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Fun Da Mental Radical Music, Political Protest
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Performing Arts

AKI NAWAZ

The conflict over Islam and the West began many years ago and the ignorant viewpoints on Islam are historical ones. Since 11 September panic has set in, and from the rampant fear emerges the question of how such a 'civilized' part of the world could be so blind. Information is everywhere, from academia to the media: becoming properly informed demands no great effort. But ironically it does not matter how much you have in terms of luxury or financial security, as these do not equate to common sense. Such a void is not the monopoly of the West; it is alive and well in every society. What is wrong with Islam? What is its problem with the West? Why cannot Islam just be peaceful like all the other religions? The questions go on and the answers are seemingly in 'recycle' mode.

We, Fun Da Mental, as a political music band, refuse to react submissively to the current crisis: not only is that patronizing, it is also a very colonialist, imperialistic expectation. Please do not see this as an obstacle but as a stance that just might equate to honesty and a perspective that can enlighten you on the complex issues. Fun Da Mental has never been about compromise.

From its inception the idea was to express our views. The group was founded more along the lines of Malcolm X than of Gandhi. We wanted to challenge: politically but also musically. There was this great artistic heritage that was neither acknowledged nor encouraged. As a band we decided that the music had to be radically different to, say, Public Enemy and the hip hop ethos, but should connect those interested in such music and attract them to our form and take. Inspired by great traditional Indian music, we also found ourselves gob-smacked by the integrity and experimentation from that continent. No wonder our parents had no interest in 'Rock-n-Roll' or the current contemporary music scene – their ears were far more delicate and demanding. They had been brought up on music that connected to the soul, their lives, culture, religion, and environment. Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims all united under a political angst, which Fun Da Mental took to the stage and frightened the hell out of everyone... yes, even our own people. This was not what they envisaged as it would cause conflict. The English people suddenly saw in us the Asian version of the Sex Pistols and they also ran for cover. The press enjoyed us as we made for good reading, but they were totally opposed to our politics. Anything radical is not acceptable in the present, but when it is finally buried and gone, it becomes trendy.

Through it all we remained stubborn and focused. Those interested witnessed us engaging not only musically but also in debates and workshops, and at universities. Suddenly we were travelling to many countries, and the excited, alternative Asian youth was relieved that here was a band that made as much noise and chaos as Rage Against the Machine and Motorhead. The non-Asian youth was attracted to the anarchist rhetoric and supported us even if they did not fully understand. We visited Bosnia a few months after the war, where young people had been playing FDM amidst the fighting and we sympathized with them as they did with us. South Africa a month after the election of Mandela saw FDM terrifying the Boers with the '10 bullets per settler' statement and was accused of being racist towards the whites. Even white people involved in the band were amazed at the audacity of the Boers. Despite all this, and after five albums, we feel we have not achieved anything in terms of political enlightenment, but we have managed to shed our submissiveness to allow for more force and directness.

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Aki Nawaz (top)
and Dave Watts
(bottom) of Fun
Da Mental.

Fun Da Mental Radical Music, Political Protest

Indeed, we have baptized ourselves. The current events and our opinions show that we do not fear confrontation and are open to debate on an equal basis. Let me say that Fun Da Mental is not entirely a Muslim band. Our members come from many different backgrounds. Nation Records works with people who, like us, have many colours, cultures, and religions – or no religion.

The music industry in general has failed to engage with artists in an honest way and provide musicians the platform to represent their music and politics. At Nation Records the integrity of the music is paramount, whereas politics is an option for the musicians. They know they have a label that will not restrict them in airing their opinions. On the contrary, Nation Records encourages this. Asian Dub Foundation, Transglobal Underground, Natasha Atlas, Joi, Loop Guru, and all the others have something to say about the situation in which we live, all of them taking different stances. This attitude from the label has also made enemies and has forced it to operate in a very underground way. Shops have restricted our products and radio/television stations have been inactive.

Acts of injustice

There is a grave paranoia in the West, and what it does not understand it wants to destroy; any attempts to take a stance against its domination will now officially be attacked. History documents the domination and it continues on. If a culture cannot be subservient or a sellable commodity, it is a threat to the Western lifestyle.

In the current climate, we see a demonizing of over a billion people around the globe – something not new to humankind. But what is it about this religion, this 'Islam', that causes so much conflict for the self-elected 'civilized' world?

Islamic thought engages with society on a daily level and it would not be right for me to separate the two as that would not be agreeable to Islam. Islam gives each individual and every community the right to challenge injustice, whether it is in a Muslim country or not. Islam is a peaceful religion but only in the context of a peaceful and 'just' society. It embraces all, encourages to work for 'all' for the common good. However, if there are injustices then it gives you the right to confront.

Allow me to commit a sin for the purpose of explaining my observation of the unjust and ill-informed propaganda against Islam: let us separate politics and religion. Politically the Muslim world is in turmoil because of many factors aside from domestic political issues. The international stage is dominated by the West either in legal, economic, or military terms. How can one part of the world that is almost devoid of the most needed natural resources be in control of a part of the world that basically has it all? There are many answers and all of them are relevant. But what about the local people? They have now had enough of the domination of the West and its unrelenting imposition of its preferred leadership upon them. This has gone on for far too long. The West



PHOTO: STEVE GULLICK. © NATION RECORDS 1999

cannot not sustain its acts of injustice without some sort of reaction from the local victims. All empires must fall.

Surviving the rounds

Travelling with the band has offered a first-hand account of local people in many countries. We, as a band, go to absorb and learn – not to impose.

We who live and reside in the West but are not 'of' it feel the injustice. We cannot sit here benefiting from the economic security of the West without wishing the same for those who do not have the same opportunities. I often have wondered whether, besides the financial benefits, there is anything here in terms of attraction or spirituality for those who value culture, religion, and tradition. Would Western people travel to the Caribbean if there were money and security? Of course they would, just as they travelled to Africa, Australia, the Americas, and Asia.

All my life in the UK I have witnessed Muslim minorities never being embraced and even to this day we are reminded what status the system expects us to adhere to. Some do, and some refuse to entertain an ounce of it. The blindness of the injustice is unbelievable and this needs to be confronted. Day in, day out engagement in any meaningful dialogue is suppressed. We are allowed but seconds on the media channels to suddenly say everything we wanted to for the last 20 or 40 years. We are invited into the boxing ring for 12 rounds, both hands tied; in the 12th round one hand is freed, nonetheless we survive the 12 rounds.

The debates that generally take place are with people who have absolutely no knowledge of Islam. They pick up on the weakness and failures of Muslims as if that is what the

religion represents. A religion cannot be judged by its followers but a follower can be judged by his religion. Islam cannot be questioned, only understood: this is the belief of Muslims. It is divine word, no discussion and no debate, only a questioning of how to understand it and act according to it. Islam covers not only the spiritual element of life, it touches every aspect, from science to nature, from capitalism to materialism, and most of all justice based on absolute equality.

But how can one who has rebelled to the maximum, and continues to do so, have no problem with religion? The Qur'an, once looked into, can reveal some very anarchic views and non-conformities. The problem in the West with religion is that it uses its own guilt complex and failings of Christianity (people have let the religion fall) to judge other faiths. Does this mean we have to have a perfect society? This is not possible, as the Word reveals. Islam is a test, not a dominating ideology. 'There is no compulsion in religion', as the Qur'an clearly states. So where does our music stand with respect to Islam? The best way to explain it is to highlight our own observations of mindless, manufactured, and manipulated contemporary music – the epitome of which is MTV culture. In a simple explanation, Islam forbids this (and other sorts of) exploitation.

Aki Nawaz is the frontman of Fun Da Mental and Nation Records. Influenced by the Punk movement, he is credited with being one of the main founders of the Asian Underground and the Global Fusion Scene. His uncompromising politics are a recurring theme in his work, from Islam to racism and everything in between.
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