

SEPTEMBER 5, 2017 | VIEW FINDERS

At YallaPunk Festival, young Arab Americans throw off stereotypes [photos]



Iranian-American Rana Fayezez closes out the first annual YallaPunk Festival in Philadelphia. (Emily Cohen for NewsWorks)

4 / 15

Hide captions



A VIEW
FROM EMILY COHEN

Rana Fayezez conceived of the YallaPunk Festival after a frustrating interaction with another member of the Philadelphia music scene.

A promoter was using Arabic lettering on a flier, but Fayezez noticed it was gibberish. She asked why they were using Arabic. Were they going to be playing Arabic music? Were they putting on some Arab musicians?

She discovered that the lettering was nothing more than a novelty, another graphic design element. It was then that she started a list of Arab musicians she knew and thought, "Hey it's been 10 years since I booked my last punk show, I think it's time to do it again."

She realized now was the time to redefine the narrative surrounding her community.

"It's really important to create our own narratives, for our own selves, because if we don't do that, we risk someone else writing our narrative for us," said Rana, who immigrated with her family when she was a child and has grown up in the United States.

She grew up with her own internal conflicts and has experienced external conflicts with how her culture has been portrayed in media and the culture around her in the Western world. Now, at 29, she is using all of her identities and connections to bring this festival into being. "You have to build your own institutions if you can't find any [already out there] that support your arts."

The YallaPunk Festival, which took place over the 2017 Labor Day weekend, was not only about punk music. A large part of the programing was dedicated to conversation and workshops.

"Music brings out a lot of people, and it's fun, but we needed to create a more holistic experience for everyone by having panels, workshops, discussions, vendors. The education portion of this [festival] is really important as well," said Fayezez.

It was equally important to friend and collaborator Layla Farahbakhsh. A first-generation Iranian-American, Farahbakhsh also felt the struggles with her identity that Fayezez felt. For her, being a part of YallaPunk was a way for to explore the different facets of her personal identities.

Farahbakhsh had a big part in the workshops and panels that were offered at YallaPunk, like "The Essential Feminist Panel," "What does it mean to be a creative MENA and how to sincerely market your creative," a look into "ElectroShabbi", a kind of underground music scene in Egypt, and more.

The second day of programming during the three-day festival concluded with an array of performances at both The Barbary and Johnny Brenda's in Fishtown. The nearly 100 attendees were able to float back and forth between the venues, catching performances by Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) American artists. It was a chance for a generation of MENA creators to perform for an audience of their peers and allies.

YallaPunk meant a lot to Zein Hassanein, who moved to Philadelphia about a year ago from Portland, Oregon.

"I was starting to feel very tired of being the token Middle Eastern person. Coming to Philly and being around this concentration of young brown people that don't fit into this stereotype was an awesome and big deal [to me]."

Hassanein was looking forward to seeing Aron Kader at YallaPunk. He first saw the comedian when he was in high school in Egypt.

"When the Axis of Evil Comedy tour came to Egypt and I was in the front row, and I was like, 'Wait, there are Arab-Americans who are funny and doing cool stuff ...' Being able to see him again is like this cosmic re-circling thing that's happening. I'm re-bumping into people who I should be near."

As Rana Fayez put it, "We get to be the people who we needed when we were younger." And that's exactly what she hopes YallaPunk will become with future programming and next year's iteration of the festival.

SUPPORT PROVIDED BY



SUPPORT PROVIDED BY



© WHY/NEWSWORKS 2017