



Hassan Hajjaj's Colorful Cabinet of Rock Stars and Fashionistas

12 April 2021 | by [Miss Rosen](#)



Hailing from the fishing town of Larache on the northwest coast of Morocco, photographer was born in 1961 — just five years after the country achieved independence. Throughout the '60s, the African Independence Movement swept the continent, restoring a feeling of pride to the peoples whose lives and land had been unjustly usurped by foreign imperialists. A new generation of photographers including Malick Sidibé, Samuel Fosso, and Sanle Sory chronicled the spirit of celebration that filled the air, creating portraits that captured the first flush of freedom as it spread far and wide.

Long before digital technology democratized photography, Hajjaj recalled his youth as, “There were hardly any cameras around then. In my town when I was growing up there were three types of photographers. The first was the studio photographer where people would have their family portraits made. I remember going with my Mum and my sisters, wearing our very best. Dad was living in

England from the '60s, so every couple of years we would go out, do a picture and send it to him. I remember that studio very well with the lighting, the backdrop, the seat. This was a big influence on me.”

The other photographers worked the streets and the beach, making portraits of people who wanted to preserve these fleeting moments of joy and fun in casual settings. “They would give you a piece of paper, and a few days later you'd get a small print,” Hajjaj says of the itinerant photographers who provided the

community with lasting scenes of happiness. These encounters left a memorable impression on Hajjaj that stayed with him throughout his life.

Hip Hop Is Something You Live

In 1973, at age 12, the Hajjaj family moved to London to join his father, a laborer, at a time when the sparkle of Swinging London was fading away. But with the arrival of immigrants from around the globe, the seeds of a new underground culture fueled by diasporic influences were firmly taking root. In 1984, Hajjaj opened R.A.P., a store dedicated to streetwear before it even had a name, in Covent Garden, the heart of London's burgeoning bohemian culture.

"The big brands didn't design for us so we used to make t-shirts that said 'Chanel No. 5 for Gucci' or buy a piece of fabric and sew it on the back of a jean jacket," Hajjaj says. Like Dapper Dan, the legendary Harlem haberdasher who designed custom looks for '80s Hip Hop icons like Salt 'N' Pepa, Eric B. and Rakim, and LL Cool J, Hajjaj understood cross-cultural appeal of luxury brands remade with an eye for street cool. "One of the nicest compliments I had came from Fab 5 Freddy of *Yo! MTV Raps*," Hajjaj remembers of the legendary New York artist and TV host that introduced rap music when it was still underground to the mainstream. "Fred came to the store and he understood it; he saw what I was trying to express — a Moroccan/Arabic/Muslim feeling of that of what he saw in Hip Hop and street style."

Tongue in Chic

This Spring, Hajjaj brings his vision of street style to New York in two exhibitions — *My Rockstars* and *VOGUE, The Arab Issue* — that explore the interplay of portraiture, personality, glamour, and style in the East and the West. With *VOGUE, The Arab Issue*, Hajjaj revisits a body of work inspired by his experiences assisting a stylist friend on a fashion shoot in Marrakech. "My friend had a riad [traditional Moroccan house] and ELLE magazine was shooting there," Hajjaj says. "Since I spoke English he asked me to sit with his workers in case they needed help. I was sitting around watching everything that was going on and suddenly I realized a bunch of people coming from Germany — the stylist, make up artist, models, fashion — and Marrakech was just the exotic background."

Inspired to create a fantasy-fashion shoot celebrating the people and styles of Marrakech,



Hajjaj embarked on a multi-year journey to create *VOGUE, The Arab Issue*, a series of photographs of local women posing in the streets of the Medina wearing clothing Hajjaj designed: traditional Moroccan djellabas, hijabs, caftans and babouches using candy-colored polka dot, animal prints, and counterfeit brand logo fabrics the artist sourced in New York, London, and Marrakech.

The series title is very tongue-in-chic, riffing on the Western notion of “The Arab Issue” that suggests a political quagmire fueled by foreign intervention for centuries alongside the aesthetic fetishization that has fueled European trends like Orientalism in high art, but otherwise ignores Arab sensibilities. Long before Conde Nast launched *Vogue Arabia* in 2017, Hajjaj understood the power and influence of Middle East style in fashion, beauty, and photography.

Live By The Code

For *My Rockstars*, Hajjaj picks up where artists like Sidibe, Fosso, and Sanle left off, seeing himself as part of the next generation of master studio photographers — with just one difference. Hajjaj constructs his studios in the street, setting up a stage and backdrops, then invites friends and performers including Cardi B, artist Hank Willis Thomas, and painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye to don one of his creations and pose for a portrait, then creates a custom handcrafted frame outfitted with miniature shelves and actual products such as soda cans and tomato sauce, often with Arabic logos.

“I met so many incredible characters that are my true rock stars,” Hajjaj says of the people in the series. “They are born with it. If it’s a singer, they don’t have to go to classes. If it’s a boxer, they have that fighting ability in their eyes. When they step into the studio, they become this character. Maybe they’re not mainstream but they live by their code of what they do.”