travel, study, and residence in France for the Francophone Lebanese, but they have also provided them with resources to implement cultural and artistic initiatives within both countries, as discussed in the section on Lebanese FIM funding earlier. In fact, my informants themselves state that their practice of FIM is mostly influenced by the French schools of thought, and more generally the Western European scenes, where they tour and collaborate with international musicians more than in other regions of the world.

I believe all the aforementioned factors largely contribute to the plausibility, or rather the inevitability, of FIM's emergence in Beirut's Francophone Christian cultural group. However, one cannot fail to acknowledge an element of truth in Bechir's linkage between FIM and upper social classes. After all, within an overshadowing pan-Arab pop star culture, the general public can hardly be expected to be aware of any other music, particularly not an "obscure," frequently aesthetically inaccessible and perhaps culturally irrelevant musical practice such as FIM. Perhaps Sharif conveys it best by stating that FIM may pop up anywhere in the modern urban world, but within particular subcultures (interview with the author, June 2008). In Lebanon specifically, the FIM subculture seems to be part of a larger "artsy," "cultured," possibly elitist group which comprises well-educated, bi- or tri-lingual, middle or upper class individuals that possess the means to expose themselves to such alternative artistic resources.

On another note, Raed somewhat confirmed my suspicion by stating that most of the audience members who attended MILL's early concerts were friends of the musicians. He says it is rather customary for Lebanese people to attend their friends' performances as a sign of support, even if they are not personally interested in the music. He adds that the audience members were mostly Sharif's friends at the time, and thus belonged to the same "financially comfortable" class as he did (interview with the author, April 2009); this resulted in a socio-economically homogeneous music scene for a while. On the other hand, Sharif admits that in the beginning, MILL musicians were all Christians, and most of their acquaintances as well as the people who heard about them were also Christians (interview with the author, June 2008).

At that point, Sharif says that it was quite possible that FIM in Lebanon could have become a purely "Christian-Christian thing," and MILL musicians then did not know that it could be any different. However, looking back, he realizes that it would have been disastrous if that had happened (interview with the author, June 2008); in a country with a brutal history of sectarianism, civil war and closed religious communities, it is particularly troublesome for an artistic collective to be labelled as exclusively Christian. But in reality, it was quite natural that Sharif, Mazen and Christine, the founders of MILL, were mostly acquainted with *Christian* areas, communication channels, and friends in the late 1990's. After all, Lebanon was still emerging from a horrific fifteen-year civil war, and they had spent their childhoods within the confines of their own religious group and geographical area, forbidden from interacting with the "enemy" – in this case, the generally Muslim constituency in West Beirut.

According to Khalaf: "As the scares and the scars of war became more savage and cruel, it is understandable that traumatized groups should seek refuge in their most trusted and deeply embedded primordial ties and loyalties, particularly those that coalesce around the family, sect and community. […] Since the boundaries within which groups circulated were becoming more constricted, these tightly knit localities naturally became the source of heightened communal

and territorial identities. Inevitably, such bonding in exclusive spaces was bound to generate deeper commitments towards one's community and corresponding distance from others. In-group/out-group sentiments became sharper" (Khalaf 2001, 226-8).

Furthermore, Sharif states that in 2000, the founders of MILL were attempting to organize performances with the very few resources they possessed as young, inexperienced musicians. Thus, they were neither acquainted with other religious groups in Beirut, nor had concert organization and promotion experience, nor possessed the resources to gain access to new channels in order to reach a broader audience (interview with the author, June 2008).

**The present: Towards a heterogeneous constitution**

It was therefore quite a surprise to the founders of MILL when Raed Yassin, a Shi'ite from West Beirut, suddenly "popped out of nowhere" in 2001 and expressed interest in playing with Mazen Kerbaj (Sharif's interview with the author, June 2008). A year later, Raed, Mazen, and Sharif decided to produce the first FIM album in the Middle East entitled "A."



**Figure 23. Cover of A Trio's first album "A," featuring Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui, and Raed Yassin and released by Incognito in 2003** (photograph taken from: <u>http://www.incognito.com.lb/store/node/291</u>)

After discussing the CD's liner notes (written by Sharif and quoted below) with the individual musicians, I realized that the creation of the Lebanese FIMS holds profound meanings unique to its members in the Lebanese post-war context:

"It is probably worth mentioning at this point that Kerbaj and Yassine come from different parts of the city of Beirut, East and West, once closed to one another, often at war. Part of the thrill from their duo comes from this new testimony of music bringing more and more barriers to the ground [...].

I must admit that I was often troubled by some differences in aesthetics, like an undecided way between free jazz and some more abstract – even minimalistic – styles of improv' I have been deeply involved in lately. But this is where we stand in Lebanon: gates between cultures, bridges between differences, you can cross, but you cannot break the gates open, and you should not bring the bridges down.

In retrospect, I hold the music on this record to be a rather brilliant example of what free improvisation in Lebanon sounds like in the early stages of its youth. It might be held as just another record to add to what has already been produced on a world-wide scale, but in my opinion, it has a special twist inherent to the context of its production, and this twist is well represented by the music, if one listens..."[90]

According to Sharif, the musicians agree that "A" was probably their worst recording ever because they were still inexperienced and had not been improvising collectively for long at that point (interview with the author, June 2008). However, I believe that their first collaborative album may forever be considered a significant testimony to the aesthetic and political-sectarian boundaries which were challenged and overcome in the process of creating the dialogic Lebanese (as opposed to Christian) FIMS.

On the one hand, Raed states that the three musicians arrived at this collective with diverse musical backgrounds and interests (interview with the author, April 2009); however, their collaboration represents an attempt to find a

90. Sharif Sehnaoui. 2003. Liner notes. *A*. La CDthèque.

common aesthetic ground through a dialogic process, as Sharif mentions in "A's" liner notes. MILL even claims that, six years into its existence, it became "the reference for the avant-garde musical scene [...] as an exchange platform for different Lebanese musicians coming from improv, free jazz, contemporary composition, noise music and alternative rock."[91] Of course these statements highlight an overly bright social utopia in their discussion of platforms for dialogue and exchange between divergent musical identities; however, as Sharif explains in his interview, the reality is not usually this straight-forward. For instance, he admits that A Trio's first album was a bit of a struggle aesthetically; although all three musicians were not experienced in FIM at that point, Raed in particular was allegedly "not the player he is today; he was much more of a jazz player," according to Sharif. This presented a problem for Sharif and Mazen who shared a more "abstract" and "minimalistic" aesthetic vision, which is why Raed was kept out of the CD mixing process for that album; Sharif even says he lowered the double-bass's volume throughout the record as part of the "correction" process (interview with the author, June 2008). Although the three musicians remain regular music partners and close friends to this day, there is much to be said about clashing identities and artistic or aesthetic visions, power structures, and the politics of representation when examining a musical artifact bringing together musicians from different backgrounds for the first time.

On the other hand, the trio also emphasizes the difference in their religious identities, claiming that a musical collaboration between them indicates the breakage of barriers, both cultural and sectarian. In this case, it is evident from the musicians' discussion that the aforementioned intangible barriers actually correspond to the physical barriers which partitioned Beirut along the Green Line during the civil war. For, as mentioned before, West and East Beirut appear to have followed different popular music trajectories which reflected their divergent political ideologies. Since the three musicians were mere children during the war,

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91. http://www.almaslakh.org/about.php

they grew up in sheltered as well as religiously and politically homogeneous environments with very little, if any, contact with the other side of the city.

At this point, the reader may be wondering how significant an inter-religious collaboration such as this may be, especially since the three musicians, from what has been displayed in my thesis so far, do not appear to be overly devout. But this is precisely the point! In Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran's words: "Alas for the nation in which sects abound, but in which religion is little found" (quoted in Ayoub 1994, 241). As such, inter-sectarian conflict in Lebanon hides behind religious pretexts but is belied by purely political agendas and struggles for power. Unfortunately, the civil war had long-lasting effects on children, and particularly members of the "war generation" who knew nothing but civil war until they were almost in their twenties. Khalaf notes: "Generations of children and adolescents grew up thinking that their social world could not extend beyond the confines of the ever smaller communities within which they were trapped" (Khalaf 2001, 228). Therefore, as Khalaf explains, members of the "war generation" grew up perceiving differences in religious affiliation as differences in cultural, ideological, and political beliefs and values as well: "Even where entry and exit into and from these communities remained largely voluntary, an increasing number of people were reluctant to cross over. The boundaries, incidentally, are not merely spatial. Sometimes an imaginary 'green line,' a bridge or a road may serve as a border. More important, the barriers became psychological, cultural and ideological. Hence, there emerged within each of those communities a distinct atmosphere of a cultural, social and intellectual world closed to 'outsiders.' It is for this reason that the social distance and the barriers between the various communities grew. The barriers are often dramatized by deliberately exaggerated differences. Such dramatization serves to rationalize and justify the maintenance of distance. It also mitigates some of the residents' feelings of guilt for indulging in avoidance" (Khalaf 2001, 231).

This might well explain Raed's (a Shi'ite resident of West Beirut) use of Arabic as his first language, as well as his exposure to, appreciation, and use of

Arabic music, poetry, and cinema in his artistic works, in addition to the obvious jazz and FIM. In contrast, the same cultural-political dichotomy has probably been manifested in Sharif and Mazen's (both Christian residents of East Beirut) use of French as their first language, their solid immersion in Western and particularly French culture (philosophy, literature, art, and comics), and their definite preference for Western musical styles.

In an interview, Sharif explains how the trio debated whether to highlight their different sectarian identities in the CD liner notes, as such distinctions represented ugly memories of the civil war. However, they finally agreed to include them since Raed joining Mazen and Sharif's duo constituted an extremely momentous occasion for them at the time, especially since ten years earlier, they could not have even met him! In addition, Sharif says that the trio decided that mentioning their diverse sectarian affiliations may actually highlight the positive social transformation which symbolically accompanied such a collaboration within the Lebanese post-war context. Sharif goes on to say: "... It was funny [the three of us] talking together when we discovered what was in common – and we have a lot in common, but lived in a very different place... the same TV advertisement, the same songs we heard, basically the same TV programs, the same politicians... discovering all these common things, it's a pretty funny process" (interview with the author, June 2008).

Sharif's words reveal how moved he was by this musical process of barrier-crossing, not only because of its social reconciliatory implications, but also because it seemed to confirm his life-long suspicions that Christians and Muslims are not actually that "different," as constructed boundaries of sectarian and cultural identity usually attempted to convince the trio members while growing up. It is the process of "other-ing" which creates artificial boundaries and gives groups of people a reason, or an excuse, to hate, fight, and destroy "the other."

As Khalaf puts it: "Residents of East Beirut depict the western suburbs as an insecure, chaotic, disorderly mass of alien, unattached and unanchored groups,

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stirred up by borrowed ideologies and with an insatiable appetite for lawlessness and boorish decadence. In turn, residents of West Beirut portray the eastern suburbs as a self-enclosed 'ghetto' dominated by the overpowering control and hegemony of a one-party system where strangers are suspect and treated with contempt. In short, both communities are cordoned off and viewed with considerable fear and foreboding. *Each has vowed to liberate society from the despicable evil inherent in the other!*" (my italics) (Khalaf 2001, 231)

One may wonder then if sectarian segregation and civil war might have been avoided if citizens had focused more on the commonalities rather than the differences between them.

Returning to the trio's musical collaboration, Sharif says: "You know, getting together, after all these years and doing common music which is neither our identity or yours - it's a common thing" (interview with the author, June 2008). Here, I would like to point out Sharif's use of two terms: "common" and "identity;" it seems that he equates finding a common ground between different cultural and sectarian factions with playing a musical genre which is not exclusively owned by either group (since it originated in Europe) and thus may offer genre neutrality since it cannot be claimed as either group's exclusive identity. Perhaps this sheds light on Lebanese FIM musicians' affinity for a musical practice which "lacks a certain prescribed identity" – perhaps this reflects their preference to remain unlabelled to a certain extent, as labels and identities create differences, which in turn represent the basis for barriers, conflict, and war. In Raed's words: "West Beirut was the leftist pole [...] which was the enemy for people in East Beirut. At the same time, East Beirut's ideologies were considered the enemy in the West. And this is why we ultimately did not believe either side because the civil war ended in a ridiculous manner which made you see that it was not worth it from the beginning – all the blood that was wasted was not worth this ridiculous cause. Thus, it was very difficult to side with anyone" (interview with the author, April 2009).

At present, MILL and its audience seem to have shifted towards a more religiously and linguistically heterogeneous constituency. For instance, Sharif states that since Raed knows the Lebanese art world well, MILL's audiences have become much more heterogeneous since he joined the FIM collective (interview with the author, June 2008). Raed himself is happy to report that only 10-20% of MILL's audiences at present are merely attending to support their friends (interview with the author, April 2009).

# Chapter 7: FIM's audiences in Lebanon: Inclusion or exclusion?

## *Is FIM elitist?*

At this point, it is important to distinguish between two perspectives which emerged from my interviews regarding the social role of music and the relationship between musician and audience, specifically in the realm of FIM. What I found especially intriguing was the sharp distinction that Sharif and Mazen drew between art and entertainment, FIM being considered art. As opposed to Bechir's dissatisfaction with this music practice's "elitism," these three musicians' perspectives can be said to occupy opposite ends of a spectrum.

Mazen communicated his distinction between art and entertainment to me in an effort to reveal why FIM is generally not taken as seriously as other types of music, and indeed attracts a relatively small audience. During my interview with him in 2008, he expressed his frustration with how little renown great "artists" such as Evan Parker receive during their lifetime, in comparison to the incalculable fame of "the smallest piece of shit who plays pop music." According to Mazen, the main difference between art and entertainment is that the latter is conceived of as a commodity which is allegedly modeled according to consumer tastes and aimed at selling to a mass market. Perhaps an important point here is that such a musical product is farther and farther removed from the writer or performer, as a large number of business-minded individuals are involved in the production and dissemination process, rendering the music a mere commodity devoid of genuine expression. Mazen adds that record companies justify their use of a seemingly standardized format in the production of popular music by claiming it adheres to consumer tastes. However, he believes that the industry must prepare people for "what they will want tomorrow and [...] give it to them." Evidently, such an approach would probably not make business sense, at least in most cases. Nevertheless, it is such realities which render the art/entertainment dichotomy plausible. As opposed to the profit-oriented popular music industry,

Mazen claims that "a true artist should never doubt his work even if he thinks the audience will hate it, since there will come a day when his work is appreciated just because it was unique and meaningful." According to him, another difference between art and entertainment is the permanency of the former and the fleeting nature of the latter (interview with the author, August 2008).

Perhaps the following quote sums up the values Mazen associates with being an "artist" as opposed to an "entertainer:" "It's very difficult to find real artists who really do what they want, expressing themselves freely and living in shit financially usually to be able to do it because today it's really the reign of entertainment everywhere – of money and product... you need a new product that sells" (interview with the author, August 2008).

I find it particularly interesting that Mazen refuted the seemingly common claim that FIM is an elitist musical practice by citing his own case as an example. For in response to the claim that this music is only for musicians, Mazen states that he himself had been listening to FIM for three or four years before he started learning to play his first instrument, the trumpet. Afterwards, it took him five years to admit that he can play the trumpet with some control (interview with the author, August 2008). In my opinion, although Mazen may not have received conventional training as a trumpet player or even as a musician, the fact remains that his socio-economic status, coupled with his education and exposure and immersion in the fine arts since his childhood, all contributed towards instilling him with a certain readiness to accept a musical practice such as FIM. In fact, I think he should not take his rebellion against traditional definitions of music (through elements such as melody, harmony and rhythm) for granted.

Sharif seems to share Mazen's beliefs about art and entertainment, but the former reveals his views when he addresses the *practical* aspects of performing for the general public. In attempting to make FIM more accessible to different socio-economic groups in Lebanon, MILL members occasionally participate in public musical events which are usually free of charge. Sharif recalls a particular occasion when Mazen Kerbaj, Raed Yassin, and Charbel Haber were playing at a

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public event at the Beirut Downtown dome[92] which paid homage to the late Samir Kassir. Kassir was a leftist political journalist who was assassinated in June 2005, one of a series of political assassinations which followed Hariri's assassination in February of the same year. Sharif tells me that the FIM trio was assigned to play for twenty minutes; however, they only got through eight because the audience of around 500 members was not listening. In fact, Charbel's guitar was nearly taken out of his hands as audience members streamed onto the stage, turning the performance into complete chaos. According to Sharif, some were even shouting: "When are you going to start playing? When are you going to start playing? Stop this! Get us some real music!" (interview with the author, June 2008)

Referring to the upcoming public concerts during "La Fete de la Musique"[93] in Downtown Beirut in June 2008, Sharif said that the same could happen to him and Mazen during their performance. However, what is pertinent here is his expectation that it will be a "painful but very interesting" experience. I believe that these musicians' consent to participation in a possibly disastrous performance relates directly to their personal perceptions of their role or duty in society as artists. For on the one hand, Sharif says that performing FIM for a random audience which has never been exposed to this music (or *art* according to him), has its upside; if this music could provoke only one in ten people, he would feel like he accomplished something significant. On the other hand, Sharif claims that even if everybody hates the music, it is still alright for him since hatred is as

92. An old, abandoned movie theatre built in 1965 in modernist style in Downtown Beirut; today it stands as a cultural icon of Lebanon's civil war and "has long been used as an alternative cultural venue, inhabited by raves, parties, temporary art exhibitions and experimental theater programs" (http://www.aadip9.net/flavie/2009/11/the-beirut-city-centre-buildin.html).

93. Since 1982, "La Fete de la Musique" has been taking place annually on the 21st of June in over 100 countries in Europe and the rest of the world. Launched by the French Ministry of Culture, this celebration of music brings together amateur and professional musicians for a series of free concerts usually held in open air venues and public areas, thus popularizing various musical styles and making them accessible across socio-economic barriers (http://fetedelamusique.culture.fr/87_English.html).

much a part of experiencing art as appreciation is. Sharif's measure of success as an artist is the amount of controversy (and even insults) his work provokes, as opposed to indifference; a reaction implies intellectual or at least emotional stimulation, which is what Sharif aims for with his art (interview with the author, June 2008). In my opinion, such values resonate with Mazen's definition of a true artist as one who is committed to genuine individual expression, believing that he has a duty to society not to adapt to the audience's needs but rather to challenge and thus stimulate their intellect.

Strongly opposing this view is Bechir Saade who may be considered a newcomer to the Lebanese FIMS in comparison to Mazen and Sharif. The following passage divulges Bechir's primary concern with the music's emotional impact on the audience, in contrast to Mazen and Sharif's seemingly more intellectual approach: "For me, it's really important what people think, or rather that the music can create *saltana* for them. The notion of *saltana* exists in all traditional music, from Arabic to Indian, Baroque, medieval (with roots in religion) and everything related to the status of man within the universe – they think that sound is a drug which allows man to exit his physical being. I think music should do that. And what took me to free improvisation is that I find it very meditative. But sometimes it might not create that condition within people, they may not enter that trance. Achieving *saltana* is my measure of success. I don't want to create necessarily beautiful music, but music that can really lift a person and move him. The important thing is that he doesn't get bored" (interview with the author, June 2008).

It is evident that Bechir's values as a musician and measures of success as a performer are heavily influenced by traditional Middle Eastern notions of the role of music in society, a point well portrayed in his constant use of the term *saltana* in his discussions. Bechir's perspective contrasts with that of Mazen and Sharif on several levels: First, there is a definite distinction between the role of the musician in stimulating the intellect as opposed to conquering the emotions and leading to a meditative experience which Bechir mentions. Second, these roles are

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directly related to the effort which the musician makes (or does not make) in order to connect with the audience. For instance, Sharif and Mazen think it is important to make their "art" available to the public; however, unlike Bechir, they do not believe it is their duty to involve the audience or even cater to the audience's tastes. This may tie into Sharif and Mazen's arguably romanticized image of the struggling artist whose only duty is to be true to himself since that is the only way to challenge and enrich the minds of his audience.

Interestingly enough, Bechir had much to say about these issues when I described the disjuncture I felt between audience and musicians when I was attending my first FIM concerts during Irtijal 2005. In fact, I doubt that my own interest in this music would have developed if it were not for my attendance of Axel Dorner's workshop in 2006 where I was actually part of the improvising collective and not merely a spectator. Bechir explains how several of his friends in the audience have expressed their frustration with the alleged disconnection between them and the musicians. He even says he has discussed the elitist nature of FIM with Irtijal organizers – namely MILL's founders – and he personally aims to work on it. Bechir claims that the purpose of improvised music is to break the hierarchy between musician and audience; however, the FIM musician is unfortunately considered to experience a state which audience members are supposed to find interesting although they are not expected to necessarily grasp its complex intellectual content. He adds that the FIM musician has unjustifiably come to stand on a pedestal, while alienating the audience through promoting the music as elitist, inaccessible, and overly intellectualized. He particularly takes issue with this state because he believes that a performance cannot take place without the presence of the audience, and the musician may even draw on the audience's engagement in the performance; thus, it is only fair to acknowledge the audience's presence and attempt to make a connection with them (interview with the author, June 2008). My conversation with Bechir clearly foregrounds his problem with exclusive music practices which tend to isolate the musician from the public, while disregarding people's opinions and possibly creating a

hierarchical structure which promotes disparity and disjuncture among different socio-economic strata.

I think it is particularly interesting to situate this discussion about musician-audience hierarchy against my informants' aforementioned discussion of the musician-musician *lack of* hierarchy within collective improvisation. One is compelled to question how some FIM musicians may feel so strongly about egalitarian music-making within their collectives while they appear to disregard audience desires altogether.

On another note, I must admit that I was initially thrown off by Bechir's perspective; after all, his interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the values of FIM seemed completely incongruent with Sharif's and Mazen's, which I believed were the norm, or in this case, a borrowing from Western European (and French) schools of thought. I was quite perplexed by Bechir's seemingly inappropriate adaptation of Middle Eastern improvisation values to a musical practice which appeared to possess divergent philosophies. However, I realize now that my understanding of the concept of appropriation – which may arguably be used to describe the process of importing a "foreign" musical practice and making it one's own – has been rather restrictive up till now. So far, I seem to have been drawing the reader's attention to very concrete local elements (such as elements of local pop culture, war sounds and nay sounds) which one may claim give FIM in Beirut a distinctive Lebanese identity. But perhaps it is just as important, if not more, to acknowledge the way certain aspects of an imported musical practice are challenged and even modified in order to fit local cultural values or practices, thus contributing to the creation of a unique set of meanings which are culturally relevant. This is especially evident in Bechir's case, where he appears to have followed a different linguistic, musical, and educational trajectory (English-educated, appreciative of Middle Eastern as well as jazz improvisation, and trained in political science at an American university) from Sharif and Mazen, and thus has developed musical values which seem to be contradicted rather than reinforced by the European origins of this FIMS.

### *Raed Yassin challenging and redefining boundaries*

I will now turn to specific projects within the Lebanese FIMS, mainly initiated by Raed Yassin, which might suggest an attempt to challenge the aforementioned aesthetic and socio-cultural barriers.

At one point during my interview with Raed, he was discussing the way globalization has done wonders in terms of connecting FIM musicians across geographic and cultural barriers through festivals and a transnational scene (interview with the author, April 2009). Interestingly enough, he immediately segued into a discussion of personal decisions he has made in order to connect with *audiences* in the Arab world; this leads me to believe that he recognizes that FIM may easily create a musician-inhabited experience which may alienate audiences, and perhaps he believes the musician has a certain duty to engage the audience.

This concept came about with Raed's suggestion that a group called "Grendizer Trio" be formed, in reference to the Japanese manga *Grendizer* which was popular during "the war generation's" childhood years (Burkhalter 2007). The group's name alone may portray an interest in connecting with Lebanese audiences, or at least a certain generation. Some of Raed's regular musical partners in Lebanon responded positively, and "Grendizer Trio" became a group flexible in size while employing a rotating cast of musicians besides the regular Raed Yassin and Mazen Kerbaj. "Grendizer Trio" is therefore a project aimed at finding ways to connect with the audience in whatever country it happens to perform, mainly in the Arab world (interview with the author, April 2009).

The group's first project in March 2006 featured Raed Yassin, Mazen Kerbaj, Bechir Saade, and Charbel Haber in a concert called "Ya Habibi Ta'ala," in reference to a song by the famous Syrian-Egyptian singer of the 1930s-40s, Asmahan. The musicians played their usual FIM sets, but Raed incorporated samples from tapes of well-known Arab singers such as Nour el-Houda (Lebanese) and Leila Murad (Egyptian), in addition to Asmahan. Raed told me:

"It was very abstract, but people slowly started to connect with the music"
(interview with the author, April 2009).



**Figure 24. Poster for Grendizer Trio's first concert "Ya Habibi Ta'ala" (photograph taken from:** http://www.norient.com/html/show_article.php?ID=90)

It was Lebanon's July 2006 war which inspired the group's second concert held on October 18, 2006 at Théâtre Monnot in Beirut. Entitled "Grendizer Trio Plays with July's War," this concert featured Mazen Kerbaj (trumpet, amplifications, objects, recorded sounds) and Raed Yassin (double-bass, radio, tapes, laptop).[94] According to Raed, their aim was to bring together all the common sounds which the audience had experienced during the war into one musical framework by using Mazen's field recordings and Raed's radio recordings. Raed added: "One can refer to this as a 'site-specific concert' since it tackles material that the people have already lived through within their collective memory." It seems that it is too early for the group to know what the audience's perception of such performances is; however, Raed seems confident that these initiatives have helped to bring the audience closer to the otherwise "abstract" musical practice of FIM (interview with the author, April 2009).

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94. http://www.kerbaj.com/news.html

**Figure 25. Poster for the concert "Grendizer Trio Plays with July's War" (photograph taken from: http://www.caipirinhafoundation.org/sound-of-resistance-lebanon)**

Returning to his current solo project which includes live video and music performance, Raed says he is very much concerned with the meaning of collective memory and what he calls the "collective unconscious." Thus, he is interested in creating a platform for communication with the audience by incorporating familiar elements of pop culture and collective experiences, while simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing these elements in order to challenge the audience instead of leaving them to passively enjoy the familiar through emotional mechanisms (what is referred to as "tarab" in Middle Eastern music) (interview with the author, April 2009). I personally find this declaration rather interesting. For although on the surface, Raed's use of Arab pop culture may situate him in the same category as Bechir in terms of attempting to connect with the audience, the implementation of his project in some ways merely reflects a *variation* on Sharif and Mazen's idea that the artist must ignore or defy social expectations through individual expression. Moreover, Raed's resolve not to give audiences what they want in a way predetermines the kind of audience that is likely to attend his performance; therefore, it may be fair to question the extent to

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which he is really reaching out to the audience if he is essentially excluding members of society who do not share his artistic views.

On the other hand, it is rather clear that Raed is attempting to blur, challenge, and redefine the boundaries which Sharif and Mazen seem to set between art and entertainment ("serious" versus "popular" music), while additionally acknowledging the fact that FIM *is* perhaps elitist, and further taking it upon himself to meet the audience (whatever its constituency may be) half-way, so to speak. In fact, Raed situates his work with pop culture in opposition to the work of the previous generation of Lebanese artists which allegedly tended to focus on a clear-cut distinction between "high" and "low" art. He claims that music in Lebanon is being erroneously labelled and misunderstood, as in other parts of the world, because of the way the music market operates; after all, he says it is difficult to sell an album without categorizing it according to well-known, although repressive, labels (interview with the author, April 2009).

In order to further prove his cynicism about the artificially-constructed categories of "high" and "low" art, Raed declares that he is interested in *sha'abi* (literally *popular* in Arabic) music and the aggressive style of *dabke*[95] which one would hear when riding the microbus to Ba'albeck[96]. Raed even adds that he finds it problematic that certain groups in Lebanon (probably those of a higher socio-economic class) grow up believing that Arabic music is somehow beneath them, as opposed to Western music which is often perceived as more "civilized" and elevated (interview with the author, April 2009). Interestingly enough, Raed's statement strongly resonates with the following passage regarding Westernized Lebanese identity quoted earlier: "In order for this unique Lebanon to be totally severed from the history of the region, a Phoenician past was invented from which Lebanon moved (magically it seems, ignoring more than a millennium of intervening history) to a Christian and Western identity. These misconceptions

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95. Music associated with a traditional line dance popular in several Middle Eastern countries

96. A town in the Beka' Valley in north-eastern Lebanon

have led most Lebanese, regardless of their religious or sectarian affiliations, to nourish a false pride in this fictitious past – their invented national identity – and to *imagine themselves superior to other peoples in the region*" (my italics) (Ayoub 1994, 242).

In addition, Raed states that there currently exists a hierarchy within Lebanon's Arabic music itself, claiming that the Rahbani family[97] is personally responsible for crystallizing the distinction between "high" and "low" art in that domain. According to Raed, it is evident that the Rahbanis were attempting to counter the powerful Egyptian invasion of Arabic music and song in the mid 20th century. Nevertheless, he claims that they also succeeded in constructing a musical standard of "high" art which immediately categorized anything else as "low" art. Raed believes the Rahbanis were able to create such a powerful hegemonic pole of music production because of their talent and connections, as well as their skills in adapting catchy melodies from other sources.[98] Based on his research and collection of old LPs from the past half-century in Lebanon, Raed even goes on to say that a considerable part of pop music was "trampled on" by the Rahbani phenomenon, to the extent that it has been permanently erased from the country's musical history! He provides examples such as Mayyada, a boogie/rock 'n roll/jazz singer of the 1960's (who sang in the Lebanese Arabic dialect), and Jacqueline of the 1980's, a singer he compares to today's Haifa Wehbe[99]. Finally, however, Raed states that people at present possess more sources of information than ever before; consequently, he believes that the aforementioned hegemonic frames will not be as powerful in controlling musical output and access in the future (interview with the author, April 2009).

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97. According to Christopher Stone, "the most prominent artistic family in Lebanon in the second half of the twentieth century – that of the Lebanese diva Fairouz, her husband Asi Rahbani, her son Ziad Rahbani, and her brother-in-law Mansour Rahbani" (Stone 2008, 1).

98. A skill otherwise known as the "plunder" approach mentioned in Raed's promotional material earlier

99. An extremely successful modern-day Lebanese lollipop singer

Regardless of whether these accusations are based on accurate or comprehensive research, the discussion above clearly portrays Raed's heightened awareness of the hegemonic frameworks which might be implicated in designations of "high" versus "low" art, as well as "serious" versus "popular" music within Lebanon's musical landscape. For instance, in response to some Lebanese alternative musicians' claim that they were the first producers of Arabic electro-pop in the Arab world, Raed argues that it is the Lebanese singers of the decades prior to the civil war which first played such music. According to him, "there is useless pretension due to a gap in history," which interestingly translates into elitist groups in Lebanon listening to older music by the likes of Elias Rahbani in a rather Orientalist manner – even regarding it as "cute," as if it is something very exotic (interview with the author, April 2009).

In conclusion, I find Raed's use of the term "Orientalism"[100] very indicative of the complexity of socio-political processes revolving around the perception of "serious" versus "popular" music in a country like Lebanon. And by that I am referring to the unique intersection of axes at which Lebanon is situated: Middle Eastern geography, history and culture, Arab language, French post-colonial ties, Americanization, as well as Muslim and Christian religions. Lebanon's society thus breeds a curious hybrid of often clashing values and influences, each set emerging as a result of particular affiliations or identities which are infused in the individual or the group by their immediate environment. It is unsurprising then that a socio-economically dominant group in Lebanon might exoticize and possibly "Orientalize" Arabic pop music – the music of the people – since the former most likely identifies with a Western (either French or American) dominant culture which it wishes to emulate.

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[100] See Said 2003.

# Conclusions

My aim in this thesis has been to explore the meanings FIM may have in the Lebanese context, the role it is playing in individual musicians' lives, and the broader social potential it may possess in a country like Lebanon. In many ways, it has become apparent that FIM performed by Lebanese musicians, at least sonically, is very similar to its European and American avant-garde points of reference. One may even argue that many of the aesthetic and philosophical ideas behind the practice of FIM are in no way distinctive in Lebanon. However, upon closer inspection, it is evident that this music does in fact possess some meanings unique to its Lebanese cultural and socio-political context of production, and thus may possess a significant role in a society still coming to terms with the atrocities of civil war and a fractured social fabric.

## FIM's meanings and uses in Lebanon

Once again, Derek Bailey describes the nature of FIM in the following manner: "Freely improvised music [...] suffers from – and enjoys – the confused identity which its resistance to labelling indicates [...]. Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it" (Bailey 1993, 83).

Since FIM in principle lacks many of the restrictions which other musical practices impose (in terms of style, instrument, technique, and cultural affiliation), this in-built freedom provides an inclusive space for musicians to assert and negotiate individual (as opposed to cultural or group) identities. This is facilitated by FIM's encouragement of musicians to use any sound-source, point of reference, and combination of influences, in order to develop techniques (or languages) which are attributable to a unique "sonic-musical identity." Furthermore, the resultant sound product does not have to fit any recognized definition of "music;" rather it is the *process* of improvisation which is of

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importance, and as Bechir and Raed's work shows, it is even possible to circle back and connect to an audience by bringing in culturally more familiar musical elements. It is obvious that Lebanese musicians' drive to forge unique *musical* identities (through the use of this idiom's aesthetic, formal, and ideological freedom) extends from their personal identities which value and practice individualism in everyday life choices (such as artistic and intellectual careers, leftist political ideologies, socio-cultural critique, etc.). This reinforces Faour's claim that there is a trend towards individualism among today's educated Lebanese youth (Faour 1998).

Moreover, this type of improvised music, with its rich symbolic capacity, supports a wide spectrum of potential interpretations, and thus can be used as a flexible means of identity exploration and construction. In this cultural context specifically, FIM provides the means for musicians like Mazen Kerbaj to replicate (whether consciously or unconsciously) the war machinery sounds they experienced during their childhood in order to initiate a "musical" dialogue with recorded or live bomb sounds. As I explained earlier, this allowed Mazen to confront his childhood memories and explore his psyche, as well as understand his complex relationship with sound and silence which developed due to his exposure to fifteen years of war. Moreover, the ability to engage musically with live bombs during the July 2006 war was incredibly therapeutic for Mazen: it provided a diversion from the terror, artistic release for the frustration and anger, as well as the illusion of agency or control over the situation which translated into much-needed emotional stability.

It is also evident from my interviews with the four Lebanese FIM musicians that they are drawn to the freedom which this music offers. Of course, the musicians are aware that elaborate freedom breeds potential for chaos and even failure. However, they seem to prefer this to the opposite extreme of structured hierarchy and predetermined game plans which accompany imperialist Western art music as well as capitalistic mainstream Arab music. For musicians who believe that art has an important role in expressing life, such elaborate

structure and obsessive planning not only crush individual expression, but also portray an artificial, predictable, and unrealistic image of human beings and life itself.

Regarding the importance of playing music which reflects real life, Lebanese musicians may well be referring to people and everyday life in Lebanon, where they grew up and continue to live. For in addition to the magnitude of terror, trauma and uncertainty which Lebanese citizens experienced during the civil war due to violence, destruction, death, and displacement, Lebanon continues to face political instability and violent conflict today. Since members of the "war generation" in particular know nothing of Lebanon prior to the civil war, they cannot imagine a life where they actually exercise agency over their own futures, let alone come up with a long-term plan of any sort. In the Lebanese experience, no matter how perfectly things are planned in advance, they can blow up in your face without any warning. Therefore, I believe that FIM holds a unique meaning to Lebanese musicians, since they can appreciate the importance of "improvising" on an everyday basis in order to *survive* in an unstable country like Lebanon.

Additionally, I think there is something to be said about Lebanese improvisers' attraction to FIM's anarchic and sometimes chaotic nature. I propose that collective FIM in the Lebanese context may represent an extension of the musicians' experiences of everyday life in Lebanese society. Growing up in Lebanon myself, I can clearly see the parallels between a FIM ensemble which lacks any authoritative voice or consolidated game plan, and the country's constant anarchy and lack of a functioning government which would otherwise provide some direction. However, this goes beyond governmental control. I have always found everyday life in Lebanon stressful and rather disconcerting, as it seemed like citizens were always enraged, hostile and lawless in public life, and what is worse, for no apparent reason! However, I recently came across a hypothesis which just might justify people's behaviour in post-war Lebanon. In

his analysis of everyday life after the civil war, Khalaf concludes that Lebanese society is exhibiting "post-war barbarism:"

"People subjected for so long to such atrocious human suffering become insensitive to what seem like benign and inconsequential transgressions. It is understandable that, in the wake of an ugly and unfinished war, moral and aesthetic restraints that normally control public behaviour become dispensable virtues. Victims of collective suffering normally have other rudimentary things on their mind. They rage with bitterness and long to make up for lost time and opportunity… [The war in Lebanon] unleashed appetites and created insatiable desires for *acquisitiveness, lawlessness and unearned privileges… Boisterous and disorderly behaviour* became routine. Some elements of this behaviour, such as ravaging the country's natural habitat, violating zoning and building ordinances, embezzlement, fraud, corruption, *deficient civic and public consciousness* – most visible in the preponderance of low crimes and misdemeanours – are all deeply embedded in the cultural ethos of *laissez faire*, excessive economic liberalism and political clientelism" (my italics) (Khalaf 2001, 222-3).

It is true that a Lebanese FIM ensemble may mirror Lebanese society in terms of its anarchic, lawless and laissez-faire characteristics which encourage freedom of expression. However, the Lebanese FIM ensemble differs in that it proposes a more peaceful, civilized and effective alternative to the "post-war barbaric" anarchy which Lebanese society and politics are experiencing at present. For within most attempts at political dialogue, Lebanon's plurality of internal voices and excess of external reference points (politically, culturally and linguistically) usually render it difficult to reach any kind of agreement in order to move forward as a whole political entity.

With regards to inter-cultural dialogue within FIM, Stanyek states the following: "Free improvisation is a particularly fertile 'communicative arena' in which divergent individual and cultural narratives can be articulated […]. [It] is a mode of *listening*, an evaluative framework that allows individuals to parse the unfamiliar and make considered (and considerate) aesthetic judgements…

Listening is the way identities are narrated and negotiated and the way differences are articulated or […] 'woven together'" (Stanyek 1999, 46-7). Likewise, as Mazen and Sharif state in reference to FIM, a collective project (such as that of a nation) does not work unless these factors are present: patience, respect, humility, open-mindedness, tolerance, listening, and give-and-take. Mazen actually claims that, like a FIM ensemble, Lebanon cannot succeed if each religious or political group has its own interest in mind. Therefore, FIM may be proposed as a model for inter-cultural dialogue and coexistence in a society where diversity and freedom of expression are central since, as Mazen puts it: "[FIM is] simultaneously personal and community expression [...]. You can have totally free personal expression but are aware that your expression can't erase somebody else's expression and also has to live with the expression of the other people" (interview with the author, August 2008).

Throughout my thesis, I have portrayed Lebanese FIM musicians' fixation on political neutrality, especially in the case of Mazen's improvisation with live bombs and his piece "Starry Night." As discussed in Chapter 5, I was initially quite troubled by the discrepancy between Mazen's apolitical stance and his seemingly politically engaged improvisation with live bombs during the July 2006 war. Based on my research, I believe that Lebanese artists of the "war generation" have a strong desire to transcend partisan politics of which they have wearied after witnessing first-hand its destructive impact. This is why they are so adamant about adopting a sense of art for art's sake, as this provides a means of moving beyond the political conflict in which they have been embroiled for so long. In addition, Lebanese FIM musicians make use of music's own intrinsic neutrality – being incapable of reference in a general sense, unlike language or visual arts – which enables a very depoliticized form of expression, or at least an art which is not explicitly political.

In connection, Lebanese FIM musicians are keen to move away from any traditional type of labelling which essentializes their identities; this explains their affinity for FIM which carries no clear identity or cultural associations. Moreover,

for musicians of the "war generation," categorizing artists according to their Lebanese background is in a way just as prejudiced and destructive as the labelling which has widened sectarian divides and caused war among different religious groups in Lebanon. Therefore, in addition to being an attempt to gain normalcy within a highly unstable social environment, these musicians' negotiation of identity through FIM indirectly expresses the absurdity of war. As Raed points out: "We ultimately did not believe either side because the civil war ended in a ridiculous manner which made you see that it was not worth it from the beginning – all the blood that was wasted was not worth this ridiculous cause. Thus, it was very difficult to side with anyone" (interview with the author, April 2009).

Furthermore, FIM's resistance to labelling and neutrality as a genre provides just the right space for a common experience in a context where Lebanese musicians of the "war generation" are coming together after a long period of sectarian conflict and isolation within their own communities. After all, FIM's lack of association with the cultural or religious identities of A Trio's members (for instance) provides a common, *neutral* ground for the musicians and thus a tabula rasa where cultural, sectarian, and even aesthetic differences can be put aside, enabling inter-cultural dialogue to take place.

This discussion foregrounds and elucidates the value of *individualism* for these members of the "war generation;" their wariness of primordial identities and partisanship seems to go hand in hand with their need to forge and negotiate individual identities of their own, with the help of a culturally, politically, and stylistically neutral musical practice such as FIM.

## *FIM's accessibility and social significance in Lebanon*

Although FIM is highly praised by its Lebanese practitioners as a flexible tool for the negotiation of individual identity, the fact remains that this music has a limited number of audience members and is only played by a handful of musicians in Lebanon. Throughout my study of individual and collective

initiatives in the Lebanese FIMS, I have suggested that in this context specifically, FIM may take on the additional role of addressing current and past political conflict as well as critiquing society and deconstructing popular culture. Although I am in no way downplaying this music's visibly powerful meaning and function in FIM musicians' lives, I question whether the following utopian ideals may only be achieved in the temporary musical realm of a FIM session: coexistence, respectful inter-cultural dialogue, and the achievement of goals for the common good of all constituents. I also question FIM's broader social significance if such ideals can only be aspired to and applied within the shelter of a FIM session. Furthermore, how effective is FIM in negotiating identity and triggering social transformation if it is only accessible, or appealing, to a small number of people in Lebanon? In other words, to what extent are FIM's ideals of inclusiveness and egalitarianism actually being translated beyond the bounds of performance, in order to challenge and redefine real-life aesthetic, socio-economic, and sectarian barriers?

First, I believe that the aesthetic barriers between the musician and the general public are definitely being challenged and redefined, though slowly, through Lebanese FIM musicians' participation in public, free-of-charge performances. Within the bounds of a relatively underground, elitist music scene in Lebanon, musicians such as Sharif and Mazen are addressing this issue of accessibility by occasionally confronting Lebanese society with "difficult" music and outright challenging people's aesthetic ideals and their very *understanding* of music. According to Sharif, there have been times when audience members at public events such as those in the Martyrs' Plaza (in Downtown Beirut) have approached the musicians after a concert, expressing their great interest in FIM. Sharif explains that in the beginning, such people think that "this [is] completely crazy and these guys are like a mental hospital they [have thrown] on the plaza. But then with time, [they] look and [they] start thinking… Like the guy who has [almost] never seen anything called art before, but is confronted with this… Maybe one out of ten will get something out of it - that's important" (interview

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with the author, June 2008). On the other hand, Bechir attempts to remedy FIM's possible alienation of the audience by advocating and applying Arab aesthetics with their dynamics of *tarab* and *saltana* in his own performances; this is not only a technique for connecting with the audience, but also with an *Arab* audience in particular.

I would say that despite MILL's efforts to make its paid concerts aesthetically accessible and *relatively* affordable (in comparison to other music festivals in Lebanon of similar quality), there is still something fundamentally inaccessible about the FIMS in Lebanon. For instance, neither the organizers nor the musicians usually take the time to prepare the audiences, whether through program or lecture, for the "difficult" music which is about to be played. It follows then that the audience members are expected to have researched and listened to this music beforehand in order to fully understand the complexity of such an idiom. Moreover, the discussion about new techniques, dynamics of collective improvisation, and aesthetic or theoretical directions are rarely communicated outside the musicians' circle, which makes it difficult for audiences to comprehend and appreciate what is being exhibited. Of course, I am not claiming that the Lebanese FIMS is a closed subculture which rejects "ignorant" newcomers. On the contrary, as an amateur musician, I myself experienced this scene's relative openness, as I was allowed to "drop in" and participate in Axel Dorner's workshop during Irtijal 2006, having no previous experience of FIM to speak of. However, that is exactly my point: it seems that this scene is not quite accessible to *non*-musicians. Another issue is the fact that, in order to understand and appreciate MILL's performances, FIM audiences are expected (at least on some level) to assume the task of reading the scarce critical literature on FIM which is usually produced in the Western world, acquire rare, limited edition music recordings (from both local and international outlets), and follow the projects of an essentially transnational music scene, usually online. Needless to say, such activities not only require specific economic means, but they also presume a certain acculturation into Western music history and thought,

which is generally available to individuals of an elitist, socio-economically privileged and highly educated stratum of Lebanese society.

It is also important to consider that FIM is in some ways as new in Lebanon as it was in Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Even during fifteen years of civil war, Lebanon was not isolated from Western musical developments over the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century. However, the country never had a formal FIMS until 2000, which is why I believe that in order to make this music more accessible to the public, it must be treated as new musical developments were in Europe and the United States in the early 20$^{th}$ century. It might seem anachronistic for MILL musicians to turn to open debates about musical aesthetics and the meaning of music in avant-garde terms. However, I believe it is rather clear that these discussions are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago; after all, they seem to have taken on new meanings in their currently more transnational scope, as my thesis has aimed to portray in the specific case of Lebanon. Perhaps then the Lebanese FIMS would be able to break some of the aforementioned socio-economic barriers, as well as translate its ideals of inter-cultural dialogue beyond its musical parameters, and inspire open and public debate in society in order to achieve broader social significance in the Lebanese context.

Finally, I would like to revisit the projects through which Raed, like Bechir, is attempting to connect to a specifically Arab, and more importantly Lebanese, audience. Raed employs a mechanism which involves the incorporation of Arab and Lebanese-specific elements of popular culture in his multimedia art work, in the hopes of triggering collective *memory* of a shared popular culture during times of war and peace, and perhaps even setting the stage for the construction of a unified collective Lebanese *identity*. This connects back to the presence of diverse ethnic and religious *identities* in Lebanon and the multiple *historical trajectories* each group identifies with, these two entities constantly appearing to inform and feed into each other. In addition to the Lebanese FIMS inching towards a heterogeneous linguistic and sectarian constitution, I propose

that Raed's aforementioned projects may actually extend this concept to one which not only holds social significance, but may also provide a key for social transformation in this post-war society. I have already shown how shared cultural and musical influences have broken sectarian barriers between musicians in the Lebanese FIMS, specifically in the case of A Trio. However, I would further like to investigate the extent to which the recognition of such common influences and identities may succeed in breaking sectarian barriers among members of the broader "war generation" in post-war Lebanon. In other words, could projects such as "Grendizer Trio's" be used as a means of constructing or consolidating a common collective memory? Could civil war pop culture be used as a basis for dialogue among members of the "war generation" who have historically been separated by civil strife? Such an exploration would provide the basis for promoting inter-sectarian musical collaboration in Lebanon as a means of post-war reconciliation and community-building.

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*NOTE: All websites in this bibliography were accessed on January 22, 2010.*