

# ↓ Slingshot Hip Hop

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Eighteen seconds can change your life – or at least screw up an already hectic schedule fraught with changing flight patterns, last minute date changes, and an assortment of issues that go along with being the director of an internationally touring Sundance Film Festival 2008 Official Selection represented by sales agents Celluloid Dreams...



Only days before the Middle Eastern premiere of *Slingshot Hip Hop*, a feature documentary that takes an intimate look at Palestinian rappers living in Palestine and Israel, American-born Palestinian/Syrian artist and filmmaker Jackie Salloum is sequestered away in New York City. She's trying to figure out a financially feasible way to keep less than a third of a minute of Tupac's "Holla if You Hear Me" music clip in her film without adding several more thousand dollars to her already stressed credit cards. Multi-million dollar Western gangsta rappers and impoverished Palestinians living under occupation may not seem the most likely of cinematic cousins, but it doesn't take much digging to discover a very deep connection.

"Hip-hop was born in New York's south Bronx as its Black and Latino communities struggled to express themselves and maintain their own cultures while surviving racism, extreme poverty, and the physical division and destruction of their community through the imposition of a major expressway," Jackie explains. "*Slingshot Hip Hop* captures the historic moment when this form of music, now so transformed in the US by commercialisation, inspires a raw, grassroots movement of young Palestinians struggling under similar conditions. I have found that people in the US, who might not know much about the true history of hip-hop, actually rediscover its power through the eyes of these Palestinian rappers halfway across the world."

Jackie's own journey around the world to make what was to become the first feature-length documentary about the nascent Palestinian hip-hop movement is rooted in her own revolution against what so many first generations experience at the hands of overprotective immigrant parents in America. "My parents were reluctant to let me do anything outside of the house, and we didn't have cable television or anything like that. Things got boring and to entertain myself I would draw all day and make collages. My artwork first started out as very escapist and fantastical, reflecting my desires to get out and explore the world. I got over that phase once I moved away to go to college. I started taking objects that are fun and familiar, such as toys, gumball machines, and music videos, and injecting them with overtly political meaning and content. I love merging a pop aesthetic with punishing honesty. With my recent work in music videos, video art, and documentary, I want to challenge popular Western perceptions of Arabs and, in particular, Palestinians.

"As an Arab-American," Jackie continues, "this was something that for a long time I felt was too close for me to touch. Israel's brutal invasion of the Palestinian town of Jenin in 2002 pushed me to start creating work on Palestine. I've returned to my roots, now combining my love of US pop culture and my identity as an Arab-American and a diaspora Palestinian. Returning to my roots was tough. For many years I hated being an Arab >





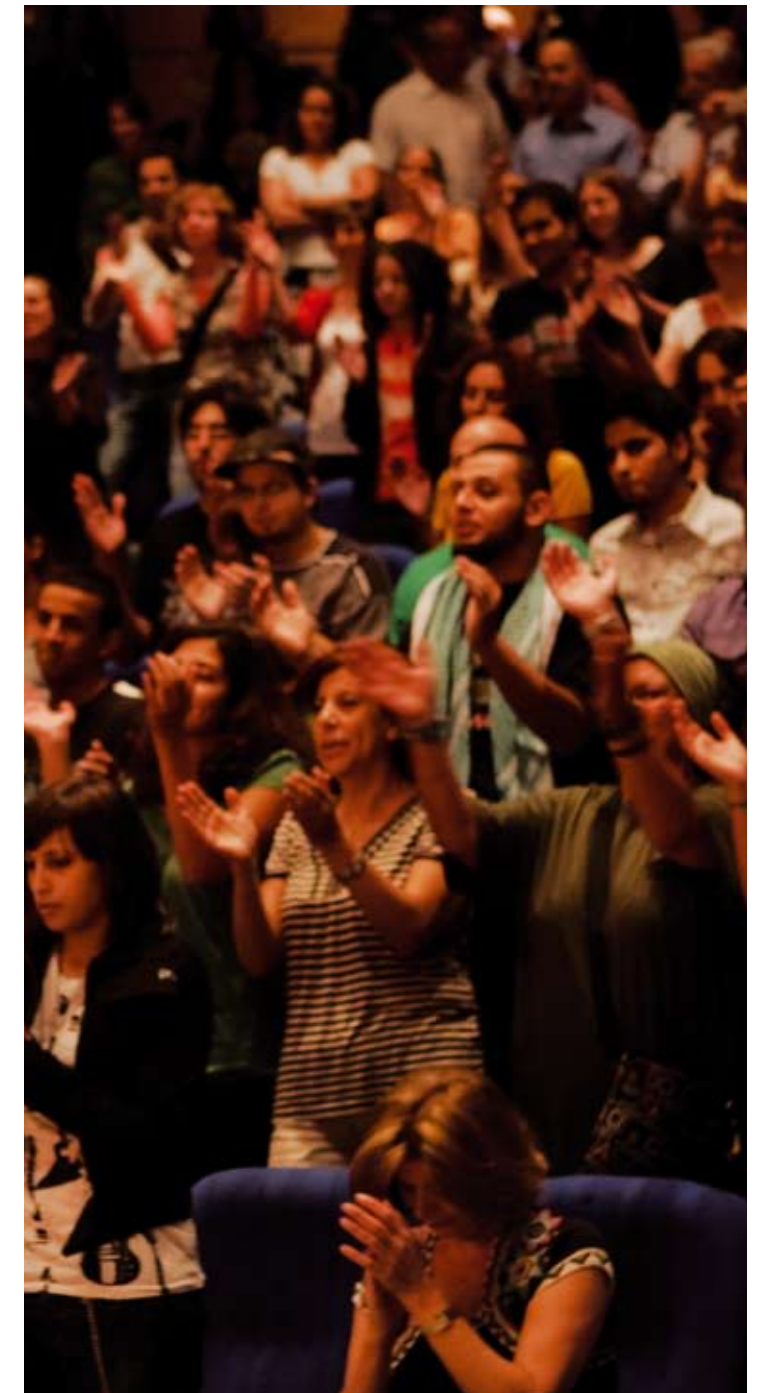
because everything I ever saw about us in the media was negative. This really angered me and I began to recognise that if I didn't like what was out there, I was going to have to make my own media."

So she did... and put it in the hands of the rappers themselves. "The process of making *Slingshot Hip Hop* has been completely collaborative. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the film is the fact that I left video cameras in Palestine with the rappers and they filmed each other, their families, their daily lives and their own shows. All the rappers were empowered to contribute to the creative vision and to participate in the actual making of the film.

"In this way, the rappers are contributing to the film, as well as using this as an opportunity to strengthen their own work and relationships with each other." It also gave Jackie unique vantage points in their world for the documentary. "Working so closely with the rappers, I was invited to join them in their daily lives and gain access to private footage from their first days rapping. Because of the trust we had in each other, and the rappers' desire to have me chronicle their emerging movement, I was able to include footage no one has seen before and won't be able to find elsewhere."

*Slingshot Hip Hop* weaves together the stories of young Palestinians living in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank as they discover hip-hop and employ it as a tool to surmount divisions imposed by occupation and poverty. The film focuses on twenty-somethings Tamer Nafar, his younger brother Suhell, and Mahmoud Jreri of Palestine's first hip-hop group, Lyd-based DAM, from their early, naïve recording attempts in an Israeli studio to fiery, sold-out shows in Europe. Aka Da Arabian MCs and meaning "immortal" in Arabic, and "blood" in Hebrew, we view firsthand DAM's politicisation with the outbreak of the second Intifada, their emergence as community leaders, and their years-long struggle to produce an album in spite of crushing poverty. We also meet Akka rapper Mahmoud Shalabi, solo R&B artist Abeer, female rap group Arapeyat, and Mohammed, Kan'aaan and Mezo of PR, aka Palestinian Rapperz, Gaza's first hip-hop group.

From the moment Tamer breaks it down into "DAM is 30 per cent hip-hop music, 30 per cent Arabic literature, and 40 per cent ..." and points to the bars on the windows of his bedroom, you realise there was never any stopping these three young men from hacking away at the walls of their prison with their rhymes, attitudes and determination to emerge as what France's *Le Monde* calls "the spokesmen of a new generation".



*Slingshot* isn't slick. It's as raw and unforgiving as the lives of the Palestinians – rappers or otherwise – portrayed in the film. And just as unsentimental – though you'd be forgiven for going a bit misty eyed every now and again. It is a film that despite – or perhaps because of – its hand-held, sometimes messy but always upfront camera and animation by Lebanese-American motion graphics animator Waleed Zaiter, is simply cool. Accessible. And staggering in its ability to clarify a complicated occupation and put a determined, hopeful, positive face to P-A-L-E-S-T-I-N-E. You know where you are and why you're there. Though not necessarily how it's going to be.

After five years, thousands of dollars, incomprehensibly difficult journeys (even if you've taken them) made even more difficult by the Israeli government's crackdown on the movement of Palestinian-Americans in and out of Israel and the Occupied Territories, all manners of guerrilla filmmaking tactics (editing on borrowed computers and borrowed time), Jackie kicked off *Slingshot's* Middle Eastern tour accompanied by DAM at the Franco Arab Film Festival in Amman. She then heads off to evoke her own brand of right of return – a kind of homecoming back to the land where it began.

"Wahad, tnain, theleteh – DAM hayati!" The Jenin refugee camp audience felt the love, and tossed it right back. The Nablus crowd, 5000 strong, proved to be DAM's largest Palestinian audience to date. PR were denied exit from Gaza to perform in Ramallah alongside DAM, Mahmoud Shalabi, Safa Hathoot and WE7, and although they were sorely missed, the show turned out to be a huge success. Several Israelis who saw the film, and saw in it for the first time the reality that is Gaza, declared *Slingshot* not only fit for television, but practically mandatory for all Israelis. And a pleasant surprise following the Nazareth show was the appearance of *Paradise Now* director Hany Abu Assad, who ➤

*This page and opposite: DAM perform in Amman's al-Hussein Culture Centre to a full house. One of the audience members said, "I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was such an amazing experience to see rappers who made a name for themselves outside and were making sure that they were understood in their homeland. It was simply awesome."*



said of *Slingshot*, "This is a gem." "I was flattered because I love his work," Jackie admits. "Actually, it means a lot whenever an Arab loves the film."

But also having to deal with hardship and a fair share of criticism is an occupational hazard. "Being an Arab-American woman trying to make an independent film with integrity has been really difficult. I struggled to get the resources and support I needed to undertake such a project. I even moved back home to Michigan and spent a year scooping ice cream in my parents' store by day, editing in their basement through the nights, and taking all their shop's profits for the making of the film. This is where the name for my production company comes from – Fresh Booza Productions. It has been amazing how many of my family and friends have contributed money, advice, skills, and other resources. However, in the art, media, film, and foundation worlds, it was difficult to get respect and garner much needed resources to complete this project.

"Other Palestinian rappers were upset with me because I didn't include them, but there's only so much room in a film. I also had to keep telling potential funders that *Slingshot* is not about Palestinians and Israelis coming together through hip-hop, even after I repeatedly explained the film is about Palestinian rappers living inside Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. And a few Arabs were offended when they heard the members of DAM speak Hebrew and told me I should dub them in Arabic. But these guys live in Lyd, inside Israel. They speak Hebrew too. This is the reality of the situation. This is how their lives are." And despite it all, including having equipment broken, items confiscated, and humiliations imposed by Israeli officials, "I didn't compromise."

Jackie Salloum's long road to making *Slingshot*, a film born out of hearing DAM's "Meen Erhabi" and subsequently making a music video/art piece for her MFA class (and, well, the rest is history), still feels like yesterday. "Where did those five years go?! It's been one of the best times of my life. I learned about the film industry and collaborating with people. I was lucky to find people who believed in the project enough to donate their time and talent – especially my cousin Rumzi, one of the producers and the person who started the project with me and Waleed, who supervised the visual effects. And the rappers of course. I made amazing friends; I'm so happy they're in my life. It's one of the best things

that came out of this experience. My favourite part of making *Slingshot* was being able to spend time with the rappers, seeing their shows and experiencing the change they inspire. It has been so exciting and rewarding to make a film about good music and talented young people with lots of creative energy. Making this film has been inspiring because it led me and others involved to meet new artists, educators, youth, and families in Palestine who manage to live and love despite the oppression they're experiencing."

That trust and connection between Jackie, her story makers and storytellers transcends the geographical, political and cultural boundaries of their disparate worlds. *Slingshot* and performances by the rappers often go hand in hand where venue and finances allow. Her vision is that "...the rappers will tour with the film, doing *Slingshot Hip Hop* community screenings and educational workshops with youth throughout the world. Many films made about people in the Global South travel far and wide while the people whose stories are told in the film are trapped where they are, rarely benefitting from the success of the film. *Slingshot*, however, is a film meant to be a tool for the rappers to use in connecting directly to other communities globally."

Wherever the film doesn't go, potential audiences can still be reached with an eventual release on DVD and an impending *Slingshot Hip Hop* soundtrack, currently being produced by DAM in collaboration with the other rappers in the film. Slated for release this year on a label founded by DAM, '48 Records is Palestine's first hip-hop record label and the *Slingshot* soundtrack will be its first release. Intended to be an open platform for Palestinian musicians on a global level, they envision '48 Records as "...a tunnel to the world [through which] Palestinians can collaborate musically without being disrupted by the implications of who carries what nationality."

In the meantime, *Slingshot* continues to spin its way through America, Europe and back to the region this October for the Beirut International Film Festival. Jackie's celebration of "this inspiring movement... this powerful form of creative resistance" seems to be on the right and rigorous track, continuing to do what she set out for it to do from the beginning: reach people throughout the world. ● [slingshothiphop.com](http://slingshothiphop.com)

