

Christopher Silver, *Recording History: Jews, Muslims, and Music Across Twentieth-Century North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 300 pp., ISBN: 978-1503631687.

“Music remembers much of what history has forgotten,” writes Christopher Silver in his riveting new book, *Recording History: Jews, Muslims, and Music Across Twentieth-Century North Africa* (13). Drawing on a personal collection of records lovingly collected over many years and from many different countries, Silver unearths the story of North African Jewish popstars in the twentieth century. These popstars sang in Judeo-Arabic, Arabic, French, and occasionally Hebrew and, Silver argues, provided the soundtrack for some of the most momentous developments in twentieth-century North African history. The book is an in-depth examination of Jewish-Muslim relations in the Maghrib through the medium of music, pushing against the standard narrative of Jewish-Muslim rupture and mass Jewish departure in the 1950s and 1960s to find a common tune of patriotism and belonging. This book is a welcome addition to the fields of Jewish Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and cultural history more broadly.

Silver’s source base for the book is unique—not many historians, with a few notable exceptions, have drawn on music to inform their writing. Silver also employs colonial-era documentation, ephemera such as concert programs and posters, newspapers, and personal papers, particularly those of the Moroccan Jewish megastar Sami Elmaghribi. The chapters range from the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the North African recording industry on wax cylinders, to the interwar era of flappers and modern women popstars like Habiba Messika and Louisa Tounsia, through the Second World War and the antisemitic Vichy period when Jewish popstars were all but totally silenced, to the era of the struggle for independence from colonial rule. Where most histories of Jews in North Africa depict the post-war period as one of inexorable outmigration and exile, the figures in *Recording History* demonstrate that Jewish life not only continued into the 1950s and 1960s, but whole careers were launched and flourished just when most histories spell the end of North African Jewish life. Indeed, Sami Elmaghribi launched his career the very year Israel was established and his stardom peaked during the Moroccan struggle for independence from French and Spanish colonial rule. Elmaghribi performed at the royal palace and at the inaugural gala of the *Wifaq*—a group dedicated to preserving good Muslim–Jewish relations in Morocco.

And yet, Elmaghribi and nearly all the other North African pop stars, departed from their home countries, heading to France, Israel, or the Americas. Elmaghribi himself went first to France before settling in Canada, where his personal papers, letters, and concert ephemera were all meticulously preserved by his daughter in Mon-

treat, felicitously nearby to Silver's own home. Even after leaving, however, Silver demonstrates how stars remained deeply tied to their home countries as their music continued to rule the airwaves.

Silver writes: "this book is a history not of political culture but culture as politics" (206). The music Silver describes, the *sha'abi* ("popular") variety, reflects its political moment. For example, *sha'abi* music included songs about independence, odes to the beauty of specific North African cities, and songs ostensibly about missing lovers but interpreted to be about exiled political leaders. If historians have been slow to take up music as primary source material, *sha'abi* music has been all the more ignored. When there have been studies of North African music, Silver points out, they have typically focused on the Andalusian classical tradition, the elite or high art, while *sha'abi* music was regarded as low class and not worthy of scholarly attention. But *sha'abi* music transcended class in its popularity, with everyone from the sultan of Morocco to the average person walking on the street listening in and humming along. In this way, Silver's book reveals a world of daily sounds, and in so doing, opens up North African popular history.

At the intersection of art, society, and politics, *Recording History* joins several recent studies of North African political history, including Jonathan Wyrzten's *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (2016), David Stenner's *Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State* (2019), and Susan Gilson Miller's *A History of Modern Morocco* (2013), as well as my own book, *The Sultan's Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging* (2021). It also joins new cultural histories such as Hanan Hammad's work on the Egyptian Jewish star Layla Murad, *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt* (2022) as well as Deborah A. Starr's monograph devoted to the Egyptian Jewish filmmaker Togo Mizrahi, *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* (2020). *Recording History* is the first book to document Maghribi Jewish popular music, and, as anthropologist Aomar Boum endorses on the back cover of the book, "is a classic in the making."

Recording History focuses for the most part on Jewish and Muslim music in North Africa. Silver gives some detail on what happened to the music stars when they migrated away from their homes in North Africa, as most of them did. For example, Silver describes the tragic example of Zohra el-Fassia, a Moroccan Jewish superstar who migrated to Israel only to wind up "being reduced to a museum piece and the life she once lived to spectacle" as a live exhibit at a 1965 exhibit on North African Jews. Lili Labassi, an Algerian Jewish star, continued his career in France, where he recorded "Ma ninsashi biladi" ("I will not forget my country") under his own record label, Disques Lili Labassi (Lili Labassi Records). Silver argues that this song was "among the first memoirs crafted by this generation of North African Jewish migrants to France, produced and performed in real time and in a language

long thought to abandoned by them” (200–201). Generations after the beginning of French colonial rule in North Africa, and after most Jews from Algeria were granted French citizenship, an Algerian Jewish star sings longingly for his country in Arabic, the language that colonial policy sought to eradicate among Jews.

After meticulously narrating the story of North African Jewish stars in their home countries, the reader is left wanting even more information on the afterlives of the figures covered in the book. But this is an opportunity for more work, and *Recording History* has opened the door to a brilliant new historiographical soundscape.

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