

## Being Original without Losing Grounds

**Grantee:** Ahmad Nazmi

**Project:** Ethbat Hala music album

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Music has been a part of my world ever since when I was a child. I remember my maternal uncle playing the piano and the guitar around me while I was a toddler. When I was turned six years old, my parents bought me a small keyboard and I started playing music myself. I went through many instruments: the oud, the drums, the piano, the guitar, the accordion. By the time I was 13, I thought I wanted to be a professional pianist. But most importantly of all, I wanted to play with a band. I couldn't find any band looking for a pianist. When my friend told me there was a band that needed a bass player, I decided to go for it. That is how the bass guitar came into my life.

Now I had never played the bass before, but I was up for anything just to be with a music group. I took my time exploring its sounds and discovering what it was all about. I found educational video by the amazing John Patitucci and came across cassette tapes of many other great bass players that enlightened my way. I felt there were no limits to my musical forays and I fell in love with this instrument. At the end, it wasn't at all a random thing for me to become a bass player; the bass resembles who I am. It is a common joke among musicians, to notice how our personality types tend to reflect our instruments. The bass guitar is always an essential part of a band, it plays a fundamental role, and yet rarely a soloist. Its sound is steadfast and dignified without standing in the limelight. It is like the hidden hero, if I may say.

Bass players are a rarity in the Arab region. Even in the West, the birth place of this instrument, the bass guitar is not particularly known for its wide range of capacities. Yet, here I am, an Egyptian musician, and I am a professional bassist, composer and improviser, playing my instrument with versatility, in my own unique way, and breaking all pre-conceived conceptions of how it 'should' be played. In my opinion, that is how to be a true musician.

I firmly believe in this need to be independent and free. For me, it is clear that autonomy begins from within. We need to individually liberate our vision and our ways of thinking from invisible shackles that limit our thoughts and minds. So many people, even so-called artists, are held back by obsolete notions or inherited ways of thinking. These binds are not physical yet they can be just as shackling.

It seems insignificant, this kind of inner struggle to be free and true, yet it is the most important thing, probably even more important than rising up outwardly against external structures and governments. I long for the day when people stop blaming others. There's always someone else to blame – the political chaos, the economic crisis, the ailing environment, the circumstances of the Arab region. I long for the day we all simply take responsibility of own capacities.

Music is about creativity, it is creative immersion and relationship to other sounds. I don't play music to please people. I play music for music itself. In fact, the minute a musician starts thinking about how his audience is receiving or appreciating his sound, you can be sure the quality of his music suffers.

Frankly, I am really disappointed with the music scene in Egypt today. It has gone down the drain. Everything is so commercial. Stay authentic, I want to say! My advice to the musicians of Egypt: Do not give up on your own voice. Do not be swayed by mass appeal and mob pressure. Do not fall into the muck of mediocrity, even if the people around you can not tell the difference!

There is a clear difference between music for entertainment and quality music-making. They are worlds apart. Sadly, it seems the majority of Egyptian musicians opt for commercial work. The independent, alternative and experimental scene is really small and receiving very little support. I have come across some excellent composers in Lebanon and Syria, but in Egypt, I see the new generation of musicians are copping out to the fast food version of music-making, crowd-pleasing formulaic renditions with very little creativity at all. It depresses me. I have spoken up a lot about this and I will never stop pushing for originality and talent to come through. It is an uphill struggle. Private venues look for profit and prefer to hire easy entertainment. Public support goes mostly to classical music, folk music and classical Arabic bands. There is no support at all for the experimental and the new. We are isolated.

But that does not mean we give up on making our own music. We need to evolve! Life changes. Culture changes. Technology has entered our life like never before. Globalization has changed all our references. We cannot keep playing the same kind of music today that we played 100 years ago.

My music is instrumental because I feel that words take away from learning to listen deeply to the sounds. I play a fusion of many contemporary sounds, including African, Jazz and Funk. My latest album, *Ethbat Hala (Proving a Case)*, is a collection of eight original pieces I composed over the past two years and includes my interpretation of a song by the legendary Egyptian composer "Said Darwish". This is a big change for me.

The Egyptian Revolution had a huge impact on my life-long relationship to music. I began to question myself and my role in society. I began to look at playing and composing music from a very different perspective, one that had been completely alien to me. Before the revolution, and throughout my musical journey, I abhorred doing anything that sounded Oriental in any way. As far as I was concerned, the Oriental school of music was something of the past and I felt it had no relevance to me at all. My instrument, an electric bass guitar, is as modern and Western as they come. I saw myself as a musician of the current globalized age and there was no place for anything Oriental in my view.

But when the revolution broke out and people took to the streets, everything changed. The pulse of the people – my people! - was so alive. I had to question, where am I coming from? How do I relate to this new reality? Who am I? Where am I going? It was an intense period of self-interrogation. And my music changed too dramatically. Yes, it is still instrumental and original, floating through sonorous minimalist moments, spiking into electrified funk, and traveling through versatile fusions. But now it also includes my explorations of identity, heritage and belonging.

I have started to feel my roots. I cannot keep turning away from that and pretend that it is not part of me. That is what my new album is all about.

Making this new album was like crossing over a bridge to find a solid ground. I realized I am not a 'khwaga' – someone who had travelled abroad and lost contact with his roots. I also realized that connecting to my Egyptian-ness doesn't mean giving up on my own sense of contemporary sound and musical experimentation. Rather, I am finding a whole new depth! Feeling the connection to the land and to the people is giving me a whole new dimension of strength.

Sometimes, I think back to the pre-revolution era and remember myself. How many times had I travelled and played with musicians from all over the world, and one of them would eventually say, 'why don't you play us something from your culture?' I would refuse and change the subject. They would be surprised and fall silent. I can honestly say there was even a diminishment in respect. What does it mean for a musician to not play his own culture's music?

My new album is my liberation from that. I got to realize that I am who I am not only because of my openness to the whole world and my love of making music my own way, but also because of my roots and my background. I am finally exploring my Egyptian heritage and allowing it to enter my musical expression, all the while in my own unique style. My music is a new form, it does not fit into a mold, and nor do I. But I feel a responsibility now to use my instrument with a broader awareness. It is no longer just about me; it is about my land and my people too.

