

Palestine’s defiant dance music scene is blooming at it’s own pace and on it’s own terms. We spoke to some of the key players in Ramallah’s underground musical community, to find out more about the challenges they face, the spaces they’re claiming as they’re own, and the beliefs behind the beats.

Words HARRY STOTT, *Photography* ADLAN MANSRI

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Creative Palestinians in particular would more readily recognise their identity in the things they make and the art they produce, and there are vibrant pockets of culture within Palestine where furiously modern music is being created by a new generation of young artists. In Ramallah, the West Bank’s de facto capital and its most potently cultural city, dance music is their outlet. Behind closed doors and on private terraces, DJs pump out the thrum of techno at house parties and events in makeshift locations. It’s a space to let go, to transcend the frustrations of their everyday reality, and it’s offering young musicians and enthusiasts a glimpse of the freedom they are denied elsewhere.

Ramallah is a small city with a population of around 200,000, located just north of Jerusalem. Like much of the Arab world, the most popular styles of music locally tend to be either traditional, like the folk-based ‘Dabke’, or the region’s jaunty, commercial pop — not exactly the most inspiring genres for young creatives with an international outlook. Having travelled and sampled the euphoria of dance music, local DJs and musicians have come together to make their own underground scene, and it’s been blossoming over the past few years.

Trying to put specific dates on a musical community which has grown as organically as Ramallah’s, is a bit of a pointless task. It’s expansion has been truly underground, unsullied by market forces and the calculated rudder of labels and PR. If anything it’s more akin to the block parties in the 1980s Bronx that spawned hip hop than anything in the hyper-speed 21st century.

As in New York, Ramallah’s party culture really began in people’s homes. “Dar stands for house in Arabic, and that’s where I started playing music, in different houses around Ramallah,” explains Dar, the moniker of DJ Derrar Ghanem. He’s a founding member of the Ramallah based multidisciplinary collective Union and, by day, works as the chief

outreach officer for the social entrepreneurial network, Build Palestine.

“We were throwing house parties, organising them and playing at them, really putting in everything: lights, sound... My partner Karam was also with me from the very start”. Karam Ali, who makes documentary and feature films alongside his DJing, started Union with Derrar and Ramallah’s most famous musical export, the globally renowned techno DJ, Sama.

Though all three of Union’s founders are dance music obsessives, Derrar and Karam’s day jobs point to Union’s wider raison-d’etre: inclusivity. The collective doesn’t only include musicians, there are designers, producers, architects and even a carpenter among their ranks. While they officially formed last year, they have been at the vanguard of Ramallah’s underground scene since they began putting on events in the city a few years back. “The first time we played outside the house was around 2015 or 2016.” says Karam. “We had maybe 10 people dancing to techno. People were still figuring it out, like, ‘What the fuck is this? What are these sounds? And how do you dance to it?’”

Ramallah’s youth, it seems, are quick learners. Karam says that techno’s recent spurt in popularity is becoming exponential: “It’s flourishing, and we see a lot of young talents coming up. There’s Dima Bamieh, she’s been playing like for maybe a year or so, but she’s already better than a lot of DJs who have been doing it for years! Then there’s this young guy in his early 20s, YA Z AN. He’s based in Berlin but is part of the collective too. There were barely a couple of DJs a few years ago, but now there are like 20 or 25”.

Early hype is all well and good, but Karam is aware that they always need to be looking to continue their expansion. “We’re looking at what really restrains us,” he explains. “We want to be able to use public space. We want to push to be able to host international DJs and have an official, legit party that is not considered in any way questionable. The future plan will also include some workshops that will not relate only to the collective, so we have more of a grass roots growth, linked to the community.”

Not being restrained also means having ambition beyond Ramallah’s city limits, and Union have already developed strong links with other cities in the West Bank and Israel. These symbiotic connections have proved to be significant catalysts to growth of each scene, allowing all involved to learn from one another, and grow in turn.

Bethlehem, a smaller Palestinian city on the southern side of Jerusalem, now too has a burgeoning scene, thanks in no small part to the experiences people from there have had at events in Ramallah. “I started Radio Nard in 2014 because there was mostly bad songs on the local radio,” remembers Laith AlBandak, the online radio station’s Bethlehem based founder. “I thought, ‘Why not do a radio so people can listen to proper music?’ I first started putting together playlists and we went live with Radio Nard for the first time in 2015. We were playing loads of different stuff: reggae from Tunisia, afrobeats from Morocco, folk from Iran, rap from Palestine — we focused on not so well known Arab styles.”

What started as an online radio station has grown much like Union, and Radio Nard are now the first collective to put on events in Bethlehem. Laith says he was massively inspired to do this by the stuff he saw going on in Ramallah. “[In 2014] The Bethlehem scene was not there yet,” he says. “It was completely out of it at that point. So I started throwing events in the name of Radio Nard in Ramallah. That was in 2017, but it wasn’t until recently, November 2018, that it all started properly in Bethlehem. Now we are hosting local and international acts — El Peche from Brazil is playing here in two weeks! It’s growing and growing and it’s been really beautiful. We started very few of us, but now there is a handsome bunch of friends at each party we throw.”

The connection between Ramallah and Haifa, a vibrant coastal city in the north of Israel with a traditionally large Palestinian population, has always been strong, regardless of music, but the link is now invaluable to musicians in both places. “Haifa is the main city inside [Israel] that actually has a very hip, open scene,” Karam notes. “You go to Haifa



Adlan Mansri, (2018) — Palestine

PALESTINE’S NEW UNDERGROUND



Adlan Mansri, (June 2018) — *Palestine Boiler Room*



Betuni Center
Ramallah, (2019) —
Google Street View

“We want to cover other parts of our community through our art: sexuality, abuse, money. All the same things that are going on in all of the world.”



Outside Radio
Ramallah Bar,
(2019) — Google
Street View

and you feel like you’re in Berlin. I remember once I played at this party there for the anniversary of Kabareet, one of the main clubs in Haifa. Me and Ali, one of the DJs in our collective, played a set their and dropped some really nice beats under Palestinian poetry. It was very revolutionary: there were foreigners and even some Israelis at the event hearing sound bites of this Palestinian lady speaking against occupation over a techno beat.”

The difference between the lives of Palestinians born in Israeli cities like Haifa — who hold Israeli passports and can therefore travel comparatively freely — and those born in the West Bank is pretty stark. Karam says that in Haifa, “The relationships between Palestinians and Israelis are a little bit more chill, so Palestinians can travel, they can have parties, they don’t have this police restriction. They’re not as criminalised as we are in the West Bank, and that let the scene develop more easily. But the moment they came to Ramallah for the first time — people like Jazzer crew and other DJs from Haifa — they found a very fertile scene. People here wanted to party like crazy, and so our connection was established early. And that pushed the scene here to develop, because naturally people will start to DJ and like different music when they see a bigger community outside their own.

“For some years there was also a festival up north, organised by some of our friends in Haifa.” Karam continues. “Mukti was the only Palestinian festival and it was illegal — the Israelis wouldn’t permit it. Most people you saw there were Palestinians and they were coming from all over the map: Nazareth, Jerusalem, the West Bank. A lot of those people were illegally there, but it was this feeling of all us Palestinians coming together in a big fucking rave, realizing the differences and the environment that we each live in. We felt so close, like music could actually bring us back together. That also created a very strong connection, and that today is unbreakable.”

Going to events like Mukti and the nights run by Palestinians in Haifa clearly galvanised the community in Ramallah, and artists from the city are keen to proselytise about the keen collaborative spirit that binds the scene together, and not just in terms of techno. Derrar tells me that there’s wide support for the scene’s growth from artists of all musical creeds, that supporting fellow musicians across genres is more than collaboration, it’s a necessity:

“It’s a small scene, but we believe it’s an ecosystem. So the techno community does its events and it looks at what other events are happening, and we all work together in this small, tight space and make sure that all crowds and all genres are fed and growing equally. Because you can’t grow alone, right? You need to have different styles — one shouldn’t conquer the other. We don’t want to make everyone listen to techno, we want you

to stumble upon us. That’s why we collaborate with other collectives. So if there is a hip hop show, we’ll be there, and vice versa.” Instead of rivalry, in Ramallah, there is harmony.

Makimakkuk — the nom de plume of Majdal Nijim, a Ramallah based DJ, singer, songwriter and close friend of the team from Union — stresses how diversity within each different group has contributed equally to the expansion of dance music in the city. “Some people have the experience of going into music completely on their own as individuals, and then joining in the community later,” she explains. “It’s different, what [musical] background each person is coming from, but it has become a community... I like to see it as ‘communities’ more than just one, because there is a uniqueness to each particular work of art. Not everything is static and looks the same, each person has their own sound and their own attitude, their own way of writing or DJing.”

Makimakkuk references groups like Saleb Wahed and BLTNM as Ramallah’s premier hip-hop collectives, and the talent found there and elsewhere means international tastemakers have begun to sit up and take notice. Derrar told me about seeing Jamie xx at a recent gig in one of Ramallah’s oldest event spaces, Radio, and hanging with him afterwards at “one of the wildest house parties we’ve seen in a long time”.

There has been interest from organisations like Boiler Room too. Their 2018 documentary, *Palestine Underground*, focuses on the lives of people like Makimakkuk and Sama, before putting on the first Boiler Room party in the West Bank. That event felt like a watershed moment for Ramallah’s nascent scene, the thing to bring techno and dance music out from its subterranean bunker. However, Derrar says that they want to continue keeping things on the downlow, maintaining the special aura their events are currently enjoying.

“When I travel — I go on techno tours to places in Europe or anywhere — I don’t want to go see no museums,” he jokes. “I want to know where the underground is. So you go find it, right? And now you could come to Palestine, to Ramallah, and you’ll find that community. You’ll find that space. You might need to spend the month, but you’ll find us.”

But the discrete nature of Ramallah’s scene is not only a deliberate ploy; it’s equally predicated on controls to nightlife put in place by the Palestinian Authorities. “We don’t have actual nightclubs per say, because we have noise and time restrictions,” Makimakkuk notes. “You have to take permission from the police and, generally speaking, at midnight there is no more noise allowed. So anybody can call up the police at midnight if they hear any noise, and the police will show up.”

Karam has seen this happen a number of times, but explains that the consequences often differ: “Sometimes the police would

come undercover at the parties and search for drugs, but it really depends on the individual. I remember one party when the police came around at 3:30 in the morning. They were going crazy, like, ‘How the fuck is this is going on three and a half hours after the curfew!?’ Usually what happens then is they take the owner of the place, but luckily that time they didn’t report him. If they did, he would have had to go through court and pay a lot of money to the PA [the Palestinian National Authority] as a fine.”

Puritanical policies like this are not a problem exclusive to Ramallah, with similar measures a scourge on night time revellers the world over. Talk to Australians about Sydney’s infamous “lockout laws” and they’ll tell you how it has stymied the city’s once booming nightlife, while the closure of London clubs has drawn the ire of dance music fans and damaged the city’s night time economy to the tune (or lack thereof) of £200 million over the past five years. Having established venues where people can listen to music, dance and let themselves go is the cornerstone of many scenes — just look at Berlin — and in Ramallah, the lack of these defined spaces was, for a long time, a barrier to growth. Finding a solution to this problem was something that Union was founded upon.

“We wanted to find and to hear more of our sounds [in Ramallah],” Karam recalls, “We wanted to move a little bit, and to have organised gigs in different places outside house parties. We were all going through a battle with many things around us: authorities, venue owners, pulling the crowd and playing a new music that is not really popular or mainstream here.”

In their quest to find a spot where they could gather and play, Union took matters into their own hands. “For me it’s always been about spaces,” Derrar muses. “So we found a space for people to come in, to breathe, and listen to our art. We found a place in town and built it up — really ‘do it yourself’, just on the go. All these different people were coming in and helping put it together, and the outcome is now a safe space for people to gather. And not just to gather and party and leave, but a community that is coming there with an understanding that they’re all there to share a moment.”

Union’s events at their space in Ramallah — which Derrar describes as a “Kindergarten for adults”, with multiple rooms, stunning light shows and proper sound systems — has made it an eden for partying in what was once a barren city. The vibes, Derrar assures me, are consistently great:

“Me and Karam were in Rome and that dance floor was like a war zone, a battlefield bro. I was worried! We were in Ibiza, and that wasn’t fun either. But funnily enough you’re in Ramallah, and suddenly you feel like there is real dance floor etiquette here... I have respect



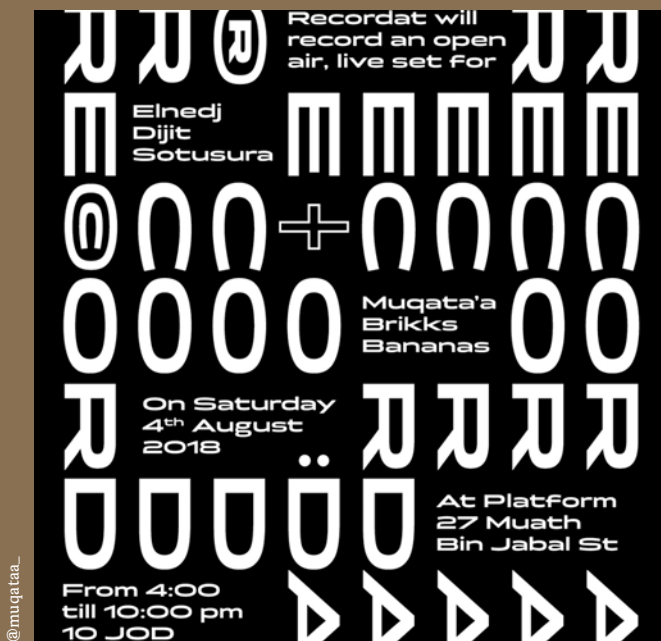
“It’s a small scene, but we believe it’s an ecosystem.”

for everyone else around me, and what you see is that everyone else is completely the same”.

Chilled dancefloors, collective action, happy, loved-up ravers: it sounds like the opposite of the stereotypical narrative that we're fed about Palestine. Gone are the ashes, dust and, most of all, silence.

Makimakkuk agrees that the scene's vibes are one of its most significant features, and that it's helping to expel the typecast depictions of Palestinians as only either passive victims or fundamentalist aggressors. It's also a counter to the notion that all Palestinian music must be necessarily politicised. "There are some people who want to address issues other than politics," she explains. "We have enough news, you know. So we want to cover other parts of our community through our art: sexuality, abuse, money. All the same things that are going on in all of the world."

However, try as they might to avoid it, the spectre of politics is never far away in the West Bank: towering walls, militarised checkpoints and barrels of guns see to that. In



such a tightly wound atmosphere, it's not hard to see why making music or even just going to a party is viewed as an inherently political statement. These events are visceral acts of unbridled liberation; a chorus of limbs proclaiming their autonomy as they writhe to four-to-the-floor beats.

Makimakkuk gets this, understanding that for some people, the all-too-real issues of daily life will end up manifesting themselves within their art. "Our political and social reality here has led us to what we are doing today," she tells me. "What do you call it, stagnant? When things are just... Nothing is moving. We



don't see how we fit in all of this. So it was bound that something different was going to come out. It came from political statements to many of us, and it came from completely non-political statements to many of us... But with all of this still comes a responsibility, because we live in a place where it asks so much of you."

The political situation in Palestine is certainly stagnant, but sometimes it even appears to be regressing. Only last year, the right-leaning government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu implemented the controversial 'Nation-State Law' that effectively renders Arab-Israelis (Palestinians who were born in Israeli cities like Haifa) second class citizens. It is now enshrined





Aerial view of Ramallah,
(2019) — Google Street View

culture through her work. Beatmaker Muqata'a, one of Ramallah's most prolific producers, is one of the biggest exponents of this view. His output, like last year's dark collection of hip hop beats *Inkanakuntu*, frequently samples classical Arabic music, and even features his own field recordings of Israeli military checkpoints. It's a sonic attempt at articulating the realities of the modern Palestinian experience, while also celebrating the region's rich musical culture.

Sampling or covering traditional regional music in order to preserve Palestinian culture isn't a necessity though. Makimakkuk believes that subverting the fusty traditions of Arab music, ones which are antithetical to the progressive sound of techno, has a similar outcome:

“[Arab music] was used before in an orientalist way, but now they're using it differently, they're deconstructing it. For example, there is some traditional Palestinian music that is sung by women in times of mourning. I can't listen to it anymore, it kills me, I just want to cry. So I want to deconstruct this. I don't want to keep crying, I want to do something.”

That “something” — an act of sustaining culture through art — doesn't have to come via a tokenistic sample. Makimakkuk thinks it is an act inherent to her experience of making music, DJing or simply just partying. “This scene, this electronic scene, has the will to dig back in its history and retrieve the lost archives of our culture.” She says to me, adamant. “Because our culture has been

systematically and on purpose... It is being dissolved, forgotten and stolen.”

The defiance that Makimakkuk gives off is tellingly similar to the politically charged genesis of the Ramallah scene's genre of choice. Techno too is a music born from opposition: birthed by pioneering black musicians in late '80s Detroit, where labels like Underground Resistance turned music into a conduit to facilitate political change. And to this day techno remains a banner around which many social movements have rallied, most notably in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. There, the queer club Bassiani, now one of the planet's premier techno destinations, has become a symbol for progressive Georgians against the conservative, post-soviet government, and a flashpoint for protest against corrupt ruling elites.

Techno has become a totem of defiance, so it's only right that it is defining the scene in Ramallah, and the music's symbolic status isn't lost on artists within the scene either. Palestinian labels like self-styled 'Freedom fighters of the booth', Harrara are putting out releases which throb with industrial depth, their black sound a statement on Palestine's political situation as much as their Soundcloud description: “Our sounds represent the reactions to the void... the oppression and the injustices on our planet”.

The new Ramallah underground, this hotbed of dance music in Palestine, is predicated upon dissent and subversion, a non-compliance that is at the heart of many Palestinian liberation movements. But conversely, it's rising stars refuse to become bogged down in the quagmire of politics, instead choosing to build their own spaces to set their own agendas, and for their growing community of musicians, DJs and passionate fans to gather in. To the thump of techno, they are looking steadfastly into the future, doing things for themselves and not waiting for permission. It's an approach to making music that is dynamic and unequivocal, forthright and direct, that Makimakkuk sums up best: “We've been victimised too long and we just need to move forward now. We need to find ourselves again and work from there. The world is moving fast, and we need to run.”



Opposite Radio
Ramallah Bar, (2019)
— Google Street View



Adlan Mansri,
Ramallah Bar, (2018) — *Palestine Underground*