

TIMEZONES BEIRUT TRANSCRIPT

A Podcast by Nadim Mishlawi and Rana Eid

My name is **Muriel Kahwaji**. I live in Beirut. I'm a writer. I studied Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths in London. And for the past two years, two and a half years I have been researching *zajal* poetry which is a form of half sung half improvised poetry that is present, very present in Lebanon today, but also in other Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine mainly.

The past almost two years in Lebanon have been very difficult because, first of all, we had the October Revolution in 2019 which was this rare moment of hope when everyone, over 2,000,000 people went down to the streets protesting against the corruption of the government, against the impeding economic collapse which we have completely, you know, we are completely in the midst of. That was quite, that was thrilling, but it was also difficult in some ways because we felt life was suspended for us. So that went on, is still going on, I guess, in various forms, every now and then we have protests but its not like the beginning. But that was a big moment for us. And then a few months after that, two months after that actually, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Lebanon and three months after that the whole country went into lockdown in March 2020.

In August was the Beirut port explosion. And, you know, needless to say, I think its something like the sixth of seventh largest non-nuclear explosion in history. So, you know, by purely objective terms I would say, it was a pretty catastrophic event.

All of this to say that it's been a very turbulent time. I think all of our work, not just as cultural practitioners, but as everybody's actually work had to be suspended. It was very difficult to find the energy to feel like there's anything even worth doing. There were definitely moments of, you know, extended periods I would say, not moments, extended periods of paralyses.

This makes me think of a conversation I had some years back with someone from my English program. I can't remember in what context this came up, but I said something along the lines of, «writing books isn't as important as curing cancer». I said this and my friend said, «yes but people will continue to write books even after we cure cancer».

What I took from this was I think something about the urge to create. We feel like we want to leave a trace in this world. And this trace can be something different for different people of course. For someone like me its writing. For a filmmaker it can be, you know, making a film. I guess basically what I'm trying to say is that, you know, its something that proves we're here.

My name is **Chaza Charafeddine**. I work in the fields of art, culture, and writing. I studied dance in Germany, and I currently live in Beirut. The themes of my work shift between the social and the political, and are always very personal.

I have no resolve and no hope. In Lebanon, over the course of six months, so many of my friends have suffered and some even died. Our money has been blocked and has lost all its value. So many people I know have died of Corona, not just the elderly. And two weeks ago, my good friend Lokman Slim was killed because of his political views. After his death, things changed for me. It triggered a kind of anger I've never felt before. The anger of someone waking up and discovering his or her house on fire.

I'm going to the studio and engaging with work, regardless of the intentions behind it. I feel like a machine, I get up, get dressed, go to work, I close my eyes and ears from the world, and occupy myself with things... I don't know if what I'm doing will evolve in any way, and it doesn't matter. The important thing is to put out the fire.

My name is **Rana Eid**, I do sound design for films and documentaries for about 22 years. it was definitely a difficulty at the beginning because the profession of sound design had not yet been established in Lebanon. It is an issue of belonging without feeling trapped.

I have a strong sense of belonging in Lebanon and the Middle East, but I don't want to drown in it.

Because Beirut is a sick city, and toxic. But at the same time very beautiful and gentle. If I want to be part of it, I have to move with it, like moving with a wave, and ask, «What does Beirut want from me today?» When Beirut exploded, it froze as if saying «I don't want this anymore.» Beirut is tired and has become cheap. Now there's an economic crisis and the country has become immobile. But I refuse to die for this place, I don't want to be a martyr in this place, I want to be alive in this place. We've been raised with the idea of dying for our country, and be martyrs for it. So what do we do as artists? The moment there's a problem we leave? This is why we do art. To talk about our society. That's not how I do things. I still have a long of things to do in Beirut. And I don't want to go into the streets and protest, I want to do things in my profession. With regards to the sound of Beirut, the city and I haven't finished our discussion and there are a lot of things I still want to do.

Sharif Sehnaoui:

I'm a musician, active in the field of experimental music since the late 90s, based in Beirut. I am also the organizer of a festival called *Irtijal* which has been ongoing since the year 2000.

Where I'm pretty sure that music took a big blow is on the level of the pandemic more than any of the other crisis effecting us. Because there, its been nearly two years we're mostly

playing at home, or in venues, but for technical and camera crews for music that will in the end go online. And when we know how important live music is, and the relation between the performer and audience is for live music and for music in general, I think this is properly devastating.

I often think now about the legacy of this period. I think about it obsessively actually. How are we going to come to see this period, let's say 10, 15, 20 years from now. And then maybe we'll have a clearer picture of the impact of these multiple crisis on artistic life. We'll be able to know how devastating it was in a way, or if there is something positive that came out of it. It will take time to be able to clearly assess this side of things. I think judgments today while within the crisis are meant to be partial, or not entirely accurate. Yet we make those judgments of course. We take decisions, we have opinions. And in the end, with time, they may change and prove to be true. From my end, I tend to think that, and this will not be revolutionary in any way, that this period was very, very, very, very damaging to the art world, at least in my sector which is music, and the creativity of musicians. But also mostly, new generations of upcoming music makers, even people who were about to launch themselves into a musical career and might never actually do so. So we might actually be losing a generation or more of musicians who will in the end never be musicians given the current situation. That I feel is very, very sad. Although as I say, maybe, with time we'll discover that no, it will lead to yet another generation that will more creative maybe. Again, time will tell.