

The Brouhaha of War: Soundscapes of the Invasion of Iraq, 20 Years On

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Under the rule of a rapacious global capitalism, "civilization and justice stand forth as undisguised savagery and lawless revenge."^[1] Karl Marx was analyzing the civil war in France, but how else could the infamy of the 2003 imperialist invasion of Iraq be described, with hundreds of thousands dead, and a country already decimated by genocidal sanctions now in ruins?^[2]

With transatlantic cultural machineries justifying the "war effort," and U.S.-British social democracies complicit, sound artist Sherko Abbas was pushed to "reveal truth...far away from what people saw from the Western media." His artistic representations were based on having lived in occupied Sulaimaniya until 2011. Musicians around the world depicted and resisted the war in other ways, yet others scraped the barrel of base, chauvinistic interests to sing for the imperialists. Sound was a partisan weapon.

In November 2021, I was invited to introduce *Brouhaha*, a sound-based performance by Sherko and Kani Kamil at Home Theater in Manchester, Britain. In their early decades in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war laid waste to both countries and left indelible impressions on the artists. This marks the starting point for the sounds on display in their piece, *Brouhaha*—roughly meaning argument, ruckus, noise, or uproar. In the performance, Sherko played a "wild instrument" of wood and metal, based on the principles of a child's toy. He explained that his construction was based on a small handmade object called *damaqachan*, or "spoke": "In Iraq, *damaqachan* is a simple toy, constructed from bicycle spokes, nails and matches, which sets off miniature explosions." Simultaneously, Kani manipulated vinyl record sound effects, including distorted musical samples of Umm Kulthum's *Baghdad* and Beethoven's *Eroica*, both of which had been used to introduce the news in pre-2003 Iraq.

During the performance, audience members gasped as warped sirens met unexpected explosions, at times filling the theater with smoke. Manipulating "sonic memory," Sherko

and Kani reminded those present of the different soundtracks heard by those who suffered the war on the ground. While relatively few of us in Britain could even approach the kinds of sonic horrors heard by those in Iraq alongside daily massacres, memories of the accompanying sounds of this forever war are indicative of broader historical phenomena. We could go back to the 1960s, to CIA encouragement of a right-wing nationalist war against Iraqi communists, or earlier to the 1921 installation of a pro-British monarchy after Britain and France carved up the Middle East between themselves. The occupation of Palestine and the wars that have engulfed Lebanon and Syria in recent decades find roots in this era a century ago.

Sanctions and war are major factors in the dislocation of oral tradition and loss of patronage for traditional musics in Iraq. In 2003, U.S. imperialists bombed Baghdad Radio and its extensive sound archive, accumulated since its founding in 1936.^[3] Other acts of cultural terrorism included the sacking of the Iraqi National Museum, where at least 15,000 ancient artifacts, spanning 7,000 years of civilization, disappeared in the wake of the invasion.^[4] Musicians seeking in different ways to address lost connections with Iraqi cultures in the wake of this destruction have included oud player Naseer Shamma, jazz and Iraqi *maqam* performer Amir El-Saffar, and contemporary musician Khyam Allami.

In the face of the targeted murder of Iraqi musicians and what Haifa Zangana sees as the fear of the occupation and sectarian proxies for *aghani al-muqaqama*, or songs of resistance, lyrics commemorating the struggle to liberate Falluja and other key battles remain popular. In *Hay-yalla ahl al-Falluja*, an anonymous vocalist sang to a folk melody and percussion:

Salute, O God, the people of Falluja,
Brave they are all
They never bowed their heads
Nor were humbled by the Americans

Zangana sees a “reversion to roots,” including forms of the once Iraqi *maqam* tradition “in the context of the growing need for unity in the face of foreign domination, and the threatened deliberate fragmentation of the people and the country.” Like Algeria, South Africa, and, we might add, Palestine, Ireland, and other examples of anti-imperialist struggle, “the Iraqi resistance has its song.”^[5]

So, apparently, does the oppressor. Illustrating the dehumanizing ideological tendencies accompanying the war to recolonize Iraq, then U.S. president George W. Bush paraded in New York to the lyrics of the *Iraq and Roll*, a song by redneck Clint Black, who boasted that Smart Bombs “find stupid people too.” Orientalism and fascism united as allies. Amidst the drums of war and sanctions, Edward Said had written on how “Arabs are dehumanized...seen as violent irrational terrorists always on the lookout for murder and bombing outrages.”^[6] In Sherko Abbas’s film *The Music of the Bush Era* (2023), the U.S. government is shown militarily airlifting members of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra to Washington at the height of the war to perform at a propagandizing concert in front of Bush and other politicians. Others weren’t offered the red carpet: U.S. and Iraqi forces raided the home of violinist and engineer, Mohammed Qassim, ostensibly in an anti-“terrorism” operation. They smashed his antique violin to pieces.^[7]

In Britain, the Labour government's enthusiastic warmongering was met by George Michael's antiwar song *Shoot the Dog*, which pleaded for Britain not to follow its U.S. ally: "Tony Tony Tony, I know that you are horny, but there's somethin' 'bout that Bush ain't right." Depicting Tony Blair as Bush's "poodle" had become a popular chant on protest marches in London and was a theme of speeches by George Galloway and other Labour MPs on Stop the War Coalition platforms. This let British imperialism off the hook and placed the blame elsewhere. The response of ex-Beatle Paul McCartney was more barefaced. He had tuned into U.S. fever pitch after 9/11, writing the derivative song *Freedom*, in support of the war on Afghanistan. He'd tell journalists, "I'd like to see the bombing stop but what are you gonna do, turn the other cheek?"^[8]

The contributions of the millions opposed to imperialist war stood in antithesis to the live-and-let-die attitude of millionaire musicians. Internationally, the attack of Iraq was met with new generations of protesters, resisters, and musicians. Based in occupied Akka and carving a new path in the underground of Palestinian music, rap group MWR released *'Arubitna Bkhatar* ("Our Arabism is in Danger") in 2003. The rappers raged against the silence of the Arab regimes, presenting imagery of bourgeois collaboration with the imperialists and placing Palestinian suffering at the heart of regional destruction.

The lyrics of MWR lamented the loss of earlier commitments to regional solidarity found in the works of Akka-born revolutionary Ghassan Kanafani in times of pan-Arab struggle. Their songs were played at anti-imperialist street mobilizations in Europe, along with other, earlier recorded examples from the 1987-93 intifada, and quickly found and downloaded mp3 anthems recorded in the Arab world to support the Iraqi resistance. London rappers Logic and Lowkey, who has Iraqi maternal roots, recorded *Relatives* in 2008, taking on the characters of Iraqi and British fighters in the war. Their words imagined forms of solidarity beyond the racism through which the invasion was justified in the British press:

Logic: My heart is in Basra, and never will I part it
Lowkey: This war's going nowhere, tell me, why did we start it?
Logic: I'm fighting regardless till I'm resting where Allah is
Lowkey: Come to think of it, I should have never joined the army
And when I think about it, I don't hate these Iraqis

In the United States, the Dixie Chicks (now the Chicks) were subject to the mobilized misogyny of the rightist media for daring to stand against the war. As the occupation wore on, Tom Morello and the Coup teamed up to record the mutinous *Captain Sterling's Little Problem*, and launched a campaign to send the song to U.S. troops in Iraq. Rapper Boots Riley argued: "the soldiers should demand to be returned home, using any means necessary to make this happen."^[9]

Other powerful sounds of resistance included the thudding of Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi's shoes, thrown forcefully at George W. Bush in a December 2008 press conference amidst claims of coalition success; for his efforts, al-Zaidi was brutally arrested and spent nine months in prison. Extreme sonic brutality is a feature of imperialist and colonialist torture techniques, from the infamous "disco room" at occupied Guantanamo to the sensory manipulation used by the Zionist Shabak in colonized Palestine, but the era also brought reminders that soundscapes could be reclaimed by those willing to resist.

After the Brouhaha performance of Sherko and Kani, audience questions discussed

childhood and war, and the realities of growing up under sanctions and occupation. When questioned about cultural identity, it was revealing that the artists saw their position as Kurds within a kind of inclusivity through which they also saw themselves as Iraqis. The stooges and elites that have bargained with the nation's position since 2003 have included the bourgeois Kurdish, pro-Zionist Barzani regime in Erbil. In contrast, the artists' exploration of sound spoke to the social solidarities shared by the masses, north and south, who faced imperialist war, sanctions, and displacement together.

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Notes

[1] Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, May, 1871.

[2] See <https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/body-count.pdf>

[3] Scheherazade Hassan, "Aspects of the Musical Traditions in the Arabian Peninsula," in Issa Boulos et al., *Music in Arabia* (Indiana University Press, 2021), 26

[4] Robert M. Poole, "Looting Iraq," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2008.

[5] Haifa Zangana, "Iraqi resistance has its song," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009): 285.

[6] Said, "Apocalypse Now," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, November 1997.

[7] Zangana, 278.

[8] The Independent, "Sir Paul McCartney: Give War A Chance," November 15, 2001.

[9] "Boots Riley of the Coup wants you to send songs to Iraq," Punknews.org, 2007.

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