

Why Do We Sing?

Reflections on Music, Solidarity and Resistance



We struggle, we keep struggling until Palestine is free...

I love to sing. And I love singing in harmony with other voices best of all. It makes my heart feel full, it makes the hairs stick up on the back of my neck, and it helps me to feel connected to the people around me without having to make conversation with them first. And I enjoy using music to help enable others to connect with these things as well. A simple space to sing together with others can be such a gift for any of us when we are experiencing difficulties in our lives, whether it's family or work crises, mental health difficulties or any of life's other unexpected twists and turns.

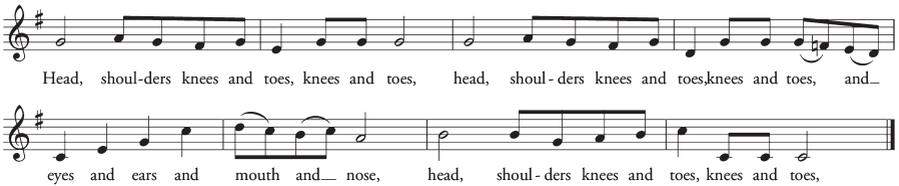
In this context, it seems a perfectly natural thing to travel to Palestine with a solidarity choir, to learn and to share songs with people living there. But at the same time, the niggling question of whether it was the right thing to be doing, whether it's somehow just too 'trivial' to go and sing into the face of a military occupation was present during our preparations. Before our first trip in 2012, we had lengthy discussions about whether people in Palestine would connect with our singing, whether it would be a useful thing to take with us, or whether we wanted to take our songs with us because they help us rather than those we sing in solidarity with. Our primary aims for the trip were to give solidarity to the people that we met, to meet with different people in different situations, to listen and learn, and to come home and tell their stories to as many people as possible who would listen to us talk and sing.

A couple of years before San Ghanny was formed, I had worked as an international observer in Palestine with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Alongside daily checkpoint watches, visits to nearby villages and keeping records on children and young men arrested in Jayyous, the village I lived in, I also played my guitar and sang. The kids loved it. The adults, especially the women, also loved it. My next door neighbour sent her oldest daughter round when it was time for the newborn baby to go to sleep, so that I could pop round and sing lullabies to the bairn until sleep came. I sang more for the mother, who was fair weary with seven children, than the baby, and it felt like a small but valuable offering. Returning to the village three years later, the now three-and-a-half-year-old jumped into my arms saying “ghanny, ghanny” (sing, sing!). Experiences such as this affirmed our expectation that singing would connect with people in Palestine, and whatever our reservations beforehand, from the moment we arrived in Palestine, we knew that sharing our singing was the right thing. Everywhere we went, whether singing with a taxi driver, with children in a kindergarten, in a farmer’s field or on a demonstration, we were able to connect with people in an immediate, human way. Our singing met a diversity of needs, and I would like to explore a few of them here.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The melody consists of quarter and half notes. The lyrics are: "Freen - ship maks us a' mair hap - py, freen - ship gies us a' de - light,". The second staff continues the melody with similar note values. The lyrics are: "freen - ship con - se - crates the drap - pie, freen - ship brocht us here the night.".

Extending the hand of friendship is the foundation of solidarity work. Showing people who are oppressed by occupation that they are not alone, that others who do not share their situation nevertheless see it for what it is and see straight to their humanity despite the dehumanising situations they are forced into, is the foundation of our action.

Our first concert upon arrival in the West Bank in 2017 was in a village called Qusra, as part of the Nablus festival for culture and the arts. This village experiences regular violence from Israeli settlers and the Israeli army and there aren't many foreign visitors to Qusra, so the only faces unlike theirs that the people there will regularly see are Israeli soldiers and violent, ideological Israeli settlers. As you can imagine, this isn't a healthy environment for kids to grow up in, believing that all people who don't look like you will likely hurt you and your family. This is one of the everyday impacts of occupation and it is important to show these kids that foreigners can be friendly. In Qusra village hall, we sang with men, women and children of all ages, in English, Arabic, Scots and Zulu. They especially enjoyed our singing of Arabic songs, clapping, stamping feet and joining in with great gusto. And afterwards we were able to share drinks and sweets as if we were old friends, having already shared this music together. And so it went in many places, sharing songs and laughter and connecting, human being to human being.



In a village near Bethlehem, in the old city of Hebron and in the Al Askar and Balata refugee camps in Nablus, we sang with groups of children. In all of these places, extraordinary Palestinian adults we met make these spaces for children to be children. Despite the occupation. They support children to acknowledge the violence around them, to help them find creative ways to process their experiences, and to grow up proud of their Palestinian heritage. One of the tools they use is music. We heard kids sing everything from nursery rhymes to songs of overt resistance to the occupation, both types of song helping the children to navigate the worlds around them and to still experience being children within it.

One of our surprise ‘hits’ when singing for different groups in Palestine was an Arabic translation of *Head, shoulders, knees and toes* taken on with scepticism by our good friend Hala. The words don’t quite fit in Arabic, and that might be what made it so enjoyable for the people we met. Children in particular enjoyed our attempted Arabic and got straight into the actions. Fair to say that their English was a lot better than our Arabic! It’s such a universally human experience, being silly, such a direct way to connect, and so important to enjoy the smaller moments of silliness amongst the everyday pressures of occupation.



*I will write your name o my country,
 above the sun that never sets.
 Not my children nor my wealth,
 above your love there is no love.*

We first heard this song at a demonstration in Nabi Saleh, a village near Ramallah, in 2012. We gathered in the village to participate in a demonstration at midday, after Friday Prayers, speaking with local community activists about their everyday lives under a huge mulberry tree. We then joined the community gathered outside the mosque to walk down the road to access their water well. An illegal Israeli settlement has taken over use of this well, and now the Israeli military won’t allow the villagers to access their water source. This community is well versed in nonviolence, and as the demonstration progressed (all ages of Palestinians walking towards the well, singing and chanting) the Israeli army responded with tear gas, with a water cannon spraying what smelt like slurry and took days to wash out, and with rubber (read: rubber coated metal) bullets at the people of Nabi Saleh as

well as San Ghanny and the Israeli peace activists supporting the demonstration. After a brief 'retreat' the community gathered together again, reasserting their right to access their water well. The shababat (young women) led us down the road again, and they sang *Biktub ismak ya b'ladi...* as we sang them *Freedom is coming...* in exchange. The song was, for them, an assertion of their connection with the land that they live upon, and of their right to exist.

Back home in Scotland, when I'm teaching this song to groups of non-Arabic-speakers, I always explain that for Palestinians (and for the millions of Syrians who also sing this song), the relationship with land runs at a deeper level than many of us are used to experiencing or acknowledging. This song is an expression of that bigger experience. 'B'ladi' is sometimes translated as country, sometimes nation, leading us to read it in the context of the nation state system, but its meaning is much more than that. It really means land as in earth, as in the earth we dig and grow trees and fruits on, the rock the wells are dug down into and the sea and the sky as well. And it means all of these things as they relate to us, as we exist in relationship to the earth, the land that we live upon. And all of these things are bound together through our shared cultural expression as well, so it's a really simple yet complex expression of a people's right to exist. And for Palestinians, occupied now by Israel, but occupied by the British empire before them and the Ottoman empire before them, asserting this right to exist as Palestinians is crucial. And song and dance are fundamental expressions of that identity.

During the same trip in 2012, we visited a kindergarten in the old city of Hebron, run by an amazing resisting woman, Zleikha, to help support the local children to experience life as children despite the everyday violence surrounding them. She focuses on creative expression to help the children process some of their ongoing trauma, and to acknowledge the grown-up realities surrounding them. These two-to-four-year-olds sang *Biktub ismak ya b'ladi* whilst dressed up to support the Palestinian prisoners. Every Palestinian is affected by the arbitrary arrests of Palestinians by Israel, mostly men and young boys.

By singing this song the children were able to acknowledge that reality with each other, as well as assert their right to exist, to be Palestinians, and to be proud of being Palestinian.

When we returned in 2017, we had learnt *Biktub* to sing together with Palestinians in concerts and on demonstrations. The response from everyone we met was amazing. Whether it was singing in performances – in a village concert in Qusra, singing with children in the Nablus refugee camps – or whether it was singing more informally in a hotel lobby, in a friend’s living room or in a taxi: Everyone we met was delighted for us to share their song with them. After their initial moment of shock, perhaps taking a moment to adjust to our imperfect pronunciation of such a familiar song, adults and children alike clapped and danced along with great enthusiasm.

And they all asked us the same thing – do you know what it means? Yes, we told them, we do know what it means, and we sing it in solidarity with you. We see you, we hear you, and we acknowledge your right to exist.

In a world dominated by English language and Western culture, it can become radically important to learn languages and songs from other traditions, acknowledging everyone’s right to cultural existence.



In Bethlehem, we took part in a demonstration to call for the return of Palestinian bodies from the Israeli government. The campaign is led by family members, often mothers, of Palestinians who have been killed by Israeli forces, or who have been involved in militarised resistance to the Occupation resulting in their own death. This includes desperate actions such as suicide bombing. For family members, the most difficult part of this is coming to terms with the actual death of their loved ones. How do you begin to grieve when

the proof of the death is missing? How do you grieve when those who occupy your land are holding the body as if for some kind of political ransom that you have no way to pay?

We went to join this demonstration in the City of Bethlehem as people gathered to march up the main road towards Jerusalem, where the Israeli Apartheid Wall has been built to block what used to be the main road between the two cities. We spoke with Azhar, the mother of one of the young men whose body has not been returned. She spoke to us about the difficulty of beginning to process his death, how unreal it feels. She spoke about having to campaign instead of grieve, about being on 'pause' until some kind of resolution can be found. She finds it hard to realise that her son is actually dead, though he has been gone for many months now.

Azhar described her teenage son as the "salt of the house" meaning that he brought flavour to their home. He was clever at school and they expected him to go on and continue studying. Then one day he left the house to buy an ice-cream and never came back. He went out and blew up an Israeli bus, killing himself and injuring 20 people. His family never saw it coming. A few months before, his cousin had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers on his way to school. The family wonder if this is what tipped him over the edge, but they will never really know. And still they can't really begin to process what happened until they can bury their son. His little sister is still waiting for him to come home with an ice-cream.

In such extreme realities, what can we offer but solidarity and songs? We marched alongside the Palestinians, and as we approached the wall, we began to sing. We stood with our backs to the wall and sang songs of freedom and solidarity and Azhar came and stood with us, starting to sing *We stand with you* and *We shall overcome* as we sung the verses in Arabic. And another woman (her name meaning 'dreams') came to stand in the middle of the choir with us, delighted that we had come to support them all the way from Scotland, and amazed that we could all sing together so easily. Both women were strengthened by our solidarity, and particularly by the singing that we

were able to share together.

Despite our obviously nonviolent action, the Israeli soldiers on the other side of the Wall threw sound-bombs at us, injuring a young Palestinian journalist in the leg with one of the thick rubber missiles the size of grapefruit that shatter on impact with the ground, and do more damage when they hit human flesh. As the demonstration was dispersing and we were moving away from the Wall, the soldiers came racing down the street in armoured vehicles and threw tear gas at demonstrators' backs. As we were running away, we had to seek emergency shelter in a nearby hotel, the staff kindly opened their door to let us in, even though they had had to lock their doors and shutter their windows against the gas. This is the kind of everyday 'low-level' violence perpetuated by Israel upon the people of Palestine, and it is the kind of provocation that makes nonviolent activists in Palestine so extraordinary in their commitment to working against the natural human response of violent reaction to violence.

Speaking later, we discovered that one of the women who we sang with had been imprisoned by Israel for many years during her youth, and the lack of access to medical services has left her with permanent damage, including partial blindness. Hugging me tight after the demonstration, she said that she felt strengthened by singing with us, and more able to keep on resisting the occupation. This is another small part of the power of using singing where there is violence.



Singing next to the wall in Bethlehem in 2012, surrounded by beautiful art of resistance on the unnatural concrete blocks towering to twice the height of the Berlin Wall, we wanted to sing until the walls came tumbling down. We did sing. The walls didn't tumble, not yet, but one day they will. We sang the energetic, hopeful South African song *Freedom is Coming* as a young Palestinian man was driving past.

He stopped his car and ran back to join us. “I want to sing with you!” he said, “Hurriya! Hurriya!” (freedom), bouncing on his toes with excitement. So we taught him the song and sang from our hearts and our bellies, dancing the South African Freedom dance with him, believing that as Apartheid ended in South Africa, so it is possible for the occupation of Palestine to end as well. It was such an unexpected encounter, so joyful in the face of the enormity of the Wall, one of the most immovable-feeling realities of the Occupation. Working with kids in one of the refugee camps he invited us to visit them, then carried on his way, energised by us, as we were energised by him.

In 2017, we visited a village in the South Hebron hills where we planted olive trees next to a fence marking off land that has been stolen by the illegal Israeli settlement next door. When the Israeli army came with a military order to move us off our friend’s land, we stood beside him and we sang. We sang, in English and in Arabic, *We stand with you, people of Palestine, mothers of Palestine, fathers of Palestine, children of Palestine, we stand with you. As we slowly walked back up the hill, we sang we shall overcome... we will live free... we are not afraid*, singing in Arabic again in support of our hosts. What did singing matter? It didn’t reverse the military order. But it did enable us to ultimately abide by the Israeli military ‘law’ (which if we had pushed it too far, they could have arrested us with) but showing both the Israelis and the Palestinians that our solidarity and support remains with the Palestinian people, that they are not alone and that we will not stop singing out. It is a small act of support, and it matters.

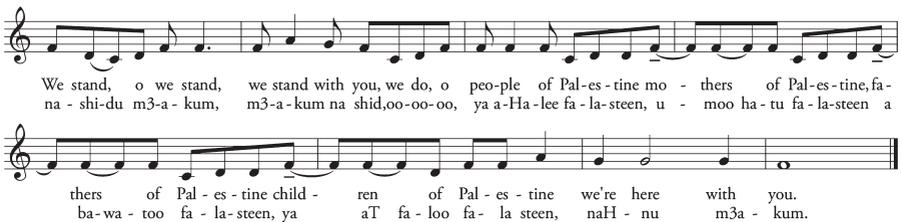
Peace, sa - laam, sha - lom,___ peace, sa - laam, sha - lom,___

10
 peace, sa - laam, sha - lom,___ peace, sa - laam, sha - lom,___

When we first visited a small village near Bethlehem in 2012, we attended a Friday demonstration, walking alongside the villagers as

they asserted their right to access their land and water wells. During this demonstration there was less physical violence used by the Israeli army than at other times, and we were able to speak with the soldiers face to face. Only their armour, guns and riot shields stood between them and us. An inspiring village nonviolence leader took the opportunity to speak with the soldiers in English, finding the middle ground of communication without having to speak in the language of his oppressors, whilst taking the effort to enable them to understand him. He told the soldiers, “Our lands are occupied, but your minds are occupied as well. Think about what you are being asked to do.” It was an extraordinary exchange to witness, watching him speak truth to these young men with guns, reaching out to their humanity and challenging them to see the reality they are part of. Some of the soldiers were visibly surprised by this nonviolent challenge to their narrative.

As the demonstration ended, the Palestinian villagers turned to walk back to their homes. They had been denied access to their land, but had nonetheless asserted their right to access the land and made clear that they would keep on seeking justice. We turned and sang *Peace Salaam Shalom*, which is simply the word of ‘peace’ in English, Arabic and Hebrew. There were again expressions of surprise in the faces of some of the soldiers as they recognised their own language. Slowly, they dispersed, some of them becoming uncomfortable with the gentle intensity of our message of peace. We were echoing our friend’s earlier words of challenge and giving space for reflection. That isn’t always easy. But two soldiers, almost imperceptably, tapped their feet as we sang. The last Israeli soldier to leave, after minutes of our singing, let a tear drop fall before he turned away.



We stand, o we stand, we stand with you, we do, o peo-ple of Pal-es-tine mo - thers of Pal-es-tine,fa-
na - shi-du m3-a - kum, m3-a - kum na shid,oo-oo-oo, ya a-Ha-lee fa - la-steen, u - moo ha - tu fa - la-steen a

thers of Pal - es - tine child - ren of Pal - es - tine we're here with you.
ba-wa - too fa - la - steen, ya aT fa - loo fa - la steen, naH - nu m3a - kum.

Back home and singing in the streets of Edinburgh in solidarity with the Palestinians, whether it's to support the Open Shuhada Street campaign, to support the hunger strikers seeking justice and dignity, or to raise awareness about the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, our most positive responses nearly always come from Palestinians and other Arabic people who have emigrated, are exiled or are travelling. It must be so important to see your truth reflected back to you when there is a concerted effort to reframe or bury your reality.

Less than two weeks after we returned from Palestine, the Israeli army entered a village we had stayed in and took the brother of some of our friends. Our hearts felt broken alongside our new friends' anxiety and distress. There was nothing practical that we could do, Westminster was on holiday, so we sang. We filmed ourselves singing that same song we sang with farmers and with protestors, *We stand with you, people of Palestine...* in English and Arabic, and sent it to our friends in Palestine. Whilst they were waiting anxiously with no news of their brother, at least they knew that we were waiting with them. It is so often the small things that help to keep us going during difficult times. And if times are consistently difficult, then a consistent stream of small nudges of support are what keeps us buoyant. Our friend's brother was released a week later. He is physically safe now, but they beat him whilst he was in the Israeli jail, being held without charge or trial, and he will take some time to recover.

The connections we made in Palestine remain strong, supporting us in our activism and supporting our Palestinian friends to keep resisting injustice. We keep singing wherever we are and shining a light onto Israel and the occupation of Palestine.

Penny Stone