

July 20, 2017 - The following conversation between Emel Mathlouthi and Victoria Ruiz, moderated by Amy Rose Spiegel, took place in front of an audience at National Sawdust as part of an event curated by The Creative Independent for Brooklyn's Northside Festival. Mathlouthi is a prominent Tunisian singer/songwriter, who released her second album, *Ensen*, in February 2017. Her song, "Kelmti Horra" ("My Word is Free"), has been called "the anthem of the Arab Spring." (She performed it on December 11, 2015 at the ceremony for the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo.) Ruiz is the vocalist of the political punk band Downtown Boys, who will release their Sub Pop debut, *Cost Of Living*, in August 2017. It follows 2015's *Full Communism*.



As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 4334 words.

Tags: Music, Writing, Politics, Inspiration.

## Emel Mathlouthi and Victoria Ruiz on using music to protest

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**Amy Rose:** I wanted to ask you about translating political messages to the masses. Emel, in your protest song, "Kelmti Horra," which came to soundtrack a lot of the Arab Spring, you sing Arabic lyrics translating to, "Don't forget the price of bread," which is a reference to governmental inflation of food costs prior to the Tunisian Revolution. That is a concept that all people can access. Victoria, "She's brown, she's smart," from Downtown Boys' "Monstro," is another lyric that comes to mind, as do the anti-discriminatory lyrics about immigration in "A Wall." How do you fight against classism and make things universal in your lyrics?

**Emel Mathlouthi:** When I write, it's usually very inspired by what I feel and how I personally see things. That's what's interesting to me, to go out from a very personal and intimate state of mind and share very, very deep emotions, and, somehow, they land in other people's hearts and because that's what I was talking about in my latest album, *Ensen*, is that we are all human. Humanity is not only about violence and hatred and all these negative things. Humanity is about beautiful things like art, compassion, and solidarity. That's the power of art and music: It turns you into a better person. It turns you into somebody who, even without realizing it, will be able to connect with another person. We all feel touched by the same powerful melody. We are all touched the same in the same parts of ourselves. That's what really catches you.

I don't necessarily try to write about situations I don't know about or situations I'm not touched by, which doesn't mean that I'm not touched by many things in a broader sense, but when you're trying to do something that's connected with art, it will necessarily have a universal aspect.

**Victoria Ruiz:** That was the perfect answer. For me, personally, it's great to be in this kind of space, because if I were speaking on a panel that was more like worker-power-centric or a panel that was more economic-centric, it would look like a different conversation, but for people who are already embedded in this idea of creativity and art as something that we can trust, when it comes to classism, it has to do with resources and it has to do with the distribution of resources.

If you go to public school in the United States, you have to take science classes where you learn about energy and how energy can't be created or it can't be destroyed. It already exists, and it just changes forms. So even like, gas in a car. You use the gas, then that becomes heat. Then the heat, that kind of heat on the road. Then that heat gets trapped, so there's all these transformations of energy. Resources are like that. They're like power; they're like energy.

So, with finite resources, how do we create infinite visions? Classism wants to limit those infinite visions. Classism wants to tell us that, in fact, perhaps only profit-making visions can control whatever resources you have—so we have to believe that. We have to somehow work towards some sort of profit-making in order to be okay when it comes to the resources that we have. Classism creates those boundaries, and in the United States, those boundaries were completely created by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the genocide of Indigenous people on this land. To ever understand classism, you have to understand racism.

They'll try and tell us, "That is identity politics." It's not. It's truly understanding the distribution of resources and land, and it's truly fighting against creating a finite amount of visions with a finite amount of resources and believing that you can have an infinite, expanding amount of ideas, and that's freedom. We will have to do that with finite resources. We will all die. We're mortals, so already our time is finite. So why would I try and work for infinite profits when I'm going to die? What would I do with those infinite profits? Who cares?

It's recognizing your own limits in order to really be able to believe in the limitlessness of who we are and what we do. Music's that great example. How many times has your favorite musician passed away from something like substance dependency or a health problem at too young of an age? All these things are really brutal, and they exist in the music community, and we don't talk about it enough. That's all related to classism and racism.

**AR: When it is necessary for you personally both, to compromise within capitalism, because you sometimes have to? You two make these enormous contributions to protest initiatives and art, but what is it like to do that within the system that asks that you go make money every day? What are the things that you will compromise about on tour and in your life, and how do you reconcile that?**

**Victoria:** It's probably so different for us two. I'm third-generation Mexican-American, so I have neoliberalism in my DNA, but I also have loyalty to fighting that neoliberalism in my DNA. Dealing with that conflict makes me realize, again, finiteness. I'm realizing like, "Yep, my band's on a label that's 49 percent owned by Time Warner Cable," but guess what? If Sub Pop Records didn't exist, we'd still be in war right now. We'd still have institutionalized racism. We would still be fighting a lot of the same fights against toxic masculinity; against all of the institutionalized oppression that we face every day.

My big thing is, being on a capitalist record label, it's not working for a weapons-making manufacturer. Realizing the many nuances and the spectrum of capitalism is important. I found out about Rage Against the Machine because their last album was sold at Target, and that was where I got all my CDs until I was, like, 25. If you're coming from a background that doesn't have access to culture—which all of us in this room have, just by being in this room—capitalism's determining what's influencing your brain. Malcolm X has this quote where he's like, "Even if I made mistakes, they were made in sincerity. If I was wrong, I was wrong in sincerity." The most important thing is to actually be sincere and not to be perfect, because nobody is perfect. That's how I deal with it and figure it out and be like, "Yeah, you know what, I wouldn't be speaking on this panel if I wasn't able to be paid for the show that we played last night." That's just how it goes.

**Emel:** We can stand for as much as possible, but there's certainly a limit where things are not under your control. When you decide to be an artist and to be a performer, you are certainly going to be part of a system that is certainly deriving from somebody who decided that the system will be like that. In a way, we all belong to the system, but it's up to us to speak up and to make choices, because there are a lot of situations where we can choose to not compromise—to have our own political decisions, and to have your own path that is certainly somehow part of the city, because you chose to be in the city, because it's important to be in the city. But that doesn't mean that you have to be a random entity. You can be a special kind of entity that can inspire others.

**Amy Rose: And you are, Emel, and you inspired so many and soundtracked an entire revolution. How did that begin for you? What was the initial period of sharing your songs in that way like? Were you nervous? Did you feel brave?**

**Emel:** I don't know. I've never thought about it. I was really very animated and very energetic. Maybe naïve. I just felt it was really a question of survival, mainly. I couldn't bear being anybody else, because, originally, my passion was singing. I wanted to be a singer, so I wanted to be a musician or an artist, because I also wanted to be an actress. The political side of it wasn't necessarily in my agenda, but it came along the way, and it just felt so right. I couldn't bear to pretend to not be conscious about what was going on and what was around me. Even if I wouldn't be a victim of all that was going wrong, I could still feel it, I could see it, and I could witness it, so I just started writing. First, I started covering songs by other artists. That gave me enough fuel to start writing my own songs based on stories of friends of mine, or on what I was seeing around me. The more I wrote songs, the less lonely I felt. I felt that my existence was more vibrant and livelier.

The first time I was onstage, I was in a metal band, Idiom. That in itself was already kind of a revolution, because in Tunisia, we don't have the history that the U.S. has of metal being heard on the radio. There are multiple universes of different kinds of creations, but in Tunisia and in the European world, what you mostly hear on the radio and what you see on TV is mostly commercial stuff. To start in a metal band and have kind of a powerful voice was already a statement. To choose metal or rock music is already saying, "No, I want to shout. I want to make noise with a very clear voice, and I know exactly what I'm doing."

Now that I think about it, I think that was it. When I started playing my own songs and playing the guitar... every time, I felt like I was on the right way—you know when you feel that. No matter what happens, what really matters is to be on the right side. I've always felt that the people I sang for, or the small crowds that came to my first concerts, they all felt that, too, in the words I was speaking. They weren't classical poetry—just raw thoughts that were talking about what maybe each one of us was living. I didn't exactly realize that then, but when I started listening to what people thought about what I was singing, I was really touched, because I felt I might be onto something in the reality that I depicted and the way I did it. I thought, *Yeah, I think I'm right to denounce this.*

**Amy Rose: Victoria, you grew up in San Jose. What was that like when you were first making music?**

**Victoria:** San Jose is a neoliberal suburb of San Francisco and there are a lot of Mexican people, Indian people, and Vietnamese people.

My mom got me piano and clarinet lessons. I always knew about music, and I was really into Hot Topic, but

I had no idea about punk. I wasn't sure what was going on. I could feel it, but I didn't know what actually existed.

**Amy Rose:** No matter where you come up, it's hard not to be a little tentative. Like, "Who are the people around me who are going to get it?" How do you find a community—or push back against the community that is around you and make your own ideology; the thing that drives you?

**Victoria:** Cutting through the noise is really hard because sometimes all people have is noise. So, realizing what noise is a form of people trying to keep their head up and realizing that the only choice is between silence and noise. There's that type of noise, and then there's the noise that's trying to tell you like, "You're done. Just give in and try to fit into this hierarchy."

If you grow up in a neoliberal world like we're in right now, there's this idea of giving into process or bureaucracy. Basically just waiting on the phone for someone to hang up on you. My mom, who is very reactionary, has this funny story where she couldn't afford diapers, and she was like, "I probably could've figured out how to get the money for diapers, but I shouldn't have had to figure that out." So she wrote the Attorney General, and said, like, "I'm going to sue you to use part of your discretionary budget unless you send me \$50 for diapers, because you're not helping me be a parent." He was so afraid that she knew what a discretionary budget was—which is funny, because that's actually how they buy police nicer shit. I don't even think she knew that. I know that now. So he sent her a check for \$50 and called her, like, "How do you know what my discretionary budget it?" She was like, "I don't even know what that is. I just figured you're supposed to represent the rights of children. This has nothing to do with me. This has to do with the rights of my child. I felt you were not helping represent the rights of my child." The Attorney General says, "How old is your child?" My mom says, "Six months old." Like, how was I supposed to call the Attorney General to say, "You're supposed to represent the rights of me."

That's the whole thing about the system—the Attorney General represents the police. I'm like, "Mom, this story's incredible, but also, you called the police. And I hate the police. I'll never call the police. It's so crazy." She just says, "No, this was about your rights." That's the whole thing—figuring out how to break through and almost give in to that complete idealism, that complete belief. It's spiritual. That comes out of a complete faith in something.

**Amy Rose:** I'm curious about how that worked in the authoritarian zone you lived in, Emel, when people had no money for food and you had a government who continued to bear down on its people as they went hungry. How do you maintain a feeling of idealism within that? How do you feel safe to speak in that position?

**Emel:** I don't think it's about feeling safe. At some point, you create your own different reality that you would like to be living in for reasons of sanity. I consider myself having been extremely lucky to have found something to hold onto, because many people can't or don't have anything. I had an ability to do something beautiful that could connect something that nobody can control but me—if I could have a voice and that voice could carry some things—then I had the responsibility to talk about those who can't and don't have the same.

Even though, for the most part, what I was *initially* doing in Tunisia were small, underground concerts. I felt that if I put all the faith in the world, and all the biggest feelings in the world into them, something was going to happen, and something had to happen. That's how I function.

As women who do something different, being in the music business is extremely hard. That's 100 percent sincere and authentic. You have to have a lot of faith and trust in yourself, just to be sitting and composing a track—and those invisible elements travel with the song.

**Amy Rose:** What are your objectives now?

**Victoria:** There's a theme throughout community organizing. You're supposed to organize yourself out of the problem. You're supposed to win against the police state or supposed to win against immigration law. You're supposed to win, so you no longer need to fight the specific person, because you've won. I feel like that in music. Because things are so bad right now in the status quo in this country, you see it's a lot of people turning to music as a form of resistance, and also as a place to project all of your pain.

My objective is to make it so that the things that we say as a band, what we represent as a band, is not unique. There's so much of it. There's such an open dialogue about protest music, racism, and toxic masculinity that's calling these things out and trying to open up conversation. There's so much of it that we are *not special*. And that's the objective: to be part of the community and of the movement.

**Emel:** Absolutely. That's what has always been lacking, because I don't think there are a lot of artists who are singing about what's tough or what a lot of people don't want to hear.

My personal objective is very simple. It is to be able to perform in a festival or on another platform where I don't have to carry the flag of my country. I'm very proud of where I came from, and I am honored to be part of a very historic movement. But, in a way, I wrote all these songs in order to be free. Now that I find myself in the bigger picture, I find myself in a prison of that label sometimes. There's a lot of unfairness towards artists who come from less mainstream countries. White artists are allowed anything. They can be multidisciplinary. They can do this and that and be considered pioneers for it, while, when we come from smaller countries, we have to be representing an ethnicity, or we have to have an exotic image. Or we are not allowed to identify ourselves. We have to receive others' labels instead of choosing our own. That's my fight for the moment, because I think it's terrible. Growing up, I was open to anything

that came from any part of the world, and I didn't even know what "world music" meant. I was listening to hip hop, to psychedelic rock, to music from Macedonia, to music from the States—from any part of the world. We were jamming all these things and trying to bring all these influences to have fun and create a lot of crazy music.

Now that I've traveled and crossed to the other part of the ocean, I feel that there's much less openness, and that coming from an Arab country, I have to wave something that makes people say, "Oh, okay, now I understand, that's that plus *that*." Instead, when we mix our stuff with rock or electronic music, all of a sudden it's not the same thing [as white rock or electronic]. We don't have the same rights to be considered equal pioneers, or to be considered as important actors to improve music in general.

**Amy Rose: What are the boundaries that people we should be looking to break down within that?**

**Emel:** I don't think it's a problem that comes from people themselves. Now that I perform in front of many audiences, I perform most of the time in front of audiences that don't necessarily understand Arab—I sing in Arab, for those of you who don't know. And I just don't have any problem. I don't stop during the show to ask people, "Do you understand?" or, "Are you following?" In a movie, the things that you like about the movie are not only the dialogue. You feel moved by the whole—by so many different things. And thank god that we don't need to understand every part of the music we hear. Growing up, we studied English, and I used to listen to and sing a lot of songs in English. Then, maybe ten years later, be like, "Oh, okay, so that is what it's about, actually." Sometimes with the flow and the emotions, you don't need anything else. I think that people don't have any problem with that, because when something really touches me and I sing it with all my 100 percent full self, I see the reaction.

That's what I was talking about humanity. It's the system. It's even more important nowadays to bring out different genres and languages together—to break all the barriers, and all the cultural barriers. When you get to listen to something you like, even if you don't understand anything, all of a sudden there are no more differences.

**Victoria:** Beyoncé has a T-shirt for the *Lemonade* anniversary that says, "I am not God. God is God." I don't think you need to even believe in God to understand: We need to stop putting expectations on people that are not attainable expectations. You cannot look for perfection in music. Music is going to make us feel something, and it's going to allow us to free ourselves of something that's perhaps weighing us down. That's beautiful, but that doesn't equal perfection. The less and less that we impose standards that are very much created from white supremacy, because they have to do with us feeling free, we will realize that no one is free unless everyone is free.

The only way that we are all free is if we end capitalism and racism and realize that there are levels to those things. Inequality has many gradients. Breaking through this hope or this idea or this need of perfection, and instead really realizing that it's about honesty and about reality, is really going to help us to make music more than this mystic space and into an actual protest space.

**Amy Rose: That kind of perfection is a capitalist concept asking us to constantly refine ourselves individually instead of within the wider world. Thank you so much for being here with us today. As we go, what is one pragmatic thing that everyone in this room can do, together, to bring one another forward?**

**Emel:** The most important thing is empathy. I think it's considerably lacking. You don't even have to go as far away as Syria to see people on the street. It shocks me every day, and it's been 10 years that I live in big cities where it's very normal that a lot of people sleep in the streets, even when it's cold. I see a lot of people passing, sometimes, very horrible situations, in very horrible quarters, for people like us. They are people like us, and people pass and don't even look at it. It starts there. Somehow, some parts of us die because we are just trying to survive, and so it becomes all about the individual.

**Victoria:** Rhode Island is the smallest geographic state in the whole country, so I realize it's probably irrelevant to most people in this room, but last night in Providence, the capital of Rhode Island, there was a practice raid by the U.S. Army. There were helicopters, there were military guns, and it's a part of the city where a lot of people just this week passed an anti-racial profiling ordinance that seeks to hold police accountable against racial profiling. There's no conspiracy theory here. We all know why, in the smallest state's capital, this is all happening this week. We need to end the U.S. military. We need to end the wars in the Middle East. We need to end white terrorism. People should not be beheaded in Portland, Oregon because they're standing up against a white terrorist. Before we can even think about what to do in music, we have to first think about what to do about the context that music exists in.

Before you can resist and really be okay with that, you have to be able to survive. Before you can survive, you really have to be able to live. Before you can live, you have to be able to breathe. There will always be things at every level trying to keep you from all of those things, trying to make sure that you can only breathe, that you can only live, that you can only survive, that you can only exist. It's constantly realizing the layers and the levels to it.

**Emel:** We all need to be useful. It's a terrible feeling when you realize that you're not connected to anyone else. As humans, we always try to reach out to something that has meaning. I was lucky enough to have found music. No matter how broken we could feel, music will always be there to remind us of which way we want to go.

**Amy Rose: We're out here. Be kind to your neighbors. There are many ways to take care of homeless people , to fight against wars and their effects in other nations , to fight against wars and their effects here ,**

to call your congresspeople about the I.C.E., to reach out in swing states that might need your help.  
Thank you so much for being here with us.

Amy Rose Spiegel's favorite protest songs:

"Universal Soldier" - Buffy Sainte-Marie

"Mississippi Goddam" - Nina Simone

"My Black President" - Brenda Fassie

"America" - Wu-Tang Clan

"The Regulator" - Bad Brains

Emel Mathlouthi's favorite protest songs:

"The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti" - Joan Baez

"They Don't Care About Us" - Michael Jackson

"Killing in the Name" - Rage Against The Machine

"Chayed Kossourak" - Cheikh Imam

"Wououd Men Al Asifa" - Marcel Khalifa

Victoria Ruiz' favorite protest songs:

"Warrior In Woolworths" - X-Ray Spex

"Testify" - Rage Against The Machine

"American Sounds" - La Neve

"Strange Fruit" - Billie Holiday

"Born in the U.S.A." - Bruce Springsteen

You can find a YouTube playlist of the above songs [here](#).

Name

Emel Mathlouthi and Victoria Ruiz

Vocation

Musicians

Fact

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