



MINISTRY OF SOUND

As French elections loom, Ed Stocker reports on how candidates are battling to counter a wave of political hip-hop and engage a disaffected populace

Above (from left to right): Lille-based rapper Axiom; presidential hopeful Nicolas Sarkozy; Keny Arkana taking to the streets

France prepares for its presidential elections at the end of April, deeply divided over who to choose. In what promises to be a tight race between socialist Ségolène Royal and rightwing UMP leader Nicolas Sarkozy, both candidates have been quick to jump on the bandwagon and showcase their hip-hop credentials. It marks the latest chapter in a love-hate relationship that has seen politicians fluctuate between wooing rap and labelling it aggressive and un-Gallic.

Sarkozy needs to win back inhabitants of France's crumbling *cités* (housing estates), where the music first emerged in the 80s, if he is to guarantee electoral victory. In October 2005 he alienated voters with hardline talk bordering on bellicose. Visiting the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil, the interior minister was pelted with projectiles, later making comments that violent areas needed cleaning with a powerhose. He called troublemakers "*racaille*", a derogatory remark akin to 'scum'. Days later two young men from Clichy-sous-Bois were electrocuted when they jumped into an electricity sub-station, apparently hiding from police. It triggered a lengthy period of rioting and car torching throughout France's major towns.

Hip-hop artists have been keen to react as civil unrest resurfaced in 2006, exposing the country's fragile social relations. In 'Sarkozik' a thinly veiled attack on 'Sarko', Parisian rapper Sinik spits: '*welcome to the ghetto*' as police sirens whirr and gun shots resonate. He calls Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National

Front's presidential candidate: '*un porc plus dangereux que le port du foulard*' ('a pig more dangerous than wearing the headscarf' – a reference to the controversy over France's strict enforcement of its secularism laws) and insults Jacques Chirac. Another rapper, Sefyu, from the *banlieue* of Seine-Saint-Denis, holds equal scorn for France's politicians – notably prime minister De Villepin and Sarkozy – saying in 'Censure' that '*one year after the riots nothing has changed*'. It's a tone of despair and disenchantment echoed by others including

In his latest album, Axiom urges listeners to vote with the slogan '*Voter est une Arme*' (Voting is a Weapon)

Psy 4 de la Rime, Alibi Montana, Joey Starr and Keny Arkana who released a song called 'Nettoyage au Karcher' in response to Sarkozy's powerhose comment.

Hardcore gangster rap elements of French hip-hop have caused numerous clashes with politicians. In 1995 the National Front mayor of Toulon took Suprême NTM to court over remarks about the gendarmerie made at an anti-racism concert. Both group members were fined 50,000 French francs and received two month suspended prison sentences. More recently Sarkozy and France's commercial hip-hop radio station Skyrock led a crusade against underground outfit La Rumeur who they accused of inciting violence against the police. Last year Monsieur R faced the courts after his song 'FranSse' compared the country to Nazi Germany and called her a '*slut*'.

Militant strains of hip-hop detract from the genre's often positive message and ability to engage. Axiom, a Lille based artist, is one of a new breed of conscious rappers trying to change the system. Politically active through an organisation called AC LEFEU (the LEF stands for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*), he has called for urgent reassessment of the random identity checks many young housing estate residents are subjected to. In his latest album, *Axiom*, he includes an insert (pictured opposite page) explaining the electoral process, urging listeners to vote with the slogan '*Voter est une Arme*' (Voting is a Weapon), next to a picture of a gun. In the wake of the 2005 riots, he also wrote a letter to Jacques Chirac, turning it into a song on his self-titled album. 'Ma Lettre au Président', set to 'La Marseillaise', is punctuated with Zola-esque refrains of '*J'accuse*' that call for Chirac's resignation, deriding him as a '*president of fear and hatred*' whose '*ministers instill terror*'.

Axiom's prayers have to an extent been answered. In March Chirac announced he would not be seeking a third presidential mandate, bringing to an end one of Europe's longest political careers. It leaves the race for

a successor open to Sarkozy, Royal and centrist François Bayrou, with rank outsiders Le Pen and anti-globalisation ecologist José Bové. The latter two candidates were at one point having trouble raising the 500 votes from elected officials they needed to validate their respective candidatures. However, both managed to scrape over the line by the cut-off point of March 16, meaning a total of 12 candidates are due to stand in the first round of presidential elections on April 22. With so many candidates to choose from, politicians need to pull out all the stops.

Sarkozy has been the quickest to recognise the power of hip-hop. His website (www.sarkozy.fr) counts down the days, minutes and seconds to victory next to his beaming photo. The shamelessly populist 'NS TV' section of the site features a range of music videos endorsing his candidacy. 'Show Gars!' by Gérard et Tony shows two rappers sitting behind a desk, ruffling papers for added gravitas: the champagne is on ice; Sarkozy's victory is assured; people should stop criticising – '*with him everything can become possible*'. Other videos include a poetry 'slam' by Aimé Nouma and the guitar-based crooning of Marcel Z with 'C'est pour Sarkozy'. Royal (www.desirsdavenir.com), more refrained, counters with a video clip of a visit to Clichy-sous-Bois (where the riots started) set to understated hip-hop beats.

Whatever the election outcome – and there's no doubting Sarkozy has led a slicker campaign – rappers have shown that they can no longer be ignored. In an age when disenchantment with the ruling elite continues to grow, artists hold a powerful socio-political tool in their hands. As Axiom says: "It's up to the people and not just politicians to change things." ●



Listen to Ed Stocker's report and an excerpt from Axiom's 'Ma Lettre au Président' on this issue's podcast

Getting Political: A hip-hop snapshot

★ Assassin 'La Peur du Métissage'

Appeared on the soundtrack to the 1995 film *La Haine* and attacks society's fears of racial integration

★ Suprême NTM 'Qu'est qu'on Attend?'

Angry and anti-establishment, NTM criticise repression and talk about burning the police state

★ IAM 'Le Nouveau Président'

A song parodying the electoral process from the original Marseille rappers

★ Le Remède & Aki 'Le Système'

Stern critique of a corrupt system, saying it's hard to have confidence in politicians

★ Axiom 'Ma Lettre au Président'

Inspired by the 2005 riots, Axiom's rap was a surprise hit – he signed to a major label as a result

★ Keny Arkana 'Nettoyage au Karcher'

Female rapper Arkana's reaction to Sarkozy's inflammatory comments. Karcher is a make of powerhose.

"Vote for me, I can MC"

Everyone needs a slogan...

Nicolas Sarkozy
"Together Everything Becomes Possible"

Ségolène Royal
"Fairer, France will be Stronger"

François Bayrou
"The France Of All Our Strengths"

Below (from top to bottom): Psy 4 de la Rime; Sefyu – the 93 stands for the number of his *département*, Seine-Saint-Denis; Joey Starr formerly of Suprême NTM; Ségolène Royal visiting Clichy-sous-Bois in February 2007

