

# ↘ Street language & experience

Words: Jackie Oweis Sawiris Pictures: Tanya Habjouqa

Fierce, feisty and fresh, Ramallah Underground are a rap collective that literally span the globe – but they all call Palestine home





Sample a philosophy, scratch it with attitude, add the beat of nationalism, mix in the words of one nation from four different cultures, spin it along the miles that stretch between the Arab world and Europe and you've got Ramallah Underground, a rap group whose spirits lie in Palestine but whose lives are spread across the world.

Ramallah Underground's most active members – DJ Sotusura, Boikutt, Stormtrap, and Aswatt – may all hail from the same Palestinian town, but they have never actually lived in the same country at the same time. Amman-based DJ Sotusura, Ramallah-based Boikutt, and Vienna-based Stormtrap evolve their beats, samples and raps in cyberspace, before they're delivered to Dubai and sound engineer Aswatt. In the 12 years they've known each other, the closest proximity these childhood friends have known is right now, in front of NOX's tape machine. Despite the miles between them, Ramallah Underground continue to assemble their songs with an impressive fluidity; DJ Sotusura mixes together the sounds of his 1,000-plus records, spinning out Arabic-flavoured hip hop, electronica, jazz, and trip-hop, with the raps bursting over the top without compromise.

Love of music was the motivation to form Ramallah Underground; politics is the impetus that keeps them going. But DJ Sotusura makes it clear that the situation is no artistic prop: "We don't want people to think we're using Palestine to listen to us," he says. "We're not using the Palestinian cause as a platform for our music." Politics are, though, unavoidable, particularly for rapper Boikutt, whose influences on his MySpace page include Intifada I & II. "90 per cent of what I rap is political because 80 per cent of life in Palestine is political. If you live in Palestine you breathe politics, you live politics. That's the main reason why our music is mostly political – because our lives are political. I may not see my girlfriend 'cause of politics; I may not eat 'cause of politics. I don't watch the news anymore. I just look out the window."

Stormtrap, who writes, produces beats and maintains Ramallah Underground's website, has a more pragmatic approach. "Music has helped us get by a lot in our lives, and without it we wouldn't have much hope for the future. We don't want to end up leading boring office lives. We're looking for something beyond that – and music is the key."

But there's absolutely no anger in Boikutt's words, no pessimism in DJ Sotusura's quiet tone, and certainly no stereotypical "yo yo bling bling money, whores, and cars" commercial gangsterism in their songs. Just the plain, simple truth of their feelings about living inside, and outside, their occupied homeland. Some of wider Ramallah Underground crew – there's more than 10, including producers, mixers and fixers – are not even out of their teens, and none are out of their twenties, yet they carry a humorous optimism that belies their serious demeanour. But they also have a serious demeanour that transcends their age. Though they want to be heard, sure, but they refuse to go the way of many independent artists and compress and mould their rap to fit into the big-label, mass-market pigeonholes created for hip hop in recent years.

Hip hop was born on the streets of New York City, where expression was a high-priced commodity minority communities could ill afford. It had a cause behind it, to say out loud what wasn't allowed to be said, and the moment it caught on, it caught the ears of moneymakers at record companies who spun it to an audience who lived the aggression, not the poetry of its protest. DJ Sotusura and Boikutt agree. "Mainstream hip hop didn't start out commercial but became that way because producers know what sells and they make rappers talk mainstream. Hip hop isn't about murder, cars, girls, jewellery, and crime; that's what it's become because that's what sells."

But selling doesn't mean you have to sell out. "Staying independent, staying organic, allows us to rap about what we want to rap about, which is more conscious, meaningful subject matter than what a lot of the big names rap about," says Boikutt. It's even more simple to DJ Sotusura; "Lyrics are the manifestations of your soul. Sell your lyrics and you sell your soul."

The danger in going commercial for Stormtrap is that they'd "have to remove the 'underground' from Ramallah Underground, and we certainly don't want to go there. Our goal is to keep making music, not money. We see it happening again and again, many artists falling into that trap, losing focus on the music due to financial motivation, but that happening to us is most likely impossible."

Ramallah Underground may just be headed for uncommercial commercial success, despite not even having an album to call their own yet. Individually and collectively, they have recorded and performed with other artists such as the UK's Unpeople and Slovo, California's Bukue One, France's Pilophaz, Switzerland's Vince Vegas, Austria's Domino, New York City's Spiritchild and most recently with Lebanon's Desert Dragons on *Shreet Mix Vol 1, 961970*, a collaboration reflecting their increasingly international reach. Little, if any, money has changed hands; their work with other groups and individuals is a show of solidarity, support and the desire to push each other forward. It's visible even in the name of their latest collaborative venture: "shreet" is Arabic

**"The media twists everything but it can't twist someone's art or music. And that is why resistance is better through art and music"**

for "tape"; 961 is a Lebanese area code; 970 a Palestinian one.

Between them, the collective – and Ramallah Underground is very much a collective rather than a band – has performed individually in Washington, London, Amman, Ramallah, and Vienna. As a group they were set to perform together in Ramallah for the first time at the end of July. The show in Palestine will be DJ Sotusura's first trip to the place his family have always called home. "I can't wait. I think my peak of creativity will be in Ramallah. I can feel it coming."

The disparate lives of the band-that's-not-really-a-band started out as a website, then evolved into a collective and now aims to become a fully-fledged label. The initial point of Ramallah Underground was to give local artists a platform, at least in cyberspace. But Boikutt, who started making beats on his Playstation when he was 11 years-old, found that the website's music section was "empty". "So we started putting our own music up and it's getting better every day." Ramallah Underground, the collective, was born. And they're always on the lookout for kindred spirits to kick in.

Behind the scenes, other friends and family support and struggle alongside them as they develop a proactive, constructive voice. Yazan, whose roots lie in Haifa, is a graphic artist who designed Ramallah Underground's logo as well as flyers for Boikutt's UK shows last year. He will become more active designing artwork for Ramallah Underground as their visibility increases. He may not share their vehicle for expression, but he certainly shares their views.

"I don't think we should give up promoting ourselves," he says, categorically, "and we should do it through art, music, any creative means necessary. The media twists everything but it can't twist someone's art or music. And that is why resistance is better through art and music." ▶



His first public exhibition, currently on display in Amman's Blue Fig restaurant, is a case in point. It's a fusion of retaliation and support of "my land and my people's rights. I'd like to go check out the arts scene in Ramallah. I think people appreciate art there more than here."

And appreciation is an issue, particularly to Boikutt, who disdains the practice of artistic genocide in the region. "If you have an unknown artist from the USA and a known Arab artist, the unknown American artist will get more audience only because the USA is automatically looked upon as better. Countries usually defer to its people rather than to foreigners. But it's not like that in the Arab world."

It's an interesting statement for someone using a distinctly American form of expression, and who raps as often in English as in Arabic, with even French set to make an appearance in future work. But Arabic, he insists, remains the favoured language. "What am I doing if I'm not showing my identity through my music? Maybe rapping in Arabic will let people feel 'they did this for us.' And that is what's happening. People are responding. Particularly to a track called "Khalini A'eesh" (Let Me Live). With pride in his gentle eyes, DJ Sotusura says "People who hear it feel like Boikutt is talking to them personally."

Boikutt and Stormtrap's first performed in Ramallah last summer, opening for California rapper Patriarch. One month later they had

**"Hip hop uses metaphors and word play. Rap is poetry and poetry isn't in your face"**

their own gig, a small venue with a big feel. They went into it believing and fearing people would pan their attempts to vocalise their collective experience. But it was quite the opposite; they impacted on the audience, who were ultimately their audience, their people. "We're in Palestine – this is happening! We felt like we achieved something"

That something may be a lot bigger than any of the crew imagined; since last year's show, the words on the streets are Ramallah Underground. "Last year's Ramallah show gave us motivation to work even harder on something bigger and better this year," says Boikutt. Although anything "bigger" may be difficult due to the ongoing events in Palestine, where the exchanges of rhetoric reached their customary conclusion with the wholesale invasion of Gaza. Ramallah Underground finds themselves again stuck between a rock and a hard place. Boikutt knows his city and knows "the locals may see our shows as just wrong because Ramallah is being destroyed and 'you guys are partying'. But we have to do it." The attention is a good thing; the consequences of it may be yet another challenge the guys have to rise to. "Ramallah Underground isn't necessarily something a lot of people will like, especially those in politics. You know how the Middle East is. But all governments hate hip hop because rappers aren't afraid to talk about everything and governments don't want people talking about anything."

Their response to a question of silence versus candour is immediate. Boikutt acknowledges he would be happy to hear others speak out, and "I worry about being outspoken but someone has to do it. And anyway, I'm giving people the idea and they can interpret it how they want. Hip hop isn't about being blatant – it uses metaphors and word play. Rap is poetry and poetry isn't in your face."

But for all his poetry, Boikutt isn't forgiving to anyone's governmental or personal politics, including those of his own people. "There are a lot of criticisms on my tracks. Of Israel, of America, of Palestinians. Not all Palestinians who live in Palestine or abroad represent me. Lots of Palestinians live in a bubble, but that bubble is political, too."

DJ Sotusura, who recently started writing, is just as candid. "I have a lot of things I want to say, basically about whatever I feel is unfair. Like the Palestinian situation, the Arab situation, the media, war and genocide in general. I want to let the world know through our music what the situation is. At the same time we don't only rap about politics or Palestine. It's the main subject but we're living our lives so we're gonna rap about our lives,"

Hip hop is enabling these few guys with a lot of ideas to transcend the barriers of space, time, and stereotypes of their own culture without sacrificing the very foundations of their musical and political belief systems. By creating a dialogue that's perceived to be Western while remaining true to their roots, Ramallah Underground are out to engage the world. Stormtrap's enthusiasm leaps off the page. "Hip hop gives me energy, motivation, and knowledge. It is a means of natural self-expression with the power to massively influence people around the world."

In keeping with their music-making dynamic, Boikutt takes it one step further. "We want to represent Ramallah; then Palestine, then the earth. We're all from the same planet aren't we?"

And DJ Sotusura wraps it all up with typical precision. "Music," he says, "is the ultimate response to politics." ■

## Khalini A'eesh (Let me live)

### Verse

I try to forget the past life  
But I put my hands in my pockets and they're empty  
And my mother is still not satisfied  
Let me live  
Everywhere I go I find a checkpoint  
Get treated like sh\*t without having any weapons or hashish  
And I don't want to take no charity from no-one  
Before I put my hand out to beg I will end my life  
Pull the plug (of life)  
But no there is hope, I will stand on my own two feet  
There is no more time for playing around  
The clock is racing towards the future  
And I will not accept anything less than my FULL rights  
I wont smile and accept sh\*t  
I will explode like weapons of mass destruction  
So if you want to risk it know this!  
I won't be quiet while you're sittin' like a mad man spendin' money  
They tell me to forget, and they sit quiet  
Not able to express themselves with words  
That are not comin' out like constipation  
Well the message will be spread because Boikutt is here...

### Chorus x 2

Let me live, no matter where I go I reach a checkpoint, get humiliated even if I'm not carrying a weapon or any hashish

### Verse

Actin' like you're Palestinian but scared to come and visit  
Scared you lose your big house and fancy car  
If that's the case then take off the hatta  
And don't speak in my name  
You f\*\*k sh\*t up from far away while the bullets go into my body  
You speak politics? We speak street language and experience  
From a point of view of people that know people that were buried  
You want Palestine? Well so do I  
But I am also a human  
And I wanna eat, drink, sh\*t  
And go to sleep  
But you don't even want peace  
You want to keep fighting and live a dream  
While you're sittin' in USA and Europa  
Talkin' about the stolen land  
And the political situation is choking and being killed  
You turn off the TV, but we are still there  
You wanna free Palestine and us to go get f\*\*ked? NO  
Because your stupid dreams one day will eat you  
You have a few millions under your ass  
Looks like the situation is increasing your profit  
Look where the money takes you  
Back and forth  
If you try to remember anything from you're real past  
It makes you forget

