



Peacefender

24/11/06, University of Technology, Sydney.
Peacefender, Tony Mitchell.

Summary:

‘Hip-hop is a really immediate tool to get results, especially when we’re working with young people, because you break down that barrier between teacher and student, trainer and participant, because you’re on the that creative level. There’s a dialogue between you and the people that you’re working with.’

Peacefender is a sound artist and hip-hop producer of Lebanese background who has been working in western Sydney for 20 years. He formed C.O.D. in the early 1990s, and did production work with veteran Westside group 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 Youth Centre and elsewhere. With Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) in Parramatta he has co-ordinated exhibitions and workshops with Australian visual and sound artists of Arabic background. He has done sound installations, hip-hop workshops and visual arts projects in Sydney, Beirut, and Berlin. He has also released several CDs of his own work and compilations of hip-hop by young people of Arabic and other backgrounds, including *Unit 5 Welcome You to the Camps*, recorded in Arabic in Beirut with Palestinian refugees. In this interview, Peacefender talks to Tony Mitchell about running workshops, combining hip-hop with theatre, visual arts and sound design, and using hip-hop within Sydney’s Arabic speaking communities.

About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

P: Peacefender

TM: Tony Mitchell

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

P: I just got drawn into it as a young guy from a non-English speaking background, Lebanese background. Back in the 80s it was more of an attraction to us, versus the Australian music. It was an alternative for us, we could relate to it: it was rhythmic, it drew us in as young people, and from there, the love developed. It was pretty much about experimentation, finding out things as you went along. As neighbourhood kids do, we sort of hung around the garage making beats using analogue methods: turntables, tape loops, etc., trial and error. And there was the lyrical content of course, also. Since hearing Public Enemy, in 86 I think, I just never looked back, really.

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

P: Well, although originally I started out to be a rhymer, it [becoming a producer] was necessity: the beats needed to be made. And there weren't many producers around at the time, or beatmakers, so you pretty much had to make your own beats. Since about 2001, I have been mainly focused on creating beats and sound, sound design etc. I've always thought of hip-hop as something that evolves, even if I make 'abstract sound art', so-called, I still consider it hip-hop, because it has all the elements of hip-hop, and it's just evolving. That's what hip-hop is to me. It's about evolving and pushing the barriers.

TM: How did you become involved in community theatre?

P: In about 88 or 89, Death Defying Theatre heard that there were young people hanging out in garages listening to music and making music, and they approached me and said 'Would you like to remix a soundtrack for us?' That was for a show called *Rap It Up*, and the main theme of that show was about consumer affairs. And we took it from there, remixed it, and started looking at hip-hop as a means to create and work with communities. There were a lot of Arabic speaking young people 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, juvenile justice centres, all across, and at the time we went to some of the adult ones also. I worked with young adults, and that led to other productions with Death Defying Theatre like *Eye of the Law*, a really cool, interesting production because 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 students across Sydney metro. I was the sound controller. The idea was that the layout of the performance was a map of a prison: it was laid out on carpet, and it was burnt using a soldering iron. And you had the three performers, and I was in the background, pretty much bouncing off them. It was in some respects like a freestyle between myself—the music, or the sound – and the performers. So although most of it was scripted, there was room to improvise, using not only sound, but the 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-90s, right through to the mid-90s, and it meant many things, that was the idea: Cash on Delivery, but sometimes it would be Course of Destruction. It was formed

in Auburn, and at the time there were a lot of problems between the Turkish young people and the Arabic young people, Lebanese young people, and the other person I formed it with was of Turkish background. So for a Leb and a Turk to actually join forces was a good thing, because there was a lot of tension at the time between those two groups in the same territory. And this actually put a lot of pride in Auburn, for a while, for that period. We would turn up to gigs, and we would have Lebanese and Turkish young people there, and we would go everywhere—from the city out to the West. Originally it was just the two of us, and then 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 was hip-hop: beats, hard beats, hardcore beats, phat beats, but we would use the derbukka [Arabic percussion instrument similar to the tabla], for example. We would use some of those traditional rhythmic elements, or the buzuq [long-necked fretted lute, similar to an oud] which is a saz [Turkish lute], within our production, to give its 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. So at an older people's function, which we've done plenty of with C.O.D., people actually 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'. It's about the moment for them. 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 idea was to create a huge media event, a celebration of hip-hop, and it's a bit naïve, but to say '*Hip-hopera*', and take it to opera levels. This involved a huge workshop process with young people of all backgrounds, and a really talented team of artists of all backgrounds and all skills. It involved pretty much 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. And we had [hip-hop] crews from Melbourne flying in. It was a really important cultural event for Sydney.

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, and 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 at the time, in Minda [Detention Centre], and 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, more electro beats, so we created electro beats, we had young people who were interested in hardcore, so that was done, 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: In 92 I started to be really active. I switched trade 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 at Bankstown Youth Centre, and from there I moved to Cell Block in 93/94 for seven years. Then I was working out at Campbelltown, and I continue to work, today, in the field. I work out at

Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre 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 artwork also.

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

P: From Cell Block, where we did a harm minimisation or anti-drug program hip-hop CD, I went out to Liverpool and the Miller areas. Back in 2000-01, and even now, Miller is everywhere – the outer suburbs of Liverpool. Back then, there was hardly any infrastructure whatsoever, but there was a lot of demand, a lot of need from the young people. So the idea was to lobby, secure some funds of some sort, and to run the *2168* project. *2168* is the postcode, and it encompasses about five or six 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 area and looking 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, performance, recording, mastering, pressing, design, etc. There's only six tracks on the CD, but they're all from different backgrounds: from Lebanese and Arabic speakers to Polynesian and Aboriginal Australian. The skills are there – they just needed the opportunity. Hip-hop is a really immediate tool to get results, especially when we're working with young people, because you break down that barrier between teacher and student, trainer and participant, because you're 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 that CD. At the time, people were starting to experiment with the Arabic language. It wasn't a global thing, because Arabic is really hard to incorporate with rhyming. It wasn't until I went to the Middle East later on that I got to hear crews that were totally rapping in Arabic. But the way they were structuring their rhymes, they were using the French language rather than the English language, so that's why when you hear, say, Aks'ser or Rayess Bek, some of those groups, if you're familiar with French hip-hop and the way they structure it, you'll see a lot of similarities between the two. Whereas now it's developed further, hip-hop in the Middle East has come far: even with rhymer in Australia, you're seeing more and more Arabic incorporation. And it's a great way to link back to tradition, and to 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: It's a funny question, that one, because over time, my opinion – or my 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 Arabic, and they'll use the Arabic language in their rhymes, and they'll stand and say 'Look, I'm Lebanese', or 'I'm Arabic', or 'Australian', or whatever, but they'll go back to Lebanon and they won't last a week. They'll be back 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 thing. It's about finding icebreakers; it's about finding connections with the group. And once you get over that hurdle, then ideas start to bounce backwards and forwards. There are certain rules, or a format that I use, and that is: you shouldn't really go in there as the 'expert' – or know-it-all – as the facilitator. I think you should just go in there and listen to what the young people are doing, the styles of music that they like – even if you don't agree with who

their favourite MC is; if they happen to be a gangsta rapper, that's fine. Just listen. It's about developing, working. And from there, you bring out, or introduce, different elements of rhyming, structure, etc. 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, and just get words up on a whiteboard. From those words, issues are drawn, and then we go around and pick certain words. Then 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 idea down, don't think about it, be automatic, connect with the paper. Also, use as another starting point, 'who, how, where, when': put those on the board. So if you get a word like 'violence', [you ask] 'who?' 'why?' 'where?' and from there, you get a structure, so you have a continuous piece of writing. Then you go back, and you read it, maybe not in the same workshop, maybe in two or three or four workshops down the track, depending on the group, and 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 throughout the process. Then you introduce the microphone, 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 project, a 'Links to Learning' project, it was looking at alternative ways of learning, and the idea was to use audio and visual components to express this. Because it was Miller, *2168* happened to be with young people that were mostly at risk at the time – males, obviously. And it was really interesting, because you would be in a workshop, and police would come in, and you'd have a kid bolt out of the youth centre and jump up the fences. So it was a really full-on experience. As the facilitator you have to be careful of the workshop dynamics. Not only the gender stuff, but across the board. You might have some shy boys that don't want to come up and do stuff, and then you might have the really loud participants who want to take over everything 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 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, but it was creating a rap song, one song; it involved writing lyrics, then recording a song, then putting a video together. And at the same time I had another workshop at the Auburn youth centre, which was working with newly arrived African communities that are settling in Auburn, so you had all the language stuff to deal with on top of that. So it is hard, but you as a facilitator have to negotiate with all these, and you have to find ways – and they're not always the right ways. It takes time and a lot of 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 you have to find 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 structure in place also, depending on the organisation that you work with, 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. Eight people, eight bars. But they've achieved something in five or six work-

shops, 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 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. We looked at ways these could be incorporated in contemporary hip-hop, along with sounds and music. For me, it was the first time going back since I came here as a kid in the 70s, so I was here for thirty years before going back, 25 years later. It was a huge cultural shock for me to go back. Here I am going from memories to being there full-blown to look at this whole big picture. What I did on the fellowship, pretty much, was connect 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 he uses poetry, like, for example, *Kahil Gibran*, spoken word. I worked with rhymers who were from 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 think they sound better in Arabic, but they want to rhyme in English! They sound full on, they've got an American accent, you could play it and say, 'This is from New York', or something. And then I worked with Lebanese rhymers also, and experimental musicians; it was more of an exchange, to look at this [work] and bring it back here and share it with the community, my Arabic-speaking community here, as an artist and as a community worker. From that I got really inspired to go back. I worked with the Beirut Theatre, and with mainstream radio stations in Beirut and in Syria, and with traditional musicians. Then there was an idea to go work in the Palestinian refugee camps, so I went back with a couple of friends, and the idea was, 'Why don't we adapt this CCD work that we've been doing here for 16 years, and take it there?' And we set up studios, worked with the Palestinian refugees, and trained [them]. We had a small NGO in Beirut auspice the money. This created a room for us to create the studio, create a facility, create infrastructure, somewhere where people can be trained. The project idea was to go South, North and to the middle of Lebanon, to the refugee camps, and to pick up young adults from all across to represent the different communities, different people, and to bring them to Beirut to the studio. And we had the young people involved from the word go. So that meant that they, themselves, put the studio together, and that included the walls, the sound insulation, the shelving, putting in all the IT equipment and the hardware and software... all this was part of the training. So they got to take this back to their community. We came up with the idea of creating mobile booths – recording booths – which could be taken out as panels and then joined together, and they could be taken to the camps, so that was also made possible. There was about 12 to 15 young people that went through really intensive workshop processes for about two months, eight hours a day, seven days a week, skilling up in sound and hardware and software technologies. And it's still ongoing, still going strong. Even after the crisis that just 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, although we didn't want to be part of it all. Stay independent, have the room to move to wherever you want to move. It's 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 the other people, or the public, or the world, see them. The tracks

produced are pretty much political, personal experience, 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. You see what people are doing there, and 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, and 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 or non-English speaking communities are doing here, on the grass-roots level. And vice versa. I've been doing a lot of video and sound art since 1999, and installation art also. I had a few screenings in Berlin, and worked with the Arabic community there. And it was at the time of the war 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. There is a huge Turkish population in Berlin. The roles are reversed: whereas here the Arabic speaking community are on the bottom – seen to be 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 Banks-town, it's the same sort of mentality 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 was a little bit too much for me, especially the impact that it had on the Arabic speaking young people. 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, 12- to 15-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 that are very active, doing great work on all levels. It is frustrating, it is heartbreaking, but it's got to be done. I can't speak for the whole community. Sometimes, it's illogical what's been said, 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 on websites. 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 Australian and we are here. We can't just pack up our bags and sell our citizenship and go back to Lebanon. Or go back to 'wherever we came from'. Because most of us were born here.

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

P: 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 work, that's what hip-hop is to us, it's about people and their voices, getting out there and being heard. It's not 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, different community, 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, it's represented millions. And it's had everyone's views heard. And to come across this movement, in such a short time, a global movement, and have it influence the world – it's an important event!