

## Review of Orlando Crowcroft, *Rock in a Hard Place: Music and Mayhem in the Middle East*

London: Zed Books. 304 pp. 2017. ISBN: 978–1–78,699-015-0

Jonas Otterbeck<sup>1</sup> 

Published online: 9 September 2017

© The Author(s) 2017. This article is an open access publication

**Abstract** This book by experienced journalist and metal fan Orlando Crowcroft is a must read for anyone curious about counter-culture in the Middle East. It contains six country studies (Lebanon, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria) in which Crowcroft's interviews with musicians are the key elements. With the knowledge of a music connoisseur, he guides the reader in the subcultural music scenes and movements in these countries, using the life stories of musicians as the red thread.

**Keywords** Music · Metal · Hip-hop · Counter-culture · Middle East

This book by experienced journalist and metal fan Orlando Crowcroft is a must read for anyone curious about counter-culture in the Middle East. It contains six country studies (Lebanon, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria) in which Crowcroft's interviews with musicians are the key elements. With the knowledge of a music connoisseur, he guides the reader in the subcultural music scenes and movements in these countries, using the life stories of musicians as the red thread. In some ways, it is an update of Mark Levine's *Heavy Metal Islam* (2008), at times writing about the same bands and individuals. But much has happened the last ten years, not least when it comes to politics, and Crowcroft's knowledge of the political and societal contexts from covering the areas in question as a journalist comes in handy.

The music of the mentioned bands is readily available through internet and one may easily listen to the mentioned artists. Consequently, Crowcroft's book does not need photos or an attached CD. Writing and researching about music today is so much more convenient.

---

✉ Jonas Otterbeck  
Jonas.Otterbeck@ctr.lu.se

<sup>1</sup> CTR, Lund University, Box 192, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden

Crowcroft clearly takes sides. He supports the musicians, the free-spirited, and the internationalist streaks against the conservatives, the authoritarians, the sectarians, and the patriarchal ones who are accused of being the ones upholding the level of violence in the six societies (and rightly so). Not least the metalheads and metal musicians are subjected to moral panics in all countries and their counter-cultural mode of expression is suspected to encourage violence and Satanism, which is ironic since Crowcroft claims that it is the physical and symbolic violence inherited in the societies that clearly pushes young music listeners to become fascinated with violence in music – in lyrics, musical expression, styles, images – and this goes for both those fascinated by ganga rap and death and black metal.

Crowcroft's book is a journalistic account, but since some academics choose to write in a similar fashion, it is of interest to discuss differences and similarities. Crowcroft has been in the field. In fact, he has managed to meet some people over the years, in different locations, like Ramy Essam, the so called voice of the revolution at Tahrir square, who he has met both in Cairo and when in exile in Malmö. I have met Ramy a couple of times and find the portrait convincing. He also provides enough information about environments and social and political contexts for the reader to recognize herself.

Crowcroft discusses his interviews and points out that he has often bonded with the artists over music and the experience of going to concerts or finding out about less well-known, but still great, bands. This has changed the balance from interview to conversation and has led to friendship, and probably solidarity. Very similar arguments are put forth by anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer in *Muslim Cool* (2016).

However, the book does not contain a chapter, argument, or a footnote on ethics, a must for researchers since the situation of the musicians are harsh, and some may be prosecuted by the state or subjected to violence by non-state actors if their music and lyrics were to gain more attention. Crowcroft writes about crackdowns against, not least, the metal bands in all six countries, and some of his informants have spent time in jail, one has been flogged (in Iran) and several of the key informants find themselves in exile today. It is a pressing problem. If you want to write about the black metal band Ayat and its members Reverend Filthy Fuck and Mulla Sadogoat, you cannot very well anonymize the band or its members without taking away the edge of their provocative music, thus anyone – or the authorities – can go to a show or start asking around. This is obviously happening in Iran at the moment; one informant actually claims the authorities have gain expert genre knowledge about extreme metal in their pursuit of vice. Kirkegaard (2017) shows how Iranian folk singer Mahsa Vahdat's presence on internet (not least concert clips from Europe) has been used against her by the Iranian authorities; she too is in exile now. But since much music and even concert clips can be found on social media sites, why presume that especially journalism should be the tipping point? Anyway, as a journalist, Crowcroft freely gives names and band names, while researchers would have to tread more carefully. Still, several of the musicians are now in exile and it is likely that Crowcroft is taking this into account.

There are no theories in Crowcroft's book, but there are ideas with the function of theories. For example, the idea that the violence experienced in society made descriptions of violence in Tupac Shakur's lyrics relevant to Palestinian youth. They could identify. Still, most youth do not become musicians and take time to decode the rap lyrics, try to find out what metal lead vocalists growl and how, or learn how to play metal guitar riffs and solos note by note. That is very time consuming. The ideas fit the

informants, but hardly apply to the rest. If comparing Crowcroft's descriptions to Samuli Schielke's in *Egypt in Future Tense* (2015) you find young adults with similar experience but who do not try to break free or create unconventional music, but rather remain caught between their longing for something else and the grinding mill of everyday life. Some, but not all, of Crowcroft's informants come from well-to-do backgrounds and have top educations. Schielke's book is set in a town outside of Alexandria and most have far less resources than Crowcroft's interviewees, probably a key aspect of the difference.

But there is something about the specific individuals, that which cannot easily be explained by structures or be seen as a response to experience – this not written to romanticize “the genius” or “the artists”, but as a simple, humanist observation. Even in societies with tight social control or an oppressive government, some people simply do not take shelter in the safety of the group, they stick out, speak up, and very often get kicked. These are the people Crowcroft has written about. He presents them as headstrong, tenacious, and driven by an idea. At the same time, knowing their environment, they are not careless. If playing in a Saudi anti-government and anti-Islamic Black Metal band like al-Namrood, it is not only a good idea to ensure anonymity, it is vital as blasphemy may be punished by death.

I have mentioned that Crowcroft's artists strikingly often end up in exile. The room for cultural creativity in their original setting is not wide and they create enemies, both among states and religious dignitaries and in societies at large. Further, the creative centers for their preferred artistic expression is not in the Middle East but in Europe and North America to which the artists long. Crowcroft ties together all the narratives about exile in the epilogue, handing the reader a bitter pill to swallow. The playfulness, the energy, the creativity, the emotional acuteness that the pages before had celebrated, has led to exile, professionalism, and, at times, homesickness and nostalgia – not revolution and change.

Crowcroft's book is a fine contribution to a growing literature on popular culture in the Middle East, providing a valuable, seldom-given glimpse into atheist, anti-authoritarian and anti-religious counter culture.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

## References

- Khabeer, S. A. (2016). *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kirkegaard, A. (2017). Silencing Artists: Reflections on Music Censorship in the Case of Mahsa Vahdat. In A. Kirkegaard, H. Järveluoma, J. S. Knudsen, & J. Otterbeck (Eds.), *Researching Music Censorship*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- LeVine, M. (2008). *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*. New York: Random House.
- Schielke, S. (2015). *Egypt in Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.