

Lebanon's most innovative band takes underground sound to Paris

Soap Kills found Beirut a little too small to accommodate musical and personal ambitions

Olivia Snajje
Special to The Daily Star

Yasmine Hamdan arrives at the Parisian cafe late, delayed by a call from Beirut. She is dragging with her a huge bag of dirty laundry. Long dark hair, slender, wearing jeans, she is braving her first Paris winter.

Yasmine is the other half of Soap Kills, perhaps the most innovative contemporary band to come out of Lebanon. Alternative hop, electro, ethno-techno, electro-acoustic; the list of ways to describe their music is seemingly endless.

With four CDs behind them, Zeid and Yasmine Hamdan, (who happen to have the same last name) make music that Lebanese film director Ghassan Salhab describes as an "Oriental-techno dirge." Yasmine's voice would seem to belong to an older woman: it is deep, melancholy and filled with longing.

But Yasmine is definitely young and representative of her generation. She was "born with the war" in 1976 and quickly left with her family after a militia had taken over the roof of her building in Verdun as a strategic post.

Her father had already worked in the Gulf and Yasmine spent her earlier years in Abu Dhabi and Kuwait, as well as in Greece. Along with her father in Kuwait at the time of the 1991 Gulf War, she was bundled into a car with friends who drove her back to Beirut.

By then the war had ended in Lebanon and Yasmine, a teenager, picked up her life again in Beirut.

With the exception of some guitar and lute lessons, she never studied music, but always listened to her parent's albums.

"My father loved Fairouz and Umm Kulthoum. He also listened to Abba, Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel. My mother loved Egyptian music."

As a child she was shy, yet known for her deep, gravelly voice. During her last year of high school, she felt the need "to show off," Yasmine says, sounding slightly disgusted with herself. "I sang silly little songs, even Disney theme songs."

She had met Zeid Hamdan in secondary school and began singing with his band, which evolved into the group Soap Kills, in 1997. She also studied psychology at the Universite Saint Joseph. She soon dropped



Yasmine Hamdan performs in the film Terra Incognita: "My father loved Fairouz and Umm Kulthoum"

out, setting into motion a long internal battle between conformity and a more uncertain path.

"Of course parents feel reassured when you pick something stable. My choices often resulted from the fact that I was unsteady. Music made me dream. I understand my parents however - for them, when I decided to stick with music, it was as if I had joined a sect, they were afraid for me."

Yasmine's family is from a Shiite village in the South. Her father leans toward the left politically (her great uncle was the communist intellectual Mehdi Amel, assassinated in 1987). Home life was secular. Her parents, only in their 20s when they left Lebanon, retained few contacts with the village.

Nevertheless, becoming a

public figure in the entertainment business has not been an easy task for Yasmine, who has had to deal with social mores and codes imposed upon women in Lebanon.

"It's very complicated. There are taboos and at the same time everything is permitted. I have a hard time in Lebanon. I always feel like a whore there, like something dirty. I know things are changing and evolving, but the years I spent there I felt bad."

Not having a formal background in music has been difficult as well. Both Yasmine and Zeid are self-taught. To add to her talents as a performer, Yasmine has taken classes in theater, classical Arabic and Flamenco dance.

"Performing at a concert is

extraordinary. It's great - although I often have stage fright and I judge myself even before I begin ... Even seeing myself on video clips is difficult; I refused to watch them for four years because I was so self-critical. Now I've learned to take a step back and watch myself so that I can improve. I know now that nobody is perfect," says Yasmine, sounding relieved.

In contrast to Beirut, where she was constantly surrounded by people she knew, in Paris she enjoys her anonymity and likes feeling "a little lost."

Yasmine initially came here to resume her studies in psychology, however "it took too long, I wasn't at all stimulated and I don't like the system, which is inhuman."

She has switched to the

Sorbonne University where she is studying film and music, but was again disappointed. Yasmine is impatient with the pedantry of systems, but also with herself. Restless yet craving stability, at the least France will give her the residency papers she needs and a professional set-up with a record company.

"I realize every day how much the war influenced my life and work. I'm not used to living in a country where the situation is calm. When I see people my age in Europe, the music they're making and how they live, I feel like I'm on such a different wavelength."

"I'm like a spinning top for the moment and I'd really like some stability."

Soap Kills is unequivocally a band on the upswing. Film-

maker Elia Suleiman used two of their tracks for his winning film Divine Intervention, as did documentary film-maker Diane Arbid in her recent Frontieres. Yasmine and Zeid Hamdan made cameo appearances in Ghassan Salhab's film, Terra Incognita, which opened last week in Paris, and Yasmine sang and narrated on Toufik Faroukh's acclaimed album, Drab Zeen.

Her move to France represents not only a chance to work with a record company, but a break from the confines of a small country.

"Yasmine is the image of a generation that wants to emerge from Lebanon. There is a feeling of suffocation there and some people have dreams that are too big for the country," says Salhab.

In Paris, Yasmine has secured an agent, a manager and is negotiating with a record company. Zeid travels back and forth between Paris and Beirut.

"We have 12 or 13 songs written and ready to go. I can't wait to get into production. There's an established structure here for production and distribution, which will be such a change from the CDs we literally hand-made in Lebanon," Yasmine says.

Has Paris become her home, at least temporarily?

"I haven't given up on Lebanon. Soap Kills is still a little 'underground' for it. It's not fashionable yet. But it will be."

"It's a beautiful country and at the same time very unstable and very badly managed. I would like to live in a country where there isn't much corruption and where people are more tolerant and less judgmental about women."

"I have a lot to say," Yasmine continues, "but haven't yet found the right way to express it. I don't want to mix politics with music, that would be too easy. Besides, I don't want to lecture anyone."

Yasmine is looking forward to moving into an apartment with her sister in which, hopefully, there will be a washing machine. In the interim, she's still working on her music. Soap Kills' particular style has certainly found the perfect niche in this city steeped in Arab culture.

"They very much belong to their generation," says Salhab, of the band, "which is electric, and at the same time they are definitely from the Orient. They have roots."

STAR SCENE



Said Kobaissy flanked by two of the models



Joelle



Khoulood Kassem and Jamil Azar



Lucia



Nada Haidar and Mona Nahleh

Book lauds design and architecture of Beirut nightlife

Volume intends to put city 'on an international pedestal'

Ramsay Short
Daily Star staff

The dark cylindrical tube with its end-to-end bar and rotating glass roof suspended atop an old villa feels as if it should be in a Manhattan skyscraper overlooking Central Park. But it's not New York. It's Beirut.

A modern, industrial, trendy bar, Centrale is just one of 18 nighttime hangouts featured in a new book depicting the stylistic design and architecture of Beirut's clubs and restaurants.

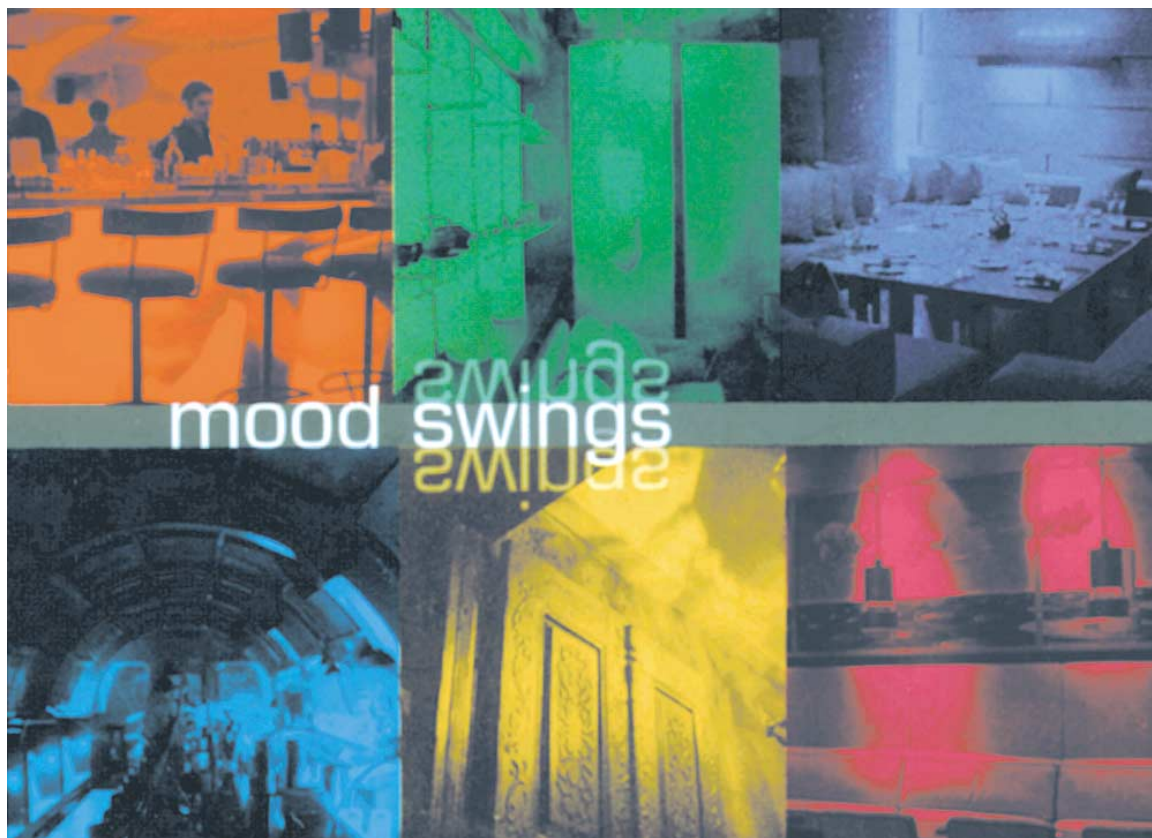
Mood Swings, printed by Art Lounge Publishing, attempts to do what no book has done before. In the words of Nino Azzi, the man who conceived the book, Mood Swings was, "developed with the intention of putting Beirut and its outstanding bars, clubs and restaurants' avant-garde design on an international pedestal."

The book tries to show that Beirut, formerly the culturally diverse, cosmopolitan, jetset capital of the 60s, is still alive and kicking and has evolved into the new millennium in a wash of designer clubs and eateries.

It succeeds in part. The venues chosen are indeed examples of snazzy, sophisticated spaces, all designed by Lebanese architects. They have sprung up in a frenzy of building over the last two years, a response to a rise in the number of tourists, and the increasing number of local residents who want to party in style.

Admittedly, a New Yorker with no knowledge of Beirut walking into Barnes & Noble and picking up Mood Swings would discover what seems a nightlife paradise nothing short of incredible.

He would find places and spaces that would fit comfortably in the world's capitals of fine dining and clubbing, not in a town which for many people



The cover of Mood Swings: Where are these beautiful people? We want to see them

in the world still maintains its legacy as a warzone.

From Centrale in its location just off the Beirut Central District in the quarter of Gemaizeh, to the new downtown club/restaurants of Panama, Asia, Lobby Bar, Bacalao and Pulse, the reader will find swanky photographs, descriptive though eulogistic texts, as well as a couple of innovative ideas.

The Beirut with which the reader is presented is one of extravagant architecture and decor. The club spaces are treated in a dynamic and functional way and adorned with luxurious furnishings.

"In bookstores, we find all sorts of publications about restaurants and clubs in Lon-

don, Paris, Berlin and New York, but we never encounter anything on Beirut," Azzi says.

"Beirut nightlife is competing on a high level with European cities and elsewhere and the architecture and interior design are in many cases of an international standard."

"We just want to show the world what Beirut is up to and where we stand in terms of nightlife entertainment and services," he explains.

Although Mood Swings is not presented as the definitive guide to nightlife in Lebanon, it manages to function as an example of the design standard in the country. Where it fails, however, is in the number of venues of an equally high standard that

are leading the way in the nightlife scene, but which are not included. Bars and clubs that should be there are not.

Pacifico, the pioneer bar of Monnot which - like few others in the fickle and rapidly changing nature of local Beirut tastes - has managed to stay the distance, is not included.

Others such as Orange Mechanique, Strange Fruit, 5 Rooms, the Peppermint Lounge, Eggzit, ED Stones and the restaurants Fennel and Aziz - all of which are stylishly designed venues - are also left out.

The reason for this was that to be included in Mood Swings each venue had to pay \$1,000. For that they got six pages of color photographs and text to

sing their praises. Those who did not see why they should pay were not included.

"Of course we started off with a wider list of venues to include, around 40 ... It's true that all the good places are not there," Azzi says.

"Some venues we wanted had closed and others did not want to pay," he continues, "but it is meant as a representative cross-section of the Beirut scene."

For those who did take up the offer, their venues can now be seen in cities around the world including Dubai, Kuwait, Paris, London and New York.

"We want Lebanese people to feel proud when sharing this book with friends abroad," Azzi

says. "It can also serve as a benchmark to people wishing to get into this business in Lebanon and as reference for architects and designers."

"In brief it is intended for all people who love nightlife and specifically the Beirut one," Azzi adds.

Currently, Mood Swings is the only book on the market to picture and describe in detail some of Beirut's well-known clubs. It tries to maintain the feel of the clubs themselves in its small, square design with lots of black and sepia colors.

One shame is that few of the photographs contain people or images of the clubs at their mid-night buzzing best, especially given that the info on the inside cover reads: "Architecture and decor, no matter how extravagant, are merely the shell of place. What infuses an enclosure with life and atmosphere, is not only the quality and nature of the entertainment, but more importantly the zeal of the crowd and their passion for living."

Where are these beautiful people? We want to see them.

There is space for more such books, perhaps more critical and more aware of the short life of most of these spaces, and perhaps more representative of that reality.

Already one venue included in the book, Element on Monnot Street, has been forced to shut and many others included may face the growing repercussions of opening without all of the necessary licenses and permits.

Mood Swings is not a bad start as a book on the interior design of Beirut's "cool infused" clubs, promoting a positive image to the world of the architectural talent and party lifestyle of one section of Lebanese society.

As such it is worth a look. But at \$30 a pop, buy it at your discretion.

Designer shows off summer colors

Jihane Akoury
Special to The Daily Star

The Phoenicia Inter-Continental Hotel hosted a fashion show Thursday by Lebanese designer Said Kobaissy, who presented his first haute couture designs around a buffet served at the Mosaic restaurant. The fashion show was the first in a series of events the restaurant will be hosting to offer a unique opportunity for emerging and talented fashion designers to showcase their collections.

Photos by Mahmoud Kheir

JUST A THOUGHT

The passion for setting people right is in itself an afflictive disease

Marianne Moore
American poet (1887-1972)