

An aerial  
view of Boiler  
Room London.  
Photography by  
Yushy

# HEALING SPACES

The story of how UK broadcaster Boiler Room connected  
the East and West through a mutual love of techno

WORDS SELMA NOURI





**IN THE 1970S**, disco was the collective voice of a generation seeking basic liberties. Amid movements like women's liberation and civil rights, disco's electric rhythms and 'four-on-the-floor' beats enabled some of the nation's most marginalised groups to liberate themselves from the social and political traumas passed down through generations. Tightly packed, dimly lit dance floors became the breeding grounds for revolution.

The momentary bliss felt in these underground spaces served as a hopeful reminder that, even during the darkest of times, freedom and humanity are possible. In recent years, a similar movement has emerged across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In a bid to free themselves from the long-endured shackles of conflict and colonisation, the youth have turned to the arts as a form of liberation and refuge.

Although a milieu globally dominated mainly by men, underground music like house, hip-hop, and techno have emerged in the region as a result of strong female pioneers. Their drive to create meaningful change has served as a monumental force in creating spaces for both local and diasporic youth to free themselves from the sociopolitical turmoil that has continued to undermine their power.

One such pioneer is Tala Mortada, a Lebanese DJ and one of the founders of AHM club in Beirut. "It's very hard to suppress music," she says. "This is why it is such an important tool for expression. In a region caught up in so much turmoil – for reasons beyond our control – we resort to music in order to gain a sense of agency and liberty. It was always my escape, so I made it my job."

Despite the growing popularity of underground music, flourishing scenes remained inherently local and relatively obscured from global audiences up until recently – then UK-based music broadcaster Boiler Room stepped in.

Founded by Blaise Bellville in 2010, Boiler Room began as a virtual 'keyhole' into London's underground music scene. After discovering a 1930s boiler room in the warehouse where he worked, Bellville began hosting regular online broadcasts of his friends DJing. Intimate gatherings of 10 to 30 friends eventually garnered millions of streamers online, who joined the audience from the comfort of their bedrooms.

Over the past two decades, however, the platform's reach has expanded far beyond London's underground. Since its founding, the premise has always been to offer viewers from across the world a glimpse into underground music and club scenes in over 200 cities, including many across the region. As Mortada explains, Boiler Room has offered people who live halfway across the world the opportunity to "discover an entirely new culture through a common taste in music" by way of streams and live parties.

She goes on to say that the broadcaster offers artists a "horizontal exchange... as opposed to a seal of approval from the West." As such, "Boiler Room not only allows people from London or LA to discover artists from the MENA region," but it also enables someone from Tunis or Beirut to "discover underground scenes in Brooklyn, Paris, or Seoul." There is a sense of equality and respect granted to all artists whose sets are broadcast, regardless of where they come from.





Boiler Room's creative director, Amar Ediriwira, underscores this sentiment. Many artists, he says, attribute their career's turning moment to their 'Boiler Room moment'. "Over the past few years, these moments are happening all over the world — not just in Western cultural capitals like New York or London," he adds.

"When we did our first broadcast in Palestine, Sama' Abdulhadi became an internet sensation overnight, with her set recently surpassing 10 million plays. Or just last year, when we broadcast from Pakistan for the first time, Lyla's set went viral and hit half a million plays in a matter of months."

Since its founding in 2010, nearly 30 sessions have been hosted in the region, with approximately two to three shows happening each year. One of the first shows was streamed in 2014 in Istanbul, which Ediriwira describes as a "weird, wild, and wonderful showcase covering an amazing range of genres from psychedelia and twisted percussion to house, techno and bass." This part of the world, he says, has an incredibly rich, diverse, and expansive musical history. "And it's inspiring to think of our contemporary showcases as a small contribution to this heritage."

In describing their curatorial process, Ediriwira uses the term decentralised. "We have a giant network of researchers, artists, and curators around the world who feed us amazing ideas and programming. They help to champion grassroots sounds, document new stories, spotlight emerging artists, and break ground by taking the platform to new cities. We're a conduit for a huge chorus of voices across the spectrum — more like a funnel than a gate."

"We operate at a truly global level," Ediriwira says. "We have a calendar of events consisting of 100 broadcasts, spread across every continent and major city around the world. A portion of these events are dedicated to coming to places we've never been to before." In 2021, for example, Boiler Room aired its first ever set in Bahrain, which was opened by one of Saudi Arabia's first female DJs, Cosmicat. And earlier this year, a show was aired in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in Asia's largest solar furnace.

The broadcast, which made waves by reconciling the traditional music of Uzbekistan with contemporary sounds, originated from the platform's quarterly grant scheme, Broadcast Lab. Now in its tenth round, Ediriwira says that the Broadcast Lab allows anyone



anywhere in the world to pitch a show idea. "We employ a rotating roster of artist judges who help us pick the winning project. Once selected, the winner then receives a financial grant as well as support from their team to realise the project."

"We care about the human experience," he enthuses. "Everything we do creatively is governed by the belief that club culture is identity-shaping. They are spaces where you meet people you haven't met and find things you haven't found. This is at the heart of every decision made curatorially."

Incidentally, the most legendary broadcast was Boiler Room Palestine in 2018. "Groundbreaking," as Ediriwira boldly declares, adding that the project sat "somewhere between documentary, A&R, activism, apparel, and IRL in a way that felt uniquely us." A key motivation for the project, he believes, was to challenge the stereotypes, assumptions, and misinformation that exist in regard to Palestine. "Our team spent a year getting to know some of the artists online before going out to the West Bank," he recalls.

The deep level of trust they created is noticeable in a documentary film that they later released, entitled *Palestine Underground*, which highlights the realities of nightlife in Palestine and the Occupied Territories. At the beginning of the film, one of the artists, DJ Oddz — who sadly passed away recently — is shown jumping the separation wall between Palestine and Israel on his way to perform at a Palestinian venue in Jaffa. While climbing it, he says, "You can't just build a wall and say you can't go and do this; it's music, it's a right for everyone." According to Ediriwira, this is the crux of what the project was about: "the right to musical expression and the artists who risk their lives for it."



From left to right:  
Sama' Abdulhadi  
spinning at Boiler  
Room Palestine.  
Photography by  
Adlan Mansri

Ustad  
Noor Bakhsh  
performing at  
Boiler Room's  
debut broadcast  
in Karachi.  
Photography by  
Hira Munir

Saliah performing  
at Boiler  
Room London.  
Photography by  
Yushy



One artist whose career transformed as a consequence of her set was DJ Sama' Abdulhadi. As of 2023, her set has reached over 12 million views. "It still feels surreal to even read that number," she says. "It went way above what I ever expected. To know that people are still listening to it and partying in their homes and cars... it makes me happy and grateful."

According to Abdulhadi, the broadcast in Palestine was important because it essentially "brought the underground scene above ground", providing Palestinian artists with an opportunity to not only gain global exposure, but also finally showcase an authentic image of the country. "For me and many others who watched Boiler Room sets for years, seeing it here in Palestine was surreal," she says. "It felt like a milestone. An international stage to showcase the different sounds that come out of Palestine. Since most Palestinians cannot easily travel in and out of the country, the broadcaster brought the stage to us."

In the same film, artist Ayed Fadel (who also performed a set) captured the sentiments of the youth, stating, "We are the third generation of the catastrophe, and we don't want to victimise ourselves anymore. We are bored of that." By providing all artists – regardless of status, nationality, or condition – the opportunity to showcase their talent, community, and culture at such a global

scale, Boiler Room is granting them the means to positively reclaim their own stories without ever having to feel like a victim.

More recently, the platform has extended this creative agency to members of the diaspora. In 2022, Boiler Room collaborated with Middle of Nowhere, a party and curated events series founded by DJ and Producer Nooriyah, to host a party in London celebrating South West Asian and North African (SWANA) sounds. Nooriyah founded the project at the end of 2021. "I had reached a place where I was feeling bored of the repeated curations and music played in events and club nights. As a DJ, I have all sorts of genres on my USB, from afrobeat to amapiano and reggaeton. If it's fire to me, I will carry it and play it alongside my SWANA sounds. However, I found that it is rare for non-SWANA DJs to carry SWANA music. Oftentimes, this is not due to a dislike of the sound, but rather an unfamiliarity with it."

To Nooriyah, Middle of Nowhere is "like a playground", but it has also given her the opportunity to widen the market for artists from the region. "We deserve a seat at the table," she asserts. The collaboration between Boiler Room and Nooriyah was a huge success, with her set alone reaching approximately 2.3 million views. "The ethos of the show," Ediriwira says, "was to recognise that the region and its sounds are not a monolith. The artists might all have a connection to SWANA, but you can't pigeonhole them beyond that. It was a beautifully diverse show, and Nooyirah must be the only DJ to have ever opened a Boiler Room set with their father."

As Ediriwira notes, the goal has always been to create dance floors that everyone can enjoy, regardless of race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, physical ability, gender identity, or sexual orientation. "Our genuine concern for the human experience is why we centre the audience in our footage." ■



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Nooriyah and her father opening her set at Boiler Room London  
Photography by Yushy

Natasha Noorani performing at Boiler Room's debut broadcast in Karachi.  
Photography by Hira Munir

Partygoers dancing at Boiler Room London.  
Photography by Yushy

