



Syrian rapper Amir al-Muarri's music booth is pictured in his room.



Syrian rapper Amir al-Muarri works on his computer in his room.



Syrian rapper Amir al-Muarri works with earphones on, in front of his microphone-equipped booth, padded with soft foam and egg cartons, in his room.

Syria rapper shines light on Idlib woes

Between the blighted buildings of war-torn northwest Syria, 20-year-old rapper Amir al-Muarri rails against regime bombs, but also shuttered universities and jihadist domination. "I chose rap because the genre is political," Muarri said. "It speaks out against dictatorship, tyranny,

Now home to some three million people, Idlib has been pummeled by regime and Russian bombardment in recent months, with around 1,000 civilians killed since late April. While a Russian-backed ceasefire has largely held since August 31, there have been sporadic strikes. With the help of friends and the internet, Muarri last month put out his first music video, titled "On all fronts." "It conveys what's in the hearts of people here," he said.

It tackles not just Syria's civil war, but also day-to-day complaints in the bastion dominated by the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate. The video, posted on YouTube, shows Idlib residents from all walks of life bobbing their heads in slow-motion to the beat. There is a rescue worker in a hard hat, a member of the so-called White Helmets who have been pulling bodies and survivors from bombed-out buildings.

But it also features some of the ordinary people who live in Idlib: a man watering his plants, a barber, and two young boys on a balcony playing chess.

Tupac and Beethoven

In the room where Muarri lives, on the top of a high building, a guitar he one day hopes to play hangs on the wall. Standing in a corner with earphones on, the young rapper spits rhymes into a tiny microphone booth attached to the wall, padded with soft foam and ordinary egg cartons. Muarri said he returned to his hometown of

Maaret al-Numan from Istanbul last year, equipped with a single microphone, after his brother was shot dead by Turkish border guards while trying to illegally cross the border. He had been living intermittently between Turkey and Syria since 2015.

He had little experience mixing tracks, but he soon learned with the help of friends found on the internet, including many based in neighboring Lebanon. "Sometimes I send them tracks and they do the mixing," he said. When he is not making music, Muarri works in his father's small shop selling cleaning detergent and other household supplies. Between customers, he whips out a phone and listens to his favorite artists: El Rass, but also fellow Syrian rapper Bu Kolthoum, and Shiboba from Saudi Arabia.

From the West, he said he likes Tupac and old school rap that denounces racism and oppression—but also Beethoven and Vivaldi. For his next tracks, he said he might write about the tens of thousands made homeless in recent fighting, or even the endless conferences that have failed to end the conflict. Above all, he just wants to be heard. "I wish my lyrics to be understood as words, not just music to shake your head to," he said.

'War and blood'

Idlib's inhabitants are supposed to be protected by a year-old deal between regime ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey although intermittent bom-

bardment has continued. In his new song, Muarri denounces "systems that feed on war and blood" eight years into a civil war that has killed 370,000 people and displaced millions. Half of Idlib's population are Syrians who have been displaced by fighting in other parts of the country, many living in camps. The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham alliance, in charge of all Idlib since January, has been criticised for shutting down universities in a bid to bring them under their control.

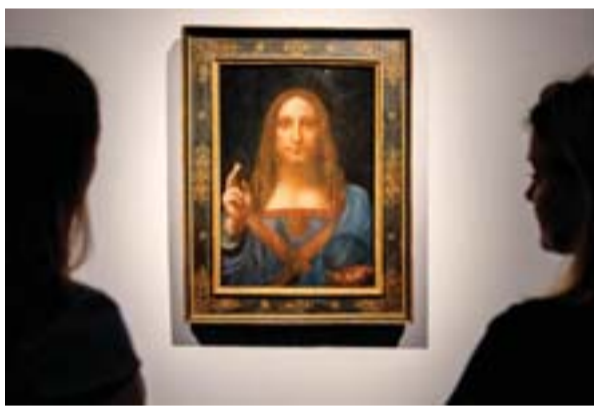
"They closed the entrances of schools ... they are closing the door to our livelihoods," the rap continues, in a jab at HTS. "Throw away the curriculum, the university has been sealed with red wax." Despite his critical lyrics, the young musician said he has so far escaped any reprisals from HTS or other rebel groups still present in the area. Last year, vocal activist, cartoonist and radio presenter Raed Fares was shot dead by unknown gunmen.

"I get warnings from journalists linked to rebel groups or organizations that I should tone it down or not talk about such and such organization or group," Muarri said. But he largely ignores them. "I want to express what I'm seeing," said the rapper. "The people all support me."—AFP



Syrian rapper Amir al-Muarri rides his motorcycle through a war-damaged street in the northwestern city of Maaret al-Numan in the Idlib province. — AFP photos

government corruption, and social issues." Muarri's home region of Idlib is the last major bastion of opposition to the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, which over the past years has also seen an influx of refugees squeezed out of other areas by the war.



In this file photo Christie's employees pose in front of a painting entitled *Salvator Mundi* by Italian polymath Leonardo da Vinci at a photocall at Christie's auction house in central London ahead of its sale at Christie's New York.



In this file photograph a visitor views the 'Portrait of a man in red chalk' (circa 1510), widely accepted as a self portrait of Leonardo da Vinci, during the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci*. — AFP photos

Two notable no-shows for different reasons

Two works are missing from the show, starting with the Mona Lisa. Organizers decided the world's most famous painting should remain in the Louvre's Salle des Elats—its normal home—to help avoid overcrowding. As it is, the masterpiece attracts nearly 30,000 people a day. The Mona Lisa's ineffable smile will however beguile visitors in a virtual reality experience at the end of the Leonardo show, which runs until February 24.

The other notable no-show is the *Salvator Mundi*, the work that became the most expensive painting ever sold when it fetched \$450 million (400 million euros) at a Christie's auction in 2017. Mystery now surrounds the painting—whose authenticity is disputed by some experts—as it has not been seen in public ever since the stunning sale. Officially, it was to be displayed at the Louvre Abu Dhabi but an unveiling set for September 2018 was inexplicably postponed. The Louvre said the museum's request to borrow the work is still pending.

Late runner: The Vitruvian Man

The final act in the row between Paris and Rome over Italy's contributions to the show came with a last-minute legal effort to halt the loan of the iconic Vitruvian Man drawing. Last week an Italian court rejected a bid by an association advocating for the protection of Italy's heritage—Italia Nostra (Our Italy)—to halt the loan of the work dating from the late 15th century, arguing that it was too fragile to travel.

A spat over Italy's contributions to the Louvre show erupted late last year when the new populist rulers in Rome took issue with the previous government's agreement with Paris. Lucia Borgonzoni, the number two in Italy's culture ministry and a member of the anti-immigration League party, argued that the accord was lopsided in favour of France. At the height of the row, it appeared that Italy would cancel the accord altogether. It was finally resolved with Paris pledging to loan several Raphaels to Rome next year, the quincentenary of that artist's death.

The Vitruvian Man—which Italian media say is insured for at least one billion euros—will join the Louvre show later this month, but only for a few weeks rather than the full four months. The drawing, kept in a climate-controlled vault in the Accademia Gallery in Venice, is rarely displayed to the public. The exhibition curated by the Louvre's Vincent Delieuvin and Louis Frank, the heads of the museum's painting and graphic arts departments, includes infrared reflectographs that offer an insight into the master painter's techniques. — AFP



This file photograph shows *The Mona Lisa* (La Gioconda) after it was returned to its place at the Louvre Museum in Paris.

Cigarette-burned Kurt Cobain 'Unplugged' cardigan heading to auction

A quarter century after grunge's enigmatic rhapsodist took his own life, Kurt Cobain's iconic cigarette-singed cardigan worn during Nirvana's 1993 "Unplugged" performance is up for sale. The tattered, drab olive green button-up sweater with dark stains and a burn hole could go for at least \$200,000 to \$300,000, according to pre-bidding estimates from Julien's Auctions, which says rock and roll memorabilia has become a major investor's market.

The thrifted cardigan is the toast of this fall's "Icons & Idols: Rock 'N' Roll" auction organized by the house, which will also sell off the late Nirvana frontman's left-handed teal Fender Mustang guitar played during the "In Utero" tour. "This cardigan, it's the holy grail of any article of clothing that he ever wore," said Darren Julien, CEO and president of the house.

"Kurt created the grunge look; he didn't wear show clothes," Julien told AFP at a New York exhibition preview of the auction, which will kick off October 25 and run through October 26, with bidding in person and online. The music cable channel MTV began its "Unplugged" series in 1989, recording live performances of acts that generally played their normally electrified music on sparse acoustics.

Cobain's haunting "Unplugged" performance with Nirvana—recorded less than six months before his suicide at age 27—is considered one of the most iconic shows of the series, and was released posthumously. Already deep into an emotional, drug-addled downward spiral, the depressive but singular talent with ocean-blue eyes reportedly lamented to "Unplugged" programmer Amy Finnerty after the set that the audience seemed not to like the show. "Kurt," she told him, "they think you are Jesus Christ."

Rock the new fine art

It's the second time the Manhattan-brand sweater has gone up for auction, having sold in November 2015 for \$137,500 via Julien's. The house originally acquired the oversized cardigan from the nanny of Cobain's daughter with Courtney Love, Frances Bean, now 27 years old. The house's CEO said interest in the rock and roll market has seen a particular uptick in recent years, as the genre ages and its memorabilia becomes artifact.



Kurt Cobain's cardigan from Nirvana's 1993 MTV *Unplugged* performance is on display at the Hard Rock Cafe in New York City ahead of the auction of Julien's Auctions in New York City.

"I've always said that the rock and roll market is the new fine art market," Julien said. "Millennials are starting to collect, and they're not collecting Monets and Picassos." "Wall Street guys" are among the major buyers, Julien said, adding that "hedge funds even are starting to invest in rock and roll artifacts as a way to diversify their client's portfolios." A paper plate Cobain had eaten pizza off of—and then written a Nirvana set list on for a performance at Washington's intimate 9:30 club—earlier this year went for \$22,400, as another of his cardigans worn at one of his final photo shoots sold for over \$75,000.

Other items from the more than 700-strong collection hitting the auction block this weekend include Michael Jackson's bejeweled custom velvet jacket the late pop star donned at Elizabeth Taylor's 65th birthday party. Guitars belonging to Elvis Presley, Madonna and Paul McCartney will be up for purchase, as well as handwritten lyrics to classics such as Eric Clapton's "Layla" and Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man."

Also on sale is a surrealist watch given from McCartney to one of his sound engineers, who helped dispel 1969 gossip that the Beatle had died. "Thanks for your help in squashing the old rumour that Paul is dead," reads a note accompanying the watch, signed by McCartney, now 77, and his late wife Linda. "Paul is Live with boots on!"—AFP



A custom velvet jacket worn by Michael Jackson at Elizabeth Taylor's 65th birthday party.



Kurt Cobain's custom-built left-handed Fender Mustang guitar.