*Almost a year and a half ago, I watched Hungary implement its own Muslim Ban. Fearing for my friend’s life, I found a song which ended up tying us together.*

**Did this EELS song motivate a Syrian refugee to leave for Europe?**

In one of my strongest memories of Louie, a Syrian man who I met while reporting on the refugee crisis, he is waving to me on the platform of Budapest’s Keleti station. He’s surrounded by about four hundred other migrants, trying to get aboard a train for Austria. It’s late afternoon and, within hours, service is rumored to be stopping for the day. I can see his thin arm raised high in the air, and he is jumping, trying to get my attention.

Louie is twenty-six. He studied Fine Arts at Damascus University. He had fled to Istanbul with his family when he was facing military conscription in Syria, and from there had made the decision to resettle in Europe. We had met earlier that day, when he told me that he was looking into numbers for smugglers, saying that the other people on the platform were too aggressive. Now, I watched his arm disappear into the crowd. He had to yell into the phone.

“They’re pushing too much,” he said. “We can’t get on. We’re thinking of leaving the train station.”

When I reached him a half hour later, there was a panic in his voice that was not there before. I later found out that he was standing outside a strip-mall, negotiating with a trafficker. “I’m really, really busy right now,” he said. “I have to go.”

My contact with Louie could have just ended there. But in time after he disappeared, new details began to emerge of some of the dangers confronting refugees on their way through Europe. Of people being kidnapped, of being left in the woods, of a string of hotels – some say as many as twenty - on the outskirts of Budapest where refugees were being brought to, confined in, and then robbed of all their valuables. Videos surfaced of police abusing people in camps. Rumours swirled of worse conditions elsewhere. Along its border, Hungary was nearing completion of a 110-mile razor wire border; a doomsday marker of the government’s decision to bar all Muslim refugees from entering the country.

And it was in these days that I would listen and re-listen to a song which Louie had shown me, wondering if it had motivated him to leave for Europe, and if he’d been killed along the way.

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So far, what has existed of the commentary focusing on the relationship between music and the refugee crisis has largely focused on music as a way of affirming one’s sense of settlement. Of the importance of songs for refugees in camps, or how newly-arrived migrants may use ‘traditional Arabic music’ to bridge the gap between their home-country and their new one. Some commenters have also looked at the importance of song in the 2011 protests again Bashar Al Asaad. *Al Arabiya*’s Leila Alwan observed how Ibrahim Qashoush, popularly dubbed the “nightingale of the revolution,” was murdered after leading thousands of protesters in a song with the refrain “Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar", or "Come on, Bashar, time to leave.”

These stories are, undoubtedly, important. But, they have also involuntarily enforced a fairly clear cultural delineation between what is supposed to be the music of the West, and the music of the East. That we, on our side, have cultural traditions which we can offer migrants and that they, by inference, can also bring with them their own. When M.I.A. released her music video “Borders” last winter, *The Washington Post* unknowingly summarized this thinking with their headline: “Think pop music and the refugee crisis don’t mix? M.I.A. just proved you wrong.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This way of thinking would still be impulsive to me, if Louie hadn’t disappeared. The hours seemed to drag on. My messages went unanswered. After three days, I tracked down his Facebook page.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Most Syrian refugees had deactivated their accounts, under justified fears of state surveillance from the Asaad regime.) After sending him another message and scanning through his interests (SWANS, *Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind*), I came across a post, from June of that year.

It was the music video to ‘Mistakes of My Youth’ by Eels.

-- \*\*\*Embed Music Video\*\*\* --

When you listen to the song, two electric guitars play off one another, with a string orchestra humming wistfully in the background. Mark Oliver Everett’s voice - muscular, melancholic - dole out the lyrics calmly. Focusing predominantly on departures, the need to change course, the speaker begins by mentioning “the waning days ahead” where he has to “look back down the road” knowing “that it’s not too late.” In a section which Louie made the entirety of his Facebook post, the lyrics seem to indicate a cycle of crisis, which the speaker seeks to break from:

***I hope it's not my fate***

***To keep defeating my own self,***

***and keep repeating yesterday.***

***I can't keep defeating myself,***

***I can't keep repeating,***

***the mistakes of my youth……***

The song concludes on an optimistic note, claiming that “the choice is mine for making/ a better road ahead / the road that I’ve been taking / headed for a dead-end / but it’s not too late to turn around,” before the string section carries out.

Louie had posted this barely three weeks before he told me he had begun to plan the specifics of his trip; when he began making soft contact with smugglers, and planning his route.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here was a song talking about altering direction, effecting change, a failed future that needed to be avoided, and it was set against the largest emigration crisis since the Second World War. Within this context, it seemed inevitable that Louie had posted it as some sort of inflection of his decision to leave for Europe. And now he had vanished.

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The next time I saw Louie, almost a month had gone by. He and his family had made it to the Netherlands, and had been moved to a second facility in Onnen, close to Groningen, where he rode his bike to meet me. (They’ve since been resettled). In Keleti, Louie had been one of the few men I had met with shoulder-length hair. Now, it was cut short, revealing small, black spacers that I hadn’t noticed before.

After getting into the smuggler’s car, Louie, his father and his brother were driven into Austria, having to duck their heads out of fear of security cameras. They had paid the smuggler to take them to Germany, 550 euros each, but the driver pulled over after crossing the border, shoving them out onto the highway in the middle of night. A police patrol intercepted them, and brought them to a station. (“My mind was like white noise. I didn’t really have clear ideas”). Instead of registering them, the cops just gave them directions to the train station, and sent them on their way. The group travelled to Frankfurt, then Onnen, and were picked up at the train station by a friend.

Louie’s settlement has been bumpy, mostly because of the long processing time for his paperwork, the feeling of being isolated from his friends, and not being able to work. “I was on the edge of my career in my former life in Damascus,” he told me. “I had connections. I was going somewhere. And now I'm doing nothing.” Recently, he’s decided to pursue a Master’s in Animation, and plans to enroll once he’s assigned his own apartment.

As Louie and I spoke in Groningen, our conversation eventually rounded to the topic of music. It quickly became apparent how much of an outlet it had been for him through his travels. He told me about a time when he was in Mytilene, an island in Greece known for its rough conditions, and was almost at the point of breaking down. “I was like in full despair ... [Then] I sit with a friend of mine, he's like the best friend of mine, and we start talking. Talking, talking, talking and eventually, as usual, we start talking about music He was saying that another member of the band Pink Floyd, Roger [Waters] is like an ideal man. He's almost worshiped him. And then I was saying another stuff about this guy, and then after a while I totally forgot that I was in Mytilene. I forgot that I was almost beaten by the police. I just sit down, relax, have a smoke with my friend. And I felt really good."

When I asked him about what album he listened to throughout the trip, he said he had only listened to one album: Mew’s *+/-*.

“It takes me to another place. A much safer place.” he said, explaining that he even listened to album in the backseat of the smuggler’s car on their way into Austria. “You are going to all these crazy places, doing all this crazy stuff and you don't know anything ... I had never been to Europe before. I feel like I am an alien. But then I listen to this music and I just calm down."

After a while, I began to tell him about the traffickers, about the hotels, about the extortion rackets. (“I did not know about this,” he told me). Then, after weeks of imagining all the things he could say, I told him the story of how I found the “Mistakes Of My Youth” post. He smiled.

“This song is so sentimental to me,” he said. “Like, this should be the soundtrack of my life."  
  
Louie went on to explain that the song did not relate to his decision to leave for Europe, but the feeling of watching all of his friends leave without him. After he had moved to Istanbul, he grew quite lonely, missing his friends from back home in Damascus. But when he met a group of musicians, he felt like his social circle had formed. “We were more like a family,” he explained. One day though, his new group told him that they had also decided to leave for Europe. Louie was one of the main providers for his family. He couldn’t go.

“I think there is some kind of scenario that comes in my life, over and over again. It keeps repeating itself. The problem is that sometimes I feel that I can't connect emotionally with people. And every time I do, something comes up and I feel left alone again. I feel like more vulnerable again. All my life I've been living with really strong walls around me and when I take people inside, it doesn't work out usually. So I was afraid this will happen again … Like now I'm staying all alone [in Istanbul] by myself again."

“I was trying not to lose hope. Even there are elements in this song that says so. ‘I can't keep repeating.’ But at the same time there is despair. You can feel it. ‘I can't do this’ because he doesn't want to do this. It's leading always to the same stuff. But it's a struggle … and the important part of your life is the struggle. Even if you know your life will always be like this you should not like give up. You can't keep repeating the same mistakes. Eventually you have to put it behind you and move on."

After getting some extra work in Istanbul, and borrowing some money from his aunt, Louie was able to plan the trip for him, his brother, his father and his uncle. (One of the reasons they chose the Netherlands is so they could send for their mother within a shorter amount of time. She joined them there recently).

Three weeks after posting the video, Louie found himself on Mytilene, surrounded by all the friends he thought were going on ahead of him. On the first night, they didn’t have any flashlights or phone battery, so one person went off to find a light source, only to come back with a handful of green glow-sticks. Louie cracked them on the floor of the tent, and everyone sat around, passing a bottle of whiskey and talking about music. “I haven't had a nicest night since I was here,” he says. “Here, it's alright. It's safe. But it's not like when you're with friends."

As Louie and I compared our experiences of the song, I eventually told him that when I had first heard it, I had cried for over half an hour over my desk.

“When I was listening to this song,” he said. “I was crying at my office. I was like breaking down.  ... You think that maybe the interpretation is different but that the feeling is going at the same level.”

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/11/29/think-pop-music-and-the-refugee-crisis-dont-mix-m-i-a-just-proved-you-wrong/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Again, a small detail – it took me three days because I did not have his last name. My colleague did. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He mentioned asking around for neighbours, as well as a friend who at one point offered to help arrange everything. Louie didn’t feel safe with the friend’s planning, so found someone else. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)