


[Browse Africana](#)

Search:

Welcome Guest

[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > B-Boys in "Les Banlieues": Hip Hop Culture in France

## heritage



Photo: French rap pioneer MC Solaar's "Qui Sème le Vent Recolte le Tempo" album cover (courtesy of CDNOW)

### B-Boys in "Les Banlieues": Hip Hop Culture in France

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

When the French hip hop troupe Compagnie Kafig performed at the Hostos Center in the Bronx in October 1999, audiences not only saw how far hip hop had traveled from its birthplace in the "Boogie Down," but also caught a glimpse of the maturity and unique character of French rap. Compagnie Kafig, a posse of rappers and dancers of North and West African origin, represents the syncretism of French hip hop culture, combining moon-walking and pop-locking with classical violin-playing and Andalusian guitar, putting a European spin on an American import.

According to British cultural critic, Steven Cannon, who studies hip-hop in Europe, ever since Afrika Bambaataa and the breakdancing groups Double Dutch Girls and the Rock Steady Crew toured France in 1982, b-boy culture -- rap, breakdancing, and graffiti art -- has gained a mass following in France, making the European nation the second largest consumer and producer of hip hop after the United States. After its introduction to French teens by American performers, breakdancing ("le smurf") flourished in France and remained popular through the 1990s, while French rappers began to compile a growing and increasingly sophisticated body of work.

Now, French hip hop has emerged as the voice of France's impoverished African and Arab minorities, expressing the rage and alienation of life in "les cités" (housing projects) in an era of welfare retrenchment and rising anti-immigrant sentiment. The bulk of France's minority communities are concentrated in the "banlieues," dilapidated zones of high-rise project housing, sub-standard schooling and high unemployment that encircle French cities. Unlike in the U.S., France's ghettos are suburban, but this has not stopped "banlieusards" ("ghetto-dwellers") from identifying with the African American experience and life in America's inner cities. Rap for

many French banlieusards represents "a turn to speak" ("la prise de parole") and an opportunity to express rejectionist attitudes and "la haine" (hatred) of the French establishment. More broadly, hip hop has emerged as a cultural vehicle for France's blacks and browns (Arabs) struggling to carve a space and identity for themselves in an often inhospitable environment.

Senegalese-born rapper MC Solaar is one of French rap's most prominent pioneers. His hit "Bouge de Lx" ("Move From There," 1991) brought rap into the French mainstream, and found a receptive audience among African, Arab and West Indian (from the French Antilles) fans in the French banlieues. Before Solaar's ground-breaking album "Qui Sème le Vent Recolte le Tempo" ("Who Sows the Wind Reaps the Rhythm," 1991), rap was mainly played on independent stations such as Paris's Radio Nova, whose rap show led to the "discovery" of Solaar and French rap contemporaries Ministère Amer and Suprême NTM. On their famous Sunday show, Radio Nova's Dee Nasty and Lionel D opened up their microphones to aspiring "champions" from different banlieues, who would free-style over Dee Nasty's remixes. Now, French rap achieves ample airplay on Fun-Radio, Sky-Rock, and NRJ, and is no longer ghettoized on independent stations.

Despite the inter-banlieue and inter-project rivalries, throughout the French hip hop nation there is an over-arching sense of belonging to an international hip hop community. One important source of this collective identity was the Zulu Nation, founded by Bambaataa in New York in the early 1980s to promote hip hop culture and mobilize youth in a peaceful alternative to street gangs. In 1984, a branch of the Nation was established in France with its own "King" and "Queen," its own fanzine, *The Zulus' Letter*, and block celebrations called "Zulu Parties." A number of other community fanzines have since appeared -- *Down With This*, *From Da Underground*, and *Black News* -- further solidifying a sense of collective identity among French hip hop fans.

French hip hop posses ("les bandes") have popped up around the banlieues as well, with names like Black Dragons and Black Tiger Force, and can be seen loitering on the Champs Elysées sporting the same hip hop gear worn by their American counterparts -- Karl Kani boots, Tommy Hilfiger jeans, and Fubu sweatshirts. The "bandes" speak an argot that blends American hip hop slang, Arabic words (given that North Africans are France's largest ethnic minority) and French "verlan" -- hipsterist word play in which syllables are reversed (for example, "noires" (blacks) become "renois," and "arabe" (Arab) becomes "beur"). French posses claim they are not gangs of delinquents, but simply trying to overcome racism and stay out of trouble by participating in hip hop festivals, dancing competitions, and graffiti art contests ("comp'tition des taggeurs").

Rap artists of African and Arab origin voice the sentiments of France's impoverished ethnic underclass, and often try to mobilize the ghetto youth for causes such as interracial solidarity and the unity of "black, beur, blanc" (blacks, Arabs and whites), the slogan of an annual anti-racist French hip hop festival and the title of France's first rap radio show, which began in 1991 on a station in Lille. Rap artists from different banlieues tend to spurn traditional politics, affirming their loyalty to their "families" from their cit's, yet calling for a multi-ethnic alliance and political movement with hip hop at its core. As "beurette" (Arab) "rappeuse" (female rapper) Saliha rhymes, "Seul le beat aujourd'hui nous lie et nous unit" ("Today only the beat links and unites us").

Despite French hip hop's predominantly black and Arab following, this effort to use hip hop as a means of forging unity across racial lines is an increasingly central theme in French rap. Unlike their American counterparts, French rap groups are often multiracial. The Marseilles-based rap crew IAM (Imperial Asiatic Men), who use Pharaonic nicknames (Kheops, Akhenaton, Imhotep and Divin Khepren), are actually of Malian, Algerian, Spanish, and Italian origin. And while they celebrate humanity's origins in Africa, the motherland ("la terre-mère"), and condemn slavery and apartheid, IAM stress the importance of racial tolerance and unity, and on the track "Blanc et Noire" compare Louis Farrakhan to France's radically conservative messenger of hate, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front.

The rapper Assassin, who hails from Paris's 18th Arrondissement (district), echoes IAM's call for racial harmony: "Le drapeau de l'unité est planté dans le 18ème/Alliance d'idées, alliance de culture/le métissage est notre force, cette force de future" ("The flag of unity is planted in the 18th/Alliance of ideas, alliance of cultures/this mixing is our strength, the strength of the future.") In the same way that the multi-ethnic collection of French soccer players who won the World Cup in 1998 (popularly referred to in France as "les blacks") symbolized the emergence of a new multi-racial generation of French youth, French hip hop often expresses a pluralistic vision of racial unity and tolerance.

Despite the existence of such positive, optimistic messages in French rap, the genre's more militant perspectives tend to get more attention from the French media. Rap artists have virulently denounced police brutality and the state's apathy towards conditions in the ghetto, often in confrontational style. Joey Starr of Supreme NTM (NTM stands for "Nique Ta Mère," "F--k Your Mother") observed in an interview with *Libération* magazine, "For people like me, a government of the left or the right is the same...voting is like pissing in a violin case...I fulfill my obligations as a citizen, every day, in writing my raps."

Similarly, IAM often rap about "ce putain d'état" ("this f--king state"), while on the song "Le Future Que Nous Réserve-t-Il?" ("What does the future hold for us?"), Assassin unleashes his lyrical, analytical skills on the European Economic Community: "La CEE organise à travers l'application de ces institutions/L'appauvrissement des pays en voie de développement" ("The EEC condemns to poverty all developing countries"). IAM also critique European imperialism on the track "J'aurais pu croire" ("I Could've Believed"): "J'aurais pu croire en l'Occident/Si tout ces pays n'avaient pas eu des colonies/et lors de l'indépendance ne les avaient pas découpées comme des tartes/aujourd'hui il y a des guerres à cause de problèmes des cartes" ("I could've believed the West/if these countries did not have colonies/if independence hadn't meant the slicing of these lands/wars rage today because of these maps"). On "Frère Faut Que Tu Saches" ("Brother, you have to Know"), the group Mafia Maghrebine considers France's hidden hand in Algeria's bloody civil war: "Trop d'hypocrisie....Maghreb détruit pendant que l'Europe s'enrichit" ("Too much hypocrisy...Maghreb [North Africa] destroyed while Europe gets rich").

French rap's incendiary lyrics have met with mainstream criticism, most notably when Supreme NTM's hit "Nique la Police" ("F--k The Police," obviously inspired by the American group NWA's song of the same name) triggered a political and legal firestorm. Performing at an anti-racism Bastille Day concert, the two rappers Kool Shen and Joey Starr encouraged the audience to shout "nique la police" in the direction of the concert security guards. Found guilty by a court of "orally abusing" the security forces, NTM was sentenced to six months in prison, fined 50,000 francs, and disbanded for six months. Leftist activists protested the decision, denouncing the

punishment as evidence of a legal double standard: they noted that Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National has denied the Holocaust (a crime in France), while Front National-funded punk rock groups call for violence against the police and Zionists, but have not suffered similar repercussions.

Although, on appeal, NTM's ban from "professional activity" was reduced to two months, "l'affaire NTM" and further anti-state rhymes provoked a political and cultural backlash. Supreme NTM's "Qu'est-ce qu'on attend?" ("What are we waiting for?") calls for the ghetto youth "to first burn down the police state and/then send the republic to burn on the same pyre....unite ourselves and incinerate this system/so why are we waiting to start this fire?" -- "Just to be a few more in number," they respond on their most recent album, "Odeurs de Souffre" ("Fumes of Sulphur," 1998).

Government officials have blamed NTM's lyrics for increased street violence and attacks on the police, and government spokesman Eric Roualt has rebuked rappers for not being positive role models. "I'm not a leader, only a loudspeaker," rapped back Kool Shen. Le Pen's xenophobic National Front has denounced rap as "a dangerous art which originated in Algiers" and warned that graffiti appearing on banlieues walls is threatening French civilization. In early January, legislation was passed mandating sterilization of the 40,000 pit bulls and other "chiens d'attaque" owned by French ghetto youth; non-sterilized "attack dogs" will be rounded up by the "Brigade K-9," and their owners will be fined 100,000 francs and sentenced to six months in prison.

The popularity of hip hop is partly responsible for the infamous Toubon Law of 1994, which guards the French language against Americanisms, Arabisms, and the word play that makes up the slang of the banlieues. The law, advanced by Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon (referred to by critics as Monsieur "Allgood"), in conjunction with the 1994 Carignon Law, dictates that a minimum of 40 percent of France's musical programming must be in French and by contemporary French artists.

Ironically, state attempts to control or suppress hip hop have only seemed to aid "le mouv" (the movement). The NTM affair (and subsequent media attention to Joey Starr's assault of a flight attendant) has helped the group secure platinum sales, a multi-record deal with Epic-Sony and a contract with Adidas. While lamenting money's tendency to "rot people" ("L'argent pourrit les gens"), Joey Starr and Kool Shen have established production companies (IV My People and Boss), which have released albums by new artists like Busstaflex and Zoxea.

Similarly, critiques of global capitalism have not prevented IAM from becoming "guerrilla capitalists" and establishing a record label, Cot' Obscur, which has produced gold albums for Fonky Family and Se Oeil. In his 1994 album "Prose Combat" MC Solaar rhymes, "ce monde est caca, pipi, cacapitaliste" ("this world is s---t, piss, a capisstalist shitstem"), but his mainstream success and lucrative movie offers have drawn the contempt of hard-core hip hop fans. Dancehall reggae group le TRIBU, for example, termed Solaar "the image of the assimilated black" ("fantasme du black int'gr") in an interview with *Black News*.

Despite collaborations between MC Solaar and the American rap group Gangstarr, and between Staten Island's Wu Tang Clan and Supreme NTM, French hip hop has yet to crack the xenophobic American charts. The recent success in the U.S. of the French R&B group Les Nubiens' hit single "Makeda," a soulful tribute to the Queen of Sheba, may augur a new

receptivity. The sibling duo of Cameroonian descent has just completed a U.S. tour, and was named the Best New R&B/Soul or Rap Group at the 1999 Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards.

The hip hop crew Bisso Na Bisso ("Between Us" in Lingala), a collection of Congolese youth who grew up in France, have also won popularity outside of France with their mixture of hip hop, Congolese soukous and other African musical styles. The group has taken home awards from African music festivals, and their debut album, "Racines" ("Roots," 1999), which expresses a uniquely Afro-French perspective and identifies strongly with an African homeland, spread like a virus among African young people across Europe and the United States. But the group has yet to find receptive listeners among American hip hop fans.

Whether French hip hop crosses over in the United States or not, it is clear that French rappers, graffiti artists and breakdancers have created a vibrant youth culture that, although inspired by American forms of expression, has evolved into a uniquely French, independent cultural movement.

#### About the Author

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

[About Us](#) | [Your Privacy](#) | [Careers](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#)

Africana.com web site © Copyright 1999-2003 Africana.com Inc.

Microsoft® Encarta® Africana content © Copyright 1999-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved to media owners