

## PERFORMING ARTS

April 17, 2018 5:09 PM

# MDC Live's Hip Hoppa Locka to turn Muslim stereotypes upside down



Amirah Sackett, who'll perform in Opa-locka on Saturday, has long used dance to reach marginalized young people.



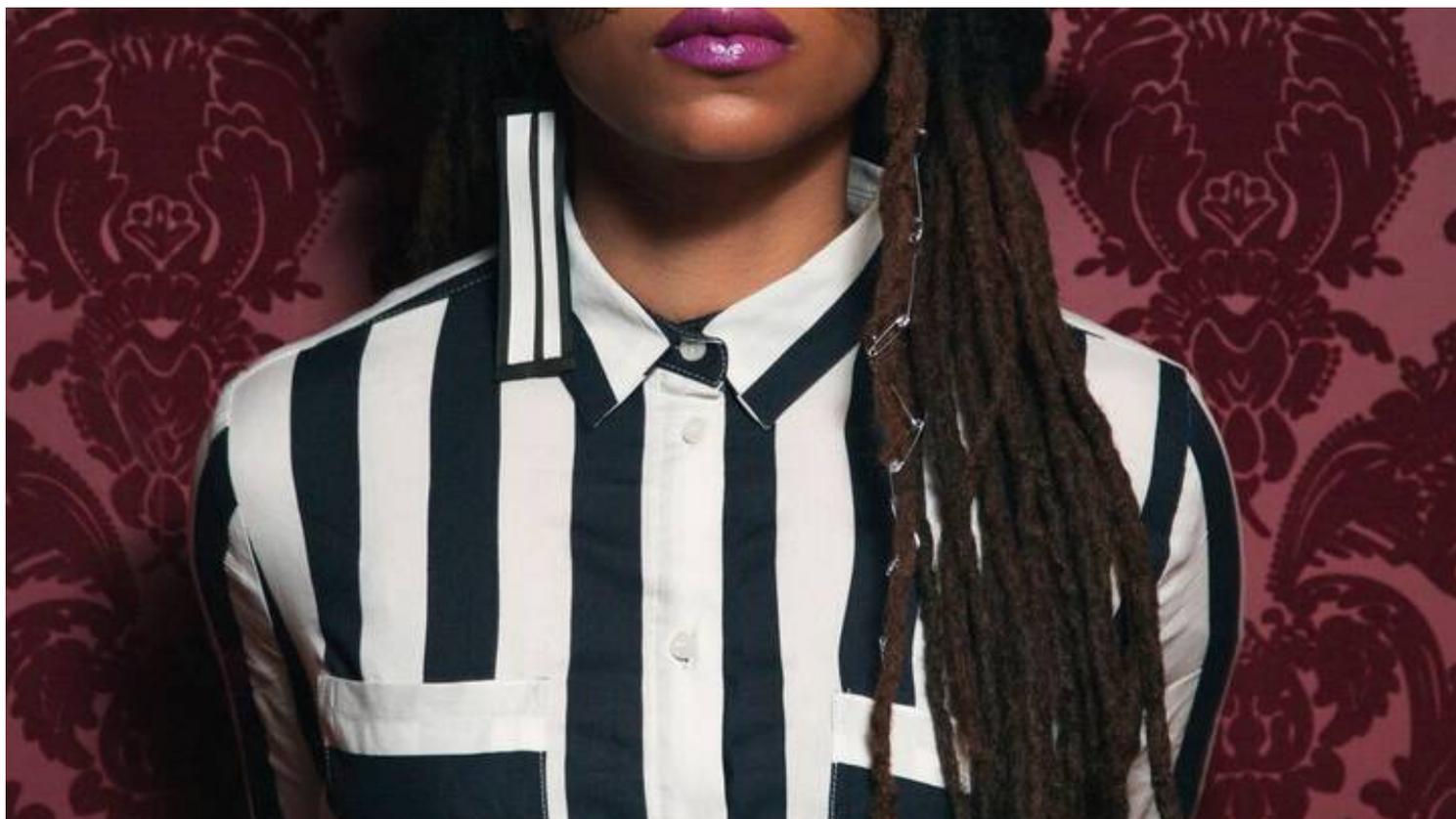
BY CATHERINE ANNIE HOLLINGSWORTH  
*ArtburstMiami.com*

Amirah Sackett came up as a dancer in Chicago's hip hop scene at a time when women were rare in the mostly male community. But she also visibly stood out as a Muslim. She keeps her hair covered according to Islamic tradition, and the hijab is as much a part of her dance uniform as her white shell toe shoes.

Sackett, from her home base in Chicago, has long used dance to reach marginalized young people. "Hip hop is a community-driven culture," she says. "I chose very early on in my career, I don't want to go to L.A. and try and be in music videos, dancing behind a rapper half-dressed. I want to work with kids, I want to be keeping kids focused on something positive."

Then, increasingly, she saw a need to use her artistic voice more actively. "When things started picking up in the U.S. with all the hate speech and attacks on Muslim women in particular, I was like, I have to do something. I have to stand up for my people." She began to address stereotypes through dance, specifically popping, a hip-hop style that is her specialty.

Sackett is visiting Miami as part of MDC Live Arts' Hip Hoppa Locka, an educational program for Opa-locka high school students culminating Saturday in a grand finale performance and block party.



For the past two weeks, students at Arts Academy of Excellence in Opa-locka have been working with Sackett, along with two other powerful female Muslim artists: rapper Aja Black and visual artist and graffiti writer Cita.

“I’m teaching the kids different skills that they can add into their own freestyle dance,” says Sackett, “because we’ve got a lot of excellent dancers at the school. I’m just giving them additional skills and tips and training them in a couple styles they haven’t learned before, like breaking and popping.

“Aja is doing song writing and beat-making and poetry, and getting them to write, which is really important for the kids, to express themselves through words. And Cita is handling the visual arts and doing painting and some graffiti and representation.”

Saturday’s performance is a celebration of Muslim women in hip hop, featuring all three artists, along with a heavy roster of visiting artists and performers.

Hip Hoppa Locka is the latest in the MDC Live Arts season programming, “Ojala /Inshallah: Wishes from the Muslim World.” Overall, “Ojala/Inshallah” has aimed to combat Islamophobia by featuring Muslim artists from many different countries including Pakistan, Lebanon, Europe and the United States.

“One of the common stereotypes that we’re battling throughout the season,” says MDC Live Arts Director Kathryn Garcia, “is that all Muslims are Arab, and all Arabs are Muslim.”

Early on, when drafting ideas for “Ojala,” Garcia knew she wanted to do something in Opa-locka.



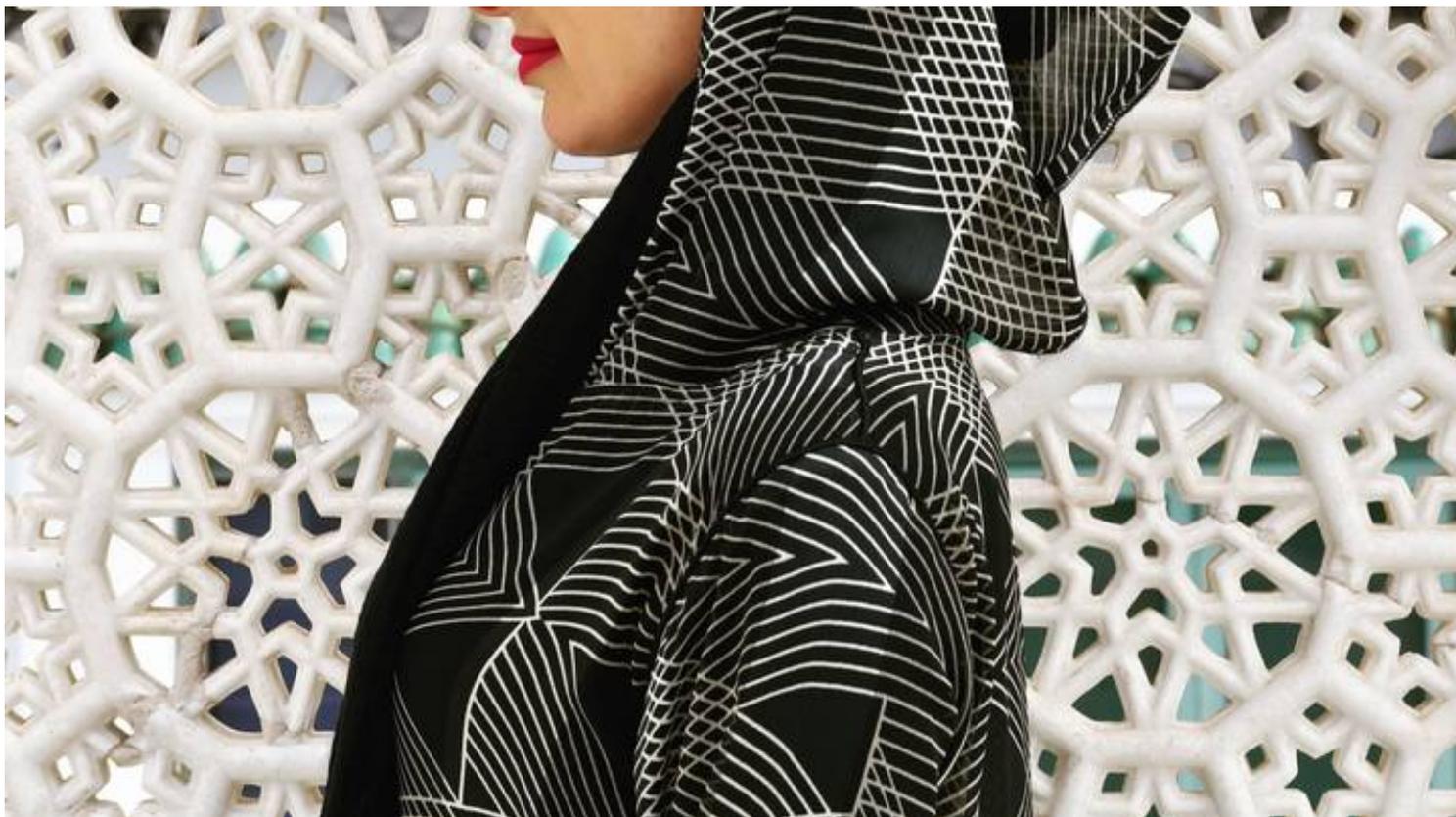
The city is currently known for both its high crime rate and its fantastical architecture, a mix of Arabic, Persian and Moorish styles. “Opa-locka really embodies this Orientalist fantasy — this idea of Ali Baba, and 1001 Nights — a very romanticized idea,” says Garcia. “I thought it was interesting to see how that particular stereotype has evolved, and to take it as an opportunity to throw stereotypes on their head.”

With Hip Hoppa Locka, she says, “We wanted to look at hip hop as a unifying force, because it’s present in the Muslim world just as it is in many different areas of the world. It’s a global phenomenon and has real meaning, whether you’re from Opa-locka or Syria.”

Sackett’s goals are similar. “I know how powerful dance is,” she says, “and I know how it can really send a message to people in a different way. It’s seeing something one way, then flipping it.

“Part of what I’ve done is use my identity to fight misconceptions about Islam by using dance, by using hip hop culture, because that’s my voice. That’s what I have to use.”

Within the Hip Hoppa Locka program, she has taken a minimal approach. “When I’m working with the kids, I’m not really mentioning that I’m Muslim, I’m just teaching them,” she says. “They might say hey, why don’t we ever see your hair? I’ll say I’m Muslim, that’s how we dress. And it’s a simple conversation. But in their minds now, they’ve met someone who they respect, who’s working with them, who they got to know and love. And she happens to be Muslim. So that helps with that image or perception later on in that person’s life, I would hope.”



Her current creative work more directly addresses Islamophobia by giving audiences new images of a Muslim woman. She often performs in full traditional dress under the umbrella of a creative group she created, called We're Muslim, Don't Panic.

Most recently, she has taken on poetry by 13th century mystic and scholar Rumi. While Rumi's quotes are ubiquitous in the United States almost to the point of cliché, she says, "people often fail to realize that Rumi is an Islamic scholar ... a lot of his poetry actually has a lot of Islamic philosophy in it."

In its essence, her work is about marking the complexity of who she is, taking her place in the fabric of American society. Others may be inclined to label her as an outsider, or even fear her because of her religion, but she's just a b-girl trying to make the world a better place.

"I think there's a lot of power for artists in telling your own story," says Sackett.

*ArtburstMiami.com is a nonprofit source of theater, dance, music and performing arts news.*

## If you go

- What: Hip Hoppa Locka, part of "Ojala/Inshallah: Wishes From the Muslim World from MDC Live Arts
- Where: The ARC (Arts & Recreation Center), 675 Ali Baba Ave., Opa-locka
- When: 4:00 p.m. Saturday
- Info: free, 305-687-3545; mdclivearts.org.

