

The Berakah Project
by
Arie Natelson

Live @ St. Anne's & St. Andrew's Church, London NW6: Saturday, 17th February 2006.

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In a post-9/11 world increasingly fraught with political tensions, where even London's cosmopolitan liberal framework has been breached, there is a breath of fresh air coursing through its ossifying arteries of tolerance...Berakah.

The Berakah Project, described as an "interfaith music initiative dedicated to peaceful co-existence" is so much more than an ensemble of hand-picked talented musicians from Christian, Muslim and Jewish heritage.

The brainchild of the band's charismatic frontman, guitarist and composer, Mohammed "Mo" Nazam, the group first featured as a headline act at the Brent Respect Festival last summer. This event, launched Berakah onto the interfaith map.

The aim, as Mo explains on the Berakah website, "apart from making good music...", is "to draw audiences from the three faiths so that Jews, Muslims and Christians can sit with each other and enjoy a cultural event and maybe even strike up a conversation. Who knows what could happen then? Some of them might realise that the images they had of the other may have been slightly ill-advised and might actually start talking to each other!"

The emphasis of the band as an interfaith project, as opposed to the more commonplace inter-ethnic groups, is important. In intra-communal faith-based relations, "a new frontier of questions, attitudes and challenges [were] opening up, with the advent of Islamophobia and continuing anti-Semitic attacks all against a backdrop of a nominally Christian society."

"Music has always had a "consciousness-broadening" capability so I figured that the way that I could make some kind of positive contribution to the issue was to form a band where we all come from the three monotheistic "sister" religions."

Delving into a rich tapestry of musical traditions, the result has been a tour-de-force of simmering, shimmering and soul-searching performances, gratefully received by audiences drawn from all backgrounds of the local community.

But this is no grandiose event with be-suited dignitaries to hand, like chintz baubles dripping off an Argos Christmas tree.

The informality and insouciance of Berakah's stage presence is a welcome tonic to glitzy event consciousness-raising events that held in the presence of philanthropic high-society figures.

From the off, the haunting ambient synths of Mark Hinton Stewart's keyboards, and dreamy, delicate forays of Mo Nazam's electric guitar set an agenda of sensitive and thoughtful music. Space reigns supreme here, but also in an extraterrestrial sense: the first composition is entitled Cydonia, which Mo informs us is a region discovered on Mars by the Viking NASA probe in 1976. It was thought by certain folk of a more "creative" disposition, to have pyramids similar to that of Ancient Egypt, existing in a biblically-prophesied parallel civilisation!

The tantalising rhythms of percussionist Abdelkader Saadoun, are reminiscent of the Rai tradition of his native Algeria, while violinist Serena Leader introduces a distinctly Jewish aroma during her solo. Double bassist Rex Horan provides the foundation with a warm syncopated line.

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There is an interesting variety of musical timbres and styles. With never an identical line up each time and every piece retains a sense of novelty and freshness. From the intimate duet of the traditional Jewish Yedid Nefesh, with nuances of jazz guitar and heart-rending violin; and a pulsating North African-influenced trio of guitar, mandola and violin: to the rousing, complete band performance of Otis Redding's People Get Ready with the powerful and soulful vocals of Chantelle Duncan. All complement each other like wisps of fragrance adorning a perfume maker's hand.

Mo introduces one of his compositions, a meandering, flowing instrumental of Spanish guitar, piano and bass. "This one is called All Rivers Lead to the Sea - sums it all up for me." However, there is no enforced political or cultural ideal here, or some hackneyed "love of all man" sentiment. Harmony as a mere concept of being, in addition to its musical connotation, reigns naturally.

Another piece is entitled Jihad, referring to its primary Quranic meaning, of the internal human struggle to follow a pious or spiritual path in life. Mo had written it a few years ago, partly to make a distinction from its more commonly perceived definition of holy war.

Between songs he comments, “the fact that it has been possible to play music based on Islamic and Jewish themes in a church, really says a lot.”

The show ends in true Berakah style – a finale rendition of U2’s I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For – with the soothing voice of Chantelle Duncan floating high above gentle arpeggiated notes of piano and guitar. It evokes memories of lying on a grassy knoll in Roundwood Park, London NW6, on a hot June afternoon, staring up at the majestic boughs of an oak tree – the breeze and light jingling the leaves like a myriad of miniature bells. It all started here last year...

This encapsulates for me the meaning of Berakah – grace or blessing in Arabic and blessing in Hebrew. Its message is beautiful yet powerful and all-embracing.

Should the position of official minstrels to the United Nations ever be created, I would say that the vacancy has already been filled.

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For more info on Berakah and forthcoming performances, please check out the band's official website: www.theberakahproject.org

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