Lost in Lights: the relevant, revelatory music of Muslimgauze

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Lost in Lights
the relevant, revelatory music of Muslimgauze
Rob Riddle on Feb 18 2002

Muslimgauze does more than just toy with elements of other people’s music; he synthesizes his own view, brings together original content for pragmatic dreamers that provides a clever conduit to another version of our world.

"Babylon takes its abstractions for realities..." ¹

Bryn Jones of Manchester, England begins his electronic percussive project Muslimgauze in 1982, fiercely inspired by the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. For 17 years, until his untimely death in 1999 from a rare blood fungus, he prolifically produces a mind bending array of experimental electronica; from soft ambient dreamscapes through dance possession oriented beats to hard edged cut ups that faithfully recreate the sounds of digital malfunctions exploding through a mixing desk. No matter where he strays musically however, events in the Middle East, and especially the plight of Palestinians, inexplicably remains the common denominator of his work. The unanswerable irony comes from the fact that Bryn, of English descent neither Arabic nor a Muslim, creates scores of albums with a strongly political, highly controversial emphasis on happenings in that region, for no apparent reason other than he feels highly compelled to do so.

With recent events culminating into a whirlwind of violence and retribution that many Americans find difficult to understand and most people worldwide deplore, we need all available tools to best understand the widespread factors that brought us here so as to successfully navigate the mindfield before us. Simplistic, moralistic explanations of good versus evil may satiate some but for those with a keen grasp on actual human motivating factors and a taste for the accurate truth (including the bitterness of raw honesty) such ignorant dualism will not suffice. My generation may have grown up on Star Wars but that doesn't mean we will settle for such a similar and unlikely dichotomy in comprehending how forces operate on our planet.

After the age of the balance of terror which lasted some forty years, the age of imbalance is upon us. The historic attack on the World Trade Center (1993) marks its beginning. A veritable big bang, this criminal act cannot continue to be downplayed for fear of causing panic in the inhabitants of the great metropolises. Indeed there is no point in waiting for the future “nuclear terrorism” to begin, if the states responsible or those more or less controllable organizations are already daring to take such action: trying to bring down one of the tallest buildings in the world to express their differences or their political opposition, regardless of whether they kill twenty or thirty thousand people in the process. It is urgent that we protect ourselves effectively... ²

By examining the work of Bryn Jones I hope to exemplify both the culture clash involved and possible methods of resolution. I certainly do not propose that his music serves as the Rosetta Stone for understanding today’s tensions. I do believe that his experiments in crossing a Western technological influence with a deep seeded interest in the issues of the Arab region does provide useful examples of both inspirational...
Who’s hand Shaitan?

"O brother what you really are is a notion; the rest of you is bones and sinew." 3

The etymological root of the word Satan derives from the Arabic Shaitan, or Iblis; a darkly elemental Jinn of chaotic proportions, a being of flame who uses illusion to ensnare one’s imagination. Some teachers have even called the imagining process itself this name. The analogy implies that one’s mind, when improperly deployed or simply in its natural state, perceives its surroundings quite deviously; greedily, selfishly, rather easily frightened by darkness and fooled by lights. In the modern world this obvious truth lies in our mundane lives (television, street lamps) as well as in our fantasies (national missile defense, Las Vegas). We completely rely on such means of external illumination; what modern world without?

The music of Muslimgauze slashes at casual misperception. In some pieces the titles alone stir emotions and confront preconceived notions. United States of Islam, Vote Hezbollah, Gulf Between Us and Hamas Arc clearly indicate the incendiary nature of the content, serving as both warning and challenge. The artwork and the liner notes also leave no doubt regarding the information transmitted, and some of the artwork absolutely amazes. Check Tandoori Dog, Box of Silk and Dogs and Iranian Female Olympic Table Tennis Team Theme for examples of ingenious packaging. The music, however, almost never speaks directly about the politics - no long discourses, no preaching. Instead Bryn consistently chooses to hint at his inspiration, coaxing and nudging the listener towards his version with atmosphere, not self righteousness.

The early work of Muslimgauze comes from the wildly experimental underground of 1980’s Britain, out of the industrial genre (including bands like Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire). From the beginning the crucial element of relentless percussion pervades throughout. By the late 1980’s Soleilmoon and Staalplaat begin to present the majority of his work, although throughout his career he releases on many other small labels as well (Audio 1 - MP3, 4.8 MB ). Bryn’s music remains strongly independent; most releases range from 1000-2000 copies. With well over one hundred offerings, his output spreads worldwide, creates an eager, loyal audience that supports the rare obscurity of his unique vision.

In more aggressive albums, such as Fatah Guerrilla, Izlamaphobia and Mazar-I-Sharif (Audio 2 - MP3, 8.9 MB) the sounds rip through the speakers, make the listener question whether the cd player isn’t dysfunctional. Loopy to a fault (but created without computers, using more traditional tape manipulation techniques, live hand percussion and effect processors) the beats and noise batter the ear drums to the point of submission, demand attention, summon the extremes of the region without uttering a single word.

He concocts desert settings, implying the subject matter in the most abstract manner. Azzazin and Al-Zulfiqar Shaheed push the boundaries of the term ambient (Audio 3 - MP3, 1.0 MB), taking it to places Brian Eno never meant for it to go. Even as a sense of serenity emerges an agitation remains far in the distance, always insists that chill space remains a temporary phenomena at best.

Occasionally, on remixes and albums (including Zul’m and Emak Bakia) Muslimgauze plays with techno, dub and just plainly pleasant world music. (Audio 4 - MP3, 10.2 MB ) We hear how this artist exhausts the possibilities of his chosen subject matter, reorganizes the same principles with varied rhythms and effects. He could, after all, play to different audiences, placing the politics far off in the background, hazy and miles away.

He often collaborates with others, both directly on new tracks and also through remixes. In his work with Rootsman and Suns of Arqa one finds some of his best constructs with hip-hop and reggae rhythms (Audio 5 - MP3, 2.3 MB). While with others, like Species of Fish, Bryn accentuates the electronic nature of his methods (Audio 6 - MP3, 4.5 MB). Abu-Dis and Occupied Territories document both his work with others, and others reworking Muslimgauze. He also remixes his own work (Audio 7 - MP3, 9.7 MB), releasing three complete cds (Vol 1, 2 and 3) of recycled material, plus constantly sneaking new versions of previous tracks on subsequent releases as well.

The Dream of Abu Da’ud

After the fantasy of seeing oneself (the mirror, the photograph) comes that of being able to circle around oneself, finally and especially of traversing beyond, of passing through one’s own spectral body...but this is in some sense the end of the aesthetic and the triumph of the
medium, exactly as in stereophonia, which, at its most sophisticated limits, neatly puts an end to the charm and the intelligence of music.  

In the desert of the real controlling perception becomes tantamount to controlling reality, since things as they are very much depend on how they are perceived. Bryn’s approach means to stymy that process. Through sudden jolts, bleeps and drones he means to bring the process to the forefront, constantly pushing the awareness of the listener. Right or wrong he intends to force the issue, refuses to allow an easy dismissal, causes a reevaluation of standard perceptions. In this interview from 1994 one gains a sense of both the single-mindedness of his political views and his stubborn spirituality. Also this account of events surrounding one of Bryn’s relatively few live shows impresses the strange story of this mad rhythm creator. Both illustrate the oddness and passions of a true innovator in a place of his own making, yet firmly rooted in the actualities of his day.

The New Crusades

"Every age has its peculiar folly: some scheme, project or fantasy into which it plunges, spurred on either by the love of gain, the necessity of excitement, or the mere force of imitation. Failing in these, it has some madness, to which it is goaded by political or religious causes, or both combined."  

Supply and demand reign supreme in the religion of the free market, capitalism. No different for the trade of weapons, where upon examination one confronts the fact that the United States relies economically on the manufacture and sale of such products. Not to say that America is "bad" or "evil" simply to state the often overlooked fact that we have a vested interest in armed conflicts. It's good for business. Of course if someone uses these products, someone else will have the products used against them. Supply and demand, products and services.

"God does not oblige the ignorant to learn until obliged the learned to teach."  

Bryn’s music invokes the spirit of the underdog in a reality where technical innovation and progress means being able to kill more people with pinpoint accuracy and greater ease, while also maximizing profitability. His music speaks to, stands up for the people of the region, he crafts respect. He creates the soundtrack for the broken boom boxes of Gaza, blaring mad noise from the rubble of leveled homes.

"This is the problem with undedifying labels like Islam and the West: they mislead and confuse the mind, which is trying to make sense of a disorderly reality that won’t be pigeonholed or strapped down as easily as all that." 

In his mind and to much of his audience Bryn champions the cause of the oppressed, albeit in his own quirky loner way. Ultimately the curious artist inundates himself with the sounds of another culture because he cares about it intensely, irrationally. As such Bryn constantly pushes the envelope in favor of Palestinians, quite willing to overlook the atrocities of Hamas or Islamic Jihad, very quick to damn Israel’s methods and intentions. Certainly he picks his side, but the points he makes need to be made, artistically and politically. He examines the region in a way that hasn’t been done before, and his particular insight does shed its own light. Important to understand the symbolism and the dynamics of hatred in faith - the power of annihilation and the lure obliteration provides to those that have lost hope. Difficult to represent that to a society with too little empirical experience to fully understand.

Inconclusive

"Last vestiges of colonial imperialist mentality cause us to mistake other peoples’ culture for the raw material of our eclectic postmodern “mix”. But in fact we’re guilty of cultural appropriation - or in less fancy terms, stealing from our friends. Native American elders have declared “war” on new age sham shamans who are trying to avenge Custer with $600 sweatlodge weekends (maybe the warriors will knee-cap Robert Bly or Paul Simon!) "Multiculturalism” means that your little bit of "folk art” will look nice in my living room. Well, fuck that shit!”

Muslimgauze does more than just toy with elements of other people’s music; he synthesizes his own view, brings together original content for pragmatic dreamers that provides a clever conduit to another version of our world. He pushes the threshold,
both with pure signal and crucial content. With such inflammatory material he burns brightly, accurate to his aim. Behind the defensive posture a more than aesthetic question remains: what methods to employ and to what end?

"Verily your deeds will be brought back to you, as if you yourself were the creator of your own punishment." ⁹

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Bibliography

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Audiography


::CrossReference

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