

Randa Safieh describes the state of Palestinian Hip-hop in the light of Israel's recent offensive in Gaza

Bombed into (temporary) silence, not oblivion



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Camps Breakerz Crew hosts an open day for the families that moved to the Nuseirat UN Primary School after their homes were destroyed during Israel's recent offensive in Gaza (2014)

How can artists in Gaza operate and reach their audience when the relentless and inhumane Israeli bombardment of Gaza has isolated them from the rest of the world with only sparse electricity sources and intermittent Internet access and mobile phone networks? The Hip-hop scene in Gaza is also part of the 'collateral damage' of the war on Gaza. Much like their American counterpart, Hip-hop mogul Jay-Z, they got 99 problems, and access to their audience is one.

War and politics have long been intertwined with the arts in Palestinian culture. Since the late-1990s, Hip-hop has functioned as a global soundtrack for pro-democracy movements all over the world. Despite its appeal to young Palestinians, Palestinian Hip-hop did not emerge without a struggle. The Palestinian economy has been paralysed by years of border closures

and Israeli restrictions on imports and exports and a government financial crisis triggered by a freeze on foreign aid following the Hamas election victory in 2006. Travel restrictions, the closing of cinemas, cafes and other public venues combined with curfews and road blocks following the collapse of the peace process, signed in 1993, and the emergence of the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000) gave Palestinian youth additional frustrations to transform into rap. When invited to perform outside of the borders of Gaza, obtaining a travel visa can seem like mission impossible.

The Palestinian Hip-hop communities operate as much in Gaza as in the West Bank and pre-1948 Palestine. *DAM*, a three-piece collective from Lydd who started rapping in 1998, can be said to be the original pioneers and heavyweights of the Palestinian Hip-hop movement and have

been credited with launching Palestinian Hip-hop into the international arena. Their emergence gave birth to a rising tide of interest in the genre and *DAM* have inspired a multiplication of Palestinian Hip-hop artists throughout Palestine. Among them are Camps Breakerz Crew, The DARG Team, Palestinian Rapperz, MC Gaza, Black Unit and Street Band Rappers.

The Palestinian Hip-hop scene has a strong community spirit, which became very apparent during the assault on Gaza. Mohammed Ghraiz, better known as Bboy Funk, founder and director of the Camps Breakerz Crew Hip-hop breakdancing collective explained: 'We have been trying to contact each other; it's very hard. Most of us are out of phone networks and electricity. We are worrying about each other. Bboy Hanson lives in Gaza City in a camp called Al-Shate. Ja-rule and Shaark are living together in one house, which is above our dance centre. Bboy Dark lives in a different area in our refugee camp, Nuseirat. Bboy Kevin, who is fifteen years old, and

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Bboy Chino are living in our camp too. Unfortunately, we can't reach each other to know if we are all okay or not. We are scared to move freely too. We really can't wait for this awful war to end so we can meet up again and start dancing for Gaza children and youth.'

Most artists have tried to stay in touch with one another and the outside world during the siege. In other messages I received during the siege, Funk, Shaark, also of the Camps Breakerz Crew, and Mothafar Alassar express their despair about the sparsity of the means of communication and the threat to their lives: Shaark – 'I don't have power; I can't do anything right now, I'm sorry.' And most poignantly, Mothafar Alassar of Street Band Rappers – 'I will try to answer all of your questions asap if I stay alive.'

Funk shares his music online to humanise the distorted image of the people of Gaza: 'We are very peaceful people who reflect peace and love through our art, we are doing this [Hip-hop] to live and survive. Sometimes we dance in darkness or with candles. We had to get a big battery that you can charge for four hours, so we turn it on when we want to practice or teach.'

Rap and breakdancing is a growing trend in Gaza, often part of rehabilitation efforts for young children. The Gazan rapping and breakdancing collective, Camps Breakerz Crew, whose eight members were still under bombardment in Nuseirat Refugee Camp while this article was being written, believe that by teaching children Hip-hop they can help rehabilitate and support their mental health, giving them an outlet for their sadness, tragedy and frustration, and attempting to restore a piece of their lost childhood. They host summer schools and workshops on breakdancing as volunteers at the UNRWA school and their dance centre located in their camp which has received funds from the international community. For the time being however, both the school and the dance centre are currently sheltering refugees displaced by Israel's assault, and they have not been able to dance nor teach. This illustrates the urgency of survival as a more immediate concern for them, yet again, than their musical output. This a direct parallel with Maslow's 1943

theory of the Hierarchy of Needs, explaining the pattern of human motivations – basic survival and needs being the fundamental and first preoccupation, with self-actualisation and creativity only being possible once the former is achieved. How can the people of Gaza focus on creativity when they are forced to focus on survival?

In the aftermath of the assault on Gaza, where a quarter of the victims are children, Hip-hop will certainly continue to be part of the efforts to deal with their trauma. The informative networking of the artists has proved itself very valuable in the battle of information; communication during the conflict will undoubtedly also increase in the weeks to come, as will their artistic output once peace is restored.

The best art may not be produced during the immediacy of a violent conflict from within bomb shelters and refugee camps. But the intriguing question remains why, contrary to what happened during the Arab Spring revolts, few new songs have managed to galvanise anyone beyond the occupied territories? Is it out of respect for the victims and not wanting to exploit the tragedy? Or is it creative impotence when faced with tragic images of deceased children and

babies? Perhaps this is why Palestinian Hip-hop artists in the diaspora have mainly communicated the tragedy of their situation through social networking rather than transform their experience into Hip-hop, until now.

After the guns fall silent, will there be a defiant and increased output from Palestinian artists to try to express the horror of their experience? Will there be hope again? Or will they have lost their admirable ethos of positivity as a collective cry for freedom out of captivity and bondage?

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Randa Safieh is an ethnomusicologist and secondary school music teacher. Her research on Palestinian Hip-hop has recently been published in the book Palestinian Music and Song: Expression and Resistance Since 1900, and she has appeared on BBC World News and Voice of America

Students practice their breakdancing skills at the Camps Breakerz Crew Centre, Nuseirat refugee camp, Gaza strip



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