

BOOK REVIEW

## We'll Play till We Die: Journeys across a Decade of Revolutionary Music in the Muslim World

**Mark LeVine (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022).  
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Mark LeVine's latest book, *We'll Play till We Die: Journeys across a Decade of Revolutionary Music in the Muslim World*, offers readers a much anticipated sequel to his groundbreaking ethnographic travelogue, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (2008). Published two years before a wave of political uprisings would transform much of the Middle East, *Heavy Metal Islam* was one of the first book-length studies of extreme music and politics in the region. In it, LeVine alerted readers to a wellspring of unrealized political potential. *We'll Play till We Die* picks up the story a decade later, offering readers a more contemplative assessment of what befell many of LeVine's initial interlocutors in the aftermath of revolution. What emerges is a nuanced demonstration of the processes through which subcultures, countercultures, and revolutionary cultures develop and respond to state oppression and authoritarianism. Through the lens of popular music and culture LeVine and his coauthors provide a deeply personal testimony to a decade of ongoing revolution in the Islamic world.

In this latest iteration, LeVine's original thesis looms large: popular music and, particularly, its more extreme underground forms provide an incredibly rich entry point for accessing the "lives, dreams, fears, and challenges of young people across the region" (p. xx). Nested within the concept of Extreme Youth Music (EYM), an aggregate of "harsher, louder, more distorted, politically, lyrically, and/or sonically dark ... forms of popular music," LeVine explores the broader political, economic, and cultural struggles facing the Islamic world (p. xx). LeVine's development of EYM as a heuristic for data collection and analysis is an advancement upon many similar texts, which too often collapse politically engaged music into poorly theorized genre categories, such as hip-hop, pop, or rock. LeVine, instead, mobilizes EYM as a more inclusive and aesthetically accurate genre, defined not by musical attributes alone, but rather by social, sonic, and political intentions. For ethnomusicologists and folklorists who have wrestled with the concept of genre for decades, this approach is a welcome improvement, as it proceeds from the idea that EYM offers more than a mere repository of collective experience; it operates as a powerful site of political intervention against "patriarchal, authoritarian, corrupt, and violent political and cultural orders across the region" (p. xx). EYM, LeVine argues, is both mirror and hammer, capable of reflecting and shaping society. It is in the common experience of creating and sharing music, in these intimate spaces where beauty and political power align, where LeVine artfully documents how "mass counter and even revolutionary publics become possible" (p. xvi). This key point is powerfully demonstrated through a "re-mixing" of the author's extensive field experience, rich political history, and his interlocutors' brutally honest testimonials. In this way, *We'll Play till We Die* demonstrates that in the hands of engaged artists and activists popular music can be a force of political transformation across the Islamic world.

LeVine's first foray into popular music came at a time when artists and audiences were too often chastised, marginalized, or dismissed by authoritarian governments. In *We'll Play till We Die*, LeVine notes that EYM communities no longer experience the same levels of social stigma and government censorship. EYM is now a more tolerated, if not accepted, space for public performance. So too, we might characterize the academic study of EYM and its many adherents. Once an academic novelty, heavy metal studies has now found firm footing across several disciplinary fields. Accordingly, *We'll Play till We Die* emerges among a growing field of similar examinations of heavy metal, rock, and alternative musics in the Islamic world by Keith Kahn-Harris, Robin Wright, Hisham Aidi, and Thomas Burkhalter. In contrast to these studies, however, LeVine's book stands out for its sheer breadth of inquiry, comparative analysis, personal testimony, and multi-vocal style. The author's diverse methodological training as a scholar, performer, and activist, coupled with decades of sustained fieldwork across the region, results in a book few could ever hope to emulate. *We'll Play till We Die*, for example, offers the reader a landscape view of music scenes stretching from Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon to Israel/Palestine, Pakistan, and Iran, with supplemental commentary on Tunisia, Turkey, and Indonesia. At times, the reader may become overwhelmed keeping track of the many artists, albums, and concerts covered by LeVine. Curating such a wide data set, however, has its advantages, rendering audible important connections that constitute larger transnational scenes. LeVine accomplishes this task skillfully, without sacrificing attention to individual experience. At the same time, there is a downside to this approach. Unique historical and cultural contexts, along with larger theoretical reflections, are absent. This is not a critique, per se. For LeVine's goal throughout the book is to make immediate connections, to remix and amplify the voices of his "collaborators and cocreators," and to reveal larger patterns of thought and behavior (p. xviii). That said, LeVine's broad exploration of EYM cultures reads more as travelogue than critical ethnography.

*We'll Play till We Die* is organized geographically, moving eastward with each chapter. My undergraduate students, with limited exposure to popular music studies and Middle Eastern politics, found this approach immensely accessible. For trained academics, area specialists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists, the writing style and format has its limitations. While LeVine provides an appendix with a basic list of references by chapter, the lack of detailed parenthetical citations, endnotes, or footnotes complicates attempts to follow up on source material. Although the book is richly nuanced with references to important recordings, videos, documentaries, and other supplemental materials, locating these materials for classroom use proves difficult without proper citation. Additionally, the choice to include coauthors/coproducers for each chapter is laudable for its decolonial positionality, even if, at times, the reader may be left a bit confused as to whose experiences and ideas are represented. As one might expect, this multi-vocal style can both enrich and obfuscate the narrative. While I applaud the decolonial politics behind LeVine's approach, there are sections of the book that would have benefitted from a more focused, direct, and critical analysis. This observation is most obvious in the expertly crafted final epilogue, where discrete sections on Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia are more easily ascribed to individual coauthors. Here, the epilogue shines as an example of nuanced scholarly collaboration among established heavy metal researchers, including Pierre Hecker, Nahid Siamdoust, and Jeremy Wallach.

Despite these minor drawbacks, *We'll Play till We Die* has clear scholarly value. While explicitly directed toward wider, nonacademic audiences, this is a book that I found useful, if not essential, to understanding the ongoing cultural and political transformations taking place across the Islamic world. In both teaching and research, *We'll Play till We Die* will be an oft-cited text in the fields of heavy metal studies, popular culture studies, and Middle Eastern studies for years to come.