

Middle East: Muqata'a 'Our music is a way to disrupt, to be a glitch in the system'

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The Palestinian rapper on the power of Ramallah's dance culture documented in a new film, *Palestine Underground*

[Muqata'a](#) is locally known as the "godfather" of the underground hip-hop scene in Ramallah, a city in the West Bank, Palestine. A former member of the acclaimed collective Ramallah Underground, he plies a brand of experimental hip-hop - based on sampling and looping the sounds of his city - that has been heralded for influencing a new generation of Palestinian musicians. His family are Palestinian refugees who moved between Nicosia, Cyprus and Amman, Jordan, and eventually came back to Ramallah. Muqata'a features in a new documentary, *Palestine Underground*, which follows members of the growing subterranean dance culture as they put on DIY parties across the region. It's released online on 30 October via [Boiler Room](#).

"Muqata'a" means to disrupt, or boycott. How does your music reflect that?

I sample classical Arabic music in my records. When our land is being taken away, our culture is muted. So it's a way to try and disrupt that - being a glitch in the system is very important. When your heritage is being attacked by the state, you have to find ways of being remembered, so I sample a lot. A lot of the Arabic music or old records in my grandparents' homes in Jaffa and Safed, for example, were taken when their house was confiscated. So this is a way to bring those sounds back. I have to find a lot of these vinyls abroad now - the UK, France or Greece. If I'm very lucky I might see them in a second-hand shop here, but it's rare. One of my current favourites is *Al Henna* by Layla Nathmi.

What other sounds have you sampled?

Some Israeli military checkpoints. I bought a Tascam recorder a few years ago, which is a recording device I used to try and sample the sounds around me. It looks a bit like a taser, so it's a bit dodgy carrying that around, so now I just use my phone, which is way more discreet. I just put it in my pocket, start recording and walk around.

How would you describe the club scene in Palestine?

We don't really have a club culture here - the parties are in cafes, or in restaurants or bars mostly. We don't have actual clubs, so it's more like small events here and there, and on the weekends we bring a sound system. But they get shut down a lot. New music and the dance culture here is political because it's trying to put Palestine on the map. When you hear it, you feel that.

In the documentary, there are a lot of references to the "sound of Palestine". What does that mean to you?

It's hard to define it as one sound, but I'd say it's definitely aggressive - it's about fighting back; it's the response to the sound of checkpoints and military helicopters and all these things we're used to hearing daily. I've never been to Haifa [in Israel], but from what I hear it's a different music vibe

there too, to do with the different environment, living directly under the Israeli government. But I'm not allowed to go there because I live in Ramallah, so I need a special permit. I describe my music as instrumental hip-hop, but others have described it as weird/ syncopated/glitchy/dark/noisy. It's my own interpretation of hip-hop and my surroundings.

What is the current agreement you have regarding the midnight curfew?

The West Bank is under Palestinian authority and there is no agreement, actually. It's just that at midnight the police come to our events and shut them down for no reason. They just say, "You're annoying the neighbours" or "It's too loud". But when more mainstream events happen here, such as big parties for the elite rich people, they are allowed to continue. Weddings go on until 4 or 5am and they are really loud!

What do you think is the power of dance music in a place like Ramallah?

In Ramallah, and in Palestine in general, there's a dance culture, but it's not just about dancing - we do a lot of events where people are just sitting down and talking, or watching. It's more than the music. The DJs, producers and rappers coming together is what's powerful, and more and more artists are popping up.

The documentary also flags up new young talent, such as the [Jazar Crew](#), female techno [DJ Sama](#), and Arabic trap producers Al Nather. How does it feel to see a new generation of artists representing Palestine in this way?

It's good to have a spotlight on talent. There is not only one sound - there's stuff happening across electronic dance music, and hip hop and the generation is being heard in its own way. I mean, it's been happening for such a long time, it's important to see how much you can do with how little.

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