Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Love, lust, music, tarab, activism. These are some of the topics that artists are tackling at Shubbak Festival. Marhaba I'm your host Nooriyah and this podcast is a window on contemporary Arab arts.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Hip Hop is one of the fastest growing genres in Arab music. Spurred by technology, the internet, the revolutions and globalisation. Arab Hip Hop has been making waves locally and internationally. This year, Shubbak Festival hosts some of the hottest new wave Hip Hop artists and performers, including The Synaptik, Felukah, Bint7alal and Philip Rachid who I will be speaking to later on in this show. Hip Hop is the stage where Arabs and the Arab diaspora's consciousness, identity, politics and art are being expressed. How did the art form make its way to, and spread in the Arab world? This episode explores the history of Arab Hip Hop, the current sound of Hip Hop, and what the Hip Hop movement shows us about a changing Arab culture.

Unknown

Now by the 90s Hip Hop was no longer confined to block parties, basements and parks like this. It became mainstream.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

and Hip Hop. American Hip Hop music began to see popularity in the Arab world in the early to mid 1990s.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

The first beats constituted Arab Hip Hop emerging from North African communities residing in France, the epicentre of European Hip Hop. In by laws promoting local content, French Hip Hop grew to become the mouthpiece for disaffected and refugee youth, with the groups Saïan SuperCrew and IAM, which had Arab members (music). This music was a blend of traditional American Hip Hop. The French styles popular at the time, and Raï a form of folk music that originated in Iran and Algeria, from Bedouin shepherds, mixed with Spanish, French, African and Arab musical forms, which dates back to the 1930s. Around this time, Hip Hop also grew in the Francophone sphere in Morocco and Algeria, spilling over to Tunisia and Libya. (music) Not long after the mid 90s similar collectives began to bubble up in Palestine, including my favourite DAM or the Arab MCs (music).

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

At this point in Egypt, Hip Hop was less popular, but a small buzz led to an emergent BBoy or breakdancing population. Relegated to an underground status by uninterested major record labels and suspicious governments Arab rap crews took to the internet to upload content online. However, it was with the explosion of satellite TV at the turn of the century, that Arabic Hip Hop really thrived. With the arrival of MTV Arabia and Western music channels, the genre found a growing audience that was increasingly receptive. In 2016 Arab Hip Hop solidified its mainstream presence in the Arab world with Hip Hop Na.

(music)

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

I remember watching this reality TV show as a kid on MTV Arabia, hosted by Fredwreck and Qusai, a Saudi Arabian artist (clip).

Unknown Speaker 5:00

(clip) Man we just can't wait to get out there and really feel the vibe out here and learn about the Hip Hop scene and get to know everybody and see what's going on out here.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Hip Hop spread to new territories in the Arab world, such as Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf, creating a new sound to their North African and French predecessors. Palestinian- Jordanian artist, the Synaptik pioneered a new wave of sound for the Arab youth. He started making music at the age of 17 (music).

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

When he was studying for medical school, there were two pages open on his computer screen, one about internal medicine, and one for an audio workstation. If anything, he says medical school helped to fuel his fire. his stage name the Synaptik was appropriately derived from his fascination with the nervous system, and his personal experience with ADHD. He is known for his honest lyrics merged with his effortless singing voice that alternates with rap. After releasing his first album, and having dozens of local, regional and international shows The Synaptik has cemented his status as one of the pillars in the Hip Hop scene of the region. This year's Shubbak Festival, commissioned in partnership with MARSM, sees The Synaptik and Felukah, two of the most sought after rap talents, combining their dynamic music in two new collaborative songs, (music). This is Nefsi.

The Synaptik

Because of the nature of the collaboration, it was about like very existential subjects, you know, because things that I and Felukah have in common. Like I mean, you know, like, she, she comes from a very, very different background than I do, but we're both humans and we have all these, you know, like common things. So Nefsi is about like (inaudible), I want to just be myself, you know, I just, I just want to be able to be real, you know.

(music clip)

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

There has been evident stigma attached to Hip hop and rap in Amman, Jordan. Because of this, Hip Hop shows don't usually draw big crowds and are often held in small clubs in family neighbourhoods. Police will be called to shut down events following complaints of loud music. The Synaptik estimates that four out of every five shows end this way. Despite these challenges, he describes a current thriving Hip Hop movement in Amman.

The Synaptik

East Amman right now is a bit more alive. You know, like, there's a lot more the market is much bigger, you know, there's a lot, a lot of like young kids who are growing up listening to like, Hip Hop and doing graffiti and skateboarding. And it's cool to see that there's this culture there now. And I think because there's like big rappers now big Arab rappers, you know, and they have like, all this access. So yeah, it's a bit more. It's nice. It's nicer now.

(music clip)

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

The Synaptik believes that the evolution of Hip Hop throughout the region has continued to evolve over time. And its influence won't be stopping anytime soon.

The Synaptik

You had like old school Hip Hop, like things that sounded like gangster Hip Hop. And then you had like this long period of like, conscious Hip Hop, you know, that's like politically aware and it's about, like political issues. And then it got like, to the point where people were like making songs that were dissonant and stuff. And now right now, it's people doing personal like, songs that like about them and stuff like this, and it's very diverse. There's a bunch of different rappers and there's a bunch of new upcoming ones that are very, very exciting. So I think it's a period of renaissance some sort of, you know, it's like gonna be the next generation is going to be amazing. And this generation is just evolving. So it's, it's a very exciting period of time. (music)

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

This track you’re listening to his Allay'ateek, another fruit of the collaboration between The Synaptik and Felukah.

(music clip)

The Synaptik

The chorus: it means when in the middle of the night you find yourself alone may God give you patience. And then it says, if one day you find yourself far away from your people and your friends know that I got your back and then I say don't think that your fear for yourself is for you alone. Like this the eternal fear that humans have they will be afraid for themselves.

(music clip)

Felukah

It was really cool working with him. I love the beats that we had in store and I got super creative just thinking about the flows I could feel. It was really, really great.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Combining her Cairo heritage and her adoptive New York City Felukah is a rapper and poet whose work flies between Arabic and English. From classic Arabic musical icons, US Hip Hop legends and contemporary prose writers, she pays homage to her past and present exploring womanhood, diasporic cultures and her self expression. She was dubbed by Scene Noise as the neo soul artists bringing the Nile to New York, and by Azeema magazine, as the rapper inspiring a new wave of Egyptian woman. At the time of the recording, Felukah was in Egypt auspiciously sharing the mic with birds singing in the background.

Felukah

I definitely started writing at a very early age, just writing poetry, and soon realised that I really love dance also. And that combining rhythm and poetry is literally rap music. And I think I was just going through this phase of listening to Soundcloud beats and different things online, and thought about freestyling some of my poetry on the beats. And once I did that, I just felt like it unlocked something super special. And yeah, it was that moment where I was like, okay, well against all odds against all obstacles, I'm really gonna fight for this, and I'm going to try and do this for real. And my family have my back. That's the most beautiful thing about it.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Arabic Hip Hop included female MCs, through every generation. Women have emerged from Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and more.

Felukah

Forward we need more women on the mic, we need more women making and writing the shows that we're watching that are seeping into our consciousness. And we think about when we drive home. We need more women, just holding the pen and constructing the narrative that changes the whole psyche. That changes the whole game plan. And we need women in these fields so that we can change them to change the way we think we can finally have a safe place for women to have a frickin existence.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

More and more Arab women are entering the Hip Hop arena. One host from this year's Fierce Voices night brought together by Arts Canteen, in collaboration with Shubbak Festival is Bint7alal, an Arab rapper and producer who wrote her first verse at 15, in Arabic

Bint7alal

This one time I was sent a video on Instagram of a little girl just dancing to my song Bint and just vibing to the beat and the vibe of the song. And her mum sent it to me. And that made me really happy because I have little sisters. And growing up, there's a lot of misogynist culture, in a lot of music, also in Arabic music, and just being able to offer an alternative. It makes me feel like maybe we're doing something right. You know, like this, this little girl gets to grow up and not listen to how she's some pearl or some. Oh, I'm gonna protect you. Like, no, like, I'm a girl (claps) and I'm doing all of these things. And that really warms my heart. It's important because I cannot take away my experience as a woman from any output that I make. It's time to give this experience the way it deserves and in a scene that's male dominated, it's even more so important not to be a token woman.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Rooted in her homeland struggles, she tells her stories through lenses of decolonisation intersectional feminism and revolutionary notions whilst maintaining her signature indignant and nonchalant attitude. Bint7alal started teaching herself different forms of creative writing from a young age later being supported by some of the best rappers in the game.

Bint7alal

I started writing when I was nine, I kept it with me for so long. When you're an artist, you come to a point, before you start putting your shit out there where it gets stuck in your throat, it's like, okay, there's something that needs to come out, and I'm not sure how it's gonna come out. But it needs to come out before it kills me, you know, and I hooked up my keyboard. I hooked it up, but I didn't understand why it wasn't making any sound, I didn't understand that I needed a DAW, you know, like a digital workstation. And from there, I started learning. And honestly, I got I got a lot of help from the guys, you know, Haykal, Mehrak, Malkom, Merk, Riyadhiyat, Al Nather they they were all there to like, listen and give feedback. All this all this feedback really helped me like get shortcuts. So that definitely gave me the space to just do it.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Both The Synaptik and Bint7alal consciously choose to rap in Arabic with the intent of being heard.

Bint7alal

It's definitely a conscious choice in the sense of choosing your audience. I'm talking to my people. And when you talk to your people, you talk to them in your common language.

The Synaptik

So I just wanted to be heard. And I know if I wanted to be heard, I have to have the people next to me hear me first, you know.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

One of Bint7alal's songs that captured my attention is Kthar for both its sound and lyricism.

Bint7alal

(music) So Kthar was actually a part of an EP that's very close to my heart. It was basically recorded and done before the social media campaign for Sheikh Jarrah. Because the ethnic cleansing of Sheikh Jarrah has been in the process for a while before people heard about it. I have one of my really good friends Issa bi7kijazz is from Sheikh Jarrah, actually and we were talking a lot during COVID and he was telling us about what's happening. So it was on my mind, obviously, Palestine is always on my mind, right? I just let it all come out. Because I was angry, it was very frustrating, you can't really do anything. So I just wrote and wrote (music).

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Her inspiration comes from music and sound used in resistance movements throughout history.

Bint7alal

I see this Hip Hop movement in the region, I see a lot of similarities with the jazz movement in the 1920s, right, because when, when all public spaces are stripped from your culture, and music really can be a space to say what you have to say, you know, actually the song Kthar the original 'tarweed shamaly' what comes in the end the sample in the end, it's called malala and malala used to be this, you know, hen parties, women back in the day before 1948 would just have different like competitions in there and you know, they would like do malala which is adding the lamb or the L to all the lyrics to code them. And then in 1948, when when everything went down, years later, a lot of the soldiers and colonisers you know, they spoke Arabic. So there had to be a way to communicate without them understanding what we were saying. So women would go and stand in front of prisons, and they would start singing malala. So the soldiers would be like, oh, who are these crazy women that are standing here, but in reality, they were getting messages across into the prison using that. Music can and is and has been a very integral part to resistance.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

The theme of identity is central to It Ain't Where You From written and directed by Philip Rachid co-commissioned by Shubbak Festival and the Arts Centre at NYU Abu Dhabi. The film included the primary talent of the young Gulf Hip Hop scene, including rappers, producers, and breakdancers Bboys and Bgirls based in Saudi, UAE and Bahrain, from Lebanese, Saudi, Iraqi and Kurdish-Iraqi backgrounds. What is very different in the Gulf scene is that it is very driven by the immigrant experience. The film is an intimate lens into each artist and the challenges that they encounter, to find their way. We get to know what it takes to follow their passion, and how Hip Hop gives voice to a third culture generation.

Philip Rachid

For me why it's very unique to make this story here in this region is because we are so close to the birth moment of Hip Hop, as it was in the Bronx, where it was a culture that was created by the Latinos and the Black people from the community who were trying to find a voice. They were living in a burned down city with no opportunities, no future perspective, no money, and they were just trying to find a voice and identity and scream it out to the rest of the world. And I believe that is exactly what we are in right now in the Middle East. You know, there's so much going on. The first thing we're trying to do is survive. You know, we were trying to survive war we're trying to survive the situations of not growing up in your own country. Some people grow up without a family. And and here we are trying to try to tell our story.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

The film included many moving stories of how Hip Hop has become some of these artists, family, friend, school and a source of discipline from BGirl Lana Ramadan speaking about breakdancing while living in constant fear in Lebanon, to Mohamed Al Khafaji aka SpikyFlave, sharing how Hip Hop supported him through loss and grief.

Philip Rachid

This film is my love letter to Hip Hop you know. Hip Hop means identity, finding yourself. It's not about copying the guy from the video clip and wearing the same cap with the same dress. No Hip Hop is a culture that makes you look inside. Who are you? And how are you going to use your cultural background to create your identity and share it and express it through arts. It's it's like the school that doesn't exist. It's the university that doesn't exist, right. So that's why street culture, we help each other grow. We help each other to go through traumas and express it in your art. Right? Every time I went through something, you know, in life that made me feel really, really down, I dance because it gives me energy. And it lets me. It lets me express myself. It lets out my anger and frustration. It lets out my happiness. It's about celebrating life as well. Why do we dance at weddings? Why do we have tribal dances that we do when we welcome new guests, right? Why do we dance for the rain? Because it's a spiritual thing. And we should not forget that.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Before starting to shoot the film, Philip had no idea what would be awaiting him. As the global pandemic broke out, he was forced to surmount unexpected challenges that taught him much along the way.

Philip Rachid

So I had to remotely direct a lot of the scenes. You know, in Bahrain, Saudi in Lebanon, I had to remotely discuss the scenes that I wanted, rehearse certain things, talk through it, do the interview, do the interview again, do it again, because I wanted natural responses. So that was very challenging and tough and what I learned from that is how do you get your money to get it? How do you get the people motivated? You have to be that engine. Because if you don't believe in what you're doing, then it will not happen.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Music is a powerful lens through which to view emerging identities and movements. Hip Hop offered a language of empowerment, self-reliance and pride. Hip Hop in the region doesn't just reflect the evolution of music culture in the Arab world but is also a lens for a changing identity.

The Synaptik

It's just the sound of the generation and our generation is like very divided. And it's very, you know, there's a huge identity crisis everywhere in the Arab world. And I think there's a collective identity that's kind of forming right now, throughout the evolving Hip Hop You know

Bint7alal

There was this like old polarisation that you're either fully Arab or you're trying to be a Westerner. A lot of people had to throw themselves in, like trying to blend fully and, like dilute themselves into Western society or leave their own uniqueness to completely dilute themselves in what our society decided is what's what. But I think we're all redefining what it means to be Arab, what it means to be Palestinian, what it means to be from our region. And we're doing it on our own terms.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

We are in a period of Hip Hop renaissance in the region, with an evolving current generation and an exciting new wave of artists. All artists agreed that due to the internet and a booming market for Arabic Hip Hop, we are now able to create art for us and by us.

The Synaptik

I think it's just the most amazing thing really, is that right now, there's a market for Arabic Hip Hop to be consumed by the, by the Arabs, for the Arabs, mainly, you know, so that's nice, you know, they can just do whatever they like, and get paid for it. And you know, and not have to make any compromises. And I think that's something that we need to protect.

Felukah

So many artists are coming up and just rocking in their own native tongue in Arabic, or mixing Arabic on English, like, just pushing the boundaries on what we ever saw before. And I think it's a really exciting time to be an independent artist, because really, the sky's the limit, like you can upload a song, you can make your own artwork, you can connect to people online and build a team. It's just really liberating for no matter where you are in the world, because of the internet. It's pretty cool.

Bint7alal

There's so much that's still been that's still untapped. And I think we're gonna see a massive revolution because the internet gave platforms away from big, massive labels that just decide for the artists what they need to do. Right now I record from my bedroom, I make all my music in my bedroom. And 10-15 years ago, no one had this access, right. You had to get signed by some big guy who saw you had to go through a lot of crap, which takes away so much from the ingenuity of the art. It was really helpful to do things from just from me to the source straight.

Presenter: DJ Nooriyah

Hip Hop marks an era of expression. It doesn't just reflect the evolution of music culture in the Arab world, but a lens for changing identity, shaped by the increased connection we experience using social media, online music platforms, and transnational exhibition spaces, such as the one provided by Shubbak. The digital sphere becomes our playground and our stage. This is the voice of the generation, and a new wave of Hip Hop is here to stay. Watch the space. Thank you for listening to the Shubbak Festival 2021 podcast series produced by Nooriyah and Gaia Cara matza. The music featured on this episode was produced by Bashir Honeini. You can find out more about Shubbak at shubbak.co.uk and don't forget to like subscribe and leave a review if you like this episode.