

# Orchestrating Hip-hop Culture Online: Within and Beyond the Middle East

Anders Ackfeldt

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*art, identity, Arab Spring, rap music, music*

Middle Eastern and Islamic themes have long been salient features in the history of hip-hop culture (Daulatzai 2012). Since the early days of hip-hop Muslim artists have used hip-hop to deliver what have been perceived as Islamic messages. Well-known hip-hop acts have for example sampled the voice of Malcolm X, quoting Five Percent lessons in lyrics or, a particularly vivid example, the featuring of belly dancers, Muslims in prayer and Quranic verses on display in the music video for Eric B and Rakims seminal "Paid in full" (1987). Audio-wise, Middle Eastern beats have been used as the foundation for several mainstream hip-hop songs. One example is Timbaland's use of the Egyptian song "Khosara," as the foundation for Jay-Z's monster hit "Big Pimpin'" (2000).

While hip-hop artists around the globe have identified themselves with the aesthetics of American hip-hop culture, American (at times Muslim) artists have converged visually, textually and acoustically with the rest of the Muslim world.

In many ways the transnational aspects of hip-hop is embedded in the creation myth, which was formalized by, for example Jeff Chang in his influential *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005). According to Chang, African-American and Latino b-girls and b-boys came together for street and park parties in the Bronx, New York to the break beats of Dj Cool Herc's legendary Jamaican style sound system (the Herculords). At least a decade before the rise of the Internet, movies like *Style Wars* (1983), *Wild Style* (1983) and *Beat Street* (1984) inspired

youth around the world to start their own graffiti crews and to write their first bars. Around the same time, Lionel Richie performance of “All Night Long” backed by break-dancers at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics finale had a massive impact on the spread of break dance around the globe. The American television program “Yo! MTV Raps” (1988–1995) was another crucial element, which cemented hip-hop as global movement.

The rise of the World Wide Web wired together artists and the estimated 150 million plus hip-hop consumers in the world, forever changing the global landscape of the culture (Motley & Henderson 2008). As a result, the record companies lost at least some of their power over the ways in which hip-hop music was distributed and promoted. The hip-hop group Public Enemy not only provided the blue print for political hip-hop, they were one of the first groups to realize the potential of the new means of communicating with their fans; releasing their music in digital formats online, starting blogs and inviting fans to participate in the creative process of making their music.

Today hip-hop fans can meet, share ideas and music from most corners of the world. Beats and colabs are up for sale online, young and aspiring MCs can, if they have money, buy a beat from a famous producer or a verse from a famous, more established MC in order to boost their own career. True, hip-hop was globalized before the Internet became an integral part of public life but the Internet has certainly changed the ways in which hip-hop culture is produced, marketed and experienced.

This current issue of *CyberOrient* brings together academics active at Scandinavian universities focusing on hip-hop from different aspects and fields. From different perspectives the authors seek to make sense of the impact, functions and dynamics of Middle Eastern and/or Islamic representations in hip-hop music online, both within and beyond the Middle East.

Andrea Dankić’s (Stockholm University) contribution “Hanounch style resistance. Becoming hip-hop authentic by balancing skills and painful lived experiences” is a carefully preformed ethnographic study of dialogically constructed authenticity between a Swedish independent hip-hop and

reggae artist and her music followers. The article looks at how this construction in turn influences the music-making process, art production and artist's identity. The article analyzes the importance of Middle Eastern cultural identity, found in the music and the album imagery as a part of the construction of authenticity.

The article "Muslimhiphop.com: Constructing Muslim Hip Hop Identities on the Internet" by Inka Rantakallio (University of Turku) is the first in-depth investigation of the website muslimhiphop.com. The site is often mentioned when it comes to discussions on the relationship between Islam and hip-hop culture. Muslimhiphop.com features Muslim artists from multicultural backgrounds from Australia to Sweden and from the US to Iraq. The article discusses how Muslim identity and Muslim hip-hop are constructed discursively and how artists on the website navigate and balances their religious beliefs in Islam with their artist careers.

Mark Levine (University of California, Irvine & Lund University) provides a comment to this special issue that reviews the history of hip-hop across the Middle East. He attempts to provide a theoretical grounding for the role of artistic production in the revolutions using the work of the Frankfurt School theoreticians Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin on the production, circulation and consumption of culture.

Finally my own contribution to this issue addresses Islamic themes and semiotics in video clips published online. Grounded in a doctoral project that explores the complex relationship between Islam and the global hip-hop culture, it is my belief that Islamic themed hip-hop video clips provide an excellent illustration of the dynamic and changing nature of Islamic traditions. On top of this, I argue that they provide a window into positions of alternative ethics rooted in Islamic traditions shared by young Muslims in urban environments in the US and Europe as well as the Middle East.

This issue also includes two book reviews. Kalle Bergren (Uppsala University) reviews Monica Millers "Religion and Hip Hop" (2013, Routledge) and Johan Cato (Lund University) reviews "Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning, and Morality in a Muslim Society" (2012, Ashgate) by Pierre Hecker.

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