

On the transformative nature of creative work



Composer and artist Fatima Al Qadiri on the alchemy of music making, using depression as a cocoon, and maintaining integrity in a challenging industry.

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As told to Ruth Saxelby, 3365 words.

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What does transformation in a creative context mean to you?

I think transformation is that alchemical process of creativity. It's turning water into wine. That's kind of how I approach it. Taking a lot of volatile energy, in my case, or turning nothing—ideas that inhabit your head—into a concrete physical work that can be listened to, that can be enjoyed. That process of turning nothing into something is endlessly fascinating. I always listen to my previous works—I'm sure most artists have this experience—and it's just like, "How did I do that?" Especially after many years have passed by. Like, for instance, listening to old work like *Genre-Specific Xperience*, I just have no idea how that happened. I don't remember the process. It's a blur, you know? I'm sure it happens as you get older and you have more notches under your belt. Your earlier works become a little more mysterious to you somehow.

That has to be tied up in the fact it's a documentation of an earlier version of yourself. So it's like, "Wait, who was that person?"

Who was that person? Exactly. I was a smoker, I was partying all the time. Yada yada yada. I had a completely different lifestyle when I made that record. I lived in New York, all my friends lived in a two-block radius. It was a completely different space and time. But I like the idea of transformation because most of the time when I've made records—I want to say 80% of the time—I am channelling really volatile energy into the work. It's like, this is a receptacle for hard angles. Because where am I going to deposit all of this anguish? *Desert Strike* was made under those circumstances, *Brute* was made under horrific circumstances. And this most recent work of *Medieval Femme* was also made under those circumstances. Very nasty negative energy. A lot of anxiety. I feel like most of my records are these transformative depositing [of] something... a lot of pain to try to make something that is beautiful to me.

"Depositing" is interesting as a term and an idea. It relates to a question I was thinking about: How does making things make and remake us? When you've made that deposit, how does that remake you?

I feel like I learn a lot from the process, but it's a way for me to channel that energy without it exploding on a person. Because it has to go somewhere. Either it's going to erupt out of me or it's like an implosion, you know? That's how I see it: I'm imploding all this energy into this work rather than being external, which is very scary. I learned to do that over the years. *Oh, you feel really bad? Take that energy and put it into something. Don't let it leave your body to the outside world in a bad way.*

So then it is some alchemy, for sure.

Oh, definitely. As I said, the vast majority of my records are made under these circumstances. *Asiatisch* and *Genre-Specific Xperience* were the only chill ones. The rest were all [made] under very volatile psychological circumstances.

Creative practice intertwines with time and space. I remember you saying that you were going to Kuwait to work on something new, and I guess that was the beginning of this new record, *Medieval Femme*.

Yes, it was. I wish I had made all of it there because I really enjoyed writing in Kuwait. It's actually a way for me to control my volatility.

How?

The creative process can be riddled with anxiety, obviously, all the time. Especially when you move around a lot. I've moved so many times in my life—apartments, cities. I'm in L.A. right now. It's hard to get your bearings to write in a new place. That's actually one of the causes of anxiety for me. It's not so much what is happening in my personal life as it is, *Oh, this room, I hate it. I can't work here. But I have to because I have nowhere else to go.*

But my bedroom in Kuwait is this windowless room where there are no distractions, and it's soundproof as a result. It's a room within a room. There's a side passageway to it, so there's a double door of privacy. My dad passes out at like 8pm. My mom stays awake and watches Egyptian movies. She's in thrall to her Egyptian movies. And I like to make music there from midnight to the morning call to prayer. That's my alarm clock: *Okay, you should go to bed now.* So this, to me, is the magic hours of writing: midnight to 5am. It's so quiet there, not a peep. I can't see anything. I'm completely in my head. Kuwait brings back all these childhood memories, no matter how it progresses and changes and transforms with technology. Just being there, smelling the air and the humidity, and the perfumes and the Turkish coffee, I feel like I am in a pyjama forcefield. I just really connect deeply to my childhood and the sense of wonder, which is what I need as an adult, as a very *been-there-done-that* adult. There's no bars, there's no clubs; no FOMO. There's nothing to do. So it's like being in a strange convent or something.

I was walking around listening to *Medieval Femme* and it felt like luxuriating in this space of aloneness and loneliness.

It's basically solitude. There's something very solitary about being a woman. I really feel that. I felt that in Kuwait, I feel that in the West. The fact that you don't have as much agency or rights as men, it feels very solitary. But I'm also thinking of these women, how lonely they must have felt writing these poems. I'm talking specifically about al-Khansā'. I read the work of a lot of classical female poets, but her poetry is the one that made it into the record. (It still amazes me that women in general were educated to write poetry at the time and that their poetry survived.) She was a contemporary of Muhammed, she wrote in the 7th century, she wrote elegies mainly. She was writing mostly about loss, and in the couplet that I used in track nine, "*Tasakuba,*" she's addressing her eyeball: "Oh, my eye, why do you not weep like a waterfall?" It's surrealism in the 7th century. I just felt the loneliness and the frustration. And the *want*.

This is the thing... growing up as a young girl in Kuwait, I wanted so much. I wanted the freedom, the access, the mobility of men. I saw how they could walk. Literally, I couldn't enter certain spaces because I was a girl. Physical doors, not mental doors. I recognized in [al-Khansā's] writings—although it's much more extreme because it's a thousand years ago or more—it's just this wanting and desire. That's when I started to see desire as being responsible for depression. I've had severe bouts of depression more or less from the age of 11. I was like, *Oh, it's because I want so much. I want so much that I can't function anymore and everything stops. Space and time collapse onto me because I desire things I can never have.*

There's all this emptiness on the album. A sense of movement but only within a contained space.

It's exactly that. This restrictive space. It's definitely the gilded cage. Because that's what growing up in Kuwait felt like. We all went to good schools. Middle class lifestyle. We all went on summer vacations, yada yada

yada. You had food on the table, clothes on your back—what more do you need? But I wanted to be a boy. I wanted to have that agency desperately. I became friends with more men than women so that I could vicariously live through their tales. Until I realized, however many years ago, *Okay, I need to befriend more women now*. And also because Kuwait was so sex-segregated. Now it's completely changed because of social media, but while I was growing up it was all-female spaces, all-male spaces. I was lucky that I went to a British school that was co-ed but the entire public school system was sex-segregated.

When did you realize that making creative work was a way to deposit depression?

I think from the very beginning. I started composing when I was nine during the occupation. That's when I realized that time disappears when you're in that mode. The thing about anguish and time is that when you're feeling volatile, time passes very slowly. It just feels like you're locked. By pouring that energy into a creative act, you shave off bits of time. You wake up renewed and refreshed. Maybe [you've] forgotten a little bit of your anxiety. But it definitely has to do with time.

Does each work transform the way that you approach the next project? Does transformation have a beginning or an end?

It always seems like it's the same each time. Where I'm moving through a dark room looking for a flashlight. Once I get the demos made, I have the flashlight in my hand. Now I can see the exit. But normally, it's a lot of trial and error. There is the belief that there's a path you can keep walking on. I know a lot of women that stopped themselves from writing music, [or] releasing music once they've written it, because of fear. I was so pig-headed in Kuwait to want to show men there that I could do what they did, and do it better, that my belief in myself was rock solid. I don't waver. The only time I have, let's say, indecisiveness is in the mixing process. But the writing process is solid. Like I said, it's just trial and error. Sometimes it doesn't work out. There's been a few records where I'm just like, *No, this is not good enough for me to listen to and therefore it's not good enough for anyone else*.

Is that a hard decision to make?

Oh, it's very hard. Especially when you've invested months or weeks in something. It's not frequent but it has happened and my decision has always been firm: *This is not seeing the light of day*.

Do you grieve that work or is it a relief to let it go?

No, it's weird. You know how you feel about missed opportunities? It's like, you can't change the past. I try to have a forward mind about things. As I get older, I try to think, *That was not meant to be*. For instance, I've been thinking about [Medieval Femme] since 2016. Opportunities have come at different times to stop me from making this record. The score for Atlantics, for instance. I was starting to work on this record when that came and I was like, *Oh, I need to make this score. This is going to change my life*. And it did.

How did working on that score transform you?

It was a very different process because you were now making work for someone else's vision. I'd never done that before. I'd worked on short films where I'd basically send the music, but it was not a whole lot of back and forth. But this is a feature, everything is composed specifically for that scene. The other stuff was more like a sync. So it was hard at first because Mati [Diop, the director] was very precise about what she wanted. I kept going back to the drawing board on some of the scenes so that was disheartening to me, but in the end I was very happy with how hard she was on me.

Like I said, it's not your vision—it's the director's vision and you're creating something that only they know what they want out of this movie as a whole. And I believed in it. The first time I watched the rough cut, I was like, "I'm in." All the scenes in the film were so overwhelmingly beautiful. I just wanted to be part of it and figure out a way to make her happy. But to me, the most beautiful thing out of the whole process is that we became very dear friends. I gained a sister from this job, which I did not envision.

Did you develop any new creative practices to deal with things over the past year?

I am very lazy at the core. It's funny that I am not into changing my routine but I've been in L.A. since March 2020 and I've had three different homes in that space of time. It's a lot, especially when you're doing this kind of work: setting up a studio, taking it down, setting up a studio, taking it down. I'm just constantly getting used to new environments, it seems.

This is why I've always gone to Kuwait for big projects. Because I know I can get it done there. It's an incubator. I started writing *Medieval Femme* in Kuwait, half the instrumentals. And then I had to move here [to L.A.] and within one week the city shuts down and I lose it. I'm a hypochondriac and my hypochondria is getting worse with age. Kuwait closed their airport so I couldn't even go home. I'm stuck here with no health insurance. I was lucky that I was subletting a composer's loft and he has the most incredible speakers I have ever worked with. Basically, I would call my family in the morning to reassure them of my sanity and then in the afternoon, after I'd called 20 people in Kuwait, I would start working. Because I needed a purpose. I think this is the other thing with the transformation, and the alchemy, is that it provides purpose. A lot of artists like myself are very prone to depression when they are idle. The lockdown, no gigs, the music industry collapses. I was about to go on tour, I had American gigs lined up, all that collapsed. So basically I was like, *I have to make this record, I need to channel hypochondria and fear of death into this record.*

Do other people's creative work transform you? The poet al-Khansā'?

Yes. To me, it's just stunning. You know when you read something from the long-gone past? Usually for me, it's from medieval times—medieval China, medieval Japan, medieval Arabic poetry, etc. It's just filled with this kind of longing. Writing and reading was such a privilege back then, almost like a supernatural power. To be able to write down your thoughts in this way that was creative and not just dictation or something. It must have felt, especially for a woman, I can't imagine... The really crazy thing about al-Khansā' is that she is worshipped by every facet of Arab-speaking society. From Osama bin Laden to the most progressive queer leftist person, she is just [worshipped]. There is no artist, living or dead, that has this kind of awe and admiration. No writer, definitely. She's a wonder in her own right. When I read her words, there's so much solitude and sadness that transcends time. Some of the most beautiful words that I've ever read in my life. I really wish you could understand it in the Arabic because the English translation is terrible.

I was just about to say what is lost in the translation?

It's like a fourth dimension that is lost. This world of every word. Because it's classical Arabic, her writing is the equivalent of Chaucer's English. So it's really, really old. It requires a lot of contemporary translation. But there is a well-like reality to her words. It's like you're falling into a hole. This is what I want to translate, how I wanted to make this record. It's as if depression is a cocoon that you should crawl into occasionally so that you can reassess what you want in life.

So approaching depression not with the intent to suppress it, but to fully experience it.

Yeah, literally to luxuriate in it. Because what I realized, in all of Arabic literature and music and theater and film, the most lauded form of art is of a melancholic nature. It makes so much sense that this is the vessel that is worshipped. The state, the space. Especially today when we're so beholden to the rat race, to the exact seconds that you send an email and so forth. We are more tethered to time now than we ever have been in the entire history of mankind. To just slink away, out of time, into the space of depression where you hit the pause button, and days and weeks or months could go by, where you're out of reach, you're *inaccessible*, is something that bears thinking about. I really feel like we are constantly on this merry-go-round, and depression is a way to get off the merry-go-round and go, *What do I want out of this? Is this what I really want? Is this what I want to do?*

How do you feel like you have transformed over the past decade?

It's so demoralizing being a woman in this field, but I started out demoralized in Kuwait. I feel like the thing that keeps my feet planted firmly on the ground, even after all these years, is I have to make music for myself. I need to... it's a need. It's not to make money, it's not any of those things. Of course, I need to pay rent and all that jazz, but the main reason I want to make music is because I need to do it for my own sanity. It's a delight and it's a deposit. So regardless of whether I get booked for this thing or commissioned for that thing, those are all extra. I know I always do it for myself. And that's what's going to keep my integrity throughout this whole process. I'm never going to be a pop figure, that's not going to happen.

Does scoring films free you up from a bit of that pressure?

It frees me up from that pressure but it puts me into another frying pan. I think for someone in my position, I just have to have patience. The thing that I am learning over time is that this person who's younger than you—he's your peer and he's white and male—he obviously got this gig way before you're ever going to get it. It is a cause for major frustration but at the end of the day I just feel like things that are going to happen will happen. That's how I have to live my life otherwise I'll just die from resentment. Resentment is a poison. It's literally a cup of poison that you drink yourself. And it's not envy. Like I said, I always wanted to be a boy because I always wanted to be default human. I just want to know what it feels like to be default and just walk into any door and be like, "Hey, I'm here, give it to me." That entitlement is so *arghhh*. I want it!

Fatima Al Qadiri recommends:

Hacks (HBO): A glorious series about boundaries, creativity and survival in the entertainment industry

To Live and Die in L.A. (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack) by Wang Chung: A fantastic road-side soundtrack to bathe in the '80s.

The Chiffon Trenches by André Leon Talley: Mr Talley recounts his treacherous tale as the first major black fashion magazine editor in the West. A must-read for the die-hard fashion children.

Any film by Sergei Parajanov: A peerless director with a singular vision, why choose a specific film when you can watch them all?

Der Todesking (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack) by Daktari Lorenz, Hermann Kopp and John Boy Walton: One of my top 10 favorite soundtracks of all time, a masterful blend of classical instruments and MIDI loops.

Name

Fatima Al Qadiri

Vocation

composer, artist, producer

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Lane Stewart