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# The One Who Loves the Sound of Words

By Selim Özdoğan

*Translated by Sultan Doughan*

I should have listened to my father.

The first time I played him my track he said, “What the hell is this? This isn’t even music. This sounds more like the stuff you have been listening to lately.”

I had been raised with the music of Ruhi Su, Aşık Veysel, Zülfü Livaneli, men who accompanied their singing with the *saz*, and whose voices were imbued with something you could call the Anatolian Blues.

“If it at least sounded like Jimi Hendrix or even Frank Zappa, but this is just boom, boom, boom, no instruments, no melody!”

He gave me a look, as if he was waiting for an explanation. I was trying to suppress my tears, although I had expected such a response. I said, “Tomorrow” with a shrug.

I was barely twenty years old and for three years, I had been in the grip of Hip-hop, listening to it for hours every day. I rapped along with the artists, memorized the lyrics, rapped alone with the instrumental versions on the B-sides of the maxi-tapes, tried to study different rappers’ techniques and mimic their styles.

Consumption is not without consequences, never. At some point, I began to write my own lyrics and to rap to B-sides. When I was sixteen, I had written poems in English, and three years later I could see that I had been trying to hide behind foreign words. Now I was rapping in German, it was 1993, “Ahmet Gündüz” from Fresh Familee was already out there, “Die Da” by Die Fantastischen Vier had already been number one in the charts, and this gave me hope. If four squares who acted like clowns and whose techniques, rhymes, and themes were mediocre could make it, why shouldn’t the doors be wide open for me too?

When I met Zack, then, a DJ I got along with and who crafted some beats for me, everything was crystal clear: I wanted to make Hip-hop in German! So we worked on our first track, the one I presented to my father. The song was about a guy who recounts all the mistakes he had made recently, situations he’s ashamed of and that he thinks he’ll never be able to forget. Almost twenty years later, I would have probably forgotten most of these things, if it weren’t for these lyrics that I still remember along with all my other lyrics.

It wasn’t the next day, it was several weeks later when I tried to familiarize my father with the song. In the meantime, many friends had listened and partied to it, also because they had never heard anything like this in German, a piece that was personal without being embarrassing.

I tried to explain to my father, what the missing melody was about, how the rhymes worked, what we meant by flow, and why the rhymes were often dirty. That we were trying to give poetry a modern form that what I was trying to do was not that far removed from from Ruhi Su, who had instrumentalized Yunus Emre’s and Pir Sultan Abdal’s poems. That he shouldn’t be scared of the looped four-four time, that this was just the groove lying beneath the words, that we wanted to create worlds with these words and that the beat was just a means.

My father had always listened to what I had to say. He was an open-minded man, and even though he remained a skeptic for quite some time, he listened to my songs, though the language doesn't open a world to him, but rather closed it. I tried to translate the lines into Turkish and bit-by-bit he understood what I was trying to do. A year later, when we managed to publish our first EP, he proudly told all our relatives and acquaintances about my musical ambitions.

"At first I thought what kind of ruckus is this? I didn't want my son to do something like this", he said, but that's how it is with old people and with novelties one is first skeptical, because these things are new and strange. One needs time to get a grip on it, but once you understand it, then you get the fever. And that's really what it's about, fever, no matter if it's rock 'n' roll, saz, ney or Hip-hop, it's about the kind of love that music can spark in us."

The words themselves were music enough for me and night after night I wrote lyrics, and whenever I became tired, I just rubbed my eyes and dreamt of checks and sex and Beck's and parties that would rock the house. Hip-hop was supposed to pay the rent, supposed to be the future, in which we have a bit of peace, supposed to give our desires a voice, our anger, our pain, our sorrows and fears, and our wish for a metaphysical revolution. It was supposed to be our whole life, and that's what it was.

At least for a while.

Zack made the beats and I wrote the lyrics. Back then I knew exactly where I was going. Maybe I was young enough and not yet sufficiently confused by life, although I was looking around and trying to understand things.

I recognized that German Hip-hop was made of people, people who would later be said to have a *migration-background*. *Foreigners* seeking understanding. The TCA Microphone Mafia for example was rapping in Italian, Turkish, English, but the applause wasn't coming so much from those who listen to Hip-hop as from those who always applaud Multikulti. The Sons of Gastarbeiters—who were actively engaged against racism and who would later win the Bertelsmann-Foundation's integration competition along with an award by the former president Johannes Rau—even performed with DJ Bobo. If the goal is fighting racism, the means are questionable at times.

I didn't want to preach and proselytize, I didn't write any lyrics, not because I knew it all better, but because without the lyrics I had nothing else to hold on to in this world, because there was no other love outside of music, that did not come and go as she pleased, because the sound of the words were the only open sea, in which I could swim.

I was simply making Hip-hop, was certainly able to spread my word, signed a record deal and even the thing with the rent eventually worked out pretty well. The feeling of standing on stage, seeing the surging mass of people, hearing that the first rows knew all my lyrics, was an incredible feeling at the beginning. One's own vanity can be a tremendous source of inspiration sometimes.

With hindsight I can say that the first four years were intoxicating, we were living Hip-hop, we were living a dream and I barely worried at all about some possible future, even though the breakthrough always seemed very close, but never happened.

My less successful colleagues who worried more about their future, started studying pedagogy at some point, and nowadays the country is full of teachers who failed as rappers. Even I started to worry about myself, the audience, the person I could be some day, and the little money I was making.

Ever since my father had understood what Hip-hop was about, he stopped discouraging me, but he was worried about me, because he realized that I was scraping by financially.

After a concert by Curse that I left before the encore, I was sitting at home feeling downhearted. People considered Curse to be self-reflexive and intelligent—a student-rapper, they called him—but to me his lyrics still seemed unpretentious. But even plain as they were, plain, the audience wasn't in the position to understand them. Most of them were hardly sixteen and were busy smoking weed and jumping up and down. Did I really want this? Would I want to—later, as a forty-something old—perform in front of those pubescent I wouldn't have anything in common with and who wouldn't understand my lyrics? Did I really want to string together words to provide the soundscape for their blaze nights? Did I really want to be successful in a scene where battle-rap was gaining more and more ground, and where no one seemed to have real topics anymore, other than just bragging about their own skills? A scene full of rivals, full of beef, as they said, full of copies and clichés from the US. What was I doing there? The concept of Hip-hop that had won out had nothing to do with my version of it, and commercial success was more questionable than ever. Years later, Retrogott rapped, “I wonder what commercial success is other than the confirmation of the stupidity of an entire people.”

Did I really want to go on for these folks? Early on I knew that I did not want to perform for those who applauded whenever there was more than one culture involved and when Fascists were targeted. But now I didn't even want to play for the usual Hip-hop crowd either, I wanted to play just for me. That would have been enough for me, but not for my landlord.

I had hit rock bottom. I could have told a complete stranger my entire life story during this night. I was just sitting there, staring at the lantern in front of my window and my only comfort was pen and paper. I wrote. I wrote a text without a single rhyme, without considering the rhythm or being slave to the beat. I wrote, that was the only thing I had found in this world, I wrote. And what if it remained script?

Wasn't literature an obvious way out? An older, better-educated audience, no longer the necessity of paying attention to rhymes, no longer having to say everything one wants to say in 4 minutes and 30 seconds. I could just go with the flow of the language and let myself be carried along with it. No longer having to live with the fact that only 400 units were sold, and suspecting that at the show about a total of 5000 people had pirated the CD. And I could still work with the material I loved working with the most; still try to form the world from words. Why hadn't I seen this earlier?

“Don't do it,” my father said.

“Excuse me?”

“Don't do it!”

“Why?”

“These are a different kind of people.”

“Yes, they are educated, they read, they have many interests. For them the evening is not saved by just being provided enough weed.”

“This is an elite.”

“So? What's bad about that?”

“You'll never be part of it.”

“The entire Hip-hop scene is elitist, populated by narrow-minded squares who don't see how restricted their horizon is, and who shy away from anything that isn't approved as official Hip-hop.”

“You can’t be a class climber when it comes to culture”, my father said, “that works in business, if you have enough money, in sports, if you perform well enough, and even in pop music, because music can overcome boundaries, but not in literature. They don’t like it, if you master their language.”

What he had just said seemed to be informed by his persecution complex and his readiness to see himself as the victimized foreigner. I went home and started writing. I had never written two hundred coherent pages, but I liked the work, I liked the rattling of the keyboard, and how the text grew. I liked the independence that the genre of the novel offered me, the free rhythm of the words and the liveliness of my characters. I liked being able to disappear behind the text and to aim for a longer attention span than just the duration of an album.

It was working out fine. Even finding a publisher was easier than anticipated, but once the novel was published, I had to think of my father’s words.

I had written a book without mentioning many foreign names, without thematizing migration. I wasn’t attempting to win the countrywide integration-contest, but every review and every critic talked about my background. At readings I was praised for my accent-free German and asked about my being torn between the two cultures. I was made a Turk, and my reaction didn’t seem to matter.

Meanwhile, Kool Savas, Eko Fresh, Summer Cem, and Azad were making Hip-hop. Barely anyone interrogated them about their heritage, and the audience, this audience I disdained, celebrated them, because they brought German Hip-hop and not Migration-rap to the fore.

When my second novel was published, it was barely any different, except that that German Hip-hop got new impulses from Massiv, Basstard, and Haftbefehl. How I assessed these impulses didn’t matter, I had left the game and realized that I wouldn’t have had any real success with my style. Yet, I was envious that no one nailed these boys to their national origins and names, while I was receiving requests by the journals to write about the integration issue. As a Hip-hopper I had received requests for features and samplers, but no one ever tried to narrow me down on one specific topic.

People definitely seemed to smoke less weed in the literary scene, their clothes were generally more fitted and more conservative, and their general education level higher, but the extent of their horizon was no wider than that of Hip-hop-heads. When I told new colleagues that I used to make Hip-hop, they gave me weird looks. “You don’t seem that dumb,” was a reaction I was confronted with more than once. For them, Hip-hop was a cover for selling vulgar vocabulary, racism, and pornography to a predominantly juvenile audience, in order to make the big bucks. A misguided idolization of pimps and sexists.

While that description couldn’t be denied entirely, it also fell short, just like the belief that literature only consists of detective novels, fantasy novels, and thrillers, that there are only authors like Dan Brown, Gaby Hauptmann, Nele Neuhaus, Stieg Larrson, and Paulo Coelho.

How close literature and rap could be, that both were engaged with rhythm, sound, metaphors, metric, and comparisons unheard of, like records fresh from the press was easily overlooked.

In the feuilletons, they would bore into in the wounds of Hip-hop with their intellectual fingers: commercialization, one-dimensional videos in which half-naked women were degraded to sex objects, disoriented youngsters who followed false role-models. They thought they were smart with their gross generalizations, without

realizing that the bestseller-lists didn't exactly testify to intelligence and farsightedness, but these smart alecks didn't notice that.

I sat at home, staring out the window again. My name could be found on Wikipedia in a list of German-Turkish authors. This might have been due to the wish to classify and name things precisely in order to create an illusion of understanding. But I imagined how it would be to have my name on the list of German Hip-hop musicians along with Sultan Tunc and Killa Hakan, who had put out almost entire albums in Turkish, rapping along with Dendemann and Prinz Pi.

I sat at home, and asked myself what was worse: to be a writer who would never be accepted as German and always classified outside German literature, or to be a German teacher who failed as a rapper? I sat at home, grasped that the way out of the dead end called classification might need several generations and that I had been born too soon. There was no way back to the pop market for a forty-something. My father was right.

I should have listened to him.

"Well", he said, "But you did not listen to me. And that's fine. That's why you started making music. And now, now there's no other way, but screw it. What do you want with recognition from people you can't even take seriously? When you're all alone, when none of them are on your side, then you might be on the right path. Every serious writer walks alone, just keep your head up."