

The Berakah Project

Tasneem Abdur-Rashid

As ignorance continues to breed prejudice, animosity and discord amongst humanity, amidst the malice and enmity, the war mongers and division creators, there are some who, despite adversity, continue to strive to make a difference.

The Berakah Project is one of those initiatives; a non-commercial project aiming to promote the concept of mutual respect and co-existence by utilising its talent in arts and music. Stemming from the post 9/11 environment of hostility and suspicion, The Berakah Project uses music to heal and motivate social change, particularly with young people but also within a wider spectrum.

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Founded in 2005 by Mohammed (Mo) Nazam and with band members of Christian, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, Berakah are the epitome of unity, both their music and their structure mirroring their noble aspirations.

“The project however, is more than just a multi-faith band but more of an entire music initiative dedicated to crossing boundaries of race, religion and culture through the arts.”

As well as writing and performing music with powerful and positive messages, Berakah have built contacts with local faith-based partners and run workshops with young people as well and the unconventional performance venues in itself are a prime example of shattering the stereotypes that faith groups are divisive.

During Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, Berakah performed in a synagogue and contrary



to expectations, many Muslims attended the show. The highlight of the evening, according to Mo Nazzam, was when a Muslim woman needed to offer her prayers... and the Rabbi happily lent her the use of his office. This was clearly a gesture that personified the success of Berakah's unifying intentions. The Berakah show provided them with a reason to visit and allowed both Muslims and Jews to put aside any Palestinian-Israeli conflict and interact on a social level.

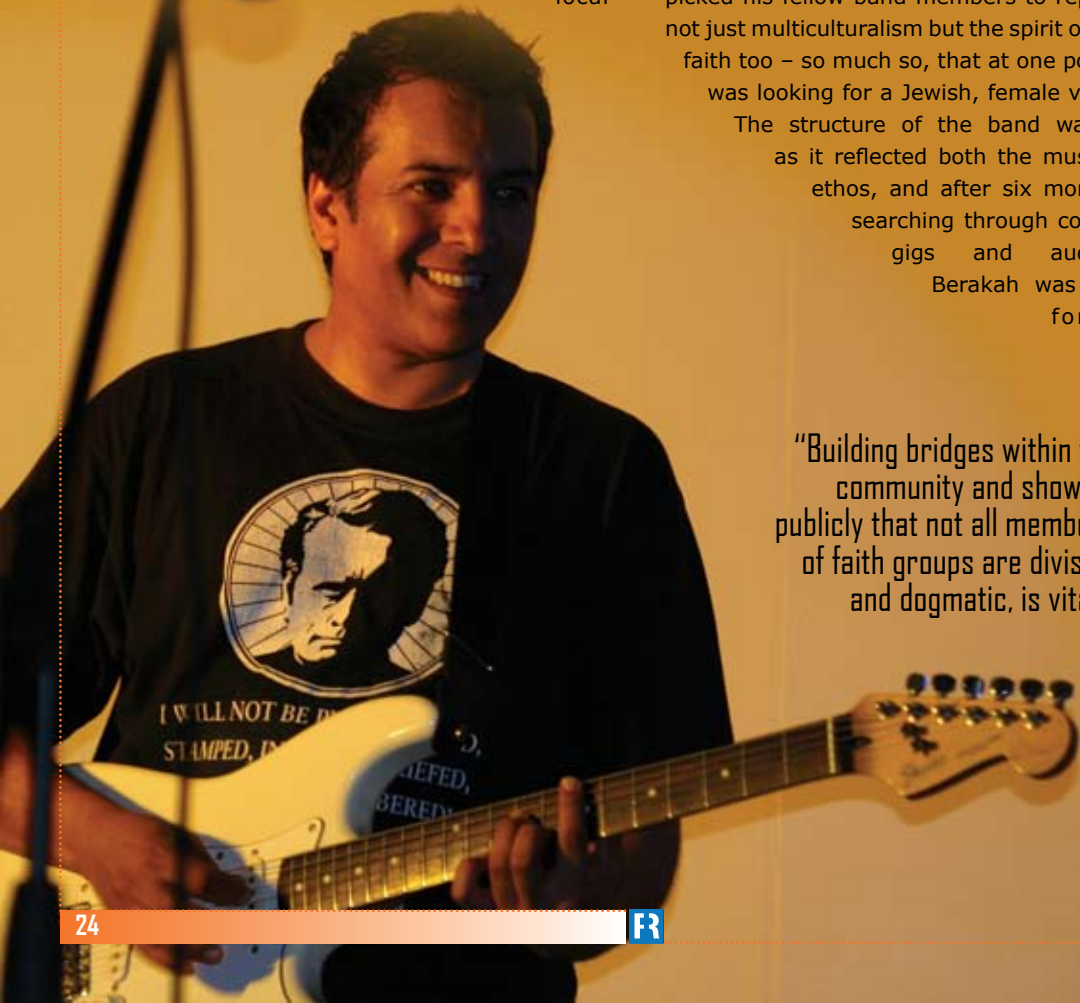
"If Britain is to overcome very real challenges of integration and understanding, then, on a smaller scale we should be working at a local

community level to increase awareness and cooperation. This project would be a first, but vital step in the right direction....post 9/11, with attacks on both mosques and Muslims, synagogues and Jews, there is a palpable atmosphere of suspicion and hostility, often brought about by fears of religiously incited terrorism or civil unrest. Against this backdrop, building bridges within the community and showing publicly that not all members of faith groups are divisive and dogmatic, is vital."

Following the conception of the idea of Berakah, (meaning 'blessings' or 'grace' in both Arabic and Hebrew), Mo Nazzam carefully hand picked his fellow band members to represent not just multiculturalism but the spirit of multi-faith too – so much so, that at one point, he was looking for a Jewish, female violinist.

The structure of the band was vital as it reflected both the music and ethos, and after six months of searching through concerts, gigs and auditions, Berakah was finally formed;

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In April, Norbury School in Harrow played host to The Berakah Project's 'Celebration of Music in Schools,' a showcase of the workshops the Project held with three different schools from North West London.

During the sessions, the pupils learned about the musicians, the history of their instruments, their heritage and cultural backgrounds. They also worked on short pieces of music, experiencing first hand the collaborative process and the joy of expression through music.

The show began with Berakah performing 'Cydonia'. There is an atmosphere of love and warmth as they perform. Their sheer ease with each other is apparent which bears testimony to their ideals of unity and harmony.

The Norbury School choir followed Berakah, singing three songs that they had chosen themselves; including Howard Goodall's 'Refuge,' a song about the hardships refugees face and the beauty of different cultures. The looks of compassion on their faces clearly demonstrated the success of the Project's aims. Following Norbury, came The An-Nisa Society children and Park High School, all performing equally as beautifully.

With such inspiring performances by the future generation, I felt some hope towards today's youth. These innocent children are yet to become tarnished by scepticism and prejudice and it is projects such as Berakah's that need to continue to develop this potential.



Rex, the bass player who is involved with "Music for Prisons," Mark, a film and TV composer and keyboard player for Berakah, Abdelkader the drummer, Serena the violinist, Charlene the lead singer and Mo the guitarist.

The music itself is a melodic fusion of emotions and cultures and of their many inspiring tracks, Cydonia stands out as a rhythmic blend of darbukka drum beats and haunting Middle Eastern chords - violinist Serena Leader bringing a Jewish twist to Abdelkader's soft Algerian beats. The music has a distinctive Eastern vibe, flowing from eerily sensual chords to faster dance beats to dreamy, delicate forays of Mo's electric guitar.

Unlike the conventional gig, the performers often hold a "Question and Answer" session at the end, allowing the audience to see Berakah beyond their music personalities - for who they are and what they stand for.

Despite the depth to their initiative, the workshops aimed at young people of all ages are not preachy in the slightest - rather than getting into long spiels on inter-faith relations, merely by demonstrating unity, The Berakah Project allows the children to see their ethos for themselves. They are currently working on a six week music project that spans across three different schools in Harrow, all leading up to a concert finale where each school will come together to perform for an audience. Mo's ultimate aim for this strand of The Berakah Project would be to see a cross borough project involving children from different schools and faiths uniting to perform in a huge gig in somewhere like Trafalgar Square.

"The Trafalgar Square vigil following the 7/7 bombings proved that people do believe in unity - and the people spreading disunity have not won the battle."

For more information on Berakah please visit: www.theberakahproject.org