

Simon, Andrew. 2022. *Media of The Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Reviewed by Jessie Rubin

Through a multisensory—and multidisciplinary—analysis of what he terms Egypt’s “vulgar soundscape,” Andrew Simon’s 2022 debut book *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt* provides readers with a robust complement to Charles Hirschkind’s paradigm-defining work on the shaping role of Islamic cassette sermons in crafting Egypt’s “ethical soundscape” (Hirschkind 2006). What is arguably most impressive about Simon’s book is his vast archive of textual material (newspapers, magazines, photographs) and audio recordings, which he weaves together seamlessly with a compelling narrative voice (18). With this, Simon is convincing in claiming the intellectual potential of a “shadow archive”¹ composed of primary source material from both “‘official’ and ‘informal’ settings, ranging from street markets and public libraries to private holdings and commercial enterprises” (13).

(Ethno)musicologists will benefit from Simon’s treatment of an object as a primary point of departure—in the case of his book, the circulation of cassette players and cassettes themselves, and the state’s subsequent efforts to gatekeep cultural production via cassettes. Analyses of sonic elements themselves (i.e. vocal timbre, evolving instrumentation in the creation of new genres) take a back seat to broader discourses surrounding the democratization of sound and the subversion of state-controlled media, and the construction of taste-values in relation to class dynamics (11). Music scholars might initially ask, “where is the sonic in *Media of the Masses*?” but it quickly becomes clear that there is much to be gained from Simon’s approach. Put succinctly, Simon’s book is more so a “history of technology-in-use” by the working-class, than a history of working-class *sound* per se (quoted in Simon 2022, 5). Simon is thus more interested in the political and cultural implications of a strategically constructed “vulgar soundscape”² of the Egyptian masses, than in what exactly made *sha’bi* (popular, of the people) music *sha’bi*, and as such, what separated it sonically from Egypt’s state-sanctioned musical production.

Rather than a chronological unfolding of Egypt’s recent history, Simon’s book takes the structure of a “mix tape,” with each chapter (or “track”) organized around a critical theme (18). As such, I will briefly summarize Simon’s chapter-to-chapter trajectory, but more importantly, this review points to particular moments that best capture Simon’s research goals and contributions to the existing literature while also pointing to some of the work that he leaves undone.

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Simon's methodological contribution is made especially clear in Chapter 1, which is organized around a low-resolution photograph of men posing with a cassette radio—with this, Simon effectively reminds us that “historians of the Middle East” have paid “insufficient attention to vernacular photo albums” with “shots of daily life produced by ordinary people” (44). Launching his investigation around cassette players (rather than cassettes themselves), Simon uses the photograph to contextualize Egypt's changing economic landscape and growing consumer culture under Anwar Sadat's *infitah* (Egypt's economic opening, or ‘Open Door Policy’). He argues that two intertwined shifts contributed to the cassette player making its way into working class Egyptians' homes—first, the ever-rising number of migrant workers, or Egyptians living in “economic exile” resulted in the “frequent flow of cassette players across Egypt's borders” (28, 31). Second, Simon notes how the forging of a so-called “modern” home was generated by both companies and individual celebrities around particular commodities (48).

Chapter 2 is likewise organized around the circulation of cassette players rather than tapes—more specifically, the theft and smuggling of cassette radios across the border. The archival material utilized here is a large pool of weekly magazine and newspaper articles who published popular crime reports primarily aimed at publicizing the success of Egypt's security sector; Simon powerfully provides a counter-reading of such narratives, this revealing the “presence of a thriving black market for cassette technology” (62). While Chapter 2 is interested in government efforts to limit the illegal market of cassette players, Chapter 3 turns to state efforts to limit and control cultural production via cassette tape. Simon notes that the advent of cassette technology meant that for the first time, anyone could become a cultural producer (108), and furthermore, working class Egyptians were able to listen to songs that had been banned by the state-controlled radio (102). Simon again deftly makes use of newspaper articles, interviews, and op-eds to trace the heated debate surrounding the rise of “vulgar” cassettes; the crux of the conflict was not just surrounding “aesthetic sensibilities,” but was crucially a struggle over “what constituted Egyptian culture and who had the right to create it” (81). One particular strength in this chapter is Simon's spotlight on songs of the renowned *sh'abi* singer Ahmad 'Adawiya, whose lyrical content is indicative of the larger conflict: he points to a song, for example that is simultaneously about “flirtation,” but also “class disparities” in which a male lover expresses “frustrations with the beauty above him”—a class divide that many listeners “identified with the *infitah*” (100). In short, the *sha'bi* music of 'Adawiya and others brought working class Egyptians music in a “vernacular” that they understood (102).

In Chapter 4, Simon focuses on the reproduction of sound via cassettes with a particular focus on piracy and the “unauthorized reproduction, circulation and sale” of music on a personal, state, and international level (115-116, 123).

I found myself most drawn to Chapter 5, possibly because it operates more within a musicological paradigm than its preceding chapters. In it, Simon examines the Egyptian government's narrative in the state-controlled press about president Nixon's infamous visit, arguing that Shaykh Imam's song "Nixon Baba" (Father Nixon) overtly challenged the government's official story. With a detailed biography of Shaykh Imam's complexly political career, and a careful lyric analysis, Simon effectively shows his readers how listeners "recorded, distributed, and duplicated" the song outside of the "reach of Egyptian gatekeepers" (142). Finally, Chapter 6 is Simon's most ethnographic section. In the chapter, Simon draws on interviews he conducted with a library director, an electronics dealer, and a religious scholar to "offer a microhistory of audiotape technology in Egypt" (149). Here, Simon compellingly compares a few different homes to cassette collections, including the Music Library at the Egyptian Opera house and a record store. Simon concludes by putting *Media of the Masses* in conversation with the British Museum in London's Modern Egypt project, which undertakes a similar project of re-envisioning the "traditional representations of Egypt with which onlookers are already familiar" (188). Each chapter utilizes an impressive pool of primary source material, and each could powerfully stand alone as an isolated essay, but stitched together they constitute a rhizomatic history of how the "most ordinary things may yield the most surprising insights" (22).

Simon's greatest strength lies in his ability to craft nuanced vignettes surrounding individual primary sources (from photographs and cartoons to newspaper op-eds), which, like his chapters, are expertly bridged together to craft a larger narrative. One such example of this comes early on in Chapter 1, with a photograph by Faruq Ibrahim of Anwar Sadat for the popular newspaper *Akhbar al-Yawm*. In the photograph, Sadat is posed in his undergarments, smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper as "'tranquil music' resonates" from a nearby cassette player" (38). Simon's careful analysis of this iconic photograph reveals how the president strategically "shed his power and prestige to appear as 'one of the people,'" and as such, enjoying cassettes was portrayed as an activity "as ordinary as grooming or a routine as relaxing with one's family" (39). At the same time, however, Sadat was of course "no ordinary citizen," so his picture next to the radio also worked to "magnify the already-hearty allure surrounding audiotape technology in the popular press" (39). Simon's analysis of Ibrahim's depiction of Sadat is just one brushstroke in the larger story that he paints in Chapter 1: a story of the creation of a modern home defined by objects rather than its occupants (40). Just pages later Simon builds on his analysis of the Sadat photo with a reading of a photograph found at a paper market in Cairo of family members enjoying their cassette radio at a beach vacation, shedding light on the "interactions of ordinary Egyptians with audiotapes and the object's relationship to leisure" (44). Juxtaposed with each other, these distinct objects come to form a conversation of

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sorts in Simon's book, a compelling one about the material culture of modern Egypt.

Similarly impressive is Simon's sophisticated song analysis, which he uses to point to larger socio-cultural dynamics during Sadat, and later, Mubarak's rule. This is perhaps most evident in his chapter on Shaykh Imam's "Nixon Baba," in which he uses the song to cultivate a counterhistory to the state's official narrative of Nixon's visit. Simon notes that after the song's opening of "Welcome Father Nixon, O you of Watergate," the lyrics "cleverly allude to the leader's national woes on multiple occasions," pointing, for example, to Nixon's "then 'frail' state" and the "possibility of him being 'no longer around'" (140). One verse even compares Nixon's arrival to Egypt to a "*zar*," a ceremony for "excising spirits," where the "parade's officials appear as spiders alongside convulsing whores" (140). Another verse takes the form of a *zaffa* (wedding procession) in which Nixon is depicted as a pathetic groom who "married as a last resort" (140). These two scenes are both part of a "never-ending *mulid*,"³ the kind of event that Imam performed at prior to the recording, and which was "immediately intelligible" to the Egyptian masses (140). With this rich description, Simon reveals how cultural actors in Egypt were actively involved in reframing state-controlled media coverage of particular events.⁴

Simon's expansive use of written and audio source material pays off richly. That being said, given Simon's convincing and politically pertinent construction of a "shadow archive" outside of the Egyptian National archives, which he describes as made up of a "constellation of visual, textual, and audio materials," I was left wondering what we might learn from a more overt consideration of the institutionalized archives that Simon did make use of in his research (13). For example, Simon mentions a few times throughout the book his gratitude for the Moshe Dayan Center's Arabic Press Archives located at Tel Aviv University. Given that Simon locates the immense circulation of cassette tapes and players in the context of Sadat's *infitah* (Open Door Policy) following Israel's victory in the 1973 October War, it seems worth considering the larger implications (and ethical concern) of formative Egyptian cultural-political texts being housed at an Israeli institution. In his introduction, Simon draws inspiration from Ann Laura Stoler's influential work on the "archival turn," which marks a "theoretical shift from treating archives as 'sources' for producing scholarship to positioning archives as 'subjects' of scholarship" (quoted in Simon 2022, 12). While Simon usefully situates his own archive as the 'subject' matter of his book, his analysis would be strengthened from treating the more formal archives he made use of as subjects in the same vein.

On a similar note, I would argue that Simon's book might have gained from a bit of reflexivity regarding his ethnographic work. While most of Simon's analysis is centered around primary source material, as mentioned, Chapter 6 is

crucially organized around the author's recent fieldwork. It seems as though Simon only interviewed a handful of people (or at least, only a few voices made their way into his book) and his choice of interlocutors comes across as somewhat circumstantial. For example, Simon mentions that a number of Egyptians with whom he spoke instructed him to "focus on 'prestigious' companies" rather than the more "amateur" enterprises under study (159). This raised a number of questions that Simon left unanswered—most having to do with these subjects' class position. Were any of them the "ordinary" (or working-class) Egyptians who listen to *sha'bi*? If so, can we contend with a scholarly project critiqued by one's interlocutors? This concern is underscored by Simon's recounting of a conversation that he had with a "prominent professor of media studies" at Cairo University who, upon hearing his interest in *sha'bi* music, told him to instead "follow in the footsteps of other researchers, who began with Sayyid Darwish, a pioneer of 'modern' Egyptian music, before moving onto Umm Kulthum and Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab" (159). I agree with Simon whole-heartedly that there is insufficient scholarly interest in Egypt's *sha'bi* music and more broadly, the cultural production of "ordinary" Egyptians, and commend how his book fills this lacuna, but the book could use a bit more consideration of its own ethnographic challenges, and without any further contextualization of the primary social class or religious identification of those who critiqued his scholarly approach, their inclusion adds little. In general, aside from electronics store owner Mansur 'Abd al-'Al interviewed in Chapter 6, contemporary listeners and appreciators of *sha'bi* are absent from the narrative, and I think Simon's compelling claims about the democratization of sound via cassette culture would have been strengthened with concrete interview material from the "working class, such as bus drivers and microbus drivers" who are described as enjoying the music (160). Simon somewhat humorously notes that a security guard he talked with was "initially determined to uncover" his "ulterior motives" which does raise the question of how often he negotiated an ethnographic environment marked by some distrust and resistance (159).

Finally, I found myself somewhat unconvinced of Simon's early declaration that his work is "unencumbered by the burden of big ideologies, like secularism and sectarianism, neoliberalism and nationalism, Islamism and authoritarianism," but instead strives to "transcend the confines of conventional concepts to undertake a more expansive explorations of one nation's recent past and the lives of those who occupied it" (18). At times, I actually think his analysis would have been strengthened with some more concrete theorization (or even intentional encumberment!) of such "big" and at times, messy, ideologies. For example, throughout the book Simon rather sweepingly refers to the "ordinary Egyptians"⁵ who engaged in cassette culture and the fact that the music they listened to was considered "vulgar"—two qualifiers that come with a slew of

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epistemic baggage, and would have benefited by being theorized within the above ideological frames. While his first chapter does effectively contextualize the rise of cassette culture in the refashioning the modern home for a massive number of working Egyptians—thus hinting at complex relationship between neoliberalism, the working class, and a nation-building project—it never comes clear who counts as “ordinary” for Simon. In other words, where does the “ordinary” Egyptian who listens to vulgar” music fit into existing scholarly discourses of secularism? Islamism? How might sectarian and class conflicts fragment this ordinary population? How is the “ordinary” Egyptian gendered? While the answers to these questions are somewhat implicit throughout (and Simon clearly covers a lot of ground), a nod to the work of others—including works such as Talal Asad’s writing on secularism and the construction of the modern nation in Egypt—could have addressed some of these issues.

These moments left undone are far and few between. Simon’s book is most certainly a triumph across a number of fields including, but not limited to, media studies, ethnomusicology, history, Middle Eastern studies, and anthropology. Simon impressively mobilizes hundreds of texts—aural, visual, written—to show his readers the deeply rooted political and social significance of a seemingly mundane object. In doing so, Simon rightly points out that contemporary scholarly insights tend to “lend the impression that only the most recent media matter in Middle East Studies,” particularly the Arab Spring (5). Simon’s book deftly sets the stage for the existing scholarship focused on more recently emergent media, contextualizing for his readers the fashioning of an Egyptian modernity and a working class politic via the circulation of sound on new technologies. Indeed, Shaykh Imam’s “Nixon Baba” crucially resurfaced during the Arab Spring: Imam’s legacy of pioneering audio technology as a weapon against “ruling regimes” thus lived on, but through new technological mediations of sound, most importantly, the internet (132). State censoring of *sha’bi* which circulated illegally on cassettes set the groundwork for the outlawing of public performances of *mahraganat*⁶ in 2020 by the Musicians Syndicate (79). *Sha’bi* remains an objects of grassroots interest and state censure, and Simon’s book helps us to understand the continuing battles about and around it.

Notes

¹ Inspired by Jean Allman’s construction of Ghana’s shadow archive.

² It is unclear where Simon gets this definition (and he does not provide his reader an Arabic term [*habit*] until page 80), but he makes it clear that this is an emic point of view: certain audiocassettes were “deemed to be ‘vulgar’ by Egyptian critics” and cultural gatekeepers (14).

³ A celebration held in honor of Prophet Muhammad's birthday/ the nativity of other religious figures

⁴ For more on vernacular protest poetry, see: Abdel-Malek, Kamal. 1990. *A Study of the Vernacular Poetry of Ahmad Fu 'ād Nigm*.

⁵ While he does draw on the work of Ziad Fahmy a few times throughout his book, Simon does not explicitly say that his understanding of who constitutes the "ordinary" Egyptian draws on Fahmy's field-shaping book *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation Through Popular Culture*, which introduces the idea of "media-capitalism" in an examination Egyptian national identity from the 1870s to the 1919 revolution, and highlights "previously neglected colloquial Egyptian sources" (Fahmy 2011, 1).

⁶ A DIY genre which emerged during the Arab Spring and is a fusion of EDM, hip-hop, and *sha'bi*.

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