

Peacefender: Hip hop from Auburn to Beirut

Tony Mitchell

Khaled Sabsabi [aka Peacefender] is a sound artist and hip hop producer of Lebanese background who has been working in Western and South Western Sydney for twenty years. He formed C.O.D. in the early 1990s, and did production work with veteran Westside group Just Us, Def Wish Cast among others. He was also a key figure in Death Defying Theatre's 1995 Sydney Community hip hop project *Hip Hopera*, and has run numerous hip hop workshops with young people of non-English speaking backgrounds at the Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre, Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service and elsewhere. With Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) in Parramatta he has co-ordinated exhibitions and workshops with Australian visual and sound artists of many cultural backgrounds. He has done sound and video installations, hip hop workshops and visual arts projects in Sydney, Beirut, and Berlin among other places. He has also released several CDs of his own work and compilations of hip hop by young people of Arabic and other backgrounds, including *Peacefender*, *Disctionary* and *2168*. Examples of his work can be accessed on his website

www.peacefender.com

This interview took place in November 2005. Many thanks to Astrid Lorange.

TM: How did you first get involved in hip hop?

P: I just got drawn into it as a young person from a non-English speaking background, Lebanese background. Back in the eighties it was more of an attraction to us, versus the Australian music scene at the time. It was an alternative for us, we could relate to it: it was rhythmic and it drew us in as young people, and from there, the love developed. Making Hip hop then was pretty much about experimentation, finding out things as you went along. It started as neighbourhood kids do, hang around the garage making beats using basic analogue methods: such as direct drive turntables, using and cutting tape to make loops, etc., trial and error. And there was the lyrical content of course, also. Since hearing Public Enemy, in the mid 80's, I just never looked back, really.

TM: And you mainly became involved in beat production, rather than MCing?

P: Well, No, originally I started out as a rhymer, but it was necessity: the beats needed to be made.

And there weren't many producers around at the time, or beatmakers, so pretty much you had to make your own beats, so beat making became a necessity. Since about 1996, I have been mainly focused on creating beats, sound design and art making. I've always thought of hip hop as something that must continually evolve, even if I make so-called 'abstract sound art', I still consider it as hip hop, because it has all the elements of hip hop. That's what hip hop is to me. It's about evolving and pushing barriers.

T.M. How did you become involved in community theatre?

P: About '88 or '89 Death Defying Theatre heard that there were a group of young people hanging out in a garage in Granville listening and making music, they approached me and asked 'Would you like to remix a soundtrack for us?' That was for a show called *Rap It Up*, the main theme of that show was consumer affairs. And I took it from there, remixed it, and started looking at hip hop as a means to create, engage and work with communities. Because there were a lot of Arabic speaking young people in our area being locked up at the time, so it was important to use hip hop to actually go in and work with young people ... I don't like to use the word 'empower', but to share experiences and stories and to bring them out to the public.

TM: So you were working in places like detention centres?

P: I was doing lots of work in detention centres, yes. And it ranged from Yasmar, Minda, Mt. Colburn and other juvenile justice centres, across all, and at the time I worked in some of the adult ones as well. I worked with young adults mainly, and that led to other productions with Death Defying Theatre like *Eye of the Law*, a really interesting theatre production, it was about three people, three stories, and how they look at the law and how the law looks back at them. It was a really popular show, and it played to over seven thousand high school students across Sydney metro. I was the sound controller. The idea was that the performance was staged on a 12 metre by 8 metre carpet; the carpet was drawn on to create the layout it self which was an old map prison, the map prison detail was burnt on by using a soldering iron. And you had the three performers on this carpet, I was on head of the carpet, like a overseer of the actors and the performance in a huge metal sculpture, like a judge figure almost and pretty much bouncing off them. It was in some respects like a freestyle between myself—the music, the sound - and the performers. So although most of it was scripted, there was room to improvise with the actors and audience, using not only sound, but words.

It dealt with issues of homophobia, domestic violence and abuse. It was an important show.

TM: And then you formed C.O.D.?

P: C.O.D. came about in the early nineties, right through to the mid nineties, and it meant many things, that was the idea: that Cash on Delivery would sometimes become Course of Destruction. The group was formed in Auburn, and the reason for this was that at that time there were a lot of problems between the Turkish and the Arabic Lebanese young people. The other person I formed COD with was of Turkish background. So for a Leb and a Turk to actually join forces in Auburn was a positive thing, to deal with the tension at the time between the two groups in the same territory. And this process actually put a lot of pride back in Auburn, for a while, for that period. We would turn up to gigs, and have Lebanese and Turkish young people there by the masses, and we would go everywhere—from city out to the West. Originally it was just the two of us, but later it developed. We got another Turkish rhymer and then another Lebanese rhymer. And then we started getting different musicians on board from different backgrounds. The format remained as hip hop: beats, hard beats, hardcore beats, phat beats, but we would add elements such as the use the derbukka [Arabic percussion instrument similar to the tabla], for example. We would use some traditional rhythmic elements, or the buzuq [long-necked fretted lute, similar to an oud] or a saz [Turkish lute], within production, to give ownership of the beats. And in the rhymes, we were talking about our situation, who we are? so it was really important for us to have beats that reflected the rhymes.

TM: Amongst older people in the Lebanese community, was there a lot of suspicion about hip hop? Is it regarded as being something American, and associated with gangsters and violence?

P: No, not really. Because hip hop, primarily, is rhythm, and Rhythm is not a new thing to our traditions, so performing at an older traditional people's function, which we've done plenty of with C.O.D., people really appreciated it. They listened and they took it for what it was, because they know that it's their kids up there, people like themselves performing. They don't look at it like: 'Oh, well, that's American crap, no; I want to stay away from that stereotype'. It's about the moment and connecting with someone who is familiar, in look and tradition, so there's really not that much [suspicion]—there's a lot of support.

TM: Can you talk about your role in *Hip Hopera*?

P: The original idea for me when I proposed the concept to DDT was to create a huge media event, a celebration of hip hop, and yes it was about being ambitious at the time to say 'Hip Hopera', and take it to a grand opera levels. Once the funding proposal was successfully secured a year later, Hip hopera became a reality. It involved a huge workshop process with young people of all cultural backgrounds, and a really talented team of artists of many backgrounds and skills. It involved every element of hip hop, put together over three months of workshops to create two huge events. One was at Pier 4, in the city, and the other one was out at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. We also invited established [hip hop] crews from Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne flying in. It was an important cultural event for Sydney and hip hop in general.

TM: Was that when you met Morganics?

P: Yes, Morgan came in having the background in performance, so he added extra skills to the project. Charlene—Spice [Sydney's first female MC and graffiti artist] also worked on it, Vahid Vahid, who was a video artist at COFA, under the guidance of Fiona Winning. *Hip Hopera* had many stages, as far as how and what we needed to do. It was about locating young people, as young as nine and ten years old. We even had one person who was inside prison at the time, in Minda [Detention Centre], we produced a song there. When it came to performance time, we projected a video of the work and we incorporated it into the performance. We had young people who were interested in dance, electro beats, so I created electro beats, we had young people who were interested in hardcore, so that was done also, and we had a couple of university students –young women—and they were on another level, they needed a different type of beat.

TM: And where did you go after *Hip Hopera*?

P: I will go back just as a brief background In '91 I started to be really active in the Hip hop and community arts scene. I switched trades from an engineering-land surveying background straight into welfare arts, because I believe in the arts as a great tool to work with people, especially when people are marginalised and isolated, even though I don't like to use [those words]. I started working in the early 90's at Bankstown Multicultural Youth service, and from there I moved to Cell Block Youth Health service in '93/'94 where I stayed for seven years.

Then I was working out at Liverpool, and I continue to work, today, in the same field. I work out at Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre LMRC and have been doing so about five or six years. I also work at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, and I've been doing lots of art work also.

TM: And you did a hip hop project for the Liverpool MRC called *2168*?

P: From Cell Block YHS, where I did a harm minimisation anti-drug program hip hop CD, I went out to Liverpool and to the Miller areas. Back in 2000-01, and even now, Miller is everywhere in the media - the outer suburbs of Liverpool. Back then, there was hardly any infrastructure whatsoever, but there was a lot of issues and demand, a lot of need from young people. So the idea was to lobby, secure some funds, and to run the *2168* project. *2168* is the postcode, and it encompasses 8 different suburbs in outer Liverpool. It was a great project, a really quick project. It was about putting a focus on Miller and on the Green Valley areas and to look for further funding and lobbying to try and get some more funds and infrastructure into the area. The *2168* CD was produced, and the whole process took about three months: from workshop, recording, mastering, pressing, design and performance. There are six tracks on the CD, but the Youth / Artist featured are all from different cultural backgrounds: from Lebanese / Arabic speakers to Polynesian and Aboriginal Australians. The skills were always there—they just needed the opportunity. Hip hop is a really immediate tool to get results, especially when working with young people, because you break down that barrier between teacher and student, trainer and participant, you're all one, on that creative level. There's a dialogue between you and the people that you're working with.

TM: And there was some rapping in Arabic on *2168*?

P: Yeah, there's a few rhymes in Arabic within the CD. At the time, people were starting to experiment with the Arabic language as rhyme in Australia. It wasn't a global thing yet. It wasn't until I went to the Middle East in 2003, on my CCD Fellowship that I got to hear crews that were totally rapping in Arabic. The way they were structuring their rhymes, they were using the French FLOW of rhyme rather than the English FLOW that we are use to hearing, so when you hear, say, Aks'ser or Rayess Bek, Lebanese Crews and if you're familiar with French hip hop i.e. "I AM" and the way they structure their FLOW, you'll see a lot of similarities between the two.

Now in a small period of time Hip hop has exploded and has developed further, Hip hop in the Middle East has come so far in a short period of time: even with rhyimers in Australia, you're seeing more and more Arabic language incorporation. And it's a great way to link back to tradition, and cultural awareness.

TM: So for young Arab-Australians it's a way of connecting with their homeland culture, getting involved in oral tradition, and even linking up with things like Lebanese poetry traditions?

P: On one account you are absolutely right on that one, on another, my opinion—or spin on it—is that it's not really about them connecting with their homeland, it's more about their identity, and they are two very different [things]. Most of these young people, although they are proud to be Arabs, and use the Arabic language in their rhymes, and stand and say 'Look, I'm Lebanese', or 'I'm Arab', or 'Australian', they'll go back to Lebanon and they won't last a week. They'll be back home to Australia straight away—because they don't fit in. That's that whole thing. It makes an impact for them to know who they are. So this is what's important.

TM: When you're working with young people in hip hop workshops, what kinds of facilitation techniques do you use?

P: Well, it doesn't matter whether it's a one-off workshop or a six-month workshop or one-year project, it's pretty much the same sort of approach. It's about finding icebreakers; it's about finding and establishing connections with the group. And once you get over those hurdles, then ideas start to bounce backwards and forwards. There are certain rules, or format that I use, and that is: you shouldn't really go in as the know-it-all 'expert' facilitator. You should go in and listen to what the young people are saying and doing, the styles of music they like—even if you don't agree with their choice, who their favourite MC is; even if they happen to be a gangsta rappers, that's fine. Just listen. It's about developing, working. And from there, you bring out, or introduce, different elements of rhyming, structure and thought. When I'm creating lyrics with young people, I like to start by brainstorming words first. From this, we use topics. And we have a relay; we split them up into two groups, by just getting words up on a whiteboard or on paper. From those words, issues are drawn, and then we go around and pick certain words that interest us as a group. We start to do writing exercises: there's no right, there's no wrong. You have to keep reminding the participants that spelling is not important; get your ideas down, don't think about it, let it FLOW be automatic, connect with the paper. Also I often use as another starting point, 'who, how, where, when' and why, I put those to the group.

So if you get a word like 'violence', [you ask] the ask the group 'who?' 'why?' 'where?' 'violence', and from there, you start to get a structure, so you have a continuous piece of writing. Then you go back, and read, maybe not in the same workshop, maybe in two or three or four workshops down the track, depending on the group, from there we structure. We listen to each other's rhymes and we work together as a group. Sometimes, a young person might not have the confidence to say their rhyme; with their permission, their friend says it for them. Their confidence is built slowly throughout the process. Then you introduce the microphone and beats, you get them out in front of people. So it is a process, but again, it depends on the group that you work with.

TM: I noticed on *2168* it was basically all guys. Have you worked with young women from Arabic backgrounds?

P: Yes, depending on the project. And it's also about being culturally appropriate. For example, when I worked out at Punchbowl, on an all girls 'Links to Learning' project, looking at alternative ways of learning, the idea was to use audio and visual components to express these issues. Miller, *2168* happened to be with young males that were mostly at risk at the time - obviously. *2168* was hard work at the time, because you would be in a workshop, police would walk in, and you'd have a kid bolt out of the youth centre and jump up fences. So it was a really full on experience. Different means for different projects. As the facilitator you have to be careful of workshop dynamics. Not only the gender stuff, but across the board. You might have some shy boys or girls that don't want to come up and do stuff, and then you might have the really loud participants who want to take over the workshop and be at the forefront of it. You've just got to be able to balance it in a clever way where you involve the group as a whole and keep those access and equality dynamics going. And it's the activities that you run that actually gel them as a whole. For example, last year I did two projects, one with Auburn Girls High School which was an all girls project. It was a crime prevention video project, creating a rap song; it involved writing lyrics, recording, and then putting a video together. At the same time I had another workshop at the Auburn youth centre, which was working with newly arrived African youth communities that are settling in Auburn, so you had all the language stuff to deal with. So it is hard, but you as a facilitator have to negotiate and be aware of all these issues, and you have to find ways—and they're not always the "right" ways. It takes much time patience and a lot of effort.

TM: With the African kids, was their English very minimal?

P: Yeah, and also minimal confidence, because when language is a problem, confidence is a problem also. So the key here is that you must find cultural group similarities, i.e. a Sudanese young person and connect them with another Sudanese young person, if they don't already know each other in the group, to work together. You have to get the support structures in place also, depending on the organisation that you work with and in, whether they can help along. Not everything is perfect, but as a facilitator, you have to know the group before you go in there: age, likes, dislikes, their backgrounds—this is important if you want to run an effective workshop.

English is a new language for them, so they want to rhyme in English—even if it's just one line. With that project, it wasn't a full verse; it wasn't an eight bar, sixteen bar or thirty-two bar verse. It was one line each. Eight people, eight bars/lines. But they've achieved something in five or six workshops, that's what's important. They've got something that they can listen to and show. With *2168*, the ones that were rhyming in Arabic were born in Australia, but politically they wanted to connect with their cultural background, so they'd use Arabic.

TM: You've also done a major project in Lebanon.

P: I received a grant from the Australia Council for the Arts, a Community and Cultural Development CCD Fellowship from 2002 to 2004. The whole idea for the project was to go to the Middle East and to look at traditional elements like *zajal*, which is a form of improvised rhyming in Arabic where people sit around a table and respond to each other, and also women's chants. I looked at ways these could be incorporated in contemporary hip hop, along with specific cultural sounds and music. For me, it was the first time going back to the Middle East since coming here as a kid in the late '70s, so I was here for twenty-five years. To go back was a huge cultural shock. Here I am going from childhood memories to being there "full-blown" looking at this whole big picture. I the fellowship I connected with different musicians, different music styles and the idea of using language. I worked with one musician who's really skilled in classical European music styles, and uses Arabic poetry, for example, Gibran Khalil Gibran, spoken word. I worked with rhymer who were from traditional Armenian backgrounds, because there is a huge Armenian community in Lebanon, but they only rhymed in English, they wouldn't rhyme in Arabic, although I thought they sound better in Arabic, they only wanted to rhyme in English! They sounded full on, they've even got an American accent, you could easily play it and say, 'this is from New York'.

I worked with Lebanese rhymer's also, and experimental musicians; it was more of an exchange of ideas and skills, to [work] and bring it back here and share it with the community, my community here, as an artist and as a community worker. From that process I got really inspired to go back. I worked with the Beirut Theatre, with mainstream and alternative radio stations in Beirut and in Syria, and with traditional and experimental musicians.

I was inspired to come back to Australia in 2004-2005 and along with two other friends and colleagues, Farzin Yekta and Rose Nakad decided to pursue the CCD studio building and training idea further beyond the shores of Australia. The idea was simple, to adopt our CCD way of working and to develop and work with at risk youth in Lebanon. After initial and unsuccessful funding applications made to the Australia Council for the Arts, We the collective decided to go and see if other possibilities may exist. Contact with a Palestinian NGO based in Beirut ALJANA, Arab Resource Centre for Popular Arts was made and this is where funding possibilities were sought. The funding was finally secured from Oxfam Québec and ALJANA auspice the funds. The project idea was to go South, North and to the middle of Lebanon, to the Palestinian refugee camps, and to pick up interested young adults from across the different regions to represent the different communities, and to bring them to Beirut central to be trained in media studio technologies.

Rose Nakad spearheaded this process over a 9-month period.

In late 2005 the project began, the participants were involved in the studio building process from the start, meaning that they themselves put the studio together, and this included sound insulation techniques and methods for walls and ceiling. They were also involved in the building of shelving and the installation of all IT equipment, hardware and software. This process was an important part of the training as the knowledge and skills attained could be taken back and utilized by their community. There were twelve young people that went through the intensive workshop processes for two and a half months, eight hours a day, seven days a week. This process not only covered the building studio aspect but also included hands-on training, understanding and working with the equipment. This project remains ongoing today even after the recent crisis that happened in Lebanon.

TM: So a lot of the stuff that they've been producing would have had some really strong political content?

P: Yes there was, but we didn't want to be part of it. We stayed independent, this way you have the room to move to wherever you want to move. It's about their story, it's their experiences, this is what they want to do, this is what they want to say. And that varies from place to place, from person to person.

You have some people that just want to put together semi-commercial love songs: fine. You have other people who want to be more aggressive or political: that's fine also. At the end, it's about them documenting their stories, their experiences, the way that they want other people, or the public, or the world, to see them. The tracks produced are pretty much political and personal experience and about their struggles.

TM: And have you brought skills and knowledge back from there that you can use with young people here?

P: I think you bring back experience, and knowledge of place and people. You see what people are doing there, and share when you work with people here, it's a form of exchange. You play music or beats or rhymes or bits of film, or whatever you have, from there to here, it's about dialogue really. People get to see the real stories.

TM: And likewise have you taken material from here over to Lebanon?

P: Definitely. It's really important to take this stuff backwards and forwards, so that communities over there see what Arabic speaking, Non-English speaking and indigenous Australian communities are doing here, on the grassroots level. And vice versa. I've been doing a lot of video, installation and sound art since 1999. I had a few screenings in Berlin, and worked with the Arabic communities there. It was at the time of the war in 2006 that happened in Lebanon, so I was involved with Stop The War Network, who were doing continuous protests every second weekend. It was important because people could see what Australian society is like, or how we perceive it, through the work, the issues that we have. And we can see the issues that they have. In Berlin there is a huge Turkish population. For me the roles were reversed: whereas here the Arabic speaking community are on the bottom—seen to be as the troublemakers, the extremists—it's the Turkish community that's looked at like that there. For me to go from here and to see a Turkish young person dressed up like an Arabic young person here in Bankstown, it's the same sort of mentality and issues in reverse.

TM: What kind of work are you doing at the moment?

P: I've sort of switched off rhymes, although I still do write lyrics today. But I've made a decision not to record lyrics any more, for a reason. Because the way I feel, hip hop has just been incorporated and it's been abused, and to me that's not what hip hop was about. For me, my inspiration was people like the Last Poets, who I picked up on after hearing Public Enemy - it's inspirational stuff.

It's about taking the power back, but then to see it move into the gangsta phase and money was a little bit too much for me, especially the impact that it had on the Arabic speaking young people here.

The most exciting project I'm involved in now is a three-year project called 'Refill' out at Liverpool, and it will be run by the 'Generations' national program, which will be run across five LGAs across Australia. It's about working with communities of people, over three years, to influence policy and find models and ways to work. We've identified the group that we'll be working with, out at Liverpool: Indigenous, and Arabic speakers, twelve- to fifteen-year-olds. We have the luxury to work for three years, and to look at real outcomes, whether they be connected to education or careers.

TM: This is a really bad time in Australia, in the sense that Arab-Australians seem to be really targeted, and discriminated against. Particularly when we've got Howard accusing Arab-Australians of not learning English. How do you operate in that kind of climate?

P: It's frustrating, but you must keep going. It's not only me—there's a thousand of me out there that are very active, doing great work on all levels. It is frustrating, it is heart breaking, but it's got to be done. I can't speak for the whole community. Sometimes, it's illogical what's been said in the mainstream, how a community is being stereotyped, shown in the media continuously. You can feel that there's something there all the time: questions are always loaded, surveys are always loaded in every context. In the media, there's continuous reminders, the way the stories are structured. You see this, I see this, but what can we do? We are also Australian and we are here. We can't just pack up our bags and sell our citizenship and go back to 'wherever we came from'.

TM: Isn't hip hop a powerful way of expressing citizenship? Of claiming citizenship and challenging 'Australian values', in the John Howard sense?

P: Yes and that's what I'd like to see hip hop doing more. And that's what hip hop should be about. At a community level, where we live and work, that's what hip hop is to us, it's about people and their voices, getting out and being heard. It's not about the big, flashy cars or beautiful video clips.

TM: Hip hop has always been associated with people who are disadvantaged, disempowered, who are struggling, discriminated against— that's how it started in the USA. And to a certain extent, it's the same here.

P: To an extent it is, but in a different place, in a different community with different people, it's something else altogether. But the one thing that we can't deny hip hop—it's universal. It's communicated with millions and it has represented millions. It's had views heard. And to come across through this global movement, in such a short period of time, and to have it influence the world—Hiphop is an important event in our history!