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### **Hip Hop & Diaspora: Connecting the Arab Spring**

Since the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 unleashed the pro-democracy movements now popularly known as the “Arab Spring”, the clamor for change and opportunity has continued to sweep through the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Citizen journalism has allowed for a near-constant stream of images of bloody uprisings from Libya to Syria, as people throughout the Arab world seek to redefine their relationships to the state apparatus and their rights as citizens. From the outset, these movements have been accompanied by a very strong musical component, from troubadours in Cairo’s Tahrir square to the *adhans* uniting in both faith and protest. Yet it has been hip-hop that has become the most iconic and widespread soundtrack of the Arab Spring and, interestingly, it is having the double effect of helping to mobilize activists in the countries directly impacted by the pro-democracy movements while also solidifying links between Arab diasporic communities in the West with those still residing in the ‘homeland.’

*Rais Lebled* by Tunisian rapper El Général (given name Hamada Ben Amor), *Rebel* by the Egyptian group Arabian Knightz and other songs in Arabic created by people within the region of conflict, will go down as the anthems of the revolution, but other songs from Arabs with hyphenated identities and more complicated ties to the Arab Spring have also become a part of the current soundscape. This dynamic became evident with the appearance and popularity of protest songs such as those by Chicago-based artist Khaled M. Libyan by birth, Khaled M. is the son of a Gaddafi dissident. His father, Fathi, was jailed and tortured for five years under the regime. Fathi eventually moved his family to Lexington, Kentucky, the former American home base for The National Front for the Salvation of Libya. Fathi died when Khaled was nine, but the father’s struggle comes full circle through the lyrics of his rapper son, who has taken up verbal arms for a homeland

he has never seen. After protests broke out in Libya on February 17, 2011, Khaled M. released the haunting single *Can't Take Our Freedom*, which reads like an open letter to both Gaddafi and the people of the MENA region: “*Can't take our freedom and take our soul/can't take our freedom, take our soul/you are not the one that's in control/you are not the one that's in control/lā ilāha illallāh, there is no power greater than God/go ahead and divide your plans/at the end of the day you are just a man.*”

The song powerfully employs the *shahada* and a common humanity to de-authorize the self-imposed omnipotence of the Gaddafi regime while encouraging protesters “from Tunisia to Libya, Bahrain to Yemen” to rise up against oppression. It also points to a tightening of familial, political, and identity links between Arabs who have long lived abroad and younger generations who may have never visited the countries their parents originally hailed from. The fact that *Can't Take Our Freedom* has been so popular and well received by Arabs both in the ‘West’ and in the MENA region speaks to a particular movement in which those who have chosen self-exile for political or economic reasons (or had it imposed upon them) are now collaborating in the rewriting of history with those who never left the country of origin but nevertheless felt internally displaced or dispossessed by the institutionalized power structures under which they lived. That Khaled M. is a multilingual Libyan-American with a dual identity and world-view is vital to seeing the Arab Spring for the multifaceted, globalized movement that it is.

The diasporic connections visible in the hip-hop of the Arab Spring, and the many possibilities for future dialogues that these engender are, however, most visible in collaborations such as *January 25th*, a song spearheaded by Syrian-American Omar Offendum (Omar Chakaki) and Iraqi-Canadian The Narcicyst, produced by Palestinian-American Sami Matar with appearances by Palestinian-Canadian singer Ayah, and African-American converts MC Freeway and Amir Sulaiman. A single song centered around the January 25 protests in Egypt, which heralded the overthrow of long-term President Hosni Mubarak, rallied together artists from all over the world. While united for the same cause, many had not ever resided in the MENA region and several did not speak Arabic natively. Yet, the common factor of breaking silence and having shared a

sense of being ‘on the outside looking in’ sociopolitically created a song that has generated over 200,000 hits on YouTube. Omar Offendum understands the nuanced importance of the premise of unity, as he raps: *“From Tunis to Khan Younis/the new moon shines bright/as The Man's spoon was/as masses demand rights/and dispel rumors of disunity/communally removing the tumors...”* Having established a common link, the lyrics then take a decidedly American political twist while remaining entirely relatable to the Egyptian political situation with the lyrics of Amir Sulaiman, who rhymes: *“wont be just niggas/wont be just spiiks/a-rabs, pakis rednecks and hicks/the leaders ain't helping them feeding their kids/the leaders helping pigs eating their kids/got me back on my Elijah eating to live/run up in the white house like I got a key to the crib...”*

Amir Sulaiman’s reference to ethnic tensions and economic frustrations endemic in the United States was a clever inclusion in a politically charged song about political subversion taking place in North Africa. The reference does not take away from or in any way supplant from the main event being spoken of in the song, but it does underscore an understanding on the part of the artists based on similar situations in the United States. The song and lyrics present a mirror of support from similar communities around the world, while also serving as a call for underserved communities within the ‘West’ to come together and reach out beyond themselves. Omar Offendum, based out of Los Angeles, has long reflected this agile awareness of community and space, as his hit song *Damascus* from his album *SyrianamericanA* weaves together Arabic, English, and Spanish, a composite reflective of the diverse demographics of the city in which he lives. Intriguingly, the events of the “Arab Spring” have not only allowed for the long-repressed voices of the many to reverberate across the MENA region and around the world, but they have also fostered an opportunity for the Arab diaspora(s), separated by geography and at times ideologically different, to speak as one voice on behalf of their brethren across the world and about themselves as Arab and Western supporters of democratic regime change.

Useful Websites:

Khaled M Feat. Lowkey “Can’t Take our Freedom”

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbZ\\_cmu8om8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbZ_cmu8om8)

Khaled M bio

<http://thisiskhaledm.com/about/>

Jan 25<sup>th</sup> Omar Offendum, The Narcicyst, Freeway, Ayah

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCbpiOpLwFg>

El Général

<http://popdust.com/2011/01/28/meet-hamada-el-general-ben-amor-the-tunsian-rapper-who-changed-the-world/>

Rebel- Arabian Knightz Feat. Lauryn Hill

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z696QHAbMIA>