

Stage

Zajal meets rap

Natasha Dirany meets Lebanon's rappers and slammers as they prepare to hit the stage for the **European-Lebanese Rap Poetry Festival**.



Katibe Khamseh will mix MC-ing with mezze for some Arak-infused freestyle!

Although the differences between poetic verse and hip hop lyrics might not seem so large to well-trained eyes and ears, the thought of Kanye West sitting down for a freestyle improv session with Carol Ann Duffy anytime soon seems unlikely.

But it's precisely this gap between hip hop and the performing arts that this month's European-Lebanese Rap Poetry Festival seeks to bridge. In a series of workshops throughout Lebanon, well-known names from Beirut's ever-growing underground hip hop scene will be joined by Europe's finest. French rappers Hakim Zouhani and Hocine Benmebrouk, Germans Fiva and Tobias Borke and Italian Frankie Hi-Nrg MC are just some of the names being imported especially for the occasion. Yet another feature of the Beirut World Book Capital celebrations, the event's been given a stamp of approval by the Goethe Institut and French and Italian Cultural Centres.

'The aim is to gain literary recognition for hip hop as a 'text', explains organiser and hip hop enthusiast Michele Paulikevitch.

That's the inspiration for 'Zajal

meets Rap', a three-day workshop taking place in Hermel Public Library. It'll certainly be an explosive amalgam. Zajal is a semi-improvised, semi-sung form of Lebanese poetry whose roots go back to 10th century Andalusia. Rap (for those born yesterday) is a rapid and rhythmic style of rhyming that began life in the USA's black ghettos. A genius pairing, the collaboration will produce the mother of all freestyle battles.

French rapper and slammer Hocine Benmebrouk will be leading the workshop with local lyricists Amro Abdel Rahman and Tarek El Khatib (members of Beirut's

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unstoppable Katibe Khamseh crew). Participants will study the techniques behind writing both zajal verses and rap rhymes, as well as the use of voice and music in both forms.

But if you think the festival will be introducing literary prestige to



'I set it off with my own rhyme, 'cause I'm as ill as a convict who kills for phone time'



'It's a chance to unite Lebanon's rap scene, and bring attention to beat-makers outside Beirut.' She emphasises the importance of working together through workshops to realise 'a new maturity' and give fresh confi-

dence to this otherwise unsupported scene. But the events aren't just for the benefit of the Lebanese – it will also be an eye-opener for the European entourage. 'I'm totally curious about Lebanese hip hop... I'm sure to get a lesson in humbleness about the Euro-centric picture the European media use to reflect the world,' says German rapper Tobias Borke.

Places for the workshops are limited, but those not taking part won't miss out on the fruits of the festival, which will culminate with a free live performance at Al Medina Theatre. Followed by a very, er, hip hop cocktail, it's a one-off chance to see a coalition of arguably the world's most credible rappers, out of their comfort zone.

street guys more concerned about graffiti than great novels, then think again. Katibe Khamseh, who count Palestinian camp Bourj el Barajneh as home, are a well-read bunch. 'The most important philosophers and writers for us are Sadek el Nayhoum, Frantz Fanon, Paolo Coelho and Yukio Mishima,' says MC Ousloub. They believe 'rap is a form of poetry' and on their first album Ahla Fik Bil Moukhayamat included poems by Abdel Rahman Jassem.

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