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May 5, 2021 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2219 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Process, Identity.

# On collaboration as an ongoing conversation

Composer Arooj Aftab discusses her open-ended process, genrelessness, the question of heritage, and finding the right people to bring her vision to life. **After more than a year, live shows are starting to happen again. There are a lot of people on Vulture Prince. Have you thought about a live configuration for these songs?**

So it's me, Shazad Ismaily, Maeve [Gilchrist], Gyan [Riley], and Greg Fox on the drums. I asked them all to come together and we rehearsed a bunch of times and it sounded really solid. They're all incredible musicians, stars in their own right, and super professional. All of them really get it because this type of music is not really set in stone. It's not super written. There's a lot of visual cues that need to happen to go from one space to another. You really have to be that kind of performer to be able to do that, not overplay.

**I was curious about how you negotiate and work with collaboration. Are you arriving with a full composition, or are parts left open for interpretation and improvisation?**

I love everyone I collaborate with. It's a little like a producer's game, really. The "band" is really a "cast" of musicians who know how to bring my vision to fruition. It starts off with me having a melody and lyrics that are extremely fixed. The harmonic structure is then dictated by the melody. I have a sense of what it sounds like in my mind. I sometimes have a demo of it and bring it to whoever I'm collaborating with on the song.

We choose the chords, kind of. So the tempo and the melody and the words and the general vibe of the song is already set. Then we just workshop the colors of the chords. Basically, the harmonic structure is something that, depending on who's playing, they're like, "Well, how about this one? Or how about that one?" Sometimes a chord can sound really happy. But then the same chord played in a different way in different inversion can add colors and texture we might be looking for. I'm always looking for sounds that are emoting more than one thing—a very less direct, less in your face emotion. The material is always kind of there.

The songs in this album I've been playing live with various different configurations of musicians since 2011. Some of them are that old. And some of them are fairly new. Then there's a bunch that will be on the next album. I'm always in the process of playing it live in a bunch of different moods and styles until I feel I like one more than the other. Or if there are a few [that] standard collaborators would really gel with. It's like an ongoing merry-go-round.

**Once something's on a record, do you view it as the final version, or when you continue to play it, do you find it mutating? Do the compositions shift as they age or as they exist?**

I think it's inevitable that it just happens. I have a small rotating community of musicians who play my material and who I've played with for a long time so they know my vibe. It might not be the same configuration each time somebody is busy. They're all solo performers themselves. They all have their own major projects going on. The band is a community of people. So depending on who is sitting in on which gig, it changes. It also depends on how everybody's feeling, because the music does have that sort of openness. There is room for you to put your emotions into it while playing. There's room for you to miss bars or play more bars, there's a little bit of room for putting your emotions there as human beings. So

depending on the day or the energy of the audience, the songs definitely change the more you play them live.

The record is this scary thing where it's you've immortalized the song and it's going to live like that forever and recorded from archival. But the fun is in playing it live and seeing it change over time.

**I like what you're saying about the band as community. Often people romanticize this idea of a person creating in solitude. How important to you is creating within a larger community?**

It's hard because you're the business and you're responsible for the band mates' success as well. There's a shared responsibility, a deeper sense of ownership over the thing. That feels like a lot to me.

I have a really strong vision for what I think my music sounds like and what it should represent. I'm reluctant to share that. But at the same time, I am very particular about who is playing, what their vibe is like, how well I know them, and how they move in the world.

For instance, Maeve, who's playing the harp, we think harp is very angelic. It's a super bright instrument. She's Irish and Scottish. And she's always the happiest person, wanting to play really bright. I love playing with Maeve because, with me, she understood that for this type of music, you need to play darker. You need to play your instrument right and an extremely energetic instrument in a darker mode with the dark energy, that's what will make [us] sound really, really unique.

**Do you arrive at the sound you want through conversation?**

It's through conversation and also playing. Sometimes it's hard to communicate what I'm saying. It's also a lot of like, "This is the color." "This is the chord I'm talking about." It's a workshopping situation. Shahzad's playing bass smoothly. The sound is already gritty and it's already dark, and it will give the harp the support it needs to lean into the darker mentality of the sound. I try to create instruments and sounds that will give the other players that support, and open up these little doors for them to see where we're trying to go.

**You must also draw certain people to the music. Like you were saying, it's a community. You blend together to make this music together. Have you ever had a collaborator show up, and this person is showboating or overplaying, and they just don't fit into that community?**

Having the right attitude as a musician is just as important as having the chops. A lot of musicians learn that the hard way. Or it's a sign of having not matured that part of your sensibility yet. That can be a bummer, because there are some musicians who are just so good, but they just can't be in the hang because they're so annoying. They're being disrespectful. They're seeing it as an opportunity for themselves rather than a joy for the music.

What I hear a lot is that people love to play with me because we aren't being rigid. We aren't chasing bars. There is an open, chill, meditative vibe to it. Everyone is very equal. So it feels calm compared to some other gigs. I think that the music itself draws a certain type of musician to me. And they also, in their own rights, have a sense of how to, or want to, play this way.

**You got best new track and Best New Music on Pitchfork. Your music is rooted in the classical tradition. When you see something like a best new album at Pitchfork, it's easy to think, "Oh, this is crossing over." Do you see what you're doing as "crossing over"?**

Right now, especially in the last two years, music and musicians in the US want there to be a genreless space. My music is extremely approachable. It's extremely understandable. It's almost, I hate this word, but it's sellable. I have roots in so many different spaces. The only actual music education I have is jazz theory. I've been classically trained. I haven't spent enough time in Pakistan to have studied anything there musically. And it's just hanging out in the New York utopia, which is this island where there's a part of the whole world here. There are these questions as a composer, "What's your heritage?" It's like, "What is heritage anyway?" What I've inherited from going around the place. What I've inherited is what I've musically absorbed from different people, from different spaces, from a show, or an interaction, and from extremely deep listening to a variety of things.

It makes sense the music I'm making is layers and layers of these things. People are resonating with that, including Pitchfork. They're not seeing it. Usually, if your music is in a different language, in the US you are by default just otherized. Then if you're actually playing with non-Western instruments like sitar or tabla or whatever, it's like "this is totally World Music. They're just running around screaming with their heads on fire." There's a huge amount of music that is New Music. It's in the flexible zone, it's approachable. With this album, I'm trying a little bit to bridge this. To put a bridge in a place where there's no gap, but there still needs to be some kind of civic infrastructure so people can go across to the good side.

**You were saying you hate to use the word "sellable." On streaming platforms or websites that review music, everyone's looking for labels. It's easier to sell that way, but it's often shorthand and not accurate. People frame something quickly, and that's the way it keeps getting framed over and over again. It's hard to get outside of that sort of a thought. My friend Emel Mathlouthi released an electronic album that felt more like Kate Bush or Björk, but because she was sometimes singing in Tunisian, it was often labelled "World Music."**

As long as people are down to listen to it and not over-categorize it, just use their senses, for musicians, that's the most important thing. I'm making something that is clearly a hybrid of many different things. You don't need to otherize me. It's actually really good if you just like it, then it does deserve [to go] on your blog. It does deserve to be there on your publication.

There's a lot of stuff on there that's just terrible. It's like, "Why is this even here?" Because it qualifies in some technicality. That doesn't make any sense. It's actually not intriguing or exciting, or it's not thought-provoking music at all. It's the same shit we've been hearing for years. There's innovative good music happening and it is coming from Brooklyn, New York. If you're turning your face away from that, then you're doing something odd. There's something wrong with you. There's something deeper that's a problem.

**It's worth noting that, at the end of the day, these are your compositions. There are people who are helping you bring them to life—the community rotates and shifts—but you're the person who's always there.**

I definitely believe these are my compositions a hundred percent. The musicians I work with, they're not just players. They are composers. They compose a lot of music in their own music world. If I jump on somebody's music and I'm singing my things, I'm definitely composing the entire melody. But if it's somebody else's project, I know you hired me because you know what I can bring to the table. Of course, everyone creates their own arrangement of how they want things to go down. At the end of the day, the person whose project it is, and who has the strong vision, or has the vision for the sound, is the producer, is the composer, unless someone wants to say otherwise.

That said, I can see how people are like, "So who actually then wrote every single little thing?" I honestly get asked that a lot. Maybe it's because I'm a woman composer. I don't really like getting into the nitty gritty with male composers. They're just like, "Oh, you composed this? Okay, cool." The general public tries to really get in on details, or make female composers prove that they actually composed it. It's like, "Come on guys." When I say I collaborate in this way people are like, "Oh, she doesn't write stuff herself." And it's like, "No, I do. I do. I don't have time for this guys. I don't have time to fight. This is my music. This is my project."

**It's a constant negotiation. You have to deal with the people who assume if a man is in the room he wrote the songs. And, at the same time, you have to find the right people who understand it's your vision and are helping bring it to life. It's a machine that has to be balanced continually. You can't rest on it, because it can go off course if you don't keep it in check.**

Writing music is a complex affair. You got to work with people who understand you and who are okay with their position in the situation. And if they're not, you're going to talk about it.

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RCA 77D  
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