



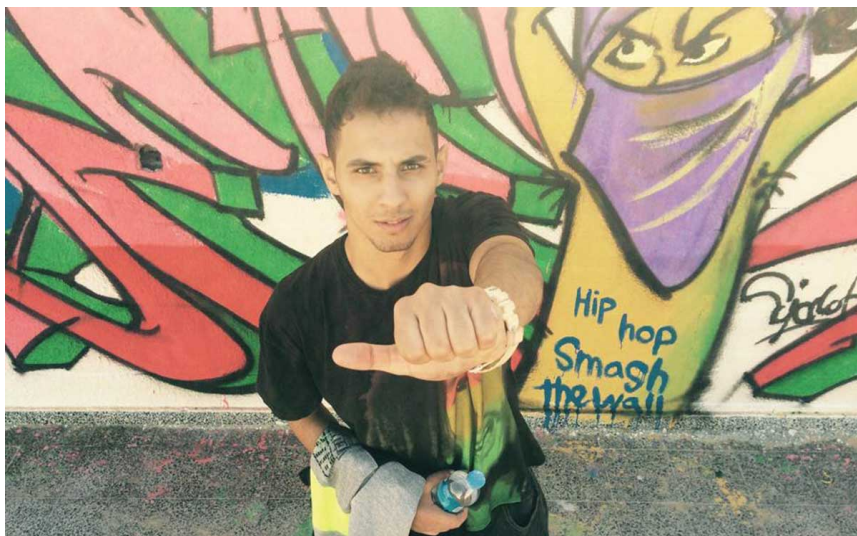
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New documentary puts Palestinian hip-hop in the spotlight

Naima Morelli
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After the world premiere in Holland, the documentary will tour a few festivals, including a Palestine cinema festival in Houston, Texas, and will have its Italian premiere in Rome in April

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Arriving in Rome by train for an interview with director Giulia Giorgi, I find myself at Stazione Termini. A few months back, the station implemented security measures and had multiple walls installed between the fast and slow trains, and another set of panels dividing the commercial area from the platforms. Passengers now have to weave through this labyrinth and are forced to make lengthy detours. At the same time, free Wi-Fi has finally been installed in the station. People might have difficulty getting from one part of the terminus to another, but, in the virtual world, they are already connected.

With this metaphor in mind, I sit down with Giorgi to talk about the release of her documentary, "Break the Siege" (Baburka Productions). This uplifting 20-minute film gives an insight into the Palestinian hip-hop scene. The storyline follows preparations for the "Hip-Hop Smash the Wall" event which took place over the course of one week in Ramallah and Jerusalem in 2014 and brought together hip-hop artists from Palestine and Italy.

"Hip-Hop Smash the Wall" featured both established and emerging artists. The locals were street artist Hamza Abu Ayyash, rappers and beat makers Anan Ksym and Rami GB, Achelous and MCs like Murad Abo Ahamd, MC Gaza, Al Hoss Basha, Hadi Hawad, and a number of Bboy, including Shadwan Krayim. The Italian artists were rappers Lucci, Don Dieogh, Coez, and Kento, graffiti artist Gojo and break dancers Xedo, Chimp and Telemare.

Giorgi explains that the hip-hop scene in Palestine has emerged in the past ten years and is now flourishing. Many young people are turning to this subculture to express themselves, even though they have no chance of making a living out of their art.

Besides the obvious difficulties posed by the Israeli occupation, Palestinian hip-hop artists face many other challenges. For a start, it's difficult to find good materials for graffiti or recording sessions. Travelling outside Palestine is extremely difficult and artists also face ostracism by the conservative fringes of Palestinian society, who see hip-hop as a Western evil. For these reasons, the local scene ends up being less well-known than those of neighbouring countries.

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“Break the Siege” aims to remedy this. Giulia Giorgi is very close both to hip-hop culture and the Palestinian cause. Besides having studied Arabic and travelled extensively in the region, she has been breakdancing since she was a teenager. Her first spell in Palestine saw her collaborating with the pioneering local hip-hop group DAM. She has since returned repeatedly to the country. When she heard about the “Hip Hop Smash the Wall” project — organised by Eleonora Pochi and the Assopace Palestina association — she put her mind to documenting the Palestinian scene.

Giorgi was able to see how hip-hop culture had developed in the previous ten years: “In the beginning, when DAM started, rap in Palestine was more about resistance.” Today, she observes, together with more militant fringes, a stronger desire for normality is emerging. “Palestinian youngsters want to fall in love and have fun with their friends. They might have political ideas, but they are not necessarily willing to articulate them artistically. They just want the freedom of being themselves.”

This attitude shouldn't be confused with disengagement. Palestinian hip-hop artists don't want to be defined solely by their hardships. They reclaim their right to express themselves as individuals. “Of course, hip-hop can represent an escape valve for their anger. But it can also be a place where they are able to recreate themselves — a place to forget the harsh reality, if only for the length of a song.”

This perspective comes out clearly in the documentary, which doesn't address the political as directly as one might expect. “Palestinians are usually represented in the media as either victims or as terrorists,” Giorgi tells me. “I wanted to avoid these stereotypes and recount Palestinian kids' aspirations, dreams and necessities. After all, these are not so different from those of young people all over the world.”

According to the Italian director, the wonderful thing about hip-hop is that you can go to the other side of the world and find someone who is into the same things as you. “Everywhere you go, you find brothers and sisters who grew up with similar ideas and values to your own. It goes beyond the culture of provenance,” she explains. “People invite you to spend time with them, jam, paint and dance together.”

Roman graffiti artist Gojo, who participated in the project, was indeed impressed by how inclusive the graffiti scene was. “In Italy this sense of community has been lost a bit throughout the years. In Palestine, though, it is still very strong.” He ascribes this friendliness to the culture and also to the fact that there are still relatively few people who are into hip-hop, so support comes naturally.

The Italians participating in the project all had a prior interest in the Palestinian issue and some of them had also been activists. This was a fundamental premise. “No one wanted to capitalise on the fact that we were in a place that gets a lot of media attention. We honestly wanted to work together with the local community,” explains Gojo. For this reason, nobody was interested in creating graffiti on the West Bank barrier, convinced — like all Palestinian artists — that such a gesture would serve no one.

“If you want to paint with the Palestinians, you paint where Palestinians live,” says Gojo. “It doesn't make sense to buy all your materials in Jerusalem, spend the night in Tel Aviv, pass through the checkpoint, paint on the Palestinian side — making sure to be seen — and then go back to Israel.”

In Gojo's view, many artists visiting Palestine are motivated by visibility rather than by a genuine interest in Palestinians. “It's about taking advantage of people's suffering for your own agenda, for publicity.” Furthermore, as Palestinian graffiti artist Hamza points out, it doesn't make sense to be writing messages of peace on the Palestinian side, rather than that of the nation with the army and weapons.

Because of the occupation and the consequent fragmentation of the country, the hip-hop scene can't help being a bit scattered. This leaves the internet as the main source of information, reaching and influencing young people long before their peers can do so in person. “For this reason, a distinctive Palestinian style, arising from a local community, doesn't really exist,” observes Gojo. “But bear in mind that, with globalisation, this has become true almost everywhere in the world.”

What Gojo has brought home from this experience are important encounters with people: “They walked me through this very complex place and allowed me to understand it a bit more through a common language which was not English, but art.”

The “Smash the Wall” project will see a second part in which Palestinian artists visit Italy. An album in both Arabic and Italian, which was recorded during the week-long event, is also about to be released.

As for the documentary, “Breaking the Siege” ends with a beautiful image: the concluding hip-hop concert in Ramallah. While the show attracted a large audience, it wasn't possible for the Camp Breakerz — the much-awaited group of dancers from Gaza — to join the rest of the group. However, the internet helped once again to “smash the wall” virtually. A live video of the Camp Breakerz was projected in real time during the concert, as a backdrop to the dancers on stage. In these final scenes, the social role of art emerges clearly, emphasising dignity and courage, healing wounds, creating community and spreading awareness abroad.

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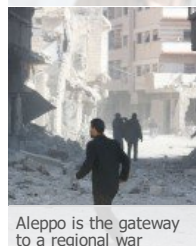


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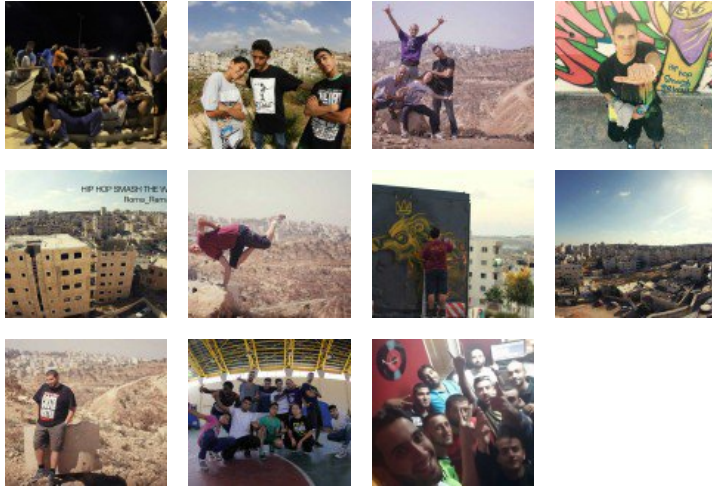
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Giorgi was very keen on targeting the documentary not only to those interested in Palestine, but also hip-hop culture in general: "We wanted to spread the message beyond the usual people who take an interest in Palestine."

After the world premiere in Holland, the documentary will tour a few festivals, including a Palestine cinema festival in Houston, Texas, and will have its Italian premiere in Rome in April. "By organising post-screening debates, we want the public to participate and connect with the artists in Palestine over Skype," she tells me. The hope is that, by smashing the virtual barriers over and over again, the physical walls will eventually be brought down too.

See below trailer for 'Break the Seige' and also images



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