On finding your inner voice

Musician Zohra discusses sublimating emotions through your art and knowing where other people belong in your creative process.

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As told to Max Freedman, 1901 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Identity, Process, Politics, Day jobs, Mentorship.

The writing around your album *Murder in the Temple* talks about your Afghan background. Can you discuss how your identity does and doesn't inform your creativity? The description also says you initially didn't want to focus on identity in your music. What incorrect assumptions about identity's role in your music have you encountered?

The reason I make music is to sublimate feelings and to filter all the bile and the chatter and the stuff that's consumed us, at least in the last 10 years, with politics. I grew up in the South. I never left the United States until I was much older. Being able to claim a heritage and say I'm American is a really powerful thing. As ugly as things have gotten, or can get, nobody really questions whether I can say I'm an American.

Murder in the Temple was the first time I let myself feel what I felt from 20 years of being in the U.S. and then seeing the U.S. going to war with Afghanistan. My family had always assumed we'd go back to Afghanistan. That's something people get wrong, that people come and don't ever want to go back. That's not the case a lot of times, particularly with folks who have been uprooted through economic strife or war.

So, a lot of friends of mine went out to the conflict over there. We exchanged our heritages throughout years of friendship; having them come back with gifts for me from Afghanistan, and knowing what they might have done or seen, was very strange for me.

It all culminated in what some of the record sounds like, and some of the imagery.

Even if I wanted to go back, to wherever my country or home is, it's not there. It doesn't exist. It's not a home I've ever been to, nor is it a place that would be safe to try to find, even if I could. *Murder in the Temple* was a bit of me feeling lost and angry, but not in a way that was pointed in any direction outside of wanting to write and work through it.

How exactly do you process all the political things you discussed, all the rage you might feel about the last 10 or so years, through music?

I'm hesitant to use the word "catharsis," because it's a word that's become ubiquitous. It's overused. But, really, honestly, I would say that it allowed me to explore the part of the brain that is internal and unconscious. It's a voice that's there, but you have to get to it. Sound has always been my pathway to that place.

In the past, I've written songs on guitar and piano. I didn't feel like an expert with synths, modular stuff, and programming drums. Once I found my way into that area, though, it allowed for more of a piecemeal way of working through songwriting. It was in a way that anyone can do, I think, which is to say, the tactile feeling of gear, making sounds, and creating shapes. Messing with sound, basically, and letting your ear and heart guide you to a

place where something feels right. I started by digging into that part, into these fractured voices. That became a conduit, which was really a balm at that time.

It's easier than ever to record bits of sound and build off of that. It's not the kind of thing where you're messing with chord structures. I tapped into the most vulnerable, honest place I have ever reached, just because I was recording it by myself—and it was piecemeal.

I was messing with dynamics in a modal kind of form, which can allow you to write over a drone that's repeated, sort of like a sound washer, a bathing, and your own mesh of frequency. I allowed the songs to be structured this way. It can open up parts of yourself to guide you to something that, not only is satisfying in a compositional way, but that is also honest. *That's* what I think catharsis is.

You do play all the instruments on the album, but you sent it to Ben Greenberg to produce. Why did you bring in a collaborator?

Initially, I brought Ben in to mix. Everything was done by me, and it was difficult to bring in a collaborator, but I knew I wasn't going to mix it myself. It was eating away at me, too, understanding whether or not something was complete. He ended up being instrumental in midwifing the songs I had written. For example, if I had a song that I'd kind of worked out, his diagnosis might be, "Zohra, you don't realize that you're wearing a producer hat and a writer hat at the same time." The capacity in which he was working with me was almost emotional, because you can get lost and not see the forest for the trees when you're enjoying that process of messing with it and getting these forms together.

It wasn't as if I had previously worked things out like "Here's the verse structure" and gotten to where I understood, "Okay, this is done." I could have. But if didn't have that part of my brain that knew I wanted to release the music, it could have just as easily been something I did over the course of 15 years by myself with 45 different songs named the same title. I kept reworking the songs, but there is that part of yourself that wants to have it land and to get into the ears and heads of folks that it can resonate with. There was that drive. Folks could probably say that it's just a way of wanting attention from your art, and I think that's part of it, but it's definitely not the whole thing.

When Ben got the songs from me, the first one had 72 stems, and he was like, "Zohra, you're producing this as well. You don't need to do this." He really helped me mentally get into a space of giving him something. It was almost an exercise in randomness after that. Once it was released, it was like a reptilian way of giving birth, and I was like, "Take it. I trust you. Whatever you fancy from here." I felt like I didn't need to over-direct after that, and he didn't disappoint. Arrangement-wise, there was a lot that's true to what I gave him, but his arrangement bits kicked it into a different space. It was also interesting hearing the music in a new, completely different way, because of his sensibility in there.

This approach was never the intention. Way back when, I thought I would have a five-piece band, but then I needed it to be me putting in all the bits. That wasn't a conscious thing. It was something that happened when it happened. It coincided with the darkest period of my life, and it worked out really well. I felt like I had gotten there to that place of sublimation I mentioned at the start. I want my music to be celebratory and full of beauty in the darkness.

In your five recommendations, you included Lydia Lunch, who's a collaborator on *Murder in the Temple*. I take it that she's also a pretty big influence of yours. How does working with one of your idols shape your creative process?

Strangely, she'd become a friend before I could work up any idea of giving her something of mine. I'd been going to her shows over the years. She's attuned, and she started to call me forward, and we just got to talking. She has a circle of folks she invites to events—a coven of witches, to keep it to her language. I've been a fan since I was 13 and she gets a kick out of my encyclopedic knowledge, from the art to the flyers and the ephemera, all of it.

I felt like she was a kindred spirit and was very much pushing me along in terms of, “What are you up to, Zohra? What do you have going on creatively right now?” She was mining, listening, and giving me a advice and feedback based on her experience. She’s been out there, hustling and making music, art, film, spoken word, and books. It’s incredible to see someone so prolific always alchemizing and turning things into tangible pieces of work.

During the last leg of mixing and producing, there was this space in one of the songs—vocals without a lead vocal line. Once we mixed it against the other stuff, I told Ben, “I might ask Lydia to throw something on this.” It occurred to me, there was that space, and it was inappropriate space. It’s not like electronic music is where she’s found herself artistically. I know she’s a fan of Muslimgauze, like I am, and other stuff, but not necessarily something more pop. It’s definitely aggressive, but it’s not abrasive electronic music.

When she heard it, within that day, she sent the part back, and it just really felt like, “Okay, yeah, this is great.” I also thought, vocally, it’s something I hadn’t heard her do in a while. It immediately felt right to have the album title visually lead with that, too—“Murder in the Temple,” the song on which she’s featured. For everything else I’d written and penned, it just felt like the perfect title, which I wouldn’t have thought would be the case. It was so singularly myopic, almost jokingly, to have the lyrics that she put down as the album title, but it encompassed the whole thing really well.

Do you have a day job? If so, how do you balance it with your creative work? Do they help or do they hinder each other?

I’ve been working in the capacity of project-managing. If somebody has a company they want to have a presence in another part of the world, we make sure it’s culturally sensitive or we facilitate the right connections—who they should talk to for their infrastructure project, etc. It’s important to me. As a part of the diaspora community, I wanted to give back.

It’s something I adopted and inherited from my dad. He got a USAID scholarship to go back to Afghanistan and use the education there. He didn’t have the opportunity to do that, and we just felt like there was such a need.

I do a lot of volunteer work through the Nooristan Organization as well. It was founded in the late ’90s to build roads and schools for girls on a voluntary or project-by-project basis. I used to work as a copy editor at a magazine.

I can do these things on the side, as well as the creative work. It’s been important to me to keep that. It can be difficult to juggle, but it’s imperative. I feel like I’m a citizen, as silly as that sounds. I don’t come at it from a space of just art all the time.

Zohra Recommends:

Naujawanan Baidar

Lydia Lunch’s *Retrovirus*

All my husband’s stuff. (I was a fan before he was my husband.)

Tamaryn

The art of Nate Turbow

Name
Zohra

Vocation
musician

Jasmine Hirst