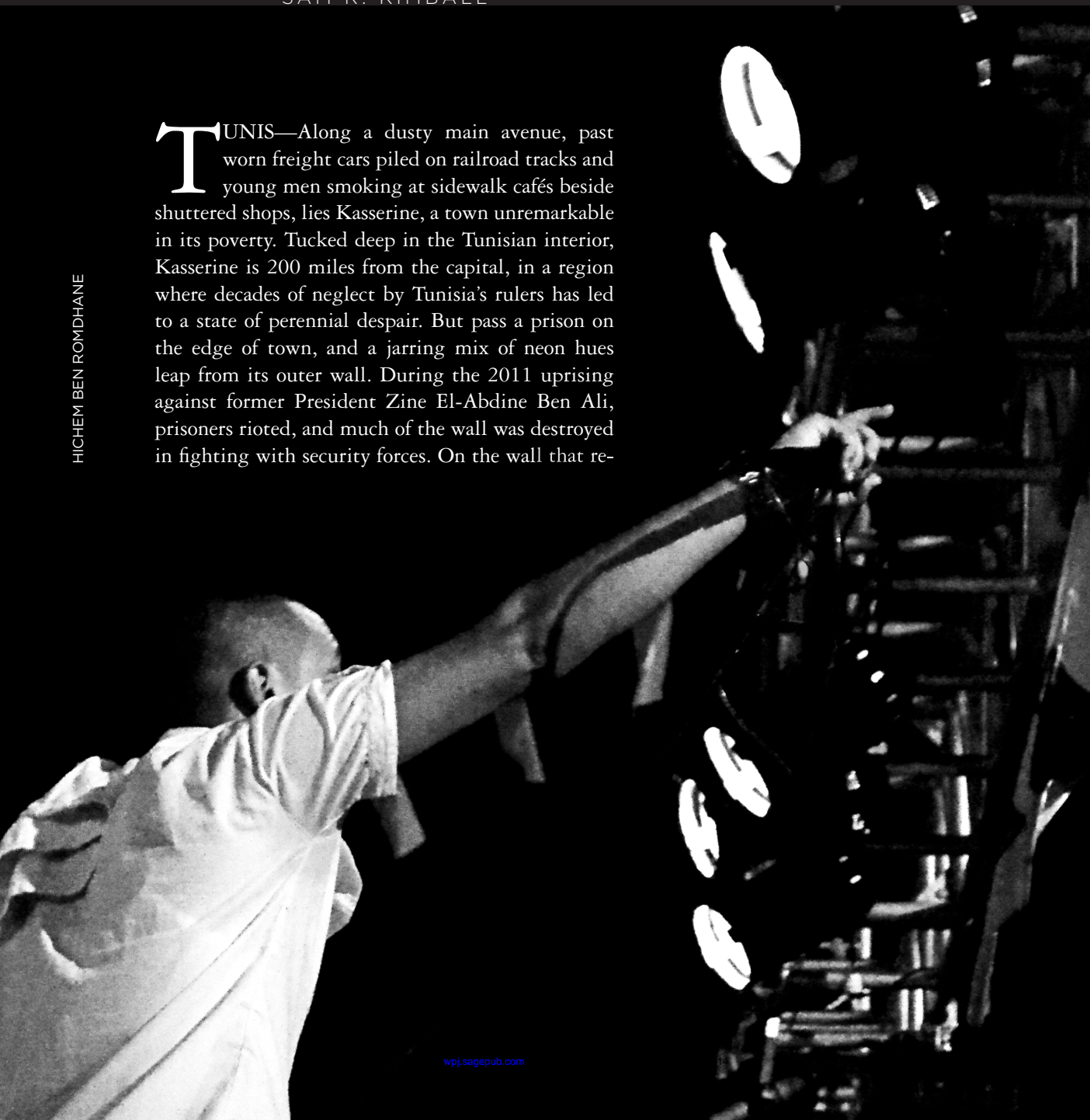


Rapping the Arab Spring

SAM R. KIMBALL

TUNIS—Along a dusty main avenue, past worn freight cars piled on railroad tracks and young men smoking at sidewalk cafés beside shuttered shops, lies Kasserine, a town unremarkable in its poverty. Tucked deep in the Tunisian interior, Kasserine is 200 miles from the capital, in a region where decades of neglect by Tunisia’s rulers has led to a state of perennial despair. But pass a prison on the edge of town, and a jarring mix of neon hues leap from its outer wall. During the 2011 uprising against former President Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali, prisoners rioted, and much of the wall was destroyed in fighting with security forces. On the wall that re-

HICHEM BEN ROMDHANE



mains, a poem by Tunisian poet Abu al Qassem Chebbi stretches across 800 feet of concrete and barbed wire, scrawled in calligraffiti—a style fusing Arabic calligraphy with hip hop graffiti—by Tunisian artist Karim Jabbari. On each section of the wall, one elaborate pattern merges into a wildly different one. “Before Karim, you might have come to Kasserine and thought, ‘There’s nothing in this town.’ But we’ve got everything—from graffiti, to break-

dance, to rap. The kids here, they’re talented; they’ve got passion,” says a local youth who assisted Jabbari in the prison wall project.

“In Kasserine, poverty is the best school,” says Housam Jabbari, Karim’s brother, speaking

about the hardship inspiring the work of artists who’ve found empowerment through this fusion of hip-hop and art. Karim Jabbari, a renowned graffiti artist who recently returned to his hometown after 14 years in Montreal, is one soldier in a battle over culture being waged across the Arab world. In nations where the Arab Spring took root, a vanguard of artists is trying to protect the gains of the 2011 mass uprisings and draw attention to attempts by new rulers to roll back those gains. Hip-hop, largely relegated to the underground before the outbreak of the Arab Spring, has taken front seat as a vehicle of political criticism and dialogue. There may still be debate over which artists are true revolutionaries and which are

in it for fame. But one thing is certain—the rebellions that shook the Arab world tore open a space for hip-hop in politics, destroying the wall of fear around freedom of expression. And governments across the region are now watching hip-hop’s advance with a blend of contempt and dread.

PRE-ARAB SPRING

“Before the outbreak of the Arab Spring, there was less diversity,” says independent Tunisian journalist Thameur Mekki, who specializes in Arab hip-hop. “There were very, very few hip-hop artists in the media or in cultural events.” Yet the presence of hip-hop has existed in the shadows for decades, at least in Tunisia, says Mekki. “In the early 1990s, there was a TV show treating social problems facing youth. One of the main characters did break dancing and popping,” two of the original hip-hop dance styles. According to Mekki, the first stirrings of a nascent hip-hop movement were found in downtown Tunis’s Théâtre Étoile du Nord around the year 2000. “At the time [hip-hop] was still considered a subculture. Artists were not treated well nor given much respect,” notes Mekki. After 2008, now-famed Tunisian rapper Balti gained some notoriety throughout Tunisia by addressing social ills in his lyrics. “But he never touched the causes of the problems. Or he invoked them lightly, without pointing at the [political] system,” Mekki points out, since Balti’s summer concert tours were organized by the Ministry of Culture.

Simultaneously, frustration with growing inequality, unemployment, and state repression, a pattern on the rise through-

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Sam R. Kimball, a journalist based in Tunis, has previously reported from Yemen and Egypt, and is researching the role of rap and graffiti in the Tunisian revolution.

out the Arab world at the time, was pushing other rappers to create more confrontational work. In 2006, Tunisian rapper Ferid El Extranjero, living abroad in Spain, released the damning critique of Ben Ali's regime "La3bed Fi Terkina" (People in a Prison), directly denouncing arbitrary police violence and arrests. He also issued the provocative song "Warqa Stylo" (Paper and Pen). "Here he began to speak clearly about liberty of expression. This was the brick in the wall that opened up the whole issue of government oppression," says Mekki, before launching into the rap:

*"Liberta! Speak out loud, discuss!
We are living in a strange society.
Where is our justice?
We were born free, you won't
stop us if you arrest us!
The press is the source of freedom,
It's the light in the darkness,
Democracy is saying the truth.
A paper and pen against the wind,
Everything will be told."*

Rosalind Fredericks, a professor and scholar of hip-hop at New York University, explains the attractiveness of hip-hop in the developing world and its power for protest. "Hip-hop has been explicitly a language of youth," over the last several decades, she says, "as youths have been the casualties of the political breakdown." Fredericks notes that part of the appeal of hip-hop forms like rap come from its accessibility and confrontational nature. "There is something about the sound of rap, its harshness, its serious, that's part of its potency," she adds. As for graffiti, she points out that it's played a role in occupying public spaces, which

until recently were under lock and key, controlled by many of the autocrats in the Arab world, who felt themselves threatened by the potential it carried for mass protest. "It's been the background noise of disaffected youth whose condition is getting worse," concludes Fredericks.

OVERTHROWING THE DICTATOR

Bizerte, Tunisia's largest port, was a center of unrest in the uprising which overthrew former Tunisian dictator Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali and two subsequent provisional governments in the early months of 2011. An hour's drive from Tunis via a *louage*, or shared taxi, it seems more of a gentle seaside city than any hotbed of political resistance. Massive freighters are docked neatly in the canal that bisects the city, under a drawbridge which must be traversed quickly before it opens to bring in yet another freighter. The October breeze coming off the canal is chilly, and the center city is animated with taxis and young people in fashionable outfits and sunglasses. Graffiti from local soccer fans dot the walls, mixed with the occasional scrawled political scream: "Fuck the system!"

Gal3y appears to be just an average young Tunisian. He rarely answers his phone before one in the afternoon, because he's sound asleep in his mother's house tucked away in a breezy alley. The stocky guy in sandals with an unkempt beard and baseball hat perched unevenly on his head, however, is the acclaimed hip-hop artist whose name is on the lips of fans across the nation. Passing through a small gate, a path gives onto the tiny yard beside his house, and then behind a dirty white window curtain hung over a door frame, is Gal3y's studio—a toolshed-like space with enough room for a computer, keyboard, turntables, beat machine, and a couple of plastic chairs.



Gal3y is now one-half of Armada Bizerte, a hip-hop crew hailing from Bizerte. Armada Bizerte puts out tirelessly political tracks criticizing everyone from former president Ben Ali's cronies to Tunisia's current ruling party, Ennahda. Gal3y plays video after video on the desktop computer in his studio, some from Armada Bizerte, others with different artists whose beats he has produced. He rocks heavily from side to side with every song, rapping along with the lyrics when he knows them. A riff on the classic inner-city track from Bronx rapper KRS-One,

Armada Bizerte's song "It's The Sound Of Da Police," produced early in 2011, is a merciless attack on Tunisia's police force—long hated for its brutality toward the poor, accused of arbitrary arrests, beatings, and killings. But the music video itself is a work of art. Black and white footage shows riot police firing tear gas into mass protests, in January 2011, along Tunisia's Avenue Habib Bourguiba. Mixed seamlessly are what appear to be scenes from the Indignados protests in Spain, which touched off in May 2011, and were accompanied by more police violence.



After a second viewing, it becomes clear that none of the footage was selected at random. Each scene was carefully chosen to illustrate the “international movement” that numerous Arab hip-hop artists claim to embrace. Later in the clip, simple cartoon figures of angry youths face off with Darth Vader-like silhouettes of riot police, followed by a stark drawing of investigators standing around a body slumped in a chair. If the viewer doesn’t understand the Tunisian Arabic used to rap in “It’s The Sound Of Da Police,” the images make the message clear enough. Spilling across the screen in stencil-cut letters as Armada Bizerta barks together, imitating the sounds of chants in demonstrations, are the lyrics:

“It’s the sound of the police.
 No justice, no peace! *Sayyib echa3b i3iich!* (Let the people live!)
 It’s the sound of the police. *Dam ecbahid mouch r5is!* (The martyr’s blood isn’t cheap!)
 I got my heart. My chest is for the bullets. Watch out for me!
 How many mothers cried because someone forgot his conscience?
 Get up! Let’s make a revolution!
 Our dignity’s been trampled.
 Now we must avenge it!”

The lyrics are perhaps more hard-hitting than Tunisian rapper El Général’s celebrated anthem “Rais Lebled,” a loud critique of the inequality and corruption in President Ben Ali’s Tunisia, which went viral on YouTube weeks before protests began in late 2010. Foreign media seized on El Général, and overnight he was launched into the realm of Arab hip-hop superstar.

Armada Bizerta, however, and countless hip-hop performers across Tunisia remain relatively unknown, going on tours of summer festivals in Tunisia and Europe and recording relentlessly in their parents’ garages. When asked what makes Armada Bizerta a revolutionary group, Gal3y explains, “We try to focus on sensitive subjects with a lot of details.” He notes that Armada Bizerta treats four main issues facing ordinary Tunisians in their songs: the distribution of resources around Tunisia’s provinces, the inefficiency of the educational system, the theft of the country’s historical relics, and the spreading of revolution beyond Tunisia’s borders. When pressed on the nature of influence his group commands over the politics of the Arab Spring, Gal3y answers confidently. “At the time of the revolution in Libya, there were people listening to our rap there. Just ordinary people. Not hip-hoppers. They sent us a message saying, ‘We listened to your songs, and they inspired us—made us feel brave, and we went out [to protest].’”

“This is just one example,” he adds. “But I’m sure there were others who heard

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rap songs and were inspired to protest. They just didn't tell us about it." Galzy is confident that there is a central role for hip-hop artists in Tunisian politics, and more broadly in the Arab world. "Because the artist is better-known than the protestor," he says, "his words are known, and they hit their target."

TARGET CASES

The target in this case is the North African nation's young people, whose humiliation and anger over bulging unemployment and restriction of basic rights form the backbone of many protests, which have shaken Tunisia over the last three years. Equally across the region, where the Arab Spring spread like wildfire, there are similar young graffiti artists, rappers, and other hip-hop artists who reflect the views of millions of young people whose aspirations remain unfulfilled. Their voices are increasingly those of despair and alarm, rather than the hope from which hip-hop was originally born.

Speaking from his own experience and that of other protestors participating in the uprising against Ben Ali and successive provisional governments, Galzy says, "Those two months were a dream. It was like being in shackles, then freed suddenly." Smiling proudly, he adds, "The demonstrations were huge in this neighborhood." He claims that, "the majority of those in prisons in Ben Ali's time were from Bizerte," pointing out that this is a testament to Bizerte's revolutionary character.

But rappers, among other artists, have had to form a bulwark against attacks on their newfound freedom of expression, won after the ejection of old dictators during the Arab Spring. Tunisia is a resounding example of this process. Ennahda, the ruling majority party governing Tunisia, was voted into power in October of 2011

by Tunisians exhilarated to be participating in the first national democratic process since the country's independence nearly 60 years ago. Yet, the ruling party's economic program has hardly strayed from the old neo-liberal model—international loans and tightened public budgets—championed by Ben Ali and his entourage. The new rulers have gone so far as to embrace far right Salafists responsible for the assassination of two prominent opposition leaders earlier this year. And its justice system has prosecuted outspoken artists and others critical of the post-uprising transitional government. Now, with rising instability in the form of Al Qaeda cells skirmishing with the military, political stalemate, street violence, and still massive unemployment, growing numbers of Tunisians have begun turning to the police to protect the nation's fractured peace—renewing faith in local security forces and dampening attempts at dissent.

In recent months, the Tunisian government has brought legal cases against two high-profile Tunisian rappers over claims that they were defaming public institutions and inciting Tunisians to violence. Weld El 15 and Klay BBJ, both popular in Tunisia, were sentenced twice to prison terms earlier this year for their song "El Boulicia Kleb" (The Police Are Dogs), a swaggering and violent condemnation of the cops. Their YouTube video was replete with images of expensive cars, half-wrecked buildings, and footage of the Tunisian police in their worst moments. In the song, Weld El 15 brags that he would slaughter a policeman like a sheep during the Muslim holiday of Eid. Weld El 15 was released on appeal last June after serving six weeks of jail time for performing "El Boulicia Kleb," but has since been re-arrested and charged with performing the song at a festival in August.

For his part, in the same August performance, Klay BBJ was summoned to a courthouse in the seaside resort town of Hammamet, where children in blue school uniforms cheered on the rapper from outside. Inside, lawyers in black court cloaks condemned Klay in impassioned speeches about the sanctity of Tunisian institutions of justice and the danger of slandering them. After his prison sentence was read aloud, his mother fainted and was carried out of the courthouse by a neighbor. Klay was released only two months later, also on appeal, and much to the delight of an array of Tunisian activists, whose Facebook and Twitter accounts were alight for weeks with outraged statements about the government's curbing of free expression, hashtagged "#FreeKlay."

The imprisonment and subsequent liberation of the two performers for their unbridled opposition to the Tunisian government and the police has been the most visible form of what activists claim is a rising trend of hazily-defined Ben Ali-era laws being revived to silence opponents of post-revolution leaders, especially those with large followings. This brings hip-hop artists and rappers squarely into their sights. The arbitrary prosecutions of rappers and other hip-hop figures in Tunisia has raised alarms from local activists as well as civil society figures. Amna Guellali, director of Human Rights Watch for Tunisia and Algeria, notes that in recent months there has been a spate of prosecutions of free speech at the hands of the transitional government. "What's happening in Tunisia," she says in her downtown Tunis office, "is much more chaotic than what could be defined as a crackdown," remarking on the frenzied and inconsistent nature of attacks on artists.

The justice system in post-revolution Tunisia is still beholden to many of the same interests as prior to the 2011 uprising. Guellali explains that "Some repressive laws in the penal codes from the Ben Ali-era have been resurrected. In addition, you have a judiciary that is the protector of the dominant discourse, be it religious, political, or that of the powerful. The judiciary is functioning as a protector of the regime." This is hardly the exception in countries shaken by the Arab Spring, where the tug-of-war

between factions over power has led to the evisceration of the judiciary and concepts of justice by many who've remained on or succeeded in seizing the throne. In Egypt, where the military swept to power this summer after disposing of the ruling Muslim Brotherhood, artists critical of the military-backed regime, even those with enormous followings, have been forced into basements or arrested on charges of "insulting the president," and whole layers of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership have been rounded up for military trials on terrorism charges.

"Hip-hop is an art form that carries with it the anger of the poor," Guellali notes. "It carries a lot of meaning regarding the revolution and the problems with the transition. The fact that [rap] says nothing's changed after the revolution might be making rulers uncomfortable." But hip-hop artists' opposition to the status quo is not always violent, nor militant. Karim Jabbari, whose calligraphic mural adorns the outer wall of the central prison in Kasserine, takes an approach

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which he says is less about criticizing the system and more about youth development through hip-hop art. Describing his recent approach to community art projects in the rough Tunisian interior, Jabbari says, “When you come to help the youth financially or with advice, you help them perfect skills they already had inside.”

Though his father was imprisoned for 13 years under the Ben Ali regime for his involvement with Ennahda, now Tunisia’s ruling Islamist party, Jabbari avoids attacking the government, claiming a dedication to teaching the frustrated youth in his hometown how to express themselves. In the shade of an umbrella beside a café in Kasserine, Jabbari observes, “The way we are raised, no one says, ‘You are an interesting man. You’re going to be successful.’ Everyone is putting you down. So you grow up and sit in the café, playing cards.”

Through workshops for youth in spoken word, rap, acting, graffiti, and other hip-hop-oriented art forms, Jabbari believes he can sew the seeds for a larger process of social development among Tunisians otherwise adrift in a sea of unemployment and political disenfranchisement—and hopefully help them find their way across other societies in North Africa and the Middle East. In Kasserine, which is no hotspot for tourism or international cultural events, Jabbari has organized a cultural festival, brimming with international hip-hop artists performing and teaching workshops to local youth, which the city will host in December. Through such events, Jabbari hopes to instill a lasting spirit of creative and civic activity in the area. “I’m trying to establish some-

thing that will stick. Something permanent,” he says, hoping to make a crack in the isolation of the poor Tunisian interior, and open the city to economic opportunities and greater political participation

Since 2011, the Arab world has entered a revolutionary process that has left the political and cultural cards scattered on the table. Though Islamist governments with conservative social agendas have come to power in Tunisia, and already been knocked from the throne in Egypt, the game is far from over. Secular swaths of society are now competing openly with Islamists, as the poor have turned against the wealthy autocrats trying to retain power.

Most importantly, the conflict is not limited to the halls of parliament or the offices of the armed forces. In many places, it is being waged—now quietly and in the open—by ordinary people in the Arab world. They fight with street protests. They fight in court. But they also fight with culture. Hip-hop’s origins in the embattled, lethally poor streets of the Bronx decades ago are not far removed from the lives of many marginalized youth in the countries of the Arab Spring, and this cultural similarity has struck a cord with them. For the many Arab youth disgusted with business as usual, the revolutions have created a space for them to speak through their language of choice—hip-hop. Jabbari notes that, if nothing else, the Tunisian uprising has built the base for democracy by pulling the gag from their mouths. With a smile he says, “In Ben Ali’s time you couldn’t say what you want in public or even at home. The walls had ears. At least we gained one thing from this revolution. We are free to speak.” ●