

July 20, 2008

Rock the Casbah

By HOWARD HAMPTON

This professor of Middle Eastern history walks into a bar in Fez, Morocco — right from the get-go, Mark LeVine’s “Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam” is not your typical dry academic slog. (Did I mention he’s also a longhaired Jewish rock

guitarist whose bio lists gigs with [Mick Jagger](#) and Dr. John?) So when somebody in that hotel bar starts talking up the local punk and metal scenes, an incredulous LeVine is hooked. “There are Muslim punks? In Morocco?” Quicker than you can whistle “Rock the Casbah,” he’s on the trail of Western-influenced underground music movements that have blossomed under authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North Africa.

Going to meet the seven-string guitarist Marz of Hate Suffocation, a Cairo band, LeVine confesses sheepishly, “I still couldn’t tell the difference between death, doom, black, melodic, symphonic, grind-core, hard-core, thrash and half a dozen other styles.” (Marz explains that his group plays a cross between death and black metal: “But it’s not blackened death metal!”) Despite a certain amount of scholarly dogma that goes with the territory — here any combination of “neoliberal” and “globalization” is as ominous an epithet as [Black Sabbath](#)’s “War Pigs” — “Heavy Metal Islam” offers the hit-and-run (as well as hit-and-miss) pleasures of a lively road trip. Practicing a first-person brand of shuttle diplomacy as he moves between countries and cultures, musicians and Islamic activists, LeVine manages to unpack enough cross-cultural incongruities to mount his own mosh pit follow-up to “You Don’t Mess With the Zohan.”

An ex-Mossad hairdresser is scarcely more anomalous than disheveled Moroccan riot grrrls, virtuoso Egyptian metalheads, Lebanese “muhajababes” (young women wearing full head scarves, army fatigues, tight black T-shirts and [Hezbollah](#) wristbands), Tupac-influenced [Palestinian](#) M.C.’s, “the Israeli Oriental death-doom metal band Orphaned Land” (complete with a devoted Arab following) and rapt Iranian Iron Maiden acolytes. A participatory, hands-on guy, LeVine not only meets and eats with Muslim headbangers, he jams with them in apartments, studios and outdoor festivals, taking in the food and the noise and the people as if it were all a movable metal feast.

Eagerly seizing on the stereotype-busting possibilities of “an 18-year-old from Casablanca with spiked hair, or a 20-year-old from Dubai wearing goth makeup,” LeVine would like us to see them as the faces of an emerging Muslim world, potentially a much less monochromatic place than the one represented on TV by the usual “Death to America” brigades. “Heavy Metal Islam” turns the notion of irreconcilable differences

HEAVY METAL ISLAM

Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam.

By Mark LeVine.

Illustrated. 296 pp. Three Rivers Press. Paper, \$13.95.

between Islam and the West on its head, appealing to the universality of youth culture as “a model for communication and cooperation” in the Internet age. LeVine reckons the likes of [Metallica](#) and Slayer provide a brute lingua franca that knows no borders, opening up breathing room in cloistered societies, gradually undermining rigid belief systems — a benign, bottom-up brand of globalization as opposed to the ruthless corporate or state-sponsored kind.

It's that old-time Lennon/Bono rock idealism reimagined for a post-Cannibal Corpse world, and that's winning on a case-by-case basis. In lands where playing “satanic” music or even attending semi-clandestine concerts can get you thrown in jail (actually charged with things like “shaking the foundations of Islam”), there's something truly heartening about the Moroccan thrash girls Mystik Moods striving to break through centuries-old sexist taboos, or Hate Suffocation trying to carve out a niche to play music and “be left alone by both the government and society.” In theocratic Iran, when Arthimoth's leader wears a T-shirt reading “Your God Is Dead,” he's risking a fate much worse than being suspended from school or getting dirty looks at the mall.

“Heavy Metal Islam” gets trapped by its good intentions whenever it attempts to shoehorn the headbangers' intransigence into preconceived political slots. Metal music, however you parse it, is dystopian in the extreme: hyper-aggressively embracing the death instinct, regimented chaos, deliriously fetishized morbidity. Call it cathartic, sure, even a way of keeping sane in an insane world (as one performer here says, “We play heavy metal because our lives are heavy metal”), but don't confuse it with “If I Had a Hammer.” Unless it's a hammer of the nihilist gods aimed at your forehead — not to hammer out justice or a warning or “the common struggle for democracy and economic equality,” but to crack your skull open, scrape out your pulverized brains and feed them to the wolverines.

Even though these antisocial bands want no part of hard-liners like the mystical Justice and Spirituality Association in Morocco or the spooky Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (and the disdain is often mutual), LeVine thinks if they could all put aside their petty differences and work together, they could start a domino effect in the Middle East like the one that toppled the Eastern bloc. (He's like the straight arrow in comic books who'd invariably look around at the scene of Armageddon and say with a sigh, “If only we could have harnessed their mutant energy for goodness.”) The punch line of LeVine's informative, valuable and moderately mad book is twofold: this conscientious anti-imperialist has written a swell tract in favor of large-scale cultural imperialism — a Marshall Amps Plan — and his program is undoubtedly the first to enlist death metal as the spearhead of a new [Peace Corps\(e\)](#).

Howard Hampton is the author of “Born in Flames: Termite Dreams, Dialectical Fairy Tales, and Pop Apocalypses.”

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