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Graffiti, Hip-Hop, Sk8s: Tehran's Young Rebels Battle the Crackdown

By TIME STAFF Friday, Aug. 07, 2009



Iranian band Hy pernova, now in exile in the West

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For a few hours on a recent evening, the headaches of keeping a step ahead of Iran's notorious security forces begin to fade. Skateboarders, BMX bikers and aggressive inline skaters zip down the quarter-pipe in their baggy street wear, pumping their arms whenever they land a tricky move. Small groups of teens from relatively well-off families, some still in middle school, stand on the sidelines staring in awe while beats spin over the booming speakers.

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The capital's only skate park is a rare refuge for some of the country's restless and burgeoning youths, allowing them to congregate without being harassed by the feared Basij militia. Under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rule and particularly since the disputed June 12 election, when thousands of angry teens and 20-somethings took to the streets, the religious police have cracked down on this sort of rebellious youth culture, driving it further underground. "These artists are at the same level as those in the West, but they're working under the most incredible pressures," explains an Iranian electro-music producer who is in his 20s. "If they're arrested here, the end of the road is execution."

(See pictures of people around the world protesting the Iranian election.)

That is not to say these musicians, artists and skater punks have been cowed into silence; rather, their influence in a country where 2 out of 3 are under the age of 30, with many hungry for Western cultural imports, has perhaps never been greater. In the run-up to the presidential election, many young voters were eagerly trading CD mix tapes featuring underground artists — practically all working

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