

## Research > MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

*Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with...* is a new series from Ràdio Web MACBA that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. The documentary series is being presented this spring at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in a prospective conference/listening format, where four collectors have been invited to share the concerns and particular characteristics that have driven them to build their personal collections. This is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

This is a conversation by email between Mark Gergis and Anna Ramos to prepare his forthcoming radio show at Ràdio Web MACBA, which took place on March 2011.

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Linked to record label Sublime Frequencies, Mark Gergis is an expert in popular and folk music from Syria, Iraq, Cambodia and Thailand, spanning from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Mark shares some of his cultural, logistic and esoteric reflections on collecting music in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the importance of format, the relevance of collecting objects from other cultures, as well as other sociological aspects relating to the practice of music collecting in developing countries.

# MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

## Mark Gergis

### 01. Conversation with Mark Gergis on his sound collection

**When did you start collecting sound and music and why? What lead you to be a record/sound/video collector?**

I've mapped out my own psychology and deduced it to this recipe: I have an Iraqi background. My father comes from Baghdad and I was subsequently exposed to Arabic music and culture throughout childhood. My mother is American. Her father was in high-level military radio intelligence and used to let me listen or talk on his state-of-the-art super-powered radio receivers in the seventies and eighties. He'd point at an automated antennae-driven globe and ask where and who in the world I wanted to communicate with. Hours were spent talking with radio operators in Africa, Asia, Russia, etc. I started collecting records as a kid. Kids' records. I was fascinated with them.

My parents listened to music on tape and vinyl quite a lot then, and they bought me a small turntable and some kids' records to go with it. I was hooked and always at the record shops looking for more sounds. I was fascinated with every aspect of them – the art, the presentation, how they sounded at varying speeds, how they were sequenced per-side – all facets, really. This continued into my teen years during the eighties with pop, post punk, experimental stuff and jazz music I was exposed to. By my early twenties, I was a recording and performing musician based in Oakland, California and increasingly growing tired of the Western sound template I'd jumped into headfirst.

I started checking out records and tapes at the local libraries and ethnic shops. There is a rich South East Asian population in the San Francisco Bay Area, and I was able to check out recordings of Cambodian, Vietnamese and Thai music, among others. Exposure to these new sounds only led to more curiosity. I was always interested in travel, and after I finally made my first trip out, I was hooked.

**The experimental scene in California is extremely rich and open-minded. Do you think it helped you to open your ears to such a different conception of structure, tonality and understanding of what popular music and folklore can be?**

Yes, being a Bay Area native, I was exposed to just about anything you can imagine musically and culturally. The ethnic diversity enabled me to make discoveries at home that led to my fascination with Asian music. Since the late-1980s, I've co-founded and played in several experimental groups here. I watched San Francisco go through many phases. The place got very conservative and almost became a parody of its former self after the mid-to-late 1990s – more than people like to admit. It still breathes, but I think the decline hastened my plunge into world travel.

**How defined/limited to an area of exploration is your collection?**

There are certain areas of the world I'm more focused on, but the parameters can always change. One thing always leads to another – and always should. For instance, hearing a form of folk-pop music when tuning into a rural Thai radio station late at night can lead to discovering another sub-genre of something you thought you already had a grasp on – and so on. I try to remain guided by curiosity.

**Your collection in numbers: approximately how many records/cassettes do you own? Is it possible to choose a personal favourite?**



[Mark Gergis' sound collection]

I now own thousands of vinyl records, cassettes, CDs, VCDs, DVDs, MP3s, etc. Honestly, I stopped counting a decade ago. I have them all meticulously labelled by geography, style, sometimes regionally. I have numbering systems for all of them. The ones that aren't in a script I can understand get scanned for future translation. I have favourites of all kinds from every region and not one single item that stands out as a prize, or anything. Instead, there are some standout anomalies that are precious to me. These can be musical anomalies, cover design/art anomalies, or related to something that I thought I'd never be able to find – or didn't know existed.

**A collection like yours seems to be not so much about the object, but about your own experience of obtaining or reaching the object of desire/music. Which would be your most valuable objects in that sense and why?**

The most valuable objects in that sense are the ones that reveal something new. Often I'm seeking out anomalies in a specific genre to see just what the parameters were within that genre. I want to understand every place it went within itself. And so, one thing leads to another as you pore over hundreds of recordings. Archiving hundreds of Arabic folk-pop hybrid cassettes of recordings from the fifties to the eighties, I can say that sometimes it starts to blend together – not because it's uninteresting, but because I'm in prolonged session with recordings that bear a thread of aural similarity throughout the collection. Then, suddenly a children's tape appears... and some of the most innovative and explorative sounds appear like none I've heard. The discovery here is that in the context of children's recordings, musicians in the region felt more comfortable producing something extraordinary. They delved into the realms of odd synths, playful sound effects and odd vocals. What happens next is that I begin to focus on children's records from throughout the region. A micro-obsession forms and the 'holy grail' of the search always feels like it's just *one* cassette away.

Other items I consider valuable in my collection are: Cambodian cassettes from the eighties, Cambodian vinyl records, Iraqi and Syrian folk-pop recordings from certain eras, an Iraqi folk-rock LP, Iraqi eight track tapes from the seventies, Vietnamese vinyl and cassettes, among a few.

**Can you share some examples of those anomalies you are constantly looking for? They definitely sound very intriguing...**

Searching through thousands of recordings, an anomaly is ultimately that which stands apart from the rest. It's ultimately uniqueness. An anomaly can be the way a guitar or drum kit was recorded and how different it is in one particular recording than a hundred others done in the same style. It can be how far out a group decided to take the music in comparison to their peers at the time on a particular song. It can be about an outstanding production style or a sudden raw outburst of some kind.

**Also your research process and your personal interest in those anomalies, seems somehow like an effort to trace an archaeology of the music you cherish. John Oswald said to me a while ago that you have to climb a mountain to see the village, meaning that distance gives you a certain and valuable perspective. Have you made any archaeological discoveries worth mentioning?**

Absolutely. I think all of the discoveries I've made during researching and collecting international music have been a result of digging very deeply into a style of music I thought I already had somewhat of a grasp on. Omar Souleyman, the Syrian folk-pop Dabke singer, is a great example of this. Levantine Dabke music was something I was already studying and collecting at the time I first found Omar's music in Syria. When I heard his sound, it was a revelation – that Dabke could be that raw and frenetic and urgent sounding.

So yes, once you have invested passion and time into seeking something out, and remembering not to mistake satiation for the end of the journey, you may find exactly what you didn't think was possible.

**What's the most extravagant record/material you have?**



[Mark Gergis' sound collection]

I buy most of these items on-location when I'm travelling. Occasionally I see something on eBay I know will fill in the gaps for me. Maybe it's something I've known about, and have been looking for – or something I want to try out based on what I've heard from a similar record. I try to avoid this, but I have been known to spend if it's something I know I need.

#### **Are you very meticulous with your sound collection?**

In the important ways, I am. I maintain a unique archive, and it grows each year, so things need to be organised. I sometimes wish I had an intern to help archive transfer and digitise audio materials and ephemera I bring back from these trips. But I don't, so hundreds of hours a year go toward meticulously doing all of those things. I am not a climate-control freak or anything like that. I can't afford to be. I just try to keep things out of the sun.

The ephemera that I collect when travelling is basically whatever I see that grabs my eye. I'm always in the bookshops going through magazines, periodicals, old photographs and postcards. I have amassed large quantities of those items and I scan and categorise them after each trip. I record off the television and radio when I travel as well, so there are always hours and hours of media ephemera to sort through as well.

#### **Do you collect second copies? Are you very picky about having mint copies? Probably this last question does not apply to your collection...**

If I see an item I know I'll never see again, or one that I've been seeking out for quite some time – and there are five copies there, I will buy them all, yes. One may be in better shape than the other. A couple will stay sealed in the archives and there's always a friend who'd appreciate a copy. Mint copies are preferred, especially if it's something I know I'll be digitising. But many times, if it's what I call a 'reference or research purchase', then I don't get so picky about mint copies. In this field I'm working in, mint copies are sometimes impossible to come by. Sometimes I'll seek out better copies if a reference or research purchase turns out to be something that really interests me.

#### **Related to the research process, can you briefly explain your relationship with Sublime Frequencies and the main goals of the project?**

I've been working with Sublime Frequencies since the label started in late 2003. We were all friends who were used to spending hours sharing music and film footage from our collective travels with each other. Much of it was street-level hybrid folk-pop – people's music – from the countries we had spent time in. The question came up often – 'Why hasn't this music been made available to people before?' When Sublime Frequencies began it was a great platform for the collective to begin sharing this material and it provided incentive to dive deeper into it. I think you could say that was one main goal of the project – to issue music and images that previously seemed criminally ignored by established institutions and record labels.

#### **Out of your collection, what makes a certain record a Sublime Frequencies release?**

I can say that an aesthetic umbrella exists, where any of us in the collective know when certain material qualifies for a Sublime Frequencies release. We share that vision and are always running ideas across to each other. I would say we maintain a sort of esoteric quality control without a controlled recipe. The parameters are open and the options are endless. Each release takes its own form. Some of the ones I've put together have been tediously crafted and have undergone rigorous revision, and some have been pretty straightforward in their approach.

#### **It definitely goes beyond collecting World Music, I'd say.**

It does. So called World Music establishments have had a peculiar tendency to ignore that which is genuine and that which is contemporarily relevant if you are actually on the ground in a locale. They showed a proclivity toward taming sounds in the studio, sometimes even employing big-time producers to temper recordings for a Western audience. It's like trying to eat Indian food in Germany –





[Mark Gergis' sound collection]

something important is missing from the recipe. I think Sublime Frequencies has always seen the merit in trying to showcase music from around the world as it actually exists in its respective locale. Presenting it any other way is often a mutual insult to artist and audience. The label doesn't employ an academic approach, nor is it a precious approach hindered by guilt-based ethics or associations. It's also never been a competitive-step-on-someone-else-to-get-to-the-source-of-some-killer-groove-I-can-DJ-and-release type deal, either.

#### **You don't feel very comfortable under that label, do you?**

People are going to call it what they will. International, World, Ethno – it's all just terminology. The term World Music reminds me of class-C gloss and sheen; 'discovered' by a Brit, recorded in Africa, mixed and produced by a Frenchman, licensed and sold by a Jew, and marketed to a specific class of people that feel really, really good about some bogus one-world one-love thing. These labels are only relevant in the West. Once you're standing in a music market in Bangkok, Damascus, Cairo or Mandalay, they mean nothing.

'International' is that middle ground where we wanted to avoid calling it World Music. Ethno seems to apply now to the newfound hipster love for music recorded outside the West.

Hipsters latching onto recorded music from 'exotic' locations isn't really the terrible problem that people might think it is. It's merely a hip youngster that's reaching out toward something else out there, and that's not always a bad thing. Maybe it's the now thing. Maybe they think it's the socially responsible part of their day when they put on that Iraqi Choubi song. Maybe it's a passing phase for them. Maybe it's a way to annoy their parents – or maybe it's genuine interest. Hipsters have been doing this for generations. In the fifties you had the cocktail generation doing the same thing with Perez Prado, belly dance music and the like.

We all have our own personal gateways into culture. If a Westerner suddenly has ears for music from another culture, no matter what the reason or the origin of their interest, at least they are thinking outside of insular Western culture for a moment. In America, that's very important. To have someone suddenly thinking about music from the Arab world in a positive way is a good start.

#### **When you started your endeavour did you have any influences or references concerning how to do it or how not to do it?**

There were no references on how to go about finding the types of music I sought out in the Middle East or in Southeast Asia. All I had to go by were my ears, intuition and communication skills.

My influences were initially the music that was available to me, and the labels that put them out. There were some great compilations issued on the Original Music label (*Street Music of Java*, etc.). *Cambodian Rocks* was another small-press but eye-opening compilation issued in the mid-1990s. It was the first Western window into Cambodia's legendary rock and roll scene of the 1960s. Later, the Asian and Arab markets in my area and in Detroit, Michigan were a great resource, and I met some great people there who helped me along in my research. Record labels such as Smithsonian/Folkways, Ocora and Nonesuch were great to listen to in abundance when I was younger, and their importance isn't to be denied, but as I began travelling, I noticed that there was a gaping lack of representation regarding street-level folk and pop music from these places.

For instance, when I first started collecting electrified Thai Molam country music, there were no blogs or ethnographic compilations exhibiting the wealth of recorded music in this genre. In fact, this brand of Thai Molam had been completely overlooked by those who were releasing international music. Even some Western ethnomusicologists living and researching in Asia considered it unworthy of more than a mention. When I heard it for the first time, it struck me hard. I didn't have to let it take hold of me like it did by any means. But I knew right away that there had to be much more where it came from. It became a meta-journey – in that after hearing my second cassette, or third or fourth, each with their own distinct character and voice, I knew that this was something to



[Mark Gergis' sound and video collection]

pursue on every level. This didn't mean making purchases on eBay or at specialty shops in the West. This meant putting me in rural north-eastern Thailand looking for something that hadn't been on Thai music shelves for up to three decades.

**A Western approach to such a peculiar market and music bears the difficult burden of historic revisionism and it must also deal with the potential risk of losing some values in translation. How do you deal with it?**

Everything seems to be revisionism to some degree. Information about the music I seek out is often very hard to find – and then when I find it, it's often hard to believe. Three or four sources will tell you five or ten different conflicting stories. People say yes to make you happy. People have special interests or biases behind truths they tell. There are financial gain interests. There is info that does get lost in translation. Answers can come very easily or not at all. I deal with it by using my best critical judgment and by not being too precious about any of it.

**Your talk includes some personal reflections on the cultural relevance – or irrelevance – of collecting and embracing exotica and the 'Other'. Can you share some thoughts related to that?**

Yes. For example, in most parts of Asia I have researched and collected music, I've found that my interests in folk-pop music from the previous five decades is not particularly shared by the people of that place. For them, it is often throwaway ephemera – something that was discarded for a reason. That reason is often simply that it was old. The fetishism of nostalgia as related to music isn't as commonplace in some cultures. Or, there may be nostalgic appreciation, but that it isn't in what I'm choosing to focus on. I can spend a decade researching and compiling Cambodian cassette-issued music from the late seventies to the late eighties and be very into the historical relevance of it, the sounds, the context – just completely immersed in it. After having released a CD of the music, I rush to my favourite Cambodian music merchant, excited to show him my collection – and it turns out that he is not only baffled that it even exists, but that he was the distributor for a lot of these cassettes during the time of their issuance – and that he put all of these recordings into the garbage bin years ago, where, in his mind, they belong.

The paradox is that he has unending love for the late Sin Sisamouth – leading fifties-seventies Khmer crooner killed at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. And so do I, but we'll never see eye to eye on the later-period material I continue to seek out. It's perfectly irrelevant to him and his wife, their family, their friends' families, etc. But once the CD I've compiled is marketed to a Western audience, it's celebrated by the press as a cultural treasure. The Cambodian merchant remains unimpressed.

Exotica is geographical, really. Syrian music is not exotica if you're in Syria. George Michael is exotic if you're in Syria. If most of my time spent listening to music in a year is spent listening to Syrian music, it's very normal to hear, even if its exotic nature initially attracted me to it. Western cautiousness with exotica is understandable, given centuries of colonial occupation and guilt, but really, in an age where we have practically seen and heard it all – it takes something you might have to call exotic to actually produce stimulus. It's not wrong to look at another culture as exotic. In a world that is becoming increasingly homogenised and sterilised, I think we need to be very thankful that there is still this *Other* to be found.

**Sound collecting has a lot to do with what you said, somehow. It is often experienced as a way to relive, re-enact or document a certain timeframe or cultural background from the distance (cultural, chronological or even both). Do you think that that distance, as you mentioned, is what gives the value to the collected subject/object to the sound collector then?**

I think that this broad concept of distance is a large part of the collector psychology. Collecting is a yearning for something, isn't it? Sometimes it's unhealthy. Sometimes collecting is disease and debauchery and sometimes it's the elixir for mediocrity. Sometimes it's trying to capture a moment in time that can't be reclaimed, or trying to isolate something out of reach so you can examine it up close, or maybe it's related to an important personal memory or a feeling that wants to be relived somehow. We have to stop and ask ourselves why we



[Mark Gergis' sound collection]

collect things sometimes. We should question the reasons we collect. Is it by habit? Is it by some strange obligation? Is it a service or a disservice to ourselves or to others? At its most basic and savage, it's about thrill-seeking or competition – and at its most refined, I think it's about self-education and hopefully results in a certain enlightenment.

**Your personal story with Sin Sisamouth shows how relative is the concept of value that the Western model builds. It shows two different/parallel ways to reconstruct and see the past and the present. It gives a very interesting insight of how value, art and modernity are viewed differently.**

Value is an unstable and abstract concept to me. Rarely do I find that what I come to value is going to be seen in the same way as most other people. And that goes for anything at all, really, but when applied to collecting sounds from around the world, it is almost always a fiasco trying to tell someone, even the very musician that created a piece of music, that it has extreme value to me or a few hundred other people that might feel like I do. There aren't really words to convince in that situation. There is only money – money that settles a deal and attaches a temporary grotesque and false value to something that, just yesterday, may have merely been an embarrassing old recording someone did once and had forgotten about.

I was once speaking with a venerable Turkish musician about a track I felt was very special, and wanted to include on a retrospective compilation of his work I was assembling. He disliked the track and couldn't believe that anyone would think it had any value. I then asked him whether he remembered the moment he completed the track (42 years before). He said that he did. I asked whether he believed in the track at the time. He explained that there was never a track he completed without completely believing in it at the moment. He now believed it was naïve and terrible. I told him that perhaps at the moment he completed it and believed in it, he sent a signal into the ether with his approval. 42 years later we are still receiving that signal and feel the same energy from that moment (though he clearly is not). Luckily he liked this concept enough to allow the inclusion of the track.

**How different is their market from the Western market and Western ways? How are careers built and how and where is the material distributed?**

It differs greatly by country. One thread seems to be that music made by and for the working class is recorded and produced in rural areas and then distributed to the urban areas where the workers have settled. Often times, record companies are owned by shrewd business people who could not care less about music or the people that create it. They may as well be in the ceramics industry. They are often mafia, and there to make money and will step on anyone to make it happen. It is this class of record mogul that often owns all of the licensing rights to the recorded music, making negotiations with them ethically disturbing. These record guys spent lifetimes ensuring that their artists made very little if any money from their recordings. Similar to the modern Western model (post-internet), there is not a viable way to make money from recordings – so the live performance becomes the main source of sustenance. Many contemporary recordings in Syria, for instance, are issued solely to keep the singer's name alive so a wedding host may remember him and hire him at his next party.

**Your collection is kind of specialised in two very specific subjects of study: the Middle East and Southeast Asia. What makes them so appealing for you?**

My Arabic heritage lent to hearing much of this music in my youth. Later, my interest in the music of Southeast Asia led me to travel and collect sounds there. These are the two areas that happened to be what turned me on the most. It's a matter of aesthetics. I was attracted to these places from the beginning, and these are the places I started travelling and began to fall in love with.

**Which are the main values of those aesthetics?**

These are personal aesthetics, specific to what interests me and how it got to be interesting for me through my collective experiences and cultural environment. By aesthetics, I just mean what moves me or grabs me. The sounds coming from the





[Mark Gergis' sound collection]

Arab world and Southeast Asia have been captivating enough for me to spend the last two decades listening and collecting.

**It is quite a vague framework, how does your research process work and what are you looking for?**

There exists a blend of obsessive tendency and near-autistic focus on a subject enough to want to explore it to the ends of the earth. This is different than mildly enjoying something in passing and then fleetingly let it fall from your scope, which happens daily with the myriad detritus floating past us. Sometimes something you've never experienced before impresses you so deeply that you wish to engage with it. That engagement, with the right alchemy can reveal a labyrinth of intrigue. The sort of intrigue that begs for repeat stimulus – and stimulation can be difficult to find if your criteria are complex. What I do know and trust is my own aesthetic taste. I think that's all anyone has to trust – themselves and their own intuition. From there, I meet others who share similar interests, be they collectors, artists, producers or what not.

**Is it easy to look for? Where do you find it? How do you gather the information?**

What's easy is climbing in and finding a few things that strike you. What is difficult depends on how deeply you choose to engage with the subject. Once layer upon layer is exposed, it becomes a question of how far you want to climb in – because you could spend the rest of your life trying to understand and collect one form of music. The difficulties arise when you know you are searching for something that existed for only a very brief amount of time, and was then discarded – for instance, something that hasn't been sold in a shop for the last 20 or 25 years. I've spent years and years looking for things like that. The results have been scant, but in that scenario, I can't describe the excitement when even small clues and results are found.

When travelling, I look for music anywhere music is sold. Street markets and older music shops have always yielded the best results. Private collections and private dealers have been crucial in some countries. I have also found quite a lot at certain ethnic music shops in the United States and Europe.

When I'm out, I amass a large quantity of music and video that span all formats. That includes radio interceptions, field recordings, vinyl records, audio-cassette tapes, eight-track tapes, CDs, and more lately MP3 discs and even people's flash drives. In the video realm, it's DVDs, VCDs, whatever I can find – as well as monitoring international satellite television. Upon returning to my studio, I set up a system to archive and back up these finds and then begin a second pass to distil what I've found to what I believe to be the best selections. It's a tangle of discs, vinyl, tapes and hard drives that eventually yields something tangible and exciting.

**For record collecting, having good sources is one of the most important aspects. Your area of expertise makes it even more challenging, because of the language and socio-political barrier. Also collecting that kind of material does have clear socio-political implications.**

When talking about 'good sources' in my case, I think I really have to talk about good communication and good relations with people met along the way. I try and check all misanthropic notions at the airport because I really value engagement with people when I travel. There are always ways around language and cultural barriers. I have seen too many examples of tourists shunning the denizens of the country they're in – and with all fears and preconceptions intact, staying close to the museums and temples, effectively worshipping the dead place rather than the living. In addition to making friends, learning, sharing, etc., I also attribute much of my successes collecting music around the world to the meaningful relationships developed on the spot while I'm there. I don't mean this in an idealistic way, just that there's genuine interest in relating and it's often mutual. Some of the greatest people I've met come from some of the most demonised countries you've heard of. I think these communicative qualities are part of what has made the Sublime Frequencies label work the way it does. Much more important than the artefacts we seek, are the legions of people we encounter along the way.



[Princess Nicotine Folk and Pop Sounds of Myanmar (Burma), 2004]

Regarding the political nature of releasing, I always think the politics are inherent in the releases on a case-by-case basis. Being part of a label that issues music from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq, and even other parts of the world, for me, has always been political. We don't necessarily wrap the discs in political packaging or get any more pedantic than we need to in the liner notes, but for anyone who's guessing, the politics are apparent. Together with the folks at Sublime Frequencies, I'm also outspoken in interviews, where our politics are usually made clear.

**Has the digital revolution influenced them as much as it has affected the Western market?**

It has, just as much, maybe even more so. Syrian music is now increasingly being released on VCDs. Many of these feature one-hour wedding concerts and are in great abundance there. In fact, it's the only place I've ever been where a number-one nationwide hit has had its origins in one wedding performance that was released on VCD. The song was played everywhere, and it was something like track two of a wedding party where women, men and children danced casually alongside the famous singer at a small gathering. It was this very recording issued on VCD that was being played on TVs and in audio carts across the country.

**Does this mean that musicians are more amateur in Syria, then?**

No. I think there are many sorts of models of music production and distribution in Syria. In particular, I was discussing an anomaly that occurred within Syria's folk-pop music movement. What I think it does exemplify is the fact that there isn't always an inherent national rigidity in Syrian music distribution. To me, it's a beautiful thing that the VCD phenomenon I described can exist in the twenty-first century alongside numerous global models that would condemn this means. You can find very Western style music industries in Syria, but this phenomenon is an anomaly that proves homogeneity isn't the mother of success – it's more like the father of mediocrity.

**On the other hand, it looks like wedding concerts are a place to try new songs. That's quite a different paradigm from the Western one, where in most weddings people want to listen to the same old tunes and clichéd music. However, there's seems to be not too much room for concepts such as underground or experimental. Is that so? Maybe it doesn't make much sense to apply that scheme to some cultures. There have been a few compilations of experimental music released by European and American labels, but again some could be understood as a Western effort to apply its schemes globally.**

There's plenty of room for it, but there isn't much interest in what we call underground or experimental music there. In my experience, Syrians don't really see the relevance for Western-style experimental music at all. And spending as much time as I have there, neither do I. When I first visited Syria, I brought recordings of more experimental or radical music in my library that I wanted to share with people, but, really, the context for it is simply not there. It just sounds ridiculous when you're there, and that's not saying that Syrians aren't inspired or creative, it's just that there hasn't been so much exposure to those sounds or ideas there. The radical arts in the West have been a result of privilege – the privilege (or curse) of cultural inundation – and the extra time and money on our hands that enables us to create art and react to art. There are people in Syria that haven't heard of Elvis or The Beatles, much less any other movements that have been born of Western rebellion culture. They see people with wild hair and gory made-up faces and ripped clothing on TV, but it's probably filed in the same compartment as watching an episode about gorillas mating on National Geographic would be. It's something that occurs elsewhere for some reason. In an inherently more conservative culture, like Syria or Iraq, the spirit that contributes to radical arts or reactionary expression in the West is channelled differently and the essence of it can probably be found in places we aren't really privy to. On the other hand, you have Syria's neighbour Lebanon with its very own experimental music label, scene and international festival.

**How about Southeast Asia? Would it be a similar case? Can you share any other relevant examples of how the industry works there?**

From my experience, the Southeast Asian markets are often run by industry moguls that have had a hold on the music business since the advent of recorded





[Omar Souleyman *Jazeera Nights*, 2010]

sound in the region, or by Sony or Time/Warner Asia – big time industries that have moved in on the market and profit considerably from it. The result is a market that dictates the sound and makes it near impossible for any sort of inspired new life to appear on the scene, with few exceptions, unless it is deemed fit to sell by the industry. A regional folk-pop music machine in Northeast Thailand exists and has been seen as a commodity niche market with the moguls in Bangkok for a good 40 or 50 years. As a result, Bangkok has often been the maker or breaker of Molam and Luk Thoong regional music from the rural northeast.

**I'm also very interested in the relationship between folklore and pop music, which from an alien perspective seems to be quite linked both in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.**

Since the electrification of instruments in the mid-twentieth century, we have seen the merging of popular music with traditional music worldwide. In Southeast Asia and the Arab world, very traditional forms of music still exist, but when music began to be electrified, a hybrid movement was spawned by what could be done with the resulting new sounds and production enhancements. I tend to appreciate the early days of this phenomenon. It was a transitional period where you could hear the traditional and the contemporary trying to synthesize for the first time.

Cultural traditions run deeper in some places than others, and in the places I'm focusing on, the pop music, despite yielding to western sounding beats or melodies in some cases, still finds a way to retain the integration of cultural motifs in its sound.

**Music is a way to introduce and consolidate certain values in society. Even folklore and pop music can be sometimes an expression of resistance (even though most of the times this becomes a mere gimmick) and rebellion (generational, political...). How does it work in the regions you've explored?**

Sometimes cultures latch on to some music movement from the West that had its origins in rebellion and resistance, but by the time it made its way to the respective countries, it was already a commercialized shadow of itself. North African Arab countries have produced music of rebellion and resistance over the decades. Rai music from the Maghreb is one strong example of that – particularly the earliest material. The popular music in the Arab world is called *Shabbi* (people's music), and it has a long tradition of speaking about personal and street-level issues covering anything from local or regional corruption, to Western and Zionist imperialism. It can be humorous and satirical or venomous and damning.

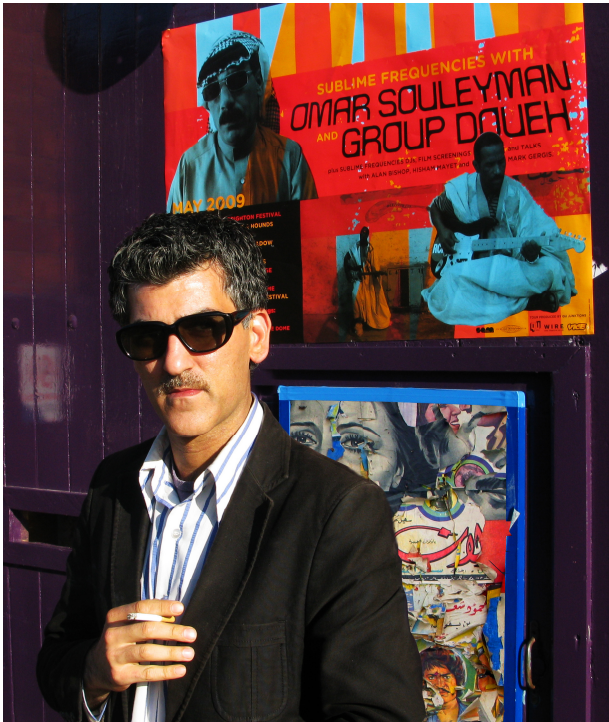
**And how about the more conservative regions, such as Syria or Iraq: is there a space for rebellion in music or is it more a space for evasion?**

Music serves as more of a cultural function in those countries. It is a normal part of life – and omnipresent. Lyrics there cover just about any aspect of life in the region. Iraq and Syria have both been secular-run countries for a long time, and there have been very decadent forms of music, dance and expression in existence there for longer than the west has had a recording industry.

You can find heavy metal and punk models in the Middle East. Rap has probably been the most impressive to me, especially in the case of some Palestinian rappers who have produced some very strong material of resistance. Perhaps it's more relevant than any rap that exists today.

**Back to global, the access to Western music and mainstream must have affected the music made today. Dancehall and reggaeton, for instance, were quite unique expressions of two different cultures and nowadays it's almost impossible to listen to that music without noticing the Autotune filters, etc. Is it the same case in the Syria or Southeast Asia?**

You can hear so many global influences permeating music in both Southeast Asia and the Arab world – as much as you can now hear Arab or Asian sounds in Western pop music I think. The Internet and satellite TV have allowed so much



[Mark Gergis]

influence and musical drift. Autotune, house music, Western dance-pop, heavy metal and global dance phenomena have really found their way around the world. You've got hardcore punk and doom metal in Indonesia – and Western pop-dance music and balladry influencing the Arab market to a degree. A lot of influence comes pre-packaged these days, via the preset sounds on the electronic keyboards made for Western markets and sold to the rest of the world.

**As far as I know cassettes are still very much available.**

Yes, in some places, but they really have started disappearing quickly in just the last five years. MP3 discs and online file sharing are really what it has come to. Many of the cassettes that are now gone forever were never deemed important enough to be transferred digitally before being discarded. Fair enough, there was no popular demand for these tapes. But to someone who sees these recordings in a different context, the search for that one cassette begins... whether it truly exists or not.

**So in this particular case, the digital revolution, to give it a name, is not killing sound collecting. Can you reflect on that?**

I try not to be a purist. Purists can miss out on so much. They often cling to a format like vinyl – whether that's what they're purchasing or what they're playing when they DJ. Vinyl is a great medium, and there's nothing wrong with specialty in a particular format, but if that's all you're paying attention to, then there's a world that's passing you by at a rapid pace. It depends on how wide your parameters are and what your intentions are. I'm often trying to piece together puzzles of a genre I come across... let's say choubi music of Iraq is one. I don't own one piece of Iraqi vinyl that contains a choubi. The reason for this is that choubi nightclub music isn't the most respectable or exportable/profitable form of music in Iraq. There wasn't a distribution network for choubi music before the cassette format came along and offered it a cheap and viable solution for making and selling the music. For two decades, thousands of choubi tapes were pumped out of the Iraqi scene. This same logic can be applied to collecting digital recordings today. We suffered through an era of very poor sounding MP3s, but that is changing – and it's what we have to work with at this very moment. We can choose to work with it or ignore it.

**What's the future of sound collecting from your point of view?**

In certain circles, the fascination with the object might increase as the culture moves further away from that sort of tangible ownership. At the rate it's going, it feels like owning a prized audio artefact in the form of a physical object may become even more deemphasised. For some, sound collecting is already about collecting MP3s and storing them in their 'cloud' on a server someplace. Ultimately, I think sound collecting will continue to adapt to the times, as it always has.

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## 02. Seven favourites from Mark Gergis' collection

MP3 <http://bit.ly/f8ATyS>

Track list <http://bit.ly/gBlcEk>

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## 03. Acknowledgements

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