On rejecting schedules

Musician Qais Essar on his relationship to Afghan culture, the difficult work of being an independent artist, and why schedules can be stupid.

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As told to Rona Akbari, 1841 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Identity, Multi-tasking.

You've been playing music since you were six years old, and were introduced to Eastern music through your father. What is your attachment to the rabab and the significance of it to you, as opposed to sitar or guitar?

It's something that I can't explain and something that I don't understand fully. Before I started to play the rabab, I played a few other instruments. I did start fairly young. I first played the violin, the guitar, and tambour, which is another Afghan instrument my grandfather played. The first time I got my hands on a rabab, it was tuned-up and I just played the one note, the tar—it was such an a-ha moment. Everything felt kind of right.

Were you around music a lot growing up?

Yeah. For me, family was a big part of it because they were one of my biggest pillars. For them, as refugees and immigrants, playing music together was one of the ways to feel at home in a place that wasn't necessarily home. We would get together every Friday night and everyone would play anything they could: harmonium, tabla, and those that couldn't would sing, clap, bang on pots and pans. That's the environment I grew up in.

Do you still go to mehmani (parties) like that, or play in them?

Oh, no. I think that lasted until I was 10. I don't really do mehmani music. The reason why I gravitated so much towards it was because I grew up not speaking English until I went to school. I had to go to ESL class for the first three years. I had a really bad stuttering problem, so I went to speech therapy for four years. I feel like for the first 10 years of my life, communication was just a little bit harder. So for me, inept in eloquent speaking and communicating, I just felt music was the way to do that. It gave me a voice.

So yeah, mehmanis no. The Afghan diaspora really confused me, and still does. When I think of Afghans, I think of my mom and dad. So, for that reason, I've dedicated my life to purveying Afghan culture and keeping it alive in a way that it's appreciated by a new generation in the States. But I don't necessarily interact with a lot of Afghans.

So you picked up the rabab, and then eventually came a time when you were like, "I want to do this as my life's work. This is my passion." What were the conversations around that? Did you feel supported?

I was supported to the fullest in pursuing music and learning music. I graduated high school and gained a pretty good proficiency in a lot of different instruments. At that point, I had been studying music for most of my life, I would say. So I said, "I want to be musician." My mom was asked, "What?" And I was like, "Yeah. I want to be a professional musician." She asked, "Why don't you think about that?" And so I said, "Okay. I will make you a deal. I'll go to a four-year school and I'll get a degree. After that, then I can do whatever I want." She was like, "Yeah. Deal."

So that's what I did. I studied Political Science and Music Studies in college. Throughout college, I was still pursuing music. I would take these crap bar gigs playing AC/DC covers until 2AM in the morning, making like $150, earning my stripes. I come from the punk rock ethic of, "You've got to pay your dues." I've been in and out of bands since I was 15, all with the support of my parents. My mom would drive me to gigs. She would not feel weird at all about parking two streets down so I didn't have to roll up with my mom.

After I graduated, I gave my mom the diploma, like, "Here you go. Now I'm gonna go do my thing." Two months after, I got this little gig in the World Music Orchestra. The first couple of years, it was a lot of, "When are you going to get a real job?" Or, "You have to start taking your life seriously." But it's not so much about them wanting me to become a doctor or lawyer or anything. I just took the work ethic that it takes to be a doctor or a lawyer and applied it to this music thing. I hustled.

Stages got bigger. More people came, and then at some point that was just who I was. Now, it's a point of pride. You know, we rarely have people over, but when we do my dad will be like, "Ok, bachem boro rabab bokon." (Ok, my son, go play rabab.)

I would get all the hoi-hoi's and the cheers and everything. For me, it's about playing live. There's nostalgia. There's the actual sound of the rabab that's a haunting, melancholic, gut-wrenching sound. And often for the audience, it's the fact that there's someone doing it that is so young, which I got shit for from my family. I think all this stuff put together would just move people.

What does a work day look like for you? How do you practice?

It's exhausting being an independent artist, but I've always wanted to represent myself. That means wearing the hats of many different people. I have to write music, I have to be a performer, I have to think about branding and business and social media and marketing and art/artwork and web design and global commerce. You're having to pay people all around the world to record in different studios. At the end of the day you're doing more of the other stuff, it feels like, than making music. But I still try to get in at least an hour of practice a day, and I have the mornings.

And, oh my god, the emails. So many emails.

How do you stay on top of it all?

For one job, where I was writing music for a movie, I remember in the morning I got this email that was like, "Alright. Send this one to your lawyer, send this one to your manager, and send this one to your agent, and we'll get this all wrapped up in the morning." He had no idea that at the end of the night it's me opening up all three emails. Like, "Okay, shit. I have to be a like a lawyer. I have to be like an agent, and then I have to do this other stuff." It's funny, but it's also so stressful.

For music, there is no scheduled time. I live in the forest now, and there's nothing to do but make music. If I'm doing a record, then I'm doing a record. That's all I do. From morning until I go to bed, just because I feel super guilty if I'm not super active and pursuing these things.

So, yeah, there is no real schedule. Schedules are stupid. That's why I don't have a job-job, where you have to go in at 9AM. For this musical I worked on, for tech and rehearsals and all this stuff, it was like, "Okay, you can go to the bathroom now." I was like, "Whoa, people wait to do that?" "Okay, now you guys can go have a snack." It's like, "What? Are you serious?" I'm not of that world at all. I can't do that. I can't do set schedules.

I saw your performance in Tear A Root at BRIC. There was a point where you manipulated the rabab to emulate helicopter sounds. You've also helped with the soundtrack for the animated film *The Breadwinner*. Is scoring and soundtracks something you aspire to do?

Scoring is something I'm getting more and more into, and that I enjoy. Music brings so much to movies. The music really has an opportunity to bring out different elements in the film; it's like taking the information in with different senses. It's a fun challenge. You see something and they explain to you, "This is what's going on," and then you have to try to make what that sounds like.

How much freedom do you have in these commissions, and what is that collaborative process like? How do you navigate conversations where someone has one idea, and maybe you have something different in mind?

To be brutally honest… if you just hear something that sounds like bullshit, you call bullshit. That's how I operate. It's established in the beginning that it doesn't have to be taken personally. Especially with stuff having to do with culture and representation. You can be diplomatic, but you don't have to try to put it in any certain way. There's only one way to tell the truth. I go into any project expecting full freedom, because I never want to have my wings clipped.

Moshtari Hilal did the artwork for your vinyl *Tavern of Ruin*. What was that like?

It was a 7-inch LP and she drew my head. She'd been following me and I knew of her. I respect that she uses her art to address different issues, and that she's honest in her work. I dug everything about her aesthetic, so when it came time to do the artwork for the album, I knew that I would really like to have her involved in some way. It's a lathe cut, which means it's bound warbly in mono. It's so low-fi, but so rad. She also did the artwork for the jackets.

What are you excited about right now?

I'm looking forward to sitting down and making some music just for the hell of it, without any expectations. Whenever I get the chance to do something just for the sake of doing it, without any expectation or any kind of commercial commitment, I put them out on cassettes because that's what I want. I don't give a fuck if you can't listen to it. It's the kind of folk music I grew up with, Beltoon. I listened to it on cassette tape, too.

Qais Essar recommends:

Time alone.

There are a couple albums that I have listened to consistently throughout the course of my life, and Devendra Banhart's "Cripple Crow" has inspired me for the past 13 years. Everything about this album was/is just beautiful to me.

Indian classical music is a vast and gorgeous cosmos. Every note Ustad Ali Akbar Khan played was magic.

Gary Clark Jr.'s performance of "When My Train Pulls In" at Glastonbury in 2016 is so rad. The blues will live and prosper through artists like Gary Clark Jr.

Read *The Mysticism of Sound and Music* by Hazrat Inayat Khan. It's all there.

Name
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Vocation
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