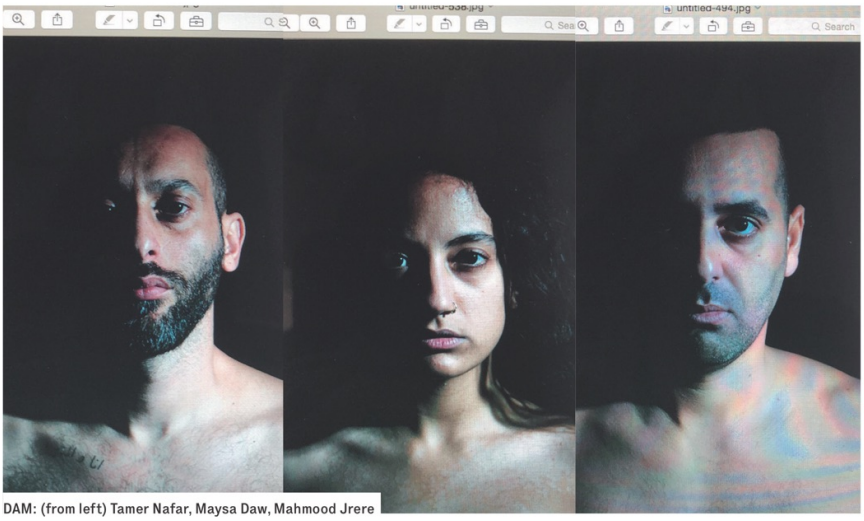
Global Ear

Sparked by the groundbreaking MC crew DAM, hiphop is now the voice of disaffected youth in **Ramallah** and the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. By **Courtney Yusuf**



DAM: (from left) Tamer Nafar, Maysa Daw, Mahmood Jrere

20 years after DAM first brought big beats to Palestine, you can hear hiphop everywhere in the region: in the smoke-filled house parties of the de facto capital Ramallah; up in the clouds in the skate park of Nablus; in the bars beneath the stars in Haifa on the Mediterranean; and in dusty Khalil where the kids are out drifting. From the West Bank and Israel, to Gaza and beyond, hiphop Palestinian style is now as varied as the people that make it. The beats are abundant: sweet and euphoric shami synths, twitching loops of cityscapes and soundtracks, classic 1990s styles, you can find it all here. And when the Auto-Tune of the taxi radio is just right, the pink summer sunsets can bring South Central to the West Bank, Cali to Pali.

The story of DAM – it stands for Da Arabian MCs in English, but the word also means blood in Arabic and eternity in Hebrew – begins in 1999, in the Palestinian area of the city of Lod in Israel. The crew was initially based around Tamer Nafar, Suhell Nafar and Mahmood Jrere, and today, on the eve of their third album *X*, Maysa Daw is the group's latest member. Does hiphop offer Palestinians today what it did for DAM back then? "No doubt," affirms Jrere, "it's a form of music that lets you express yourself with no limits!"

For Shams Eldeek, a rapper in Ramallah's Straight Outta Palestine, what the style offers is clear: "You know man, Palestine is a crowded place and there's a lot of guys with not a lot of work to do. People might not know how to write but they can do hiphop. It's a shelter. When you speak the people really hear you."

Hiphop thrives on honesty and attitude. It was DAM's earth-shattering anthem "Meen Erhabi" ("Who's The Terrorist?") that first showed Shams Eldeek the music's power. A defiant hit that blew up amid the toxic cloud of Islamophobia kicked up by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, its searing frankness and relentless critique racked up over a million downloads. For Eldeek, they said it like it is: "That's the power of hiphop man."

Way back in the early 2000s, Tupac Shakur and Public Enemy were DAM's hiphop idols. Today, Tamer has a new model: "The biggest name in hiphop right now is Kendrick Lamar. He's very poetic and political. Thanks to him and J Cole, conscious hiphop is back in the mainstream and for me, personally, I'm very blessed to pay attention to the details they deliver. I really take them with me everyday."

If the genre demands speaking up and calling out, DAM's new album *Ben Hanna Wa Maana* does not shy away. It concerns Black Lives Matter and Me Too as much as the Arab Spring and Donald Trump. Quick-stepping between wedding music and a march, "Milliardath" ("Billions") jumps to a tight dabke-beat as the group swing between bars about the money spent keeping people apart and the power of minorities united. "Prozac", the album's opener, is "about being openminded about being openminded," argues Maysa. "Prozac is a Western drug, not a medicine. We know the Middle East has problems but their ideal is not ours." "Real Enough" is about self-examination and was inspired in part by Jay-Z opening up about his lesbian mother ("This was such a taboo in hiphop!"). Another standout track, "Mariam", with its punchy *"Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, Bismillah!"* refrain is built upon a stripped back beat made for driving at night. It offers a grounded message of hope: *"Yes we live in darkness but it's a womb, not a tomb"*.

Telling it how it is is no easy thing. For generations, Palestinian rappers have had to be wary of Israeli authority attention landing them in jail. But for those living in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority is increasingly a force to be reckoned with too. In the wake of the latter's controversial 2017 Presidential Decree on cybercrime, Palestinians have had to be even more careful about what they say on social media, lest they disturb "social harmony".

One of two solo tracks on the album – the other performed by Suhell Nafar, who is now based in Brooklyn and part of the editorial team of Spotify's Arab hub – "Maysa Spoken" ends the album with a steely, punctuated volley on the struggle of an Arab woman and her body in the white man's world. Daw, having previously faced threats for sharing a stage with men – "I don't even have to go on stage, just look at my inbox on Instagram" – has come to appreciate the power of the platform. "I really believe in the message of DAM," she says. "I used to get annoyed when people just booked me because I'm a Palestinian woman, sometimes without even knowing my songs. Now, I've come to recognise what opportunities that provides me with."

Platforms and venues are critical for a healthy hiphop ecosystem. For Shams Eldeek in the West Bank, without an internal market for selling music, "You just make money from doing live shows and that's it. Except for selling T-shirts or CDs on the street. And we don't really have festivals or parties just for hiphop." DAM's Jrere has been on the case. Three years ago, the rapper co-founded the Palestine Music Expo, an event centred on copyright and live music workshops and panels climaxing with an industry-facing showcase. Its 2019 edition is to be held in Ramallah in April. With ten artists signed to labels and tours after the first year alone, Jrere and his team are "trying to do something with social impact, to push and build an infrastructure. This will take time but we're moving."

Palestinian hiphop is clearly doing something right. In last year's documentary *Palestine Underground*, Boiler Room followed a series of hiphop and techno producers, DJs and collectives, as they overcame the division of the West Bank and Haifa and assembled for a roaring party in the heart of Ramallah. Featuring Muqata'a, a godfather of the Ramallah scene, the live show included Al Nather and Mukammarak, and attracted over 260 million live-streamers. It was Boiler Room's biggest ever.

The benefits of breaking barriers are certainly not lost on DAM. But for Tamer Nafar, walls not only divide Palestinians – they exist between them and the Western world: "I have to say, I always feel jealous when I read interviews with The Beatles and no one asks them about the UK. I know I need to understand that I'm not that privileged, that the UK is a colonial place that built a lot of borders between me and the world, and that I need to work out how to break them. I just want people to look at us not at who we are but what we did, not that we just wrote about Palestine but how we wrote about it. I'd like to think that if there were no occupation, we'd still be artists and still have something to say." ☐ DAM perform at London's Jazz Cafe this month: see Out There

Guillermo Camacho