01 2013

# “It’s a Tough Job Recreating Ties”

**Abdoulah Bensaid (Musik à Venir)**

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**Interview with Abdoullah Ben Said by Birgit Mennel and Stefan Nowotny**

*Musik à Venir’s slogan is: music breaks down walls. On one hand, this slogan is a reference to Rousseau who, in the 18$^{th}$ century, answered the question as to whether the sciences and arts broke down walls. On the other, it also refers to the city walls. To begin, can you give us a more precise idea of what this slogan means in the context of your work?*

Really, it was a play on words to make an allusion to Rousseau, the main goal was to play with the words. But behind that we hear, “music sweetens walls”, because a lot of people that belong to the association are from so-called “sensitive” neighborhoods. And there’s an expression in these neighborhoods like “hold the walls”: when kids don't do anything at all, we say that they are holding the walls – it’s become a commonplace expression. And we often say that these kids holding walls are the ones that cause trouble and everything, generally. So, yeah, the initial idea was to make a reference to Rousseau; then after, yeah, it was to say that with art and music, or even with a link, certain parts of people can be sweetened.

*Really, music – and notably rap – seems to play a huge role in the production of discourse that comes from the* banlieue[1] *and also a kind of discourse that is almost always openly critical of the representation of these zones by politicians and mainstream media. How do you see the specific importance of musical production in this double context and, more particularly, in relation to the histories of migration and the so-called postcolonial situation?*

For me, rap is like other artistic expressions; it gets a lot of things out. In relation to the history of rap, it's true that most rappers are people from a particular place. If we take the United States for example, most rappers are people from the black American ghettos. Logically, here in France, people are really influenced by these ghettos and they feel, let's say, represented by them. They are "put aside" in the same way that black Americans are "put aside", seeing the places where they are put, the ghettoes. So, yeah, young rappers that come to Musik à Venir are going to be worried about "immigration problems" if their parents descend from immigrants, because those are the big worries that, in some sense, have troubled them for their whole childhood, so that's going to be one of their main concerns. Plus, another particular thing about rap is that you've got to be raw somewhere and talk about what is in your heart. So, when talking about kids, they have in their hearts what they know, the place where they live, the places they have lived, places that have problems, and that's what comes out the most.

Nevertheless, critical rap isn't at all in the mainstream media. Today's rap has become so commercial, it's really just selling to sell.

Nowadays, people produce, produce, produce, and they let go of rap's main message, the only real aim now being making music distributors happy. So, what we see today on television has completely lost the main message of rap. In its beginnings, rap was

a new style, there weren't many people doing it and they could sell and have their audience without those middlemen; on the contrary, the latter had to follow the rappers. But now, everyone does rap, the media just has to grab the one that seems the best for selling.

But aware rap is still listened to, by kids and really young kids; most people between 25 and 30 listen to rap like Casey, de Medine, or maybe Kery James. In political terms, we know who listens to what. If someone is completely outside of politics, the rap words they'll want to wont' be involved words. However, I think that rappers can still be influential, except that today most of them avoid talking about their political leanings, unless they are radically leftist; if not, it's rare that they talk about politics. Before they did more so, less now. For example, when I was younger, there was that song called "11:30 minutes against racist laws": it was a song written after the "Debré Law" on immigration in 1997, it was a really strong song, and all the kids listened to it because even at 15, we were interested in politics a little. We weren't great politicians, but we knew who represented what.

Now, politics are less central because we've taught kids that they're not a priority, that you've got to follow what they tell you to follow. For me, it's everything: we put anything on television, so kids watch whatever, so they're main interest is how pretty a girl is, a guy, who is with whom, who sleeps with whom... That's our priority right now, but back then that wasn't kids' priority at all.

Now, they are more interested in Sarkozy's child's name than in his politics. Obviously, you see it the most in the youngest.

So I think that, yeah, a rapper can really influence kids. Take, for example, Kery James' song[2] about hash to talk about how he quit

smoking; I know a bunch of kids who stopped smoking after listening to that song. And when Jean-Marie Le Pen got to the second round in the presidential elections with Chirac and when, basically, we had to chose between the plague and cholera, there was that song written by a bunch of rappers to say that it was better to vote for the right than to let the extreme right win[3] – and finally, kids went out to vote in masses. But I know, sure, that kids are also influenced by the words of rappers that talk about big luxury cars like Ferraris and Lamborghinis and making money; there are kids that listen to that kind of music and want to make money too. And we can do that too, we can put the people who don't have anything to say or who don't' say anything out front rather than others, because what influential people say can change things, not everything, but at least certain things.

*Let's get back to Musik à Venir: What is the goal of your work? And what are the ways you produce and collaborate?*

The goal of our work is to create bridges between "the youth world" and the "institutional world" because we can really see a gap between these two worlds: in certain neighborhoods, there is absolutely no more confidence towards institutions. However, institutions always have something to teach to the kids, and kids always have something to teach institutions. With Musik à Venir we try to recreate the bridges that don't exist anymore, we try to make it so that these two worlds cross so that they can change – above all the kids. We chose music as our tool to be able to make these ties, but beyond music there are also all the social pedagogies that have been developed according to this task.

There is a real rupture between certain kids and "society" in general. So that tie has to be recreated so that the two sides connect, because we can't live forever like outcasts, like people who

don’t follow society’s movement. So it’s precisely in that moment when society has to question itself. But to be able to question itself, there have to be sharp people, people who are conscious enough and who aren’t sheep; and most of the people who still aren’t sheep are the kids – they have a little bit of utopia.

Most people have to meet their needs, they have their problems from everyday life and so their political involvement is less consistent. It’s often said that when we’re young we’re really involved, we’re even ready to give up our lives. When we grow older, however, we have more responsibility and we try to deal with everything and still be involved – but we do try to be involved. So that’s it, our goal, is like that: we try to get kids to understand that society is there, that we have to have something to do with it somewhere – whether we’re outcasts or not – because society is there, judging us. So we have to try to enter that society, what we don’t have to do is enter into the mold, to act like everyone else, but to try to construct something: whether it be changing society, part of society, or building something that agrees with us and agrees with society. If we let “adults” or “governing bodies” guide us, we will only follow and, starting in that moment, we’ll never get outside of their ideas.

So with Musik à Venir we try to reestablish ties a show kids that it is possible to think about how we want to think – knowing that we are here, in France, that we’re not in a country where the military is in power and where we don’t have the right to speak. Here, we have the possibility to think about how we want to think and, at the same time, try to advance society; the possibility of not being an outcast, of not feeling set aside, because even if we feel set aside it’s always possible to get back on the boat.

*Regarding the ties you mentioned, what are the mechanisms that make the creation of such ties here more difficult than elsewhere, or that even destroy the existing ties in peripheral urban zones?*

What can destroy ties is a lack of confidence – and money. Because we can say beautiful words but if things just stay the same, people lose their confidence. And what stops things from moving ahead is the lack of funding: that's what makes certain projects late, that's what makes people lose the desire to do things. It's a vicious circle that snowballs. But what slows things down the most is a lack of confidence. Because like I said earlier, nowadays kids have totally lost confidence in the current system. And even when they try to gain confidence, they realize that we try to se them aside – that's the situation of the kids I work with, in any case. Suddenly, they prefer to go it alone rather than asking help from the state or from whatever. And when someone doesn't have anymore confidence, it's difficult for them to say "don't worry, we're going to try to regain confidence."

It's a really tough job recreating ties. It can be done in a subtle way, and sometimes we can even ask the question "is it necessary to make ties" because we can wonder if "are the institutions behind this really going to follow through"? When I say "the institutions", in quotation marks, I really mean the society where we have to insert ourselves "to live", "have a family", etc.. With things like they are now, it's difficult to gain confidence with society, above all when facing certain political measures that are put into place to throw out a certain part of the population or to clearly impoverish them. And it's still difficult if we watch television, where the information in certain programs have always accused the children of immigrants, the youth of the *banlieues*, Muslims... – we accuse them of this and that. The kids receive a load of information that

tell them, in general, that everything they represent is bad. How can someone make the first step if they've been insulted?

To give you an example, we went to Poland and it was great. But there were tons of looks because most of us are black. It's true there aren't a lot of Africans, of blacks in Poland, and the looks were really... it wasn't even racism, it was surprise. But to get everyone to understand that it wasn't racism, but surprise, we had to talk and talk, we had to make an effort in saying "no, no, no, we have to make an effort toward people and we'll realize that that gaze isn't a racist gaze, it isn't a racist gaze". Then at the beginning of the second day, we came across a group of skinheads; they were really and truly racists and we had to work again because, yeah, it was racism. But afterwards, how do you separate things? Tell yourself "those guys, they are racist and those other guys, they're not racist"? First of all you're scared, it's strange, it's the other, and not the other in the strict sense of the term, but in the sense that we don't know it... What does that mean, if we're afraid of what we don't know, it's difficult to go there. We didn't know Polish culture, so we had to make the effort of going toward them too.

And the image of society it exactly the same thing. Society now no longer recognizes the youth, it no longer knows what happens in the *banlieue*. Ministers or representatives don't even know how much a baguette costs because they don't know people anymore. They only do politics for a certain category of people, and the others are completely left aside and thrown away. They're never asked their opinions. It's becoming difficult, under such conditions, to believe in politics or society. How can you believe in an "ideal" society when, at the base, that society throws out a bunch of people?

*You were talking about your trip to Poland where you tried to create some collaborations. What possibilities do you see in such translocal collaborations? What are the difficulties regarding communication but also regarding the specificities of lived situations and the possibilities of building an exchange around these different situations?*

Concerning our trip to Poland, there wasn't really any true language barrier since we had English and even if we couldn't speak it well, we could manage to communicate anyway. That's because communication is established starting from the moment when we want to communicate, when we want to move in someone's direction. I remember, for example, a moment when I was in Egypt and I met someone who basically didn't speak anything but Arabic and I could only speak English and French: we actually managed to hold a conversation for over thirty minutes only using a few words in English and Arabic and then he even invited me to stay at his house for a year if I wanted to learn Arabic. It was a magical moment! What happened in Poland was exactly the same thing. We managed to communicate even through we didn't know Polish at all and the kids were able to do a concert for an audience that didn't understand French. It all plays out in the gestures, in the gazes; communication is something totally different.

What happened in Poland is the proof that it is possible to make things change. If you can even communicate with people who don't share any common language, you should be able to come to an understanding with politicians or with people who do have a language in common. This shows, in my opinion, that you have to make an effort, that both sides, the politicians and the kids, stop being afraid of one another. But to do that both sides have to want to communicate and I have the impression that one and the other are situated the same in that regard ....

*In your opinion, can music facilitate intercomprehension because maybe there is less hierarchy in it?*

I think that art in general breaks down walls. In Poland, for example, we went to a concert of accordionists with no singing, without words, so there was only the music speaking. These accordionists proposed that we came up to do a song with them in freestyle, but all that – their question to come up on stage, to take the microphone, to sing – all came in a completely non-verbal way. For me, art allows you to do really beautiful things and break down a bunch of walls. When we see that there are young artists making music everywhere and that, rightly so, people come to see them even if they don't know the language... I think that's really beautiful. Above all when, after, we see politicians that we know, that speak the same language but in the end don't understand at all!

I saw a documentary where there were young Palestinians and young Israelis playing soccer together through the wall; in fact, they were passing the ball over the wall. For me, that's something very beautiful. In this case, the medium of communication was sport but, again, the game was possible because they wanted to communicate together. As soon as we want to do things together, everything is possible, I think.

*One last question that we've already asked Sonia (Chikh) and that we would also like to ask you: What is the role of the events of fall 2005? Did they change anything and, if so, in what sense?*

I know there are political structures that wanted to give more money to the *banlieue* to facilitate artistic expression. But that didn't change anything regarding what people carry out in the *banlieue*. Regarding the kids, the youngest might want to identify

themselves with that event and represent their neighborhood in saying “yeah, my neighborhood did that!” But in itself, it didn’t change very many things, seeing as we are still at the same point and that there are still the same problems: people on the exterior still don’t know the *banlieue*, they only know the *banlieue* through what they see on the television or through the bias of that interpretation. But the television and that interpretation create fear, the fear that already existed before. No, in my opinion, that event only fueled fears and ghosts.

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[1] *Banlieues* are translated as “suburbs”, as these are also residential areas on the outer edge of a city, but the connotations of the term *banlieue* in France can be different from those in English-speaking countries. The “suburbs” in the United States, for instance, are generally associated with low population density, detached or semi-detached housing and middle and upper class inhabitants. On the other hand, in France *banlieues* are more frequently areas of low-income apartments and social housing. Thus, the equivalent of *banlieues* in the United States would be "the projects". In the UK, the equivalent would be a "council estate". The term *banlieue* itself comes from the two French words *ban* and *lieue* ("league", or roughly four kilometers) [translator’s note].

[2] “*Nuage de fume*” [“Cloud of Smoke”], on the album “*La cérise sur le ghetto*” [“The cherry on the cake” (in French “ghetto” rhymes with the equivalent of cake “*gâteau*” ] (2003) by Mafia K’1 Fry [editor’s and translator’s note].

[3] “*La lutte est en marche*” [“The struggle is Marching On”], on the compilation “*Sachons dire non 3*” [“We know how to not say 3”] (2002) [editor’s note].