

community **links**

making links

fifteen visions of community

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'Music for the Heart'

A little old-fashioned
love, peace & harmony

Mohammed Nazam

IT'S FUNNY HOW QUICKLY a person's life can change. It's one of the strange ironies of the human condition that life-changing events often creep up on you, quietly, with what seems like an alarming lack of forethought for your ability to actually deal with them, and whack you around the ears with the metaphorical equivalent of a rolled up newspaper. Of course there are those un-mistakable markers of change that everyone seems to experience. Marriages, births, deaths, moving house, discovering the warmth and security of a really good knitted cardigan ... these are experiences common to many of us, signs that we're moving on somehow, and that nothing will ever be the same. But quite often, life-changing events are hidden deep within other, seemingly innocent, occurrences. Their significance only becomes apparent later, with the gift of hindsight.

Something like that happened to me in winter 2001, in a barn in Suffolk. I had spent a week with some young people as part of a residential course run by The Prince's Trust. It was a course involving music, so the week was spent learning songs, teaching the basics to those who'd never touched an instrument before and working towards a concert at the end of the course. Many of these teenagers had lived the kinds of challenging lives that we all read about in the papers; drug addiction, homelessness, prison, deeply flawed

parenting ... all the usual red-top fodder that one encounters over a cup of tea and a scone.

Finally, at the end of the week we all performed a concert in front of their family and friends, which for some of the people involved was the first time they'd ever played in public. Needless to say, for most of the people taking part, nerves were at an all-time high, emotions were charged and it must have felt like their whole lives depended on getting this one night right. I've been a musician for a long time, and I can't ever remember being as nervous as these guys were. To me the stage has always seemed like my home from home, except with more plug sockets and brighter lights.

One of the young guitarists I'd been teaching all week had just finished playing his splendidly raucous version of the Jimi Hendrix classic 'Voodoo Chile'. He stepped off the stage, walked up to me, started to cry and threw his arms around me, hugging me close to him. 'I've wanted to play that since I was six years old. Thank you so much.' In that instant, I realised the truth of Gustav Mahler's words: 'What's best about music is not contained in the notes'.

Music had been my life for nearly 30 years, and in a lightning flash my life changed. This young man had been a heroin addict for some years. It had ruined him, scarring his physical body, his mind and, for all we know, his soul. But playing his favourite song in front of an audience for the first time, something that seemed so ordinary and every-day to me, had caused a shift in him. Whatever the future held for him, he'd done something that he'd never done before and it made him feel good, perhaps for the first time in years. Music's power to change, to cause something to shift in a person, to uplift them and have a positive impact, had become a palpable reality for me and in hindsight I can see in that moment was born the germ of an idea that later became Berakah.

It's funny how we just know that some things were meant to be. I was a musician. And I had been born a Muslim. Both of those elements came into sharp focus for me post 9/11, as I pondered fate, destiny and the well-known saying regarding fools and angels. I've always felt that things happen for a reason, even though it may not be apparent to us, so it was clear to me that both as a musician, and as a Muslim I had something to contribute to the situation. I just didn't know what form it would take.

At the time that this idea was swilling around at the back of my brain, I was aware of a number of issues that were taking shape in society. Not a day went by that there wasn't a newspaper headline, a radio phone-in show, or a TV documentary in which Muslims were depicted as bellicose, dogmatic or in

some way problematic. I'd always had an interest in issues of faith, theology and the philosophy of religion and, although not being religious myself, it was becoming apparent to me that religion generally, and its place in a civil, pluralistic society, was going to be the new frontier opening up before us and that what was happening was similar to what had happened in the history of other religions: a coming to terms with modernity and the need for a form of expression outside the confines of an institutional, orthodox approach to life. For Christianity this had meant a huge shift in its approach to what was 'real' and what was 'faith', and the social (and emotional) upheaval that followed such a paradigm shift. In Judaism there had also been a coming to terms with the shifting, changing nature of society, the values that we hold and what we take to be 'truths'. Both traditions had survived the changes, and although in some cases dogmatic factions continue to put their case forward in somewhat vociferous terms, religion (as opposed to faith, which I consider to be somewhat different) had found a place in a modern, secular society, albeit a sometimes uncomfortable one. It appeared to me that a similar process was happening within the Muslim psyche. Western Europe's tradition of secular democracy is at odds with any truly theocratic system (just ask a Jehovah's Witness) so this appears less as a clash of civilisations and more like a natural process of a theocratic belief system coming to maturity, and learning to accept divergences of opinion and the lack of absolutes. Such a process is obviously not without its difficulties, as the history of Christianity proves. The difference is that 16th Century Europe didn't have the Internet, planes or, in fact, freedom of thought and speech.

So, with all this in mind, what would be my contribution to the process? Something in the back of my mind told me and that whatever it was it would be musical, have a message of peace, would have to bring people together and also confront the issue of religious violence. Call me a naïve simpleton but I've always had a hunch that killing each other in the name of God (whatever God may be!) was deeply obscene and counter to our true nature (whatever that may be!). The idea slowly started to take more of a definite form in my mind. Although I had never been institutionally religious it seemed to me that the best way to contribute something positive, using whatever talents with which I may or may not have been blessed, was to form a band made up of Jews, Christians and Muslims. All three traditions sprang from the message of the central, possibly mythic, figure of Abraham, who introduced the concept of monotheism to the Middle East, and I pictured us performing concerts both in places of worship associated with those faiths and at events that had a central message of good old-fashioned peace and understanding. The band would be

called Berakah, a word found in Hebrew and Arabic, meaning Grace and Blessing.

Finding good musicians is relatively easy, especially if you're lucky enough to spend most of your time working with some of the most gifted musicians in London, but musicians who would understand the concept, see that this was more than just another 'working' band, and would be sympathetic to the ethos behind the music? Not such an easy task. I did have an idea, a feeling, about some people that I would approach. Chantelle Duncan is a singer I have worked with in a number of different bands and situations, and not only does she have a voice that can truly move you, she embodies a spirit that I knew would capture the essence of what I intended to do. I'd also known Mark Hinton Stewart for many years and always enjoyed his playing, which is incredibly sensitive. Although we'd played in smoky jazz clubs on many occasions I knew that Mark had a background in classical music, and as Berakah was to cross musical boundaries too, I knew he'd be right for the part. As well as being musical colleagues, I'd enjoyed many long conversations with Chantelle and Mark. They knew that I had always seen music as something more than just a 'gig', so neither was surprised when I explained the idea to them and asked them to join. I'm glad to say that they both agreed, and I count myself particularly lucky to have their presence in the band.

I first met Rex Horan at a party, probably sometime in 1999. We hardly spoke then, but at the same party was a drummer friend of his, Darren Moore. A few weeks after that party the phone rang and on the other end was Darren, who asked me if I'd be interested in joining a new band, playing original material, that was being put together by a singer that he knew. Now, normally, the first thing that goes through a musician's mind when someone asks them to join such a band is: 'What, do a gig for free?' or perhaps 'I bet I was the last name on the list, and everyone else said no.' But I had a hunch about this, and I'd been looking for a band to join on a more permanent basis, because, as anyone who has done it for any length of time will tell you, freelancing is great, but there's nothing like the camaraderie that you get in a band. So I said I'd come along to a rehearsal, have a play, get to know everyone else and if it all felt good I'd join. Rex was the bassist in that band, and I'm glad to say that we became good friends pretty much from the off. Rex is thoughtful, gentle and enormously funny. The fact that he plays bass so well is really just a bonus.

So I had a core of individuals who would form the foundations of the band, and there was no doubt in my mind they were the right people, being both gifted musicians and spirited human beings. Even so, there were certain things

that had to be in place for the idea to work in the way it was envisioned. There would have to be a flavour of the cultures associated with the faiths, so to me that meant Middle Eastern percussion (evoking a sense of Bedouin tents at the oasis) and for some reason I had an image in my mind of a woman playing the violin. To make this work we'd need a Jewish violinist, and it had to be a female violinist! It was very clear that the band needed that 'energy' but I didn't know any female Jewish violin players.

Providence works in beautiful yet strange ways. One night in May 2005 I'd just finished a gig playing with an African jazz band. On the same bill was a group led by a fantastic Algerian singer/percussionist named Abdel Kader Saadoun. We were chatting in the backstage area, surrounded by the dubious detritus of post gig shenanigans (empty bottles of booze, ash trays filled with suspicious looking cigarette stubs) and on a hunch I mentioned my idea. He said he'd be really interested in bringing his knowledge of Middle Eastern percussion to the project. I also mentioned the search for a female Jewish violinist, and how I was having real trouble finding the right person. One of my band mates happened to overhear my lament and his eyes lit up. 'I know just the person!' he said. And he was right.

Serena Leader comes from a classical background so had very little experience of Jazz improvisation or 'World' music but on our first meeting in my NW London hovel I knew I'd found the final piece in the Berakah jigsaw. Her tone, fiery spirit and enthusiasm for new musical exploration was just what I was looking for. When I explained the philosophy of the band, and the idea that the music we played would serve as a 'model' of peace, harmony and the dissolution of barriers both musical and religious, she 'got' it. Chantelle, Mark, Rex, Kader and Serena make Berakah what it is, and I'm privileged that they said yes to what may have sounded like the strangest idea for a band that anyone had heard!

Berakah played its first concert at the Brent Respect Festival in July 2005. Since then we've played in synagogues, churches and schools. In June 2006 we appeared at a special conference held at the British Museum and beginning in January 2007 we will be touring with the support of the Arts Council of England. The tour will begin with a special concert in Oldham to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day. I've also assembled a group of advisors and volunteers (including my good friend Esther Foreman who has been helping to organise our events and write press releases) who help to steer the project with advice and support. Our audiences have included members from many of the communities. At club gigs or open air festivals it's quite usual that

people from all races, ages, cultures and backgrounds make up the audience, but we've made a deliberate point of working with faith groups locally, and of performing concerts in venues associated with faith, especially places of worship. At our first indoor concert at the Harrow and Wembley Progressive Synagogue in September 2005, the audience included Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, mystics and probably a handful of those with no faith at all, who were just there because they were intrigued by the idea of the band, or got dragged along by a spouse. For all I know, some of those people may even have actually enjoyed the music. All our concerts have drawn such a mix of people, and in some ways what Berakah is doing is going back to the time when music meant something, possibly expressed something that dwelled in people's hearts. A great deal of today's popular music is just the soundtrack to the latest blockbuster movie, so maybe it's about time that we had some bands that were saying something other than what a marketing department tells them to.

Some people ask: 'What do you think you can realistically achieve? What difference do you think you can make?' My answer is always: 'I'm really not sure.' But I do know that being realistic doesn't mean that you have to give up on your dreams, your vision or your aspirations. It just means that you have to temper them. And one way that I have found to make a difference is to talk to young people and tell them about your journey, how you arrived where you are, and what you had to do to make a difference, because there will be those who'll hear an echo of your experiences in theirs. Music, and the passion for it, allows us to communicate on a level that is very hard to reach through the use of words, and it allows us to pass down our knowledge, our tradition of musical expression, to those just starting out. That's why, from the very beginning, working with young people in our schools was always a core aim of ours, and already Berakah has started to organise workshops and music events in a number of schools, and we regularly receive requests to develop music related programmes. I've always seen this as a vital aspect of our work. It's all about sowing the right seeds.

As I write this (the day before the deadline!), Berakah has been together for about 18 months. In that time the topic of religion and its place in our society has taken a more central place in our consciousness. The war in Iraq, the London bombings, the war between Israel and Lebanon, public displays of religious belief, single faith schools ... all these things have placed faith relations (which also carry an element of race relations) at the forefront of our social consciousness as well as helping to create a palpable atmosphere of fear, suspicion and tension. Anti-Semitic attacks are on the increase and many

people within the Muslim community feel under siege or alienated. Passions are easily aroused and sometimes it would be easy to just sit back, let it all wash over you and treat it as another example of human beings being a lost cause.

But I don't think so. As a species we're evolving, growing, changing. Technological change is easy to measure. Psychological and emotional growth is a little more difficult to quantify. Growing pains are always fraught. It's an uneasy process, one that some of us will meet with resistance and fear. But others will greet it as a step towards whatever our eventual goal is, a rung on the ladder. A ladder that naturally leads us up towards our highest aspirations, no matter what our lowest natures are capable of, or want to cling to. Berakah's central aim is to throw some light on a situation that seems so unrelentingly dark. We're saying that as long as there are people with hope there IS hope, and there's nothing wrong with a little old-fashioned love, peace and harmony. Those of us who hold no fear, anger or hatred in our hearts sound the rallying cry of the desire for peace. It's been my experience that music has the power to by-pass the normal 'mind-centric' methods of communication and go directly to the heart, giving joyous expression to the love and compassion that lives and breathes within every human being, if only we'd listen to what our hearts are trying to tell us.

And you don't have to be a Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or even an atheist to experience that feeling. All you need is a heart.

- **Mohammed Nazam** was born, apparently, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. His family moved to London when he was about 10 months old. Details are sketchy, as his family aren't renowned for the accuracy of their memory. Always a lover of books, movies and music, it was a foregone conclusion that he would eventually pick up the guitar, which he did when he was fifteen. Since then he has been lucky enough to play with some of the best musicians in the UK, often within the Jazz and World Music genres, although he can also be found in various smoky clubs playing the Blues. He also teaches the guitar at various educational establishments and often works as a tutor on courses for The Princes Trust. One day he hopes to fulfil his childhood ambition and become an accountant, doctor or lawyer.

Although brief spells were spent in various towns around the UK, such as Crawley and Bolton, Mohammed considers himself to be a Londoner through and through. If pressed though, he'll admit to being a Hyper Dimensional Pan Galactic Traveller.



making links celebrates the 30th anniversary of **community links** the innovative charity at the forefront of community-based regeneration. This book draws together varied views on our communities and the way we interact. To mark our anniversary we invited some friends to take a look with us at the state of our communities and, perhaps more importantly, where we are going. Looking across the voluntary sector, the public sector, the corporate sector and beyond, thoughtful and committed individuals 'tell it like it is' from their experience and provide visionary, forward-looking insights about how we live together in geographical communities, communities of interest and online communities. Contributors write in a personal capacity about the issues that they think are important for us all.

www.community-links.org

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