

Palestinian Hip-Hop

By Randa Safieh

Hip-hop music was born in the 1970s in Harlem and the Bronx. It began life as a musical mouthpiece for the marginalised African-American communities, recounting the social, economic, and political issues that they encountered.

The cultural and political power of hip-hop as a form of protest was not lost on Palestinians. Fast-forward two decades, and it is neither a coincidence nor a surprise that Palestinian youth have so forcefully adopted this cultural, political, social, and musical phenomenon. Since the late 1990s Palestinian hip-hop has flourished and become a national phenomenon, the privileged expression of the unheard voices of identity at home and in exile, and their yearning for nationhood.

Edward Said once said that in the case of a political identity being threatened, culture is a form of resistance against negation and extinction. Palestinian hip-hop artists today are using politically charged music as a powerful factor in the construction and preservation of their identity, drawing upon traditional Palestinian musical influences to guarantee its authenticity. Many Palestinian youths have chosen hip-hop as their very own creative and non-violent expression of opposition to the occupation.

Politics and the creative arts are deeply intertwined in Palestinian culture. After the *Nakba* catastrophe of 1948, the renewed sense of national identity was often conveyed through music: village songs and *dabke* became political songs and dance, a form of self-preservation and defiance. Music and poetry became a running political commentary and later played a mobilising role in the Intifada movements and, more recently, in the Arab Spring. Politically charged hip-hop, with its spirit of resistance, is the latest manifestation of this phenomenon and

has become the soundtrack for the pro-democracy movements around the Arab world, from the streets of Gaza and Tunis to Cairo and Damascus.

Musically speaking, Palestinian hip-hop is a direct blend of urban American hip-hop and Palestinian musical influences. Palestinian hip-hop artists often rap in English as well as in Arabic, and artists like DAM even rap in Hebrew. The purpose of rapping in English, as well as in their native tongue of Arabic, is to allow the Palestinian experience to be comprehensible to an audience beyond Palestine. The Hebrew lyrics have a similar intention, to reach a society that is increasingly uncomfortable with the "Palestine under Israel issue," which refers to the continued presence within Israel of the indigenous population of Palestinians. Palestinian hip-hop in Hebrew is an eye-opening reminder to the Israelis that the ostrich-like policy of hiding their heads in the sand – in this case behind walls – is not a solution, and that the issues of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the rights of Palestinians with Israeli passports need to be addressed.

The Palestinian hip-hop scene is primarily concentrated in three locations: Gaza, the West Bank, and pre-1948 Palestine. DAM, a three-piece collective from Lod, can be said to be the original pioneers and heavyweights of the Palestinian hip-hop movement. They have been credited with launching Palestinian hip-hop into the international arena, having started rapping in 1998. DAM, who have been featured on MTV and in magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, have collaborated with hip-hop artists such as the socially-conscious Talib Kwali, whose musical output has become a hot topic in academic discourse, and have inspired a multiplication of artists throughout the regions of Palestine. Operating in the area of Ramallah,



Shadia Mansour, the London-based, self-titled 'First Lady of Palestinian Hip-hop.' Photo by Ridzdesign - <http://ridzdesign.com>.

there is also the well-known Ramallah Underground, and in Gaza, We7 and Palestinian Rappers, among many others.

Although hip-hop is predominantly a male domain, female Palestinian hip-hop artists are an important alternative voice, both in their status as the indigenous Palestinian minority within Israel and as a minority group within the Palestinian hip-hop community. Among DAM's female counterparts are Arapeyat, a duo from Akka, and also Abir Zinati from Lid. Although they are a minority within the Palestinian hip-hop community, they

have achieved popularity and respect as the few female Palestinian hip-hop artists who operate in Palestine.

Female rappers in Palestine emerged as a musical force since its origins, with double acts such as DMAR, whose debut song "School" was an immediate regional success. Conveying universal themes of frustration with school, and highlighting the specific challenges they face as Palestinian students in Israeli schools, they have achieved resonance with their audience both inside and outside Palestine. Male Palestinian hip-hop artists have shown immense support

and respect for their female counterparts and have tried to fill the void that exists in female Palestinian hip-hop, through collaborations of their work.

With the proliferation of Palestinian hip-hop artists, and the existing female hip-hop artists such as Arapeyat, DMAR, and Abir Zinati setting precedents for the future generation of Palestinian female hip-hop artists, we are likely to see a growing and evolving trend of women's participation in the genre. In the words of original female hip-hop ground-breaker Roxanne Shante, "Rap is co-ed now," and Palestinian hip-hop has proved no exception.*

Palestinian hip-hop is not alien to tradition since it draws upon Palestinian classical and folk musical influences, but it is also a fusion of two different musical vocabularies, Eastern and Western. Neither one has been sacrificed or threatened, but instead each has developed into an original form of refashioned heritage. In many ways hip-hop relates to the protest music that emerged during the Intifadas of 1987 and 2000. The protest songs were a simple form of music, usually based on the well-known folk songs and effectively used as a form of information dissemination.

The political struggle became a constant theme in Palestinian *ughniyya siyasiyya*, "political song." Traditional folk lyrics were substituted with political lyrics that became a running socio-political commentary of the resistance to the Israeli occupation. With an all-embracing oral tradition that permits music to freely reflect the socio-political trends, Palestinian hip-hop is consistent with these trends and is an authentic extension and development of the Intifada songs that preceded it.

Since pre-Islamic times, oral poetry has been endemic to Palestinian as well as other Arabic cultures, a communal expression of values and folklore. As such, the Palestinian rap tradition shares commonalities with its African-American counterpart, which narrates

historical stories and the values and cultural markers that shape those stories. Palestinian hip-hop combines local vernacular customs with facets of African-American hip-hop such as scratching (a technique used to produce distinctive sounds by moving vinyl records back and forth by hand while they are playing on turntables, and MCing (spoken or chanted rhyming lyrics).

Local and regional dialects and vernaculars feature significantly in Palestinian hip-hop, defining a unique Palestinian sound. There is a strong connection between rap and *zajal*, which is a form of strophic folk-sung poetry. *Zajal* is performed by two poets, in a call-and-response manner, in an attempt to outwit one another, comparable to free-styling in hip-hop where two hip-hop artists duel with rap.

Palestinian hip-hop may be a new genre of Palestinian music, but it builds upon the old as it incorporates the new. It combines traditional Palestinian instruments (the *ney*, *oud*, *qanoun*, and *tabla*), and sentiment, rhythmic patterns, and rhyming structures with urban American hip-hop influences such as rapping, samples, beats, and vernacular.

Palestinian hip-hop is not a nostalgic affair. As a movement with rising momentum it has created a community for young Palestinians that transcends national boundaries and traditionalism in music.

Colonised, persecuted, and oppressed peoples will always find a way to chronicle their own history and struggle. Palestinian hip-hop is part of that effort. Rapping about Palestinian identity beyond the boundaries of the Palestinian community bridges the distance between Palestinians and Arabs, in general, who live within Palestine and the Arab world as well as in the diaspora, whose paths might not otherwise cross.

The appeal of Palestinian hip-hop is yet another assertion of the power of music in human affairs. The late Yasser Arafat used to say, "The Palestinian National



Palestinian hip-hop pioneer Tamer Nafar of DAM from Lod. Photo by Ridzdesign - <http://ridzdesign.com>.

Movement is not only the gun of the freedom fighter but mainly the pen of the writer, the brush of the painter, the words of the poet." Now that the Palestinian side has abandoned the dialogue by arms and resorted to the arms of dialogue, the Palestinians' cry for freedom expresses itself more and more through the music of their composers and musicians.

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* There have been many collaborations between Palestinian hip-hop artists and those of the Arab world. For example, DAM have worked with the Palestinian-Syrian group *Refugees of Rap* on the track *Ahkee*, which talks about the experiences of four rappers from Yarmuk Refugee Camp in Damascus. Tamer Nafar of DAM has also extended his work into outreach projects.