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The Heavy



Raed Yassin in Berlin, October 2020

PRAED Orchestra! are a big band, and they promise what the cream of big bands have promised since (and before) Duke Ellington: a raging swirl of sound, inviting us to get lost, get drunk and dance our masks off. And even more: moments of delicacy, a harp caressing battered ears; laugh out loud moments of sheer craziness, as banshee wails hit the ceiling; and classy instrumental solos, pushing at the envelope as Tricky Sam Nanton's experimental trombone did for Ellington's audiences in the 1930s.

PRAED (pronounced pra-ed) Orchestra!, with that fanfare of an exclamation point, are an expansion of Paed Conca and Raed Yassin's Praed duo, founded in 2006. A tight horn section, some extra keyboards, percussionists, harp, plus guitar and a pair of Middle Eastern lutes (oud and buzuk) – 13 strong, this cutting edge big band jet in from – where else? – Berlin and Beirut. *Live In Sharjah* arrives as a triple album, recorded in 2018 at the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates. The first impression is the relentless beat swiped from Arabic pop, and punching horns. Horn lines are composed by Conca, leading on clarinet. At first we seem to be locked into a driving four-time, but those horns are actually working in ten or 14 beat sequences, and the hypnotic pulse starts to sound like the Beirut afterparty version of Steve Reich's *Music For 18 Musicians*. "Can you feel the embarrassment?", hollers Yassin as the 12 minute piece ends (the title is "Embassy Of Embarrassment").

Conca's horns may be super tight, but one theme running through PRAED Orchestra! is the clash of opposites. Yassin clowns around on stage in a pork pie hat, dark glasses, and T-shirt (for UK TV viewers recalling comedian Alexei Sayle), while Conca (Swiss but Beirut based) sits up straight behind his music stand. Conca is vegetarian; a Yassin release from 2015 is titled *Johnny Kafta Anti-Vegetarian Orchestra*. The Praed project even seems to have started as a joke: we're Raed and Paed, both bass players, let's tour!

Over Skype from Berlin, Yassin expands on this theme: "Yes, we are opposites. I can compare us with the American band Sparks – we have very different personalities. Paed is always in a suit and playing clarinet, reading scores. I play beats and synthesizers and sing, mostly with a T-shirt. Also, I have the microphone, so Praed shows are somewhere between club and cabaret. The duo on stage has a very humorous approach. There is a character at Egyptian weddings called Nabatshi – more than a singer, he's the guy that introduces the singers and dancers, and encourages people to give money for the bride and groom. Also he throws in some jokes."

The orchestra's horns include Hans Koch, Martin Kuchen and Alan Bishop (Sun City Girls), veteran improvisors who can also hold a riff in the pocket. The two extra keyboardists are Nadah El Shazly and Maurice Louca, both key bandleaders in Cairo (featured in Maha ElNabawi's piece "Cairo's New Wave" in *The Wire* 413). Lebanese percussion is courtesy of Khaled Yassine – Raed Yassin's *Malayeen* album with Yassine was my record of the year a while back, but he also plays with Tunisian oud player (and ECM artist) Anouar Brahem. Michael Zerang is a Chicago drummer who has frequently visited Beirut. Yassin stresses how they wanted everyone "to add their own thing", and they chose musicians who were not only part of the scene but also "don't think alike".

The album's final track is "IL A3SAB", translating as "Nerves". Yassin clarifies: "It's a cover of a song from an Egyptian science fiction movie, where Spielberg's ET appears and sings. We thought it needed a character to do it, so our first choice went to Alan [Bishop]. He's my big brother and we collaborated on the Omar Souleyman project. And the last thing I did was an art project with him, *The Sea Between My Soul*." This is an installation theatre piece, a miniature environment of skyscrapers among which taxidermy animals perform a "cacophonous rock musical".

The orchestra's operatic vocalist is Ute Wassermann. Sam Shalabi plays guitar and oud – "And we wanted the duality of the oud and the buzuk," continues Yassin, "so we asked Radwan Ghazi Moumneh, who is Jerusalem In My Heart. The only person we didn't work with before, and only met once, is the Russian harpist Christine Kazarian. We knew she does improv and classical, plus we're both fans of Alice Coltrane, and there's an interesting weirdness in having her on stage. Honestly, the whole thing came out better than I hoped."

In a 2010 interview with *Norient*, Paed Conca listed the ingredients of their music: "We pull many things through the grinder: audio tracks of old Egyptian or Japanese movies, speeches of Arabian dictators, propaganda music, field recordings from the Lebanese Civil War, and many other things." By email, Conca describes their evolution over the past decade: "Nowadays we don't put everything into a grinder – we take Arabic popular music apart until we have the skeleton of it, and from there we rebuild this music to fit our vision of a psychedelic dance music."

What about the Orchestra, I ask. Was it tricky to balance big band and small group improvisations? "The idea was to make a kind of a two-hour-long travel story, so thinking in waves, rather than just going up and staying there until the end of the show," replies Conca. "So we had a clear idea about the small groups and how to put them together, and we started rehearsing the programme every day as a whole suite, to reach this idea of a trip or a journey. This could have failed big time, but it didn't!"

I ask Yassin about "8 Gega", a track from their 2011 album *Made In Japan*: over an intense beat a voice roars repeatedly, "Allah, Allah!". On stage Yassin doubles up the voice with his own. "This is a small loop taken from an Egyptian comedy film," he explains. "You hear sometimes in boats on the Nile there's a very

With his latest ensemble
PRAED Orchestra! Beirut
and Berlin polymath

Raed Yassin

channels Egyptian pop,
political soundbites and
a multinational cast of
improvisors into a
musical juggernaut. By
Clive Bell. Photography
by **Mustafah Abdulaziz**

Monster Sound

energetic, high level voice, always shouting. You rent a boat and you can have a couple of beers. There are not so many options for drinking in Cairo. The boat has fluorescent lights and a huge sound system. Wherever you are in the city, near the Nile you'll hear that special kind of echo. But that shouting is also to make a connection with the idea of the Mouled celebration, when they spin around – it's like the Zar ceremony. Sufism in Egypt turned into more of a popular art, it's not about spirituality any more, it's about the event and the happening. When you live in a society which is full of poverty and oppression, you need somehow to get this energy out, to balance yourself."

So, if the Mouled celebration inspires the spirit of Praed performances, the actual beats are drawn from shaabi, or Egyptian pop and wedding music, which really took off after keyboards were introduced around the turn of the millennium. Yassin supplies a potted history: "So shaabi started in the late 70s, and one of the most famous figures is Ahmed Adaweyah: he's an icon, still alive and an extremely strong character. Other musicians looked down on him – it was music for degenerates and low classes, and there is a big class issue here. Then all these shaabi musicians went into cinema: The Contractors Cinema was a movement in the 80s, when [President] Mubarak opened up the economy... That was a cheap kind of B movie cinema, shot in two days, edited in two days. You can see tons of mistakes, microphones and shadows, but everybody worked in it because there was a lot of money involved."

"So that made a rise for shaabi music," he continues. "In 2000 when keyboards appeared, you can make a parallel with dabke in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Then new wave shaabi led to mahraganat around 2007: it's done by DJs remixing shaabi, and there is an MC. Mahraganat has extremely interesting lyrics, their obsession with noise and women. It's very macho, very sexist, but it reflects their reality. In mahraganat there's a DJ and an MC, while in shaabi there's a whole band and a singer. But mahraganat really boomed after the Egyptian revolution, because it was the voice of the unheard people, all in their twenties. They were all abused by the regime and suddenly they feel they can say things."

"Nasser made it clear for singers that songs would be about love, or love for the country, and that's it," he explains, referencing Egypt's President who dominated politics in Egypt and across the Middle East through the 1950s and 60s. "If you listen to lyrics before then, they were much more about daily life, taking drugs or your existentialist problems. So, shaabi lyrics were closer to what happened before Nasser: the popular imagination about life, seeing the whole of society from the streets and alleys of Cairo. I lived in Cairo for a while: it was super weird, if you switch on the radio you think you're living in the 50s. If you go on the street it's very different!"

One of my last concert trips before UK lockdown was to watch Omar Souleyman entertain a capacity audience at a large London venue. With only a keyboard player, no visuals and no English language, the Syrian dabke veteran employed charisma and rapid, pounding beats to hold over a thousand Brits in the palm of his hand for a couple of hours. It's striking to realise how far Middle Eastern music has penetrated the club world.

As Yassin points out, Syrian dabke is a parallel to

Egyptian mahraganat. And whereas Souleyman has tirelessly targeted crossover success, Praed is a complex project that likes to stay unpredictable and unresolved. In fact their approach to beats themselves has evolved, Yassin points out: "The first album was all about sampling. But after *Made In Japan* we started to add different beats, hiring people to do it. On *The Fabrication Of Silver Dreams* and the last album *Doomsday Survival Kit*, that was all made from scratch. We both went to Egypt and worked very closely with several percussionists and three keyboardists to record the base material. We tell them, imagine you are at a wedding and you are communicating – these are all wedding musicians. Then we edit the files and build it up, so it's a very long process to make one album."

As a performer, Yassin has quite a range. At a Cafe Oto evening alongside John Tilbury and Eddie Prevost, I watched him play an upright bass solo set. OK, not upright: he propped up the bass diagonally, resting on a chair, so it becomes a workstation. On its various wooden surfaces he places Tibetan bowls or cymbals, and then little vibrating motors inside the bowls. With the bass in this position, Yassin can't easily finger its neck, and in fact he doesn't finger a note all night, instead thrusting sticks between the strings and then bowing a variety of drones. Or wazzing a tuning fork between strings for minutes on end. Meanwhile he engages beautifully with Tilbury's precisely calibrated piano chords and Prevost's bowed cymbals.

Switch to a video of Praed on tour: Paed Conca sits alone, warming up the stage with his clarinet lines. Then a siren howls and Yassin bursts in, brandishing a megaphone he found backstage. Cavorting like a horrified security guard, he bellows gibberish announcements. No one is more amused than Conca.

My theory is that Yassin revels in such creative freedom and breadth because he started out as an artist rather than a trained musician. He gently puts me right about that: "Actually I have a background in theatre, I studied acting and directing. But at the same time I studied double bass for ten years with Jack Gregg, an American. He came accidentally to Beirut and stayed there for ten years [Gregg played bass in The National Symphony Orchestra]. He wasn't picky about whatever I wanted to play. He was part of Marion Brown's band but he also did a lot of free jazz. I also liked the sound of contemporary classical music – I don't like the elitism but I like how it sounds. Then what really helped was that I met Mazen Kerbaj and Sharif Sehnaoui: these two guys and me, we organised the Irtijal Festival [in Beirut]. And since 2002 we have a band called "A" Trio. This diversity is just from my interest in everything. But also it comes from my personality, I get bored if I stay doing one thing."

Yassin's artworks are bright and direct. One example: *Warhol Of Arabia* (2018) shows a series of doctored photos of Andy Warhol visiting the Middle East. In several the accompanying dignitaries are holding garish Warhol-style images of Arab figures. Warhol himself, always in awe of celebrities, is a lone star in the crowd: a pink-haired, lipstick alien surrounded by monochrome locals. "In my work there's a lot of lying and fiction," Yassin chuckles, "to create new conspiracies around events and get something from gossip. In 2010 I met a gallerist from Kuwait, she told me that she invited Warhol to do an exhibition in the 1970s and she has photos of the exhibition and

the party afterwards. At that time Warhol was losing money and his stardom was going down. They went to Kuwait hoping to get as many portrait commissions as possible, of the royal family and celebrities. So the project proposes the kind of commission that *might* have happened. We don't know: because of the Gulf War, so many things got burned and stolen and disappeared. In his diaries Warhol mentioned he hated Kuwait, he didn't understand the social code. 'They keep pouring this green drink,' he writes, 'they call it coffee but it tastes like cardamom.'"

Yassin is from Beirut but his wife is Kuwaiti, and the pair moved to Berlin in 2018, feeling that Beirut had become progressively more suffocating over recent years. "We felt the regime was just there to kill us... between 2005–15 was a period of bombs, just one after the other. We decided OK, it's better if we go to a European city where we have a lot of friends. The other thing that brought me here is that with my Lebanese passport I'm a second class citizen of the world – I need a visa even to go to Egypt. In Berlin it's not so difficult to get an artist visa."

"The art scene everywhere is closed and mafia-like," he continues. "I don't have hope for art but I have hope for music. Let's say the body is in Berlin, the mind and soul in Beirut."

Having finally organised his website (thanks to lockdown), Yassin is now writing pieces for Stuttgart's Neue Vocalsolisten, and enjoying an electronics and voice duo with Wassermann. February 2021 should see Akuphone's release of his *Archeophony*, a long-awaited solo follow-up to 2009's *The New Album*. Whereas that record was an often hilarious bravura display of turntablism, juggling fragments of beloved Arabic popular classics, the new album (to coin a phrase) is a carefully considered manipulation of precious material, namely Yassin's archive of solo voice and instrumental recordings from North Africa, the Arab world and South East Asia. "These are basically colonial recordings," admits Yassin. "*Archeophony* is like archaeology in phonics – digging. It opens with a very important recording for me, it's a woman from Syria reading the Koran, which is a pretty rare thing. I'm super fascinated by Koran readings, it's something that I collect like crazy on vinyl, especially from Egypt because their approach is extremely avant garde in the vocal art. I made two pieces: 'Imama Of Dawn' and 'Imama Of Dusk'. Imama is female, from imam [leader of a mosque], but there is no such word – it's not used. There is a prayer when the sun rises and another prayer when the sun sets. The album is a journey between these points."

The records Yassin is using are from the Unesco collection, various British labels, and a 40 LP Japanese box set spotted on eBay by Yassin's friend in Tokyo, the improviser and organiser DJ Sniff. "I'm really thankful that these recordings exist, especially in the Arab world, where no one kept recordings. There was no commercial interest in recording, for example, solo ney [Arabic flute] – I'm a huge fan – or to archive it. Arab culture in general – the real Arabs are from the peninsula, living in the desert – and Islam as a religion, it's all about oral knowledge. Everything happens and disappears, nothing stays. There are no ruins, especially in Bedouin culture, you just leave and it all disappears. It's very poetic somehow." □ PRAED Orchestra!s *Live In Sharjah* is released by Morphine

