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Hip Hop Bridges the Divide

The Concept: President Obama has said that he wants to pursue “a new way forward with the Muslim world”. His Al Arabiya interview, his Nowruz greetings to Iran, and his visit to Turkey all have demonstrated his desire to improve relations with the Muslim world. Questions are beginning to be raised about what actions will follow the President’s gracious words. For despite the new administration’s positive gestures, the fact remains that eight after 9/11, the divide between the west and Arab and Muslim world remains significant, according to public opinion polls by Gallup and Pew.

There are untapped opportunities to bridge this divide, and to reach out to the majority youthful population in the Muslim world, most notably in music, specifically rap and hip hop music which is hugely popular not only in the Arabic speaking world, but also in Iran. Whether they sing in Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, French or English, today’s hip hop musicians speak a common language; they voice feelings of alienation and frustration, but also hopes for a better world. During the Cold War the jazz tours of Dizzy Gillespie and others kept hopes of freedom alive behind the Iron Curtain, as Vaclav Havel and others from the Eastern bloc have testified. Today hip hop plays a similar role, but its potential to build bridges across cultures has not been tapped.

Music is a universal language, and hip hop is today’s global music, yet its potential to reach out and build connections has not been realized. Both as music and as contemporary poetry, hip hop resonates in the Arab and Muslim world. Iranian hip hop artist YAS (www.myspace.com/yaspersian2) admires Tupac Shakur; DAM, the top Palestinian hip hop group, was inspired by Nas, Mos Def, and Tupac as well as Arab music (<http://www.palestineonlinestore.com/art/dam.html>).

With new technologies and possibilities of producing music on the web, there is untapped potential both for cross cultural communication through hip hop and rap music and for tangible benefits to musicians in the Muslim world. 1) The low entry costs of producing and distributing music and films on the web mean greater opportunities for more people to take part; 2) Communicating on the web and social networking offers opportunity for self-expression and connection to others for frustrated youth population in Islamic world. An online social networking build up to the concert, combined with uploaded personal videos from the concert would leverage the potential of the concert as a large scale connector between cultures for young people (and other hip hop fans); 3) potential for production and distribution on the web also makes it possible for some to earn a living through creative expression. (Youth unemployment is a huge problem in the Muslim world).

- **The Event (s):** A global hip hop summit and jam session aimed at bridging divides between cultures, communities and countries, specifically targeting the divide between the US and the Arab and Muslim world. Given importance of poetry in the Arab world, the summit also could include poetry jams, modeled on Def poetry. Could also be held in two locations – one in west and one in Muslim world. Could expand reach with online streaming and/or large screens in different locations.
- **Key Players:** Muslim American stars such as Akon, Nas, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Lupe Fiasco (just to name a few). Stars from Muslim world such as DAM, Ramullah Underground, YAS (Iran), Fez City Clan (Morocco) and others.
- **Beyond the Concert:** With the engagement of Quincy Jones, Russell Simmons, or someone comparable, it would be possible to have a contest with a recording as prize and music production (including online) workshops. With the musicians from different countries, could have an all night jam session that could be web streamed. Documentary film makers could be engaged to produce short videos about the performers. Amateur videos from audience could capture experience of concert, and keep it alive on YouTube. Could also hold panel discussions on global political and socio-economic aspects of hip hop. Russell Simmons's Hip Hop Summit and Action Network (HSAN) provide a good model.