

Using Music to Resolve Sour Notes of Campus Discord – Martin C. Winer



Marcel Cohen passionately talking about Peace

When I first met Marcel Cohen he had a mantra of using music and the arts to promote peace in the Middle East. While his doe-eyed optimism was admirable and occasionally infectious, I looked at him cynically. Middle East peace, after all, is one of the great unsolvable problems, the purview of statesmen and long negotiated treaties. I was often tempted to offer Marcel a paternal pat on the head, subconsciously saying, "Cute kid, you go ahead and try."

It was only a few short years later, indeed just recently, that news trickled in about Marcel's new organization YONA (Your Outreach Network for the Arts) and the success it had achieved in bringing harmony, both musical and social, to racially divided university campuses. With an increasing appetite for more news of Marcel's success, I was happily forced to eat those doubting words I had uttered under my breath.

In my defense, at first glance Marcel Cohen, by his own admission, is anything but what one would picture as a community leader. Shy, clinically humble, and soft spoken, he stands a stark contrast to what we have come to expect of an "alpha male," yet refreshingly so. Over the course of our discussion it occurred to me that Marcel possesses a certain geological power — a quiet yet determined exertion of pressure over time, which eventually yet inevitably will raise mountains and alter the landscape around him.



Participants dancing at an April 2009 concert at York University featuring Egyptian-born George Sawa and Cantor Aaron Bensoussan, a Moroccan-born Sephardic Jew.

In his university days, he noticed that student cultural programs designed by both Palestinian and Israeli groups only managed to fan the flames of intolerance. He found that “people were talking at each other instead of to each other.” He continued: “Jews and Muslims are quite similar in culture, especially in their music and food. They are quite curious about one another but they need a safe medium, such as the arts, in which to explore their similarities.”

When he heard of the recent upswing in racial discord at Concordia and York University he felt supremely powerless. But just then, an Israeli spiritual band was looking to start a North American tour. The Concordia conflagration was at its worst; Marcel knew exactly where their first show would be held.

That show was one of many to follow that saw Jews and Muslims dancing together in peace. Marcel was shown to be correct: students could find commonality in music and the arts when they could not be united by an exchange of words. Subsequent concerts were held at York University and at the University of Toronto, featuring Neshama Carlebach, a famous Jewish spiritual singer. Marcel noted that in such concerts “the opportunity exists not only to import Middle Eastern music in the cause of peace, but further to manufacture Jewish-Muslim peace externally and export it back.”

At the end of one concert, Marcel was invited to offer some parting words. “I am a Special Education Tutor in the Hebrew School System. As such, every day I teach the Hebrew alphabet which begins with the letter ‘aleph’. If you change one vowel, you get ‘eleph’ which means 1,000, and if you change a vowel again, you get ‘alluph’ which means chief. I’ve put together this concert such that Jews and Muslims can begin to eat and sing together. It is my hope that this will spread to a thousand other campuses and become the chief way that Muslims and Jews interact.”

Marcel had come up with the perfect antidote to hate and dissension: humility in the face of ego, persistence in the face of cynicism, and creative communal expression instead of protracted and counterproductive debate.



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