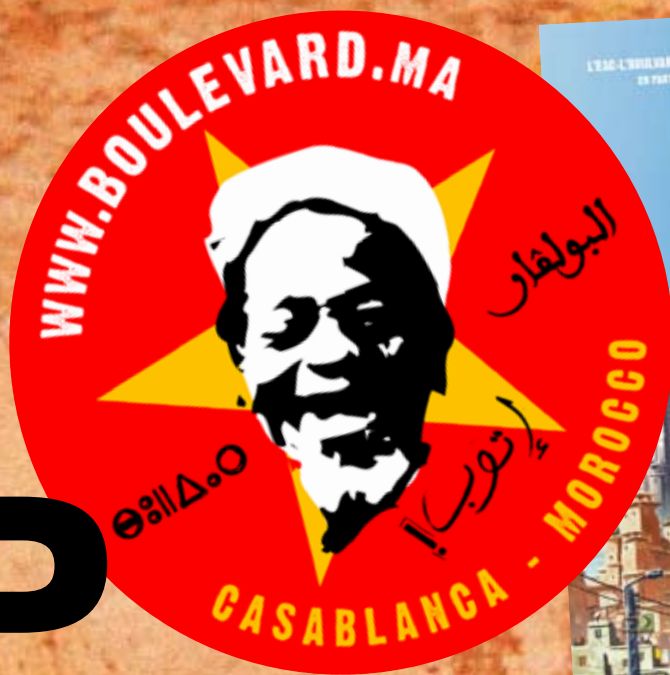


# HIP TO BE ARABIC

LOSE YOURSELF IN THE MUSIC OF MOROCCO'S  
HIP-HOP SCENE – THERE'S A GLOBAL  
DIVERSITY THAT GOES WAY BEYOND EMINEM  
AND ANGST ABOUT THE PROJECTS

WORDS ED STOCKER







*Right, at the Gnaoua Festival, a fusion of hip-hop and other contemporary styles is showcased alongside traditional music; below, while fans look the epitome of hip-hop, they also stay true to local cultural values*





THE DJ CRUNCHES his knuckles together and takes a deep breath, readying himself for some turntable dexterity. Adjusting his cap, he launches himself at the decks, sending a blast of hip-hop crashing from the speakers tilting out of an open window and echoing around the decaying housing estate below.

It was with this seminal scene from 1995 French film *La Haine* that non-English-language rap stood up to be counted. It showed that hip-hop, an American phenomenon, could be translated into a different language, coloured by another culture and imbued with local grit. And the success of the music in France, now the world's second largest consumer, has spawned global scenes from Tokyo to Toronto, Johannesburg to Jakarta.

In Morocco, the subtle nuance between tradition and modernity, youthful exuberance and respect for elders, means the North African country's flourishing rap scene not only makes for a fascinating exploration of a society in flux, but also represents an exciting hotspot where this evolving musical hybrid is taking shape.

Hip-hop culture in Morocco took root in the mid-90s, influenced by North Africans in France who were achieving mainstream success as rappers. But while Europe-based artists were often motivated by social inequality and institutionalised racism, in Morocco the reasons for the genre's rocketing popularity were different.

In a country where half of the population is under 20, rap provides young Moroccans with a music they can claim as their own. "Before rap established itself in Morocco, we listened to the same music as our parents," explains Hatim of Meknès rap group H-Kayne, "the great Moroccan classics and those from the Arab world, where 'love' dominated three-quarters of the repertoire. Now, with rap, we sing as we speak – it's as simple as that."

It's a language that directly engages youngsters, tackling issues from juvenile delinquency, women's rights and illiteracy, to tolerance, optimism and Morocco's rich cultural heritage. Rap has consistently preached a moderate line, with songs springing up to condemn the 2003 bombings in Casablanca and, more recently, vocalising support for women and children in Gaza. Artists almost uniquely rap in Darija, the local Arabic dialect, allowing them to reach the widest possible audience and counter the continued influence of French in the country's urban centres. "Darija is the language for every day," stresses Hatim.



Above, Amarg Fusion are a popular group from the coastal town of Agadir

## MOROCCO'S RAPPERS ARE KEEN TO SHOW THAT THEIR MUSIC HAS STRONG LOCAL ROOTS

There's no doubt Moroccan rap has been influenced by America, but there's one big difference, says Mouhssine Tizaf, leader of Marrakech crew Fnaïre. "The musical reference points for Moroccan hip-hop remain American," he says, "like Eminem, Dr Dre and Tupac. But local rappers don't identify much with their lifestyle." In a country that still has a strong conservative streak, tales of drugs and violence don't wash well. And while rap in Morocco – like the US – is an almost uniquely urban phenomenon, it hasn't been marginalised to the "projects" like the States. "Unlike other countries," continues Mouhssine, "this music

genre comes from the heart of the city – the old medinas – and not the estates."

Despite an outward appearance of copycatting America, seen in the baggy jeans, baseball caps and football shirts commonly worn, Morocco's rappers are keen to show that their music has strong local roots. Many of the rap tunes blasting out of the radio mix the ubiquitous hip-hop beat with strong Arabic rhythms, often featuring collaborations with traditional singers. Fnaïre, for example, refer to their music as *taklidi* (traditional) rap and on 2007 album *Yed El Henna*, they teamed up with spiritual poet Abdelsselem Damoussi. ➔

*Below, the arrival of rap gave the members of H-Kayne something else to listen to other than their parents' music. Now they're stars of the scene*



LOCAL RAP IS PART  
IMPORTED, PART  
DOMESTIC AND 100%  
MADE IN MOROCCO





Clockwise from here, a diverse line-up of performers wow the crowds at Boulevard Festival in Casablanca



It hasn't always been easy. Turning the tide of public opinion and winning over the media has taken time and it's only since the new millennium that hip-hop has really exploded in popularity.

Much of the credit for Morocco's nascent alternative scene can be traced to one pioneering festival: Boulevard in Casablanca. Founded in 1999, the first edition welcomed 12 groups and around 200 non-professionals. Fast-forward to last year and, despite previous run-ins with the authorities and one rock band being labelled "blasphemous", 160,000 boisterous youngsters came to watch their favourite heavy metal, hip-hop and fusion stars. Boulevard has certainly helped kick-start many a rapper's career, thanks to its *tremplin* (literally "springboard") amateur stage, which provides artists with a first experience of playing in front of a

crowd. "Boulevard isn't only a festival. It's a movement," says Hatim.

The talent pools are deep. Alongside Fnaire and H-Kayne, the roster of respected rappers includes Fez City Clan, fronted by child rapper MC Anou; the crunk and gangsta-inspired Casa Crew; part-time law student and full time megastar Biggy; and K-Libre, first-prize winner at the Boulevard's *tremplin* stage in 2005. All have sculpted rap into something that is part imported, part domestic, 100% made in Morocco – and overwhelmingly positive. "We defend our Moroccan identity," affirms Mouhssine, "we inform, we raise awareness and we even provide some solutions."

easyJet flies to Casablanca, Marrakech and Tangier from many destinations. See page 192 for our route map. Book online at easyJet.com



## ★ WHERE TO SAMPLE SOME PHAT BEATS

Piracy levels are high in Morocco and artists make much of their income from live gigs, so you're guaranteed to get a big local name at one of the country's many music festivals. Here's a list of the best:

### ★ Boulevard (Casablanca)

Where the cool kids come out to play, bouncing about to a mix of rock, rap, reggae and fusion. Free entry.

*Fly to Casablanca*

28–31 May, [www.boulevard.ma](http://www.boulevard.ma)

### ★ Timitar (Agadir)

Promotes Amazigh (Berber) and world music through a mix of big names and traditional artists. Free entry.

*Fly to Marrakech*

1–5 July, [www.festival-timitar.com](http://www.festival-timitar.com)

### ★ Mawazine (Rabat)

Last year artists from 40 countries played on five open-air stages. Free entry.

*Fly to Casablanca*

15–23 May, [www.mawazine.ma](http://www.mawazine.ma)

### ★ Tanjazz (Tangier)

This established jazz extravaganza will feature 190 artists over 10 days. Tickets from MAD100 (€9); full pass MAD 1,000.

*Fly to Tangier*

10–14 June, [www.tanjazz.org](http://www.tanjazz.org)

### ★ Gnaoua (Essaouira)

The scope of this festival is huge and includes the late-night *Scène Afters Méditel* rap and fusion event. Free entry.

*Fly to Marrakech*

25–28 June, [www.festival-gnaoua.net](http://www.festival-gnaoua.net)

### ★ Casa Music (Casablanca)

A huge urban festival with breakdancing on four stages and a host of big-name French and local rappers. Free entry.

*Fly to Casablanca*

16–19 July, [www.festivaldecasablanca.ma](http://www.festivaldecasablanca.ma)

### ★ Festival of World Sacred Music (Fes)

An emphasis on the Sufi mystical strand of Islam. Tickets from €9; full pass €260.

*Fly to Casablanca*

29 May–6 June, [www.wesfestival.com](http://www.wesfestival.com)