

The **B-BOYS** of **YEMEN**

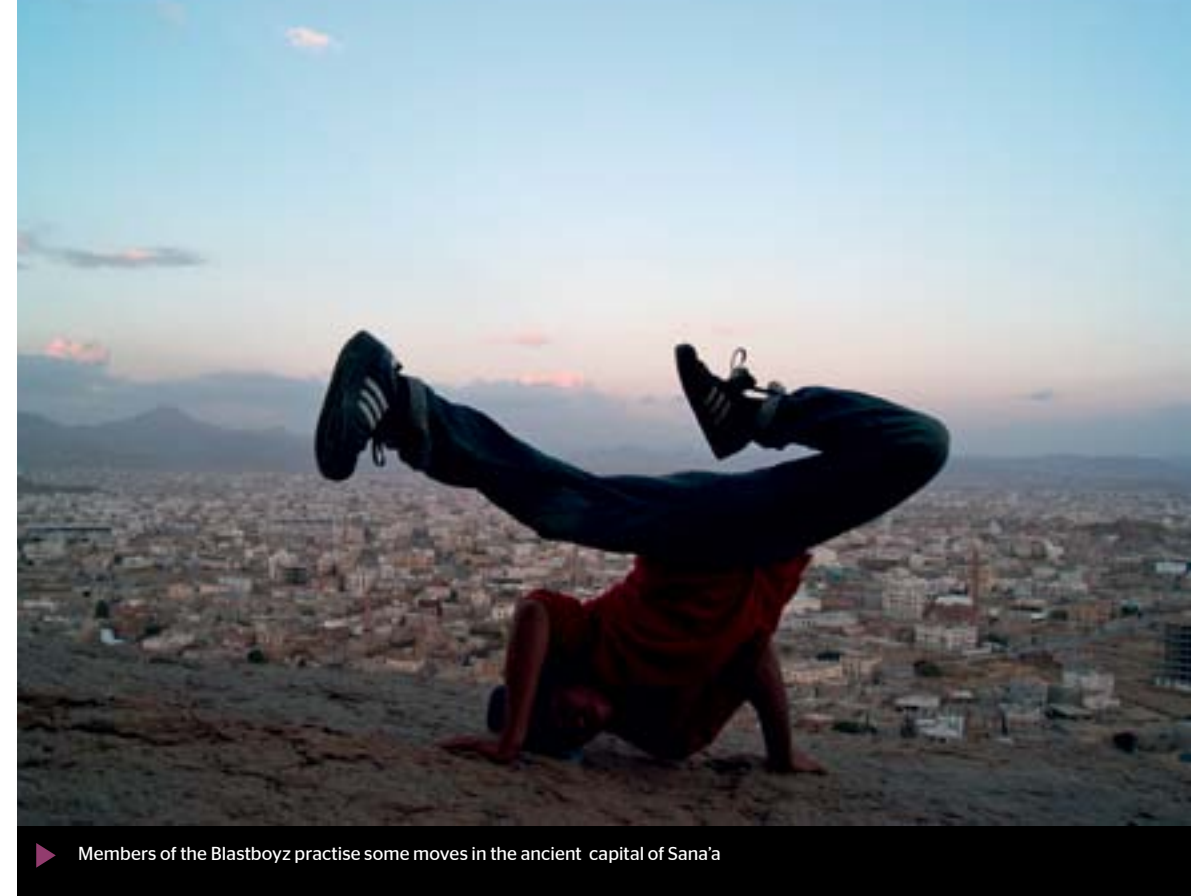
When your country is sliding towards chaos and the people are demanding revolution, there's only one thing left to do — hit the streets, crank up the stereo and bust some moves

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM FINN

Bab Al-Yemen is the bustling gateway to the striking capital of Sana'a, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Inside the *bab*, a crowded market filled with oranges, straw hats, camels and heart-shaped helium balloons gives way to a warren of cobbled streets and medieval tower houses adorned with intricate alabaster crescents.

There's a physical vibrancy about the ancient souk, but it is offset by a lingering lethargy: men sit in the dust in rows, their elbows propped up on old cardboard boxes, idly stuffing qat leaves into their cheeks and staring vacantly at the sky as if waiting for a long-due change in the weather.

Most afternoons pan out the same and today is no exception. But then a group of hip-looking boys in neon T-shirts arrive with a boom box and begin to unroll a square of plastic matting onto the hot concrete in front of the gate. It's not long before a huddle of intrigued onlookers has surrounded them.



Members of the Blastboyz practise some moves in the ancient capital of Sana'a

"I'm not sure about this," says Fares Masoumzadeh, a tightly muscled sixteen year-old in skinny jeans, nervously surveying the crowd of middle-aged men toying with their *jambiyas*, Yemen's traditional curved dagger, tucked into the sashes around their waists.

His friend, Mohammed Alman, glances up briefly at the commotion, flashes a cheeky grin and flicks on the battered stereo. "Let's do it," he replies.

Yet more heads turn as a remix of James Brown's "Sex Machine" leaps out from the tinny speakers, bouncing off the dusty walls of the towering gingerbread-like houses behind them and echoing around the square. Fares readies himself for a second and then launches into the circle of spectators. He glides effortlessly across the smooth plastic on his knees before righting himself and pulling a back flip with the ease of a seasoned acrobat. This move, followed by a deftly delivered mishmash of head spins, downrocks, flares and freezes, leaves the crowd stunned and confused.

"What's he doing?!" asks an old Yemeni sheikh with a weathered face, jabbing his finger at the blur of whirling arms and legs in front of him.

"He's dancing!" laughs Mohammed, "dancing!"

Before long the crowd's apprehension has turned to elation. The bystanders, wrenched out of their qat-induced stupor, clap, click and yelp as one boy after another hops into the circle to display his own distinctive mix of moves.

According to Mohammed Alman, breakdancers, or b-boys as they call themselves, are a growing sensation in Yemen. Mohammed, a twenty-four-year-old originally from Iraq, arrived in the country in 2005. As a boy growing up in Baghdad he'd marvelled at Michael Jackson and his moonwalk. But it was in Yemen of all places that he got into breakdancing and became – by his own account – the country's first b-boy.

In Sana'a, a sprawling city of five million packed with mosques and military bases but bereft of parks and playgrounds, breakdancing – which requires only a patch of level ground and a

stereo – seemed to Mohammed to be a good way of passing the time. And so he spent a few solitary months memorising moves from YouTube, practising them in an abandoned car park behind Saleh Mosque, the president's official place of worship. It was not long before some of his friends from school had joined him to form Yemen's first b-boy crew, the Blastboyz.

The group grew quickly to comprise a motley bunch of Yemenis, refugees and expatriates, harking from Canada, Tanzania, Iran, Somalia and America. "Dancing just brings people closer better than politics," laughs Mohammed when asked what his crew have in common.

Mohammed and his friends are a different demographic from the black working classes of New York who pioneered this style of street dance in the 1970s. When they're not rehearsing in the leafy courtyard of Sana'a's French Cultural Central (a rarefied environment equipped with an espresso machine and a place where the elite take their French language lessons) they're hanging out in cafés, Facebooking each other, studying English and listening to local rappers.

Despite their relative privileges (some of the boys tout degrees in engineering and medicine, others are enrolled in the country's top private schools) they remain part of an exasperated demographic found across the Arab world, not too far removed from the ones who have taken to the streets: the over-qualified and unemployed. Many of the Blastboyz despair about ever being able to get a good, fulfilling job or save enough money to get married and start a family.

Like their counterparts in the Maghreb, Yemeni youths like Mohammed and his crew face daunting economic and political obstacles on the road to adulthood. The raw statistics speak of a tipping point: seventy percent of Yemen's twenty-three million people are under twenty-five, with fifty percent under the age of fifteen. Yemen's population is also set to double by 2030 and with youth unemployment currently standing at over fifty percent and expected to rise further, this youth bulge presents a demographic and economic time bomb.

To make matters worse, the Yemeni economy is both too small and too weak to create sufficient jobs for its rapidly expanding work force, a problem compounded by an outdated education system disconnected from the realities of employment.

With its lack of political legitimacy, absence of government accountability, widespread government corruption, and an ageing leader struggling to govern an alienated, frustrated, and overwhelmingly young population, Yemen, like Egypt and Tunisia before it, stands on the brink.

Social stigma, the b-boys say, is the only thing stopping them from joining the ranks of protesters who have been camped outside Sana'a University for the past two months calling for Yemen's ruler for the past thirty-three years, President Ali Abudallah Saleh, and his family to leave power.

"My father would disown me, simple as that," says Danny Al-Basry, another Iraqi considered one of the crew's most talented members. "But if things get much worse here, I will have to join them."

Like many others, the boys say they feel alienated by social expectations that are no longer achievable as a result of the deteriorating economic and political situation. For some of them, b-boying is not only a means of expression but also a vital way of escaping from these looming pressures as well as the monotony and tedium of everyday life in Yemen.

"It keeps me sane," says one of the crew's younger members, "but I have to hide it from my father; he says it's un-Islamic."

Dancing and singing in public in Yemen is almost totally confined to wedding ceremonies. Outside of this tradition it can be frowned upon and seen as counter-cultural or, even worse, *haram*. The Blastboyz attempt to get around this by blending modern ideas like hip hop and rap music with their cultural and religious heritage: they'll breakdance to rap but also to traditional Yemeni music; sometimes they'll wear skinny jeans while other days they'll throw on the full-length Yemeni *thawb* as worn by their fathers.

The boys' primary audience is their peers (Blastboyz has over a thousand followers on Facebook) but when they've ventured beyond the walls of the French Cultural Centre they've also had a good reception from others. "When we danced in the old city the reaction was mixed; some of them were confused and offended, others loved it," says Mohammed. "Yemeni society may seem static to the foreign eye but it's always changing. I hope we keep on doing this because you never know how open-minded some Yemenis can be."

Unfortunately the boundaries of culture are not so flexible for Yemen's women who have greater housekeeping duties and are expected to be discreet in public. Mohammed says that lots of girls have asked to join the crew but he has to turn them down. "We can't accept them because the French Cultural Centre is worried that they might be targeted by some *gabili* (tribesmen) who would bomb them or something if they had girls dancing in there."

That hasn't totally prevented girls from joining in the action — Mohammed admits that some of the guys teach their families at home. "I don't know about the others," he smiles, "but I'm always teaching my nieces."

The Blastboyz are not alone in the world of local b-boys, in fact they're part of a budding underground scene of youthful breakdancers scattered across the Arab world who have helped the movement explode in recent years. (Mohammed says his proudest moment will come when guys he's taught go on to compete in regional competitions.)

While globalised hip-hop is used to sell trainers and fashion as well as records, on the ground in the region's political hotspots it's finding its own distinctive voice. From Saudi Arabia to Palestine, b-boys are finding ways of meshing their newly-found creativity with the social norms and standards of behaviour found in their countries.

Breakdancing in Gaza or Sana'a might sound like an unlikely proposition, but to experts like Adam Mansbach, founding editor of the Nineties hip hop journal *Elementary* and one of the leading scholars of hip-hop culture, it makes perfect sense.

"New York in the early 1970s had been decimated by deindustrialisation, loss of jobs and an uncertain future," he says over the phone from America. "This led to a tremendous anxiety, and there was a lot of energy among young people that had no outlet. In the Bronx, where all this started, there were no youth organisations.

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Where previous generations may have had an athletic league or a place to play basketball, these kids had nothing so they had to make their own space. In hip hop the takeover of public space was not just rebellious, it was also practical because there was nowhere else to go. That's why they started throwing parties in schoolyards or breakdancing on pieces of cardboard in the street."



Boys from the hood: the Blastboyz in action

Hence the sport is a natural fit for kids anywhere who are bored or alienated by their surroundings. Breakdancing never went mainstream in the way that rap did. But this fact has allowed it to flourish internationally while staying under the radar. One of the most hardcore scenes, for example, can now be found in Korea.

"The level of expertise around the world is understandably higher in the West since the art was introduced and mostly developed there," Mohammed explains, pausing for breath in the shade of a tree after another sweaty practice session at the French Cultural Centre. "But breakin' is all about skill and hard work. It's got nothing to do with money. I believe that in one or two years, the breakdancing scene here will be phenomenal."

He may yet be proved right. Last month a new breakdance gang made its name known on the Facebook pages of Sana'a's youth: "RocknCity", an ensemble of eleven b-boys, all Yemeni nationals aged between fifteen and seventeen. This group is quickly gaining a keen fanbase and may soon be battling the Blastboyz for their title as Yemen's number one b-boy posse.

Yemen's b-boys cannot claim to share the same grievances as the New York Bronx street kids of the 1970s but they do have one important thing in common. They're frustrated and want to express themselves so they've taken this Western dance form and made it their own. Hip-hop's former cry of "it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at" still rings true. **3**