



N.O.M.A.D.S. vs Philistines

Interviewed by **Ishraq Zraikat**
Photography **Franz Eller**

Despite common misconceptions of Hip Hop culture and MCs, **Ragtop (Nizar Wattad)** and **Omar Offendum (Omar Chakaki)** are polite, well spoken and socially, politically and culturally conscious. And with such attitude they are perforating the Hip Hop scene with full force, putting on sold-out shows in cities like Los Angeles and New York.

In 2005 they realized "Free the P" mix tape which combines some of the finest Hip Hop and Spoken Word compilation out there today. And although they are Arab Americans who feel a strong connection to the Middle East, their message is not strictly political.

SKIN: What is hip hop?

RAGTOP: Hip Hop is a global youth culture. It's about 30 years old. It encompasses all aspects of...

OMAR: ...self expression!

RAGTOP: Hip hop was a way of providing an alternative to gang activity. Now it's an alternative way to express yourself, to get your energy out there and get your ideas out there.

SKIN: Is it strictly an African American phenomenon?

OMAR: No. When I first heard Big Pun's album Capital Punishment, he was the first Latino artist to go platinum and he was using sounds from his culture and speaking Spanish over beats and interlacing it here and there and showing the cultural richness in the Latino culture in New York City.

RAGTOP: From the very beginning there were Latino, Black and Jewish Hip Hoppers.

OMAR: Now in L.A. you have a huge vibrant Asian Hip Hop community.

RAGTOP: It's not purely African American and no one from within the culture would claim that. It never was about being African American.

OMAR: There is obviously a huge influence though. The largest contributions came from the African American population but since the beginning it was never meant to be an exclusive thing.

SKIN: In the Middle East you get RAP as Hip Hop but you don't get Hip Hop.

OMAR: In lot of places and even in the US you only get rap these days.

RAGTOP: How many famous rappers names are DJ names? Traditionally in Hip Hop the DJ is the foundation. There is no Hip Hop without music. The producer was the DJ and everyone was dancing to his music and speaking over his beats.

OMAR: There are a lot of egos involved now. That's what happens when you have money and major corporations invested in something where they just want to get music that sells.

RAGTOP: This is what worries me about Hip Hop in the Middle East. For example the founders of Hip Hop, like Big Daddy Kane and 'Rock' Campbell, Grand Master Flash, talked about their lives and that resonated with people. A lot of the West Coast originators of gangster rap came up in gangs so they rapped about that. So the generation that grew up listening to them grew up copying them as opposed to speaking from their own true experience. Now you've got MC's who are copying MC's who were copying the originators. You can feel that lack of an anchor.

So then extrapolate that to the Middle East, how can kids get a chance to listen to the original old school underground hip hop when it's not even over here? So all you get is the bling bling thug image bullshit and that is what they are affected by.

OMAR: It makes the real genuine stuff sound more genuine. There is a time and place for everything. Sometimes you want to listen to something that is moving, you just want to party and there is nothing wrong with that.

SKIN: Honesty is important in originality. If one is speaking from their own experience and if one is honest towards their medium they are adding something new to it – that is when an artist truly steps up to being an artist and not just someone with a hobby.

OMAR: After a World Associated Press article came out about us, we heard comments from people who thought: how can they talk about Palestine when they have never been to Palestine? Not only have we been there before and it affects our daily lives, but our parents live there. We are a part of that world. We understand the responsibility of being Arab Americans. We have to be able to represent the way people here think. We are here, we find ourselves a little more defensive about some Middle Eastern issues but unfortunately when we are back in the Middle East we are not fully accepted there either.

RAGTOP: Mainly we are trying to represent ourselves as human beings, as artists. It's not like we are saying: 'This is our politics, listen to us!' it's about: 'we rap like you rap.' We have the same problems in our personal lives so we talk about them.

SKIN: So who are The Philistines and who are the Nomads?

RAGTOP: The Philistines are myself, Ragtop (Nizar Wattad), my

younger brother B-dub (Bader), C.J. (Cookie Jar Pizarro), who produces most of our beats and sings and raps. He plays a lot of instruments. There's our DJ, DJ Afterwards (Nate).

OMAR: The N.O.M.A.D.S. are myself, Omar Offendum (Omar Chakaki), Mr. Tibbs, (El-Tayeb Ibrahim) a Sudanese friend of mine, and mison king, who DJ's a lot of our shows. I like to consider him a part of the N.O.M.A.D.S.

SKIN: So how do you make beats? Do you have a studio?

RAGTOP: Computers.

OMAR: In this day and age I can work from home. We have access to computer programs and we teach ourselves how to use them. The beat making process for me is different than it is for CJ, who actually plays a lot of instruments and makes all of his sounds.

RAGTOP: CJ will actually play something and record it and then take it to the computer and cut it and loop it.

OMAR: Whereas I would get something that's already recorded from an old song, cut it and do something to it. We all use the same programs but the sound is totally different.

SKIN: How did you get into Hip Hop?

RAGTOP: I was 9 or 10. I was in Palestine visiting relatives, and a cousin of mine asked me to translate naughty by nature 'hey ho' that was the first time I heard Hip Hop. I liked it and I felt scandalized because it's a fowl song. I was an Arab kid, but in the sense of popular trends in the US I was not following along. All the kids in school were wearing Air Jordans. I was wondering what they were. It was a culture I wasn't a part of but just liked the way it felt – the energy of it. I started off listening to popular artists, copying them, and then I started learning the lyrics. Then you start putting your name instead of their name. That starts to be cool but I started wishing that I had written it, so I started to write.

OMAR: I moved to DC when I was 4, and DC is chocolate city and is heavily influenced by African American culture. The radio stations were playing Hip Hop. I went to an Arabic Muslim school and everyone there either listened to Hip Hop or Arabic music. I grew up in the US learning Arab History, qawa3id, na7w. Then I moved to Washington DC when I was older and I felt the urban aspect of Hip Hop then.

SKIN: Were you aware of the elements of Hip Hop when you got into it? Did you feel it was a cultural movement?

RAGTOP: Initially no. I came to it like most other people, through the images of MTV, popular images. Now I know who KRS 1 is, but I remember as a kid I heard a commercial that he did and remember liking it. What got me more into it was Mos Def and when I heard it I liked the rhythm and the beat, but most importantly I liked his words.

SKIN: There is still a misconception in the Middle East and around the world, that Hip Hop is rap. How do you deal with that? Do you feel like you have to fight for your art form?

OMAR: In the Middle East there is an affinity for it, it's a very oral culture. Arabic tradition puts emphasis on learning anasheed, learning poetry, shi3r. For many generations there has been a profound respect for poetry, which will help Hip Hop carry on.

RAGTOP: The more you realize people support what you're doing, the more you realize you don't have to be anything else but

yourself. A lot of the time, you're tempted to write what rhymes and what sounds good and feels good and you have to balance, and think: is this something I want out there representing me or not? Sometimes you make compromises in order to have something sound cool and maybe its not 100% what you mean but it's not bad necessarily. But there's a line you have to draw and not allow yourself to cross.

We came to this from loving Hip Hop and loving music. You don't develop skills as an MC or as a producer because you decide on a political campaign. In being true to Hip Hop culture you have to be true to yourself, so you have to represent where you are from and you have to talk about what affects you; and since we are Arab Americans that comes out in our music, but it's not the purpose of our music. The purpose of our music can only be music.

SKIN: Has 911/ affected your music or other people's perception of your music?

RAGTOP: I didn't get serious about making music until after 911. That was the reason I decided that yes let's be a group and put out our music and try to change people's minds. I was just free styling and having a good time before that, but then I was about to graduate from undergrad but it was mainly having this thing that we can do that not many people can do. People think that we do it well so maybe we can attract people that way. That was the catalyst to getting this whole thing started. And it's not a coincidence that post 911/ those past few years is when all these Arab hip hop crews started popping up.

OMAR: Arab comedians, Arab Hip Hop groups, Arab American art and culture in general has been thriving. People are a lot more interested to hear about how this particular part of American culture can express itself after something like that, and how we fit in after something like that, when they try so hard to marginalize us and make us seem like the other. But there is a growing, vibrant community here in the US that considers itself legitimately from both parts of the world and perhaps wants to build that bridge across. So 911/ had a huge impact, there is no denying that. It had a political impact, an economic impact, a social impact, directly and indirectly.

SKIN: So there's a network of Arab American Hip Hop artists? Do you collaborate with them?

OMAR: We are definitely starting to build the network. "Free The P" Mix CD was a good reason why we have met a lot of these people. It's a compilation of Hip Hop and Spoken Word dedicated to the youth of Palestine inspired by the global struggle for peace and justice. Nizar and I conceptualized it and we wanted to bring together some of these artists. Then Nizar had the great idea of making all the proceeds of this mix tape go to helping Jackie Salloom, a friend of ours who is doing a documentary film about Hip Hop in Palestine called "Sling Shot Hip Hop" which is now in its final editing phases. What was amazing was that we thought initially it was going to combine mostly Arab American Hip Hop artists and it turned out mostly not. There are African Americans and Latinos and in spoken word in Hip Hop we have poets and MC's and beat makers from all walks of life from all across America and Canada and even

two of the groups, DAM and PR are from Ghaza.

RAGTOP: You can say that this CD got the ball rolling. Getting people to know each other and wanting to work with each other more. But the only actual collaborations on this CD are us. So now on my CD that's coming out I've got Omar on a track and my brother on a track and the guy from Euphrates in Canada on a track and Iron Sheik and EXCENTRIK on a track.

OMAR: It was a great way to network and start the process of getting to know each other. We build on their networks. Euphrates in Montreal is connected to groups in Europe that we didn't necessarily know before. The Hip Hop society in Montreal has a connection to the Hip Hop society in France. Through that we have an outlet to get to know more people out there as well. With something like that you can rally people around it and it was a beautiful thing to see that it wasn't just all Arabs. Suheir Hammad is the main voice on the CD.

RAGTOP: She is the first Palestinian on Broadway and deaf poetry Jam. She's a well known poet and spoken word artist. She tours around all the time.

OMAR: Some of the most powerful spoken word pieces are from Suheir. She came to the show on March 16th, in New York, and Anthony Morales and AKIL DASAN were also there.

IMMORAL TECHNIQUE gave us a track. He's a very big underground Hip Hop artist known for his battling but also for his revolutionary political content, so having names like them on this CD helped us tremendously not only to get other artists to get on it but also to be able to promote it and have people be interested in it. So we are indebted to them.

RAGTOP: In terms of the Arab American Hip Hop that's going on right now, you have a handful, maybe a dozen world wide really seriously active artists working at it.

OMAR: And we naturally gravitate towards each other. What sets Nizar and I apart from a lot of people who are trying to do it, is that we disciplined ourselves in streamlining the process day to day. We save contacts and we build on them. We push things and market hard. We are getting "Free the P" CD's sold in consignment stores in Vancouver now. You can live in America and make as much art as you want but no one is going to hear about it unless you bust your ass to make sure a lot of people hear it.

RAGTOP: The ground work has been laid. Everyone who has supported Free the P and bought it is ready and waiting for the next project.

SKIN: So what's the next project?

RAGTOP: Representation.

OMAR: As much as we love having full control over our business and image, there's the leg work that you wish you didn't have to do. At this point we do it because we want to make sure it's done right, but we would love to get to the point where people interested in us realize we have a very strong core audience. People are listening to us.

You can buy "Free the P" online at: www.freethep.com, www.cdbaby.com, and various consignment stores and other activist bookstores and organizations that now sell it on their websites.

www.thenomads.biz - www.thephilistines.com - www.freethep.com
Omar and Ragtop are wearing jeans by LRG - www.l-r-g.com and t-shirts by Maestro Instruments - www.maestro-instruments.com



Ragtop - currently graduating Masters in Creative Writing : USC
THE PHILISTINES ALBUMS
The Philistines - Self Defined
Co-Produced "Free the P" 05



Omar Offendum
Bachelor in Architecture : UVA
The N.O.M.A.D.S. albums:
Dissonance & Dissentdat 04
Co-Produced "Free the P" 05
N.O.M.A.D.S. VS Philistines mixtape 06