

Subliminal Kicks Off US Tour

Written by Robert ID958

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Israeli rap artist Subliminal makes his U.S. debut tonight in Los Angeles, but his presence has already been felt around the world. Known as a right-wing Zionist, the hip-hop star, whose latest album went gold on its first day in stores and who will team with Wyclef Jean, Ashanti and Miri Ben-Ari (the hip-hop violinist) for his next one; has incited demonstrations from France to Canada.

Subliminal, born Kobi Shimoni, is not afraid of political confrontation, and he stands by admittedly militant songs like "Biladi" (Arabic for "My Land"). "When we talk politics with Arabs in Israel, they say, "My grandfather used to live in Tel Aviv, and now it's owned by Jewish people -- we want to come back,"" he says. "I respond, "My parents came from Iran and Tunisia, but nobody is going to give our property back to us. It's all been confiscated . . . We have this little sandbox we call Israel. We give our hearts and lives to make it a proud country. Every one serves in the Israeli Defense Force in order for Israel to survive. You have half of the globe. What the fuck do you want from us? Go live in Saudi Arabia.""

A number of Subliminal's lyrics are in Arabic, not only making his words more accessible to communities across the globe, but also reflecting his Middle Eastern heritage. His being the son of Jewish refugees is at the core of his hard-line politics. "My mother is from Mashad, Iran, where every Jewish girl was married by the age of seven, because if a Muslim asked for the girl's hand and you said no, they would kill you," he says. "In Tunisia, my father grew up with his family locking all the doors and windows whenever performing a Jewish ceremony -- out of fear of attacks." Both parents, he says, "ran for their lives" to Israel, where they spent decades recovering from the persecution they had faced.

During a concert in France last year, members of the Arab community turned out in droves, protesting Subliminal's performance and attempting to shut it down. Sniper, a leading rapper in France was quoted as condemning Subliminal's appearance -- leading a local radio station to invite Subliminal and Sniper for a live rap battle. Sniper didn't show, so Subliminal used the airtime to invite the French rapper to visit Tel Aviv to "see what it is that you hate so much about Israel."

After booking a show in Canada, one club owner got so much flak that he cancelled the performance, even after all the advertising and tickets had already gone out. Following negotiations with Subliminal's management, the show was finally reinstated.

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Subliminal blames the controversy on bad press -- not so much about him, but his people. "The international media makes us look like blood-eating, Arab kid-killing monsters," he says. "You want to know what's real? Listen to my lyrics, and you can find out."

Those lyrics have actually earned him accolades from a number of Arab hip-hop artists, some of whom have even asked to work with him. "They say they are Muslims," Subliminal recounts, "and that they understand the message and accept it. They also give us props and respect, because they thought Jews were guys in black costumes, doing secret ceremonies in the Temple way up there [laughs]. Then they see a guy who looks just like them, who eats the same humus and couscous and kouba, and speaks Arabic just like them."

How American audiences respond to Subliminal remains to be seen, but he hopes his tour will similarly break down stereotypes and perceived barriers between Arabs and Jews. "If I were to meet another Arab guy -- it doesn't matter from Tunisia or the Gaza Strip -- and we were to meet each other in L.A., we would see that we look similar. We're not black, Hispanic, Japanese or Chinese, and we're not white like Europeans. We're the sand guys from the Middle East."

Subliminal North American tour dates:

3/2: Los Angeles, Canyon Club

3/3: San Francisco, Ruby Skye

3/5: Miami, Marco Polo Hotel

3/7: Washington, DC, 930 Club

3/9: Boston, Roxy

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3/10: Toronto, Revival Club

3/12: Montreal, Metropolis

3/13: New York, B.B. King's

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