

# Voices of a Generation

## Grantee

Mideast Youth Director Esra'a Al-Shafe'i – RTR Grantee 2013

## Project

Mideast Tunes

*Story collected by Zena Takieddine, March 30th 2014*

While, many reporters have wrongly assumed that Mideast Tunes was created as a response to the 'Arab Spring,' in reality, it began under the umbrella of Mideast Youth which I founded in 2006, dedicated to creating platforms and web applications that amplify diverse and progressive voices advocating for change in the region. The overarching mission of Mideast Youth was specifically focused on three principles: empowering access to information, free speech and minority rights. By providing powerful content delivered with cutting edge and accessible design, my team and I are making sure that the message of social change isn't just told, but also heard.

Projects launched by Mideast Youth include CrowdVoice.org, an open source platform that curates and contextualizes social justice movements worldwide, Ahwaa.org, a bilingual platform to support LGBT youth in the Arab world that leverages game mechanics to facilitate high-quality interactions, Migrant-Rights.org, a research and advocacy project documenting the plight of migrant workers in the Middle East (the Gulf in particular.) We also have a few others highlighting the plight of Kurds, Assyrians, Baha'is and the Bedoon (stateless community in the Gulf.) We also run MEYArabic which is a group blog shared by a few hundred Arab authors, with monthly podcasts highlighting a wide range of topics, from human rights to literature and poetry.

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In 2009, I contacted a few musician friends in Bahrain and they all agreed that a platform for independent music was needed. The potential to advance and to connect our aspirations in new and interactive ways was huge and I found myself frustrated by the lack of a proper streaming platform that showcased underground musicians in the Middle East and North Africa. If you recall 2010, local band profiles could either be found through sporadic interviews in a few blogs or they had a disconnected presence in MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and so on. MySpace was quickly becoming the graveyard of the Internet, and although some bands had reached fame, the majority was

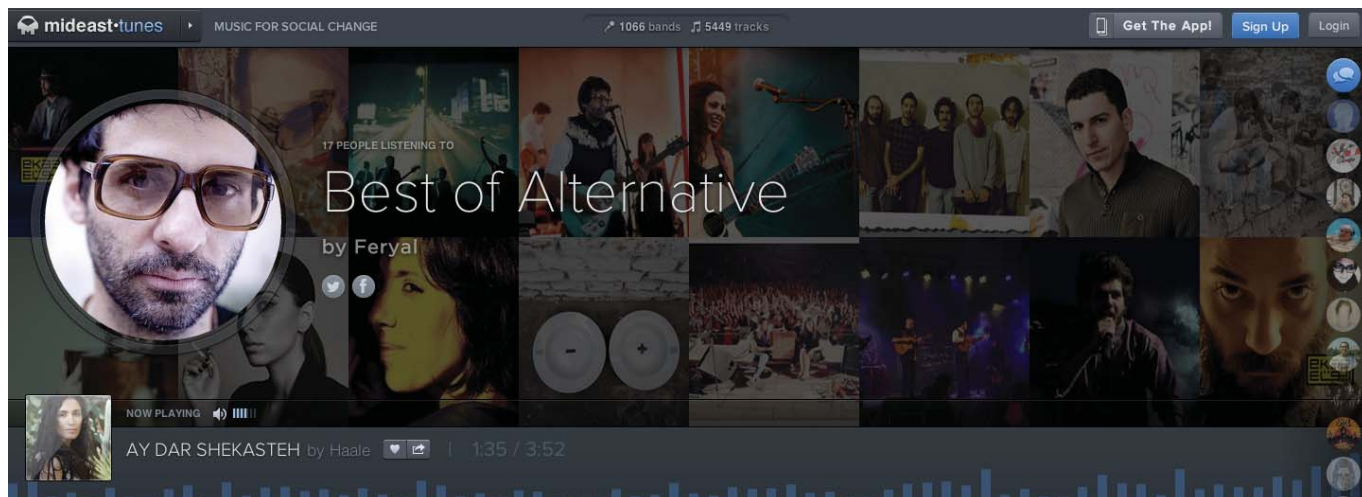


That was when we decided to launch Mideast Tunes. I put together a quick site and invited a handful of bands to be a part of it. Initially we focused on the Gulf, because being based here means that's the scene I was already connected to. The only criteria was that music had to be original – no cover songs. The response was immense! From the few local Gulf bands at our onset, we started receiving requests from Palestinian, Lebanese, and Egyptian bands to join too. 20 bands quickly turned into 50, and then 100, and then 300, and so on.

To date, we have 1,130 bands, 5895 tracks, across 25 genres, representing every Arab country, as well as collections of bands from countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Kurdistan. Any band from the region with originally produced music is eligible to be a part of Mideast Tunes. Bands that promote government propaganda or racial hatred are of course not considered for inclusion, but typically these types of bands don't register to be amongst us anyways, so we've never had an issue with this. Across our mobile apps, we have over 70,000 users.

Being a side project, we hadn't anticipated that kind of reaction. The initial site couldn't handle the growth and the increasing number of images and tracks, because it was powered by WordPress. We had to rebuild it entirely into a far more robust framework. Our servers also couldn't handle the traffic, as the site had gained attention from NPR, BBC Radio, and CNN, and it was clear we had enough interest in the platform from both bands and users to professionalize the service.

We rushed into redevelopment, and in early 2011 we built and launched a version of the site that failed. It was slow, poorly thought out and had a confusing interface. Users wanted a lot more features than what they were offered, such as playlists, the ability to embed tracks, mobile apps, and much more. Bands wanted faster upload time and



was not well received. But being a volunteer-run self-funded project from the start, we had no budget for that kind of expansion. Luckily, a few bands came to our aid and performed a local fundraiser where we requested support from fans, bands and friends. It was a beautiful spontaneous gesture through which we raised a modest amount. In that same year, we launched a much slicker version of Mideast Tunes. It received great press from tech blogs such as The Next Web, who said:

“Both the website and iOS apps are beautifully designed, and offer the Middle East’s socially conscious musicians a unique opportunity to reach an international audience. The variety of music available on the site is impressive, and is the ultimate tool for anyone who wants to find out a little bit more about the best in indie music coming out of the Middle East.”

And Wamda: “The site has doubled in size over the past year, on a beautiful site that offers flawless streaming, even in Lebanon.”

Gradually throughout 2012 and 2013, the number of bands, users, and app downloads continued to grow and we finally launched on Android as well. But growth online inevitably meant more expenses (servers and ongoing development.) We also wanted to bring our volunteers on board as official team members to get their full commitment and dedication. We also expanded our services to include press coverage for our musicians by connecting bands to regional and international journalists and radio stations, and partnered with the Arabic division of Radio Netherlands Worldwide, Radio Monte Carlo and Shazam, a music discovery service. Mideast Tunes has helped regional bands get coverage on CNN, UAE’s The National, NPR, TIME magazine, Rolling Stone Middle East, and various radio programs globally.

Given our growth and visibility, we started receiving requests from investors - both from the region and abroad - seeking to learn about our plans to “monetize.” It was a difficult conversation for us to have as we quickly discovered that few of them showed any true appreciation for the talent that was being showcased and all they cared for was ownership and financial metrics. We ultimately rejected all offers and stayed independent, despite the

We see our independence as the reason why we have been able to keep charging forward. We need no one’s permission to keep working on what we consider a treasure. We also know that, no matter how tempting the financial offers, they only solve a short-term issue; a project’s integrity is long-term. Sticking by our core values and ethics meant sticking by the music bands first and foremost. Without them, we would not be here. Proudly, we remain a nonprofit project.

In 2013, my friend Ramzi Jaber of Visualizing Palestine told me about AFAC. It was the first time I felt that we had found the right kind of support for our vision. Without any hesitation, we applied for a grant in the RTR category and waited to hear the results in the coming months. During that time, we kept working, trying - and failing - in 2 different crowd-funding campaigns. To secure any funds was going to be hard, so AFAC was more or less our last hope.

On the day of the announcement in November 2013, I was in Abu Dhabi attending the last day of the World Economic Forum. I had been refreshing the site obsessively to hear the news. It was approaching evening by then. I called my friend and our designer Hajer to tell her we did not make it, because if we had, we would have been alerted by now. She told me to wait a little longer, the day was not over yet. At the airport, waiting for my flight back to Bahrain, I kept my eye on AFAC’s website for any signs, clicking refresh again and again. Nothing. It was late night in Beirut already - that’s it! It was over.

And then, just before the last call for boarding, my final click showed an announcement from the website at last. We made the cut! AFAC officially joined our vision to create the ultimate platform for independent musicians throughout the region. AFAC is our first and only grant, and we take much pride in being a part of this network. Thanks to the grant, we have already launched an Arabic interface for the web application, and we are now working on complete revamps for both our iOS and mobile applications. We’re also constantly improving the overall performance of the platform to present the best possible showcase of these artists, some of whom literally risk their lives to be heard.