Haja: Incorporating Aghani Al-Banat into a Western Popular Music Recording Project

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Abstract

The album 'Haja' is a cross-cultural collaboration based around recordings I made of female artists from Sudan who perform a traditional form of music called Aghani Al-Banat (*girls songs*). Working class in origin, Aghani Al-Banat is only performed and composed by women and is predominantly heard at wedding ceremonies in accompaniment of the traditional Sudanese bridal dance called the Subhia. After hearing this music at my own wedding in Khartoum, I returned there a year later to record with two separate Aghani Al-Banat groups including one that played at my wedding led by Gisma, a famous *Ghanaya* (woman who plays Aghani Al-Banat). This was done with the intention of merging this music with my own, being western contemporary pop and then embarking on a process of further collaboration with contemporary popular artists from New Zealand. This experiment was undertaken in order to determine from a purely musical perspective what, if any, were the unifying themes shared by the two different forms of music. Secondly, by juxtaposing the source material with that of the female artists from New Zealand I collaborated with, bring attention to the commonalities between the lives and the work of female artists from two entirely different parts of the world (both with major differences in history, culture, religion and government). Finally, by placing these voices together, I intended to highlight some of the misconceptions found in certain stereotypes concerning the roles of Muslim females in Islamic societies currently being propagated in the west.

The purpose of this exegesis is firstly to provide historical and cultural context for the collaboration via the works of key scholars who have researched Aghani Al-Banat. Secondly, it provides an overview of the production process – demonstrating how cross-cultural collaboration took place, as well as the technologies and creative processes I used. In doing so it also provides insights into my own personal creative and spiritual journey.

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Introduction

23 January 2014 – Khartoum, Sudan – Dana wears traditional red and gold bridal toub at the Jirtik ceremony which was the third day of Jon and Dana's wedding. Both the bride and groom wear red as it is thought that this colour wards off the evil eye and brings good fortune to the couple.

I was married in Khartoum, Sudan on January 21, 2014 to my Wife Dana Siddig Abdelmagied Salih in a traditional Sudanese wedding which, in our case, was a three-day event where each day celebrated a different aspect of our union with a unique ceremony. Day one was the 'Henna' where the bride and groom are marked with Henna to display to society that we are newly weds. Day two is the 'Aggad' where the marriage contract is signed and witnessed by the senior males of the families, then finally, on Day three we had what is called a 'Jirtik' which, apart from myself, is an all female affair where my wife performs a traditional Sudanese bridal dance called a Subhia for me onstage in front of 300 or so female members of the family and friends. Accompanying her dance was an all female group of musicians led by a woman named Gisma that played a form of music known as Aghani Al-Banat literally translated as 'girls songs' which is only performed by females, mainly at weddings.

Just like when I first met Dana, I instantly fell in love with this music. To my ear it was reminiscent of the sounds of western music I loved such as Hip-Hop, Dance and even the tribal rhythms of the British Post-Punk movement of the late 70s and early 80s. Being based purely around rhythmic instrumentation featuring instruments such as Daloka[1] (pronounced *da-loo-ka*), Finger Drum, Djembe and hand claps and also synchronized vocals where simple, catchy melodies were sung in unison, it had an urgency and rawness that I was immediately attracted to. Even though they sung in Arabic it sounded to me like the truth and I could not stop moving my body to it.

As they played my mind was filling in the spaces left by the absence of melodic western instrumentation (guitars, keyboards, bass etc.) and I felt driven by my own curiosity as both a musician and music fan to see what would happen when these two musical worlds, Aghani Al-Banat and the contemporary western music I played and consumed, were thrown together based on the music I was hearing in my head. My initial instinct was that there was more in common between the two and the people that made the music than what one would expect based on the differences in geography, history, religion and society. And I wanted to find out if my instinct was correct.

During an interval in the dance, while Dana left the stage for a costume change, I seized the opportunity and sat down with the musicians while they kept the music going for the guests. That's when I introduced myself, using music as our shared language. They tested me out by getting me to replicate a few simple clap patterns. When they saw I could keep up with these they began introducing more intricate patterns and and this went on and on until they had seemingly accepted me as a fellow musician and we all sat around laughing and dancing together. Once the ceremony had concluded, rather than leaving to another wedding, Gisma and her group stayed and sung and danced with us until the celebration ended, which in Sudanese culture, is both unusual and a great honor.

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[1] A drum made of clay and covered by animal skin used in Aghani Al-Banat songs - Malik, Saadia. *Exploring Aghani Aa-Banat: A Postcolonial Ethnographic Approach To Sudanese Women's Songs, Culture, And Performance*. Ohio University, (2003)

23 January 2014 – Khartoum, Sudan – Jon and Dana dance onstage at the end of the Jirtik ceremony celebrating the completion of the final stage of their wedding.

This being the case I asked the Aghani Al-Banat group if I could one day record with them, which I then did when we went back to Khartoum the following year to visit family. My plan was to take those recordings, arrange them into a contemporary western format, and fuse with melodic instrumentation I had heard in my head on top then send this music out to NZ artists I thought were doing inspiring work in their own fields to get their take on it and see what, if any, were the unifying themes between the music the Aghani Al-Banat performed and the music and thoughts of my NZ musical contemporaries.

In undertaking this creative project, I also had other ideological motivations. I wanted to highlight some of the misconceptions found in certain stereotypes currently being propagated in the west concerning the role of Muslim females in Islamic societies i.e. where women are seen as being somehow oppressed, submissive, covered and forced into playing societal support roles. From my own experience of my time spent in Sudan, through conversations conducted with family members and cultural insiders, and also while researching the history of Aghani Al-Banat to try and gain a deeper understanding of it's cultural context I have learnt that these stereotypes are both incorrect and

damaging. The *Ghanayaat* (women who play Aghani Al-Banat)[2] and the women and friends of my wife's family for that matter were colourful, confident, powerful, outspoken individuals who were not afraid to speak truth to power. They were business women in control of their own destinies just as the female artists from New Zealand I collaborated with from were. By placing these voices side by side with the New Zealand-based voices, and by exposing the music of the Aghani Al-Banat to a western audience, I intended that the album itself and the music contained in it to be a rebuttal against a narrow yet prevailing world view.

22 January 2014 – Khartoum, Sudan – Jon shows the traditional Henna the groom receives on the first day of the wedding. These marks signify that he is a newly married man. The process is done by respected female members of the family placing handfuls of fresh henna into his palms and then clenching his fists for 2-3 hours. It is also repeated on the soles of his feet.

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[2] Literally translates as 'Songsters' - a term used as both a label and also a distinction between them and the Sudanese female artists labeled *Fananaat* (Artists) that are considered to play a more 'sophisticated' or 'decent' form of women's music known as *tom-tom raqi* who, unlike the *Ghanayaat*, sing songs that are approved by the state run media institutions of Sudan and are predominantly composed by male poets. Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 11, 54-55.

In 2010 after spending 23 years as the main songwriter in the New Zealand Rock band Shihad I felt I had reached a brick wall creatively. In terms of composition I found that I was repeating myself both musically and lyrically and because of this, I was losing a lot of the inspiration and enjoyment I had previously found in the process of songwriting. To try and help remedy this situation I started a musical project working with other New Zealand songwriters and performers I knew and admired under the name The Adults[3]

This project was based on a collaborative manifesto where ideas I had started were then passed to other artists to shape in the way they saw fit. This could be lyrically, musically or even purely thematically. This process required me to let go of trying to control the final outcome of the song as well as many of my pre-conceived ideas about song composition. I had to put my faith in the process of collaboration achieving a finished result rather than directing things based on my own internal compositional 'rule book'. Working with so many other talented artists challenged me and re-invigorated my passion for writing and music in general with many of my favorite songs being written during this process.

I see the new Adults album Haja – which culminated from this Masters project – as being an extension of this collaborative process where, instead of the initial ideas coming from me and being shared amongst artists I already knew, this time around the music had its genesis in another part of the world with musicians from an entirely different culture and background who spoke a different language and where my only personal connection with them was that they had performed at my wedding. On top of this, the secondary collaboration process in New Zealand involved working with contemporary New Zealand artists who's work I admired but did not have an existing personal relationship with which required an even bigger creative risk than the first album.

My process began by recording the Aghani Al-Banat groups in a natural, live performance setting in Khartoum then from these recordings, (which were performed in musical

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[3] https://open.spotify.com/artist/0nzYADTfJqnGNNQjEE92F5/about

passages ranging in length from anywhere between 1:30 minutes to 21 minutes) identify and edit 4-16 bar loops of what I considered to be the 'hookiest' or 'catchiest' parts based on my own western 'pop'/'rock' music song writing background. I then took those edited loops of the Aghani Al-Banat performers and spent time arranging complimentary sets (both musically and thematically) of them (usually between 2 to 4 of them in number) into very basic contemporary 'pop' arrangements (Verses/Choruses/Middle 8's) using the functionality of Ableton's Live software which enables the user to 'play' through loops in real time through a browser section. Once I had established an arrangement I would then work on the bringing the rhythm section of the Aghani Al-Banat performers into a more contemporary western context by layering in complimentary drum patterns using drum samples – which included kick drums, hi-hats, percussion instruments – sometimes finding patterns that would play against what the Aghani Al-Banat players were playing to create something new entirely and other times just bolstering the groove they were already playing. I would then set about working on accompanying the Aghani Al-Banat singers musically using electric bass, finding complimentary lines that would help emphasize the differences between the sections of each arrangement (i.e. make the verses more 'versey', the choruses more 'chorusy' etc.) all the time making sure it worked musically with the Aghani Al-Banat singers. After this I would add extra musical layers using electric guitar, software synthesizers, and vocal melodies to further emphasize the different sections of each arrangement.

The next phase consisted of working with co-producer Devin Abrams (see Appendix 1) on selecting the best tracks from the large pool of work I'd created, refining each arrangement, adding extra instrumentation and working on the sonics of each of the chosen tracks. During this process we spent time stripping away the original Aghani Al-Banat loops from the arrangements to provide potential collaborators with a workable canvas (i.e. the space in which to work with). Sometimes, because of the nature of what I'd written around these original loops, this could work as an entirely new piece of music and other times we would have to re-arrange things and add extra instrumentation to make them work without the original Aghani Al-Banat loops in there.

Once this was done and we had an album's worth of material we spent time finding complimentary New Zealand artists for each song and contacting them to gauge interest and availability. Collaborators were chosen based on how inspiring I personally found their work. Also I was initially looking predominantly for female New Zealand artists as I wanted to juxtapose their stories and experiences as working female artists from New Zealand with the stories and music of the Sudanese Aghani Al-Banat musicians in order to see what, if any, were the commonalities or universal themes that connected women from two seemingly entirely different environments and if so, highlight them using the music. To help facilitate this process I would always give the potential collaborator a back story on the Aghani Al-Banat music and the musicians who performed it, my relation to them and the circumstance of the recording process and finally, and most importantly, a translation of the Arabic lyrics and contextualized meaning behind each song I had sampled.

In some cases, this collaborative work took place remotely as in the case of a track like 'Boomtown' where I sent the same music to 2 different artists, Chelsea Jade and Raiza Biza (see Appendix 1). Chelsea Jade then wrote and recorded her own vocals in a studio in LA, California and Raiza Biza recorded his own vocals in a studio in Hamilton NZ completely separately from each other. They both then sent back their work once completed which Devin and I then placed into the instrumental track and with this put together an arrangement we thought worked best based on it's musical momentum and lyrical narrative. In other cases, such as in a track like 'That Gold' I actually flew to Wellington from my home in Melbourne to work with Aaradhna in the relative comfort of her own studio bringing a rack-mounted vocal recording chain to ensure fidelity and then proceeded over the course of a two-day period to write and record with her - the material based on personal conversations and observations between the two of us. I also wrote and sung on one of the final 8 tracks on the album myself.

Exegesis Overview

The purpose of this exegesis is firstly to provide historical and cultural context for the collaboration via the works of key scholars who have researched Aghani Al-Banat. Secondly, it provides an overview of the production process – demonstrating how cross-cultural collaboration took place, as well as the technologies and creative processes I used. In doing so it also provides insights into my own personal creative and spiritual journey.

In Section one of this exegesis I will explore the cultural context and relevance of Aghani Al-Banat as a musical form and the accompanying Subhia dance in modern Sudanese society by referencing studies from Saadia I. Malik's 2003 thesis 'Exploring Aghani Al-Banat' and via that also El-Tahir's 'History of Music in the Sudan' and Sikainga's 'Slaves into Workers'. I will then trace the history of the music itself, it's relationship to the existing class structure and the cultural environment from which it stems. To do this I will explore the overall history of Sudan, it's colonization, the re-gaining of it's independence and its current system of government and religious practices. Section two will cover the project's production techniques, from the recording of the Aghani Al-Banat musicians in Khartoum through to the collaboration process with contemporary NZ artists. To give further insight into the production of the album I will go into detailed case studies of two entirely different tracks off the album from their inception through to their completion. Finally, I will give my conclusions as to what I have learnt during this process, what I would perhaps do differently next time and what contributions the final result of this project make to music and culture in New Zealand (and further abroad)

16 January, 2015 – Khartoum, Sudan – Jon with traditional Aghani Al-Banat group set up in the garden at the family home. This picture shows the musicians with their instruments including the Daloka (just behind Jon) and gourds floating in water baths.

Section 1: Cultural Context – exploring Aghani Al-Banat

In this Section I will explore the origins of Aghani Al-Banat, the Subhia bridal dance the music traditionally accompanies, the music's cultural relevance both historically and also in contemporary Sudanese society and take a look at how a musical form written and played predominantly by working class women came to be co-opted by the whole of the Sudanese society as being an essential part of the sound of Sudan. To do this I will look at the history of Sudan, it's colonization, it's re-independence and it's current political and religious climate. I will also look more closely at the musicians who have dedicated their lives to playing the Aghani Al-Banat and how they are perceived in Sudanese society.

1.1 The Subhia dance and the accompanying Aghani Al-Banat music

Northern Sudan is an Arabic speaking, Islamic African Nation poised, both physically and culturally between Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and African nations such as Ethiopia, Chad and Central African Republic. This makes for an amazingly unique clash of diverse and colourful cultural traditions and for me, as a musician especially in the musical realm. Aghani Al-Banat is one of the only Sudanese musical traditions that deals exclusively with woman's issues and woman's lives especially working class females.[4] It originated in Central Sudan and created a space for Sudanese women to express their own narrative and to ostensibly redefine their roles in society. Seen as a resistance to patriarchy, tradition and narrowly defined gender roles Aghani Al-Banat allowed women to assert themselves through song.[5] This being the case it is typically played and performed exclusively by female musicians. It is also normally performed at celebratory occasions, especially weddings and as such, is usually upbeat, fun, simple folk music that communicates the story of the everyday woman.[6]

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[4] Alsarah & Nahid. *Alsarah & Nahid - Habibi Safr Mini - Aghani Albanat song from Sudan* YouTube Video, online (2012): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPOnonHh6a4&index=11&list=RDCSF7QrzoiD0 at 4:43

[5] Hall, Diallo. *Sudanese Women Singers Assert Themselves With "Girls' Music* MSM Magazine Article, online (2010): http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/10/28/sudanese-women-singers-assert-themselves-with-girls-music/

[6] Alsarah &Nahid. *Habibi Safr Mini* YouTube Video

There are numerous traditional groups who not only perform this music at weddings but also instruct Sudanese brides-to-be on how to dance to each musical piece performed at their wedding. At our wedding and in the recordings I made we used a well known group led by Gisma, a Sudanese singer and dance instructor who has revolutionized the art of the traditional wedding dance night, and has shaped and reshaped the traditional wedding industry over the years. Due to the trends and standards she has set, wedding singers and instructors – and by association the entire traditional wedding industry – have shot up in cost, style and importance[7]. The bridal dance itself, *the Subhia,* has apparently been performed on, or near, the bride's wedding night for thousands of years. Like Sudan, it is both Arab and African. And, like Sudan, it is neither Arab nor African[8], a point that will become clearer through this exegesis. It is deeply erotic and performed in front of an entirely female audience of cheering family members and friends with the groom being the only male in attendance, positioned onstage beside the dancing bride. The dance itself consists of several songs, smart choreography, a custom-built stage and a whole wardrobe of costume changes.[9]

The bride will wear a traditional toub which is a long piece of cloth (usually 4.5 meters) that is wrapped around the body and looped over the head and tossed over the right shoulder. It is probably the single most defining symbol of Sudanese women in the past and today.[10] During the dance she will slowly unravel the toub revealing more of herself to her new husband. In a not so distant past some wore no clothes at all.

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[7] Gaafar, Reem. *30 Sudanese Women You Should Know About* Public blog, online (2016): http://reemgaafar.blogspot.com.au/2016/06/30-sudanese-women-you-should-know-about.html

[8] Thompson, Gwen. *One Sudan Marriage Ritual: An Alluring Dance.* Special Series: Hidden World Of Girls, Radio programme, online (2010) http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127855568

[9] Thompson, *One Sudan Marriage Ritual*

[10] nubiaNomad. *Ya baladi ya habob…jalabia wa TOUB*. Public blog, online (2011) https://nubianomad.com/2011/08/05/ya-baladi-ya-habob-jalabia-wa-toub/

23 January 2014 – Khartoum, Sudan – Dana performs The Subhia bridal dance at the Jirtik ceremony at our wedding. The groom accompanies the bride onstage and claps as the bride dances around him.

Sometimes, a gathering of sisters, aunts, mothers and friends teaches the steps and some brides engage professional instructors (such as Gisma). Young brides-to-be practice their steps every day, sometimes for months in advance.[11]

In terms of how the Subhia fits in with Islam, the country's main religion, Sudan's current Islamic fundamentalist government has strict rules on how women should comport themselves in public: conservative attire, head and legs covered, no shimmying yet the dance itself predates Islam in Sudan.[12] From an outside perspective the Subhia seems to contradict mainstream Islamic values such as Hijab or the need for a female to dress modestly however it is still widely accepted as part of a traditional Sudanese marriage by most families.

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[11] Thompson, *One Sudan Marriage Ritual*

[12] Thompson, *One Sudan Marriage Ritual*

1.2 Historical and Cultural Background

When I first encountered the Aghani Al-Banat performers at our wedding they seemed like outsiders to me compared to the Sudanese women I had met through my wife's family, even though they were an integral and indispensable part of the ceremony. They dressed slightly differently from the other woman and spoke in a different type/style of Sudanese Arabic from the guests at the wedding. They carried themselves in a confident manner that suggested and edge of defiance. The women from my wife's family and their friends I had met seemed, on a whole more reserved, considered, intellectual and far more concerned about doing things culturally correct whereas the Aghani Al-Banat women seemed more relaxed about these things. Of course they had their own codes of conduct that they followed but they were different ones from the other guests.

The attitudes I picked up from the guests were that they desired the music the Aghani Al-Banat played, they loved it in fact and the prestige the performers brought to the wedding but not necessarily the lives they lead. A middle class Sudanese mother would love to have her daughter dance to the music they produced but would be extremely unhappy with that same daughter choosing to play that music herself as a profession. In her thesis "Exploring Aghani" (2003) S. Malik, a scholar indigenous to Sudan who's findings informed my research, interviews a famous Aghani Al-Banat singer Hawa al-Tagtagah, one of the originators of this form of music who told a Malik that the families that employed her considered her not only as a performer but as a 'blessing' to the family yet would be forbidden by the males of the family to play her main instrument (the daloka) during rehearsals for the bride's dance in the family home as it was considered an 'unacceptable act'.

To understand these perceived contradictions, I had to look back at the colonial history of Sudan and where this music and its performers originated. Between 1820-1880 Sudan was ruled by the Turko-Egyptians (Ottoman empire). During this time slave trade flourished. The city of Khartoum was also established as the capital. After gaining it's

independence in 1880 Sudan was once again colonized between 1896-1952, this time as part of the British empire. During this time the Slave trade was abolished 'creating a new social class composed of rural impoverished people and urban poor laborers descended from ex-slave Sudanese men and women and other ethnic groups'.[13] Malik also argued that "Although the official abolition of slavery by the British system brought economic independence to many ex-slaves and their descendants, they were and are still considered socially and culturally inferior in the Sudanese society'.[14]

Because the British concentrated most of it's economic development of Sudan on the Nile Valley, Khartoum and the Blue and White Nile areas, it caused a mass relocation of people from the poorer rural areas of Sudan to the more developed urban areas (e.g. Khartoum) as that was where the main employment opportunities were. Lacking education and the skills to compete over the limited jobs available, and also facing marginalization in the city as ex-slaves, most of the women were either incorporated into prostitution and in brewing and selling alcoholic drinks in bars/social clubs called 'Anadi' in the urban slums which were called 'Daims' - where they also lived. According to Malik 'many researchers believe that the 'tom-tom' rhythm employed by the Aghani Al-Banat performers and the accompanying lyrics appeared in these Urban slums during this time specifically in the social clubs (Anadi) and since then, in the mind of the Sudanese society, has always been connected with Anadi and al-khumour local alcoholic drinks'.[15]

The British considered these slums as 'outside the office classification scheme' so the people in them were not entitled to any health or social services[16]. Malik also noted that as in the early African-American Blues and Folk music from the 1930's, another musical form to arrive out of the emancipation of former slaves, one of their ways of communicating and transcending the hardships and reality of their new situation was

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[13] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 42

[14] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 42-43

[15] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 43

[16] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 43

through music played on a Daloka called "Tom Tom" which became the basis of Aghani Al Banat.[17]

According to El-Tahir in 'I Am Omdurman: The History of Music in the Sudan' (1995) The Tom-Tom rhythm and songs first appeared in the city of Kosti which, at that time was a famous trading center from which agricultural product were transported to Khartoum". The rhythm appeared in the music of two slave-descendants twin sisters, Um Bashir and Um Jabair who lived in the slums there. The songs they sung transferred from Kosti to Khartoum via wedding parties.

Tom-Tom music is the rhythmic foundation that all Aghani Al-Banat music comes from. But because they were mainly uneducated poor they sung in their own language, the language of an uneducated Sudanese person. They were illustrating their situation through this music. As the former Sudanese slaves flocked to the big cities during the 1920s and 1930s for employment, according to Sikainga, Ahmed. in Slaves into Workers Austin: University of Texas Press (1996) they experienced autonomy and worked for the creation of their own communities and began molding their own resilient and festive culture in the urban centers of Sudan thus Tom-Tom singing appeared in these decades as working-class singing by ex-slave Sudanese women reflecting the new relations of production and the new standards in the urban milieu of Sudan. As the ex-slaves in America did in the early 1900s, the women who played this music were "expressing their aspirations as free, autonomous individuals in these urban structures"[18]

It was slave women that propagated this type of music and started performing it in the social clubs and bars of the slums of Khartoum (and other main urban centers of Sudan) using the Daloka as their main instrument therefore it became forever connected in the minds of the Sudanese society with the slave women and the bars they performed in. This connection made many Sudanese families unwilling to allow their daughter to play

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[17] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 113

[18] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 50

Daloka. In fact, the famous Aghani Al-Banat performer Hawa al-Tagtagah told Malik in an interview that she was deserted by the male members of her family after choosing the life of a 'Ghanaya' (a woman who performs Aghani Al-Banat) and dismissed from the family home. She even had an Uncle try to kill her after finding out from her Mother that Hawa had wanted to become a Ghayana.[19]

In terms of the modern Sudanese society The Ghayana are still considered as coming from a lower class in relation to the middle and upper class families that hire their services for their wedding celebrations. However, despite all this and perhaps even because of it, Aghani Al-Banat has become the un-official soundtrack of the female Sudanese experience. Even though it was written from the performers perspective as a way of escaping/describing/reflecting their new life in the Urban slums of the cities they now found themselves in, the music also became the soundtrack of those cities. It was also the only form of Sudanese music written and performed solely by females where the lyrics dealt exclusively with the Sudanese female experience (albeit a particularly working class perspective) meaning that, although written as an outlet for the thoughts and experiences of the working poor, Sudanese females of all classes gravitated to it as it was the only form of music that articulated what it was truly like to be a Sudanese female from a purely female perspective untouched and uncensored by the men in power in Sudan. S. Malik quotes K. Al-jinaid, a voice from the Sudanese diaspora currently living in the US - *"Aghani Al-Banat is the voice of collective women's experiences that expresses the group and then expresses the society"*

There are other popular forms of female music in Sudan. Fananaat, for example is considered a more sophisticated form of the Tom-Tom music (tom-tom raqi) that Ahgani Al-Banat was based around and is traditionally performed by more educated females and/or females with musical training. Fananaat was played regularly on the state-run

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[19] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 81

radio station - Radio Omdurman, and later, state run TV channels but to do this the songs of the Fananaat had to be approved by the state run media institutions of Sudan based on whether the they were deemed consistent with the society's Islamic values. Unlike the Aghani Al-Banat songs many of the Fananaat song lyrics were written by male poets rather than by the female artist performing them and had to adhere to a strict criteria dictated by the government run media institutions enforcing a preconceived idea of what it meant to be an 'ideal' Islamic woman.[20]

Aghani Al-Banat was considered inconsistent with these Islamic values and far too 'loose' to be played on these media channels. But this also ensured that Aghani Al-Banat remained outside of this classification regime as it remained a predominantly performance based music rather than a recorded one meaning that it circumvented the hold of the censorship endured by the Fananaat and left it as a 'pure' form of Sudanese female expression. They weren't being played on radio or the television. They were playing live at weddings and celebrations so they could more or less keep saying exactly what they liked. Because of the religious and political landscape of modern Sudan, Aghani Al-Banat's very existence is an act of defiance to the powers that be.

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[20] Malik, _Exploring Aghani,_ 11, 54-55

Section 2: Production Methods

In this Section I will look at the project's production process in detail starting with the recording sessions conducted in Khartoum with the Aghani Al-Banat groups in both casual and studio environments. Following this I'll go into the loop editing and song arrangement process conducted at my home studio in Melbourne once I returned from Sudan utilizing modern technology and powerful editing and arranging software and the overdubbing of melodic instrumentation that took place once this process was complete. I will also cover the further arrangement, sonic manipulation and song selection process which took place with the help of the album's co-producer Devin Abrams at his home studio in Wellington. Then finally I will go through the collaboration process that took place after the songs for the album had been selected and prepared for the potential collaborators to work on and the diverse communication methods, recording techniques and songwriting processes utilized.

2.1 The Recording Process in Sudan

I went back to Sudan in January 2015 and worked with two groups. Firstly, the Gisma group that played at my wedding the year previous which I recorded at home on my iPhone during some rehearsals for my Sister-in-law's upcoming wedding, and a second group, organized by my Mother-in-law that came to the family house to showcase all the different instruments and songs that were used in these situations. They also took the time to show me how each instrument was played – from extra large gourds floating in water baths which when hit with sticks created what would best be described as a low 'kick-drum' sound through to large wooden mortar and pestle combinations that acted as another bass for rhythmic patterns. These were combined with more traditional North African percussion instruments such as the Daloka (tabla) and frame drum.

After that we agreed on doing a recording session a couple of days later at a professional recording studio in Khartoum. In this session I asked the group to perform the songs as they were which always include vocals but then play them all again without

the voices. This would mean I could then have more options when creating new tracks out of what I had recorded in Sudan and I could bring the Sudanese voices in and out of a track when needed – for example – when either I or another guest vocalist needed space to sing ourselves or if I needed an instrumental break in the track. This session lasted for maybe 4 hours and was an amazing insight into how this music was constructed and also how the musicians worked together. It also became obvious quite early on in the session that these musicians weren't exactly used to being in a recording studio which in retrospect I think came down to the fact this was music that was meant to be experienced, danced and sung along to in a live, celebratory setting, and not necessarily consumed as a recording in your own living room.

Gisma and Jon, 'Haja' music listening session at the Salih family home, Gereif West, Khartoum, July 3, 2017

As I did not speak Arabic I enlisted the help of my Mother in-law, Nawal Mohamed Kheir Osman to act as a go between myself and the Ghanayaat, firstly to communicate to them what I was after and what I intended to do with the recordings as well as dealing with logistics such as recording locations and timings. Secondly she helped negotiate culturally and financially appropriate remuneration for the musician's work and time taking into account what was culturally acceptable and appropriate. In the case of the group I recorded in both the garden and professional recording studio this was paid in US$ as requested by the group during the negotiation. In the case of Gisma, as we never got into a professional studio, worked in a casual setting and therefore never entered into serious negotiation I had to travel back to Sudan in June 2017 with the work I had done using the recordings I had made on my iPhone, organize a meeting with Gisma at the family home where I played these ideas to her in order to seek her approval, firstly for the ideas themselves and secondly for them to be released to the public in this new form.

Fortunately, after listening to only a few songs she turned to me with a smile on her face and said 'I like this one'. She was listening to 'Haja' which features Gisma as lead vocalist and was intended, more than any other song on the album, to be my homage to Gisma and group so I was both extremely relieved, and elated. Once I had played her everything, and based on the advice of my Mother in-law, I presented Gisma with a large gold ring which was purchased with the help of Nawal at a *souq* (market) in preparation of the meeting. The ring was selected based on it's literal weight in gold as much as it's appearance. In Sudan gold is highly valued and is considered a very respectable way to remunerate someone, and to show how much you value them, especially someone of Gisma's stature in society. She was very pleased with both the gift and the music and we spent time after the listening session discussing the meanings of the songs and even the idea of one day performing live together which I think would be amazing.

2.2 The Recording Process – Melbourne

This process started with importing all the recordings I had made in Sudan into a Pro Tools session, listening through in great detail and marking out where I thought the best 'hooks' were and also where the best performances were. In these situations, I try to work fast and make edit decisions quickly based on instinct and what 'moves' me. This kept the momentum of the project going and stopped me from getting bogged down in all the finer details of what was literally hours of amazing music.

Once this process was done I could then go back through with a 'fine tooth comb' and create loops – a section of music that repeats seamlessly upon itself usually around 4-8 bars in length - out of the hooks I had marked by editing at just the right point in the music. When doing this I would try and make the longest loop possible to keep the integrity of what the musicians were playing and also to hopefully help fool the listener of the end product that they were in fact listening to a live take of a song (which they sort of were). To do this I would concentrate on the particular performance of each hook or theme I was trying to edit, find where it was being played the tightest and work until my edit would loop seamlessly - which wasn't that difficult as in this case the musicians were very good and played extremely well with each other.

When I had completed this process I had a library of tight, 'loopable' musical themes or hooks which I could then 'play' in the Ableton Live software utilizing it's 'warp' functionality whereupon you can throw loops into a session on the fly and have them line up in terms of time (and, with a bit of work, even pitch) to whatever was already being played in that session (whether that be a drumbeat, a bass line or anything else)

Originally designed in Germany as a way for electronic music producers to play their music more easily in a live performance situation during Berlin's 90's Techno scene, Ableton Live "allowed musicians to easily store and trigger samples during their shows so audiences could watch them build songs in real time" which in essence "made it easier for the average person to make music and *turn their computer into an instrument*"

according to Maya-Roisin Slater (2016).[21] This is shown clearly by my process described above and illustrates the creative potential of Ableton as a powerful compositional tool.
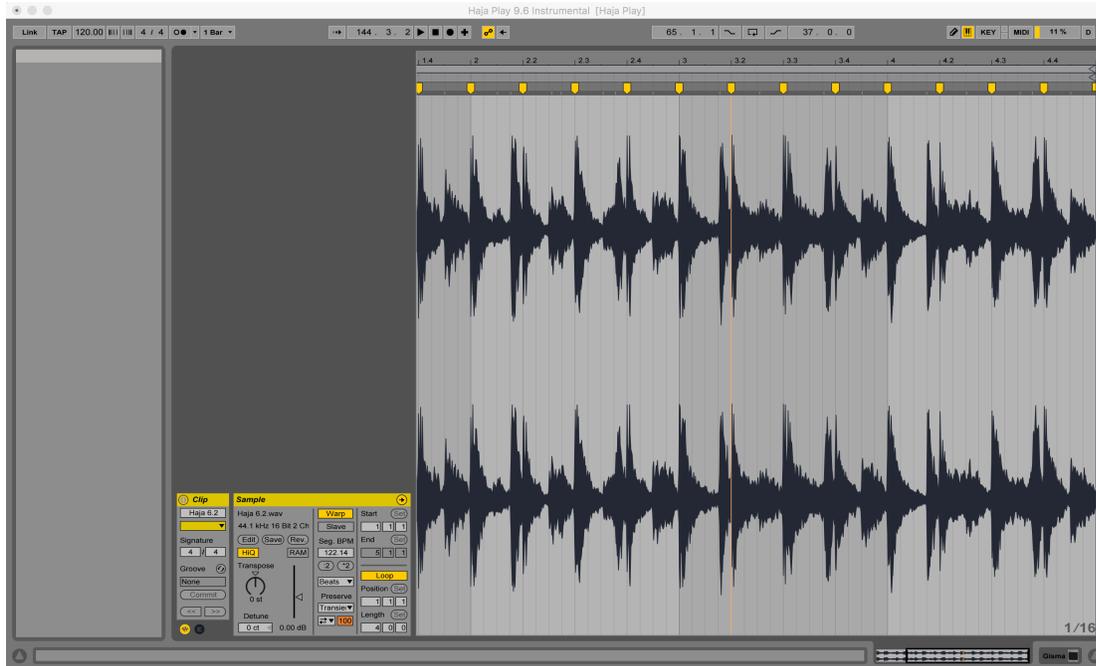

Screenshot of the Ableton Live Sample Edit window showing the process of tightening the groove of a particular loop of the Aghani Al-Banat group to the master tempo of the track 'Haja' using 'Warp Markers' (in yellow above the waveform) to shift certain 'looser' sections of the sample into time.

Learning to use the Ableton Live software had been an extremely liberating experience as a writer and arranger for exactly this reason. I had already been writing Shihad and The Adults tracks in it for a while and knew what the software was capable of so creating the 'library' of Sudanese musical loops in Pro Tools, although at times painstaking, finicky work, I knew was always going to be an invaluable part of the process once it came time to playing with these in Ableton – where everything became much more creative and jam orientated.

Because Ableton works with a browser window where you can see your hard drive(s) from the edit/arrangement window I could literally throw themes or hooks I thought may

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[21] Maya-Roisin Slater. *The Untold Story of Ableton Live: The Program that Transformed Electronic Music Performance Forever*. Vice Article, online (2016) https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/78je3z/ableton-live-history-interview-founders-berhard-behles-robert-henke

work well together up onto an audio 'clip' track and play through from one idea to the next using Ableton's warp functionality to seamlessly 'sew' them together in real time. Sometimes this would work so well I'd have the basis of a song – verse, chorus, breakdown – relatively quickly. Other times ideas that I was sure would've worked together clashed terribly. And then there were the complete surprises where I would randomly select loops from completely different jams that when put together created something completely new and breathtaking – which is why the Ableton software is, in my opinion so powerful – you can literally paint in a completely new way from how you would usually. In a writing sense It bypasses your usual mental framework or process and means you can work 'outside the box' of your own usual thought process by giving you instantaneous access to all these different ideas. If something doesn't work straight away it doesn't matter – you have so many other ideas to try out and sooner or later there will be themes that do 'stick' together. Essentially you are literally 'playing' musical themes like you would play notes on a musical instrument.
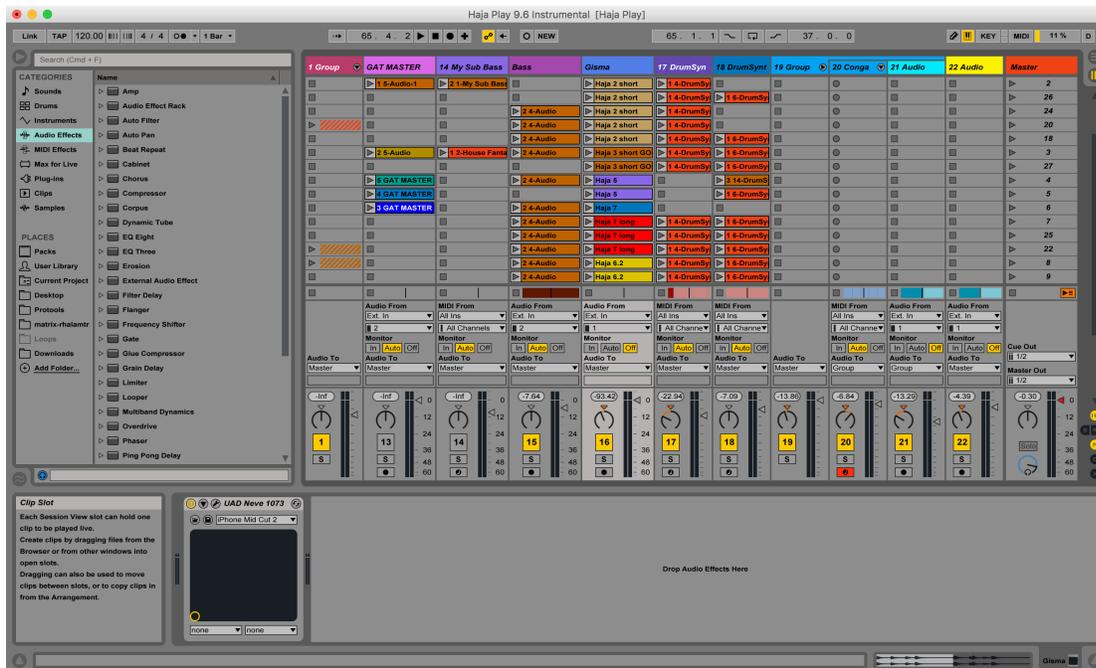
Screenshot of the Ableton Live 'Session View' window where you can place loops, samples and midi instruments in real time while a song is playing. This is done by accessing these directly from your hard drive utilizing the software's browser window (to the left)

Once I had settled on a flow of between 2-4 themes I would then pick up a bass and play along, using it to structure a 3-5 minute piece of music. With my background being in contemporary rock and pop I tended to work around a simple verse/chorus/middle 8 structure to start with and then refine arrangements based on the material from there. Because the loops I was playing with were taken from musical movements that may last as long as 25-30 minutes rather western pop songs this gave my simple 'pop' structures a new lease of life. After I had settled on a basic arrangement using the bass line as the main song component I would then add percussion in the form of kick drums, hi hats, extra tablas and handclaps to give things a weightier, more contemporary pulse. After this it would be extra instrumentation which, depending on the track could be anything from electric guitar, keyboards (both internal and external) sampled strings, backing vocals etc. whatever I felt served the 'song' the best.

When I played what I had done to Dana's mother Nawal (she came over From Khartoum to Australia for my son's birth) I was nervous about it as I had taken liberties with the narrative of each original piece and wasn't sure if it would still make sense as I don't speak Arabic – however she loved the music (she was dancing around our house Sudanese style) and informed me that each piece still made sense to her as there were always unifying themes of love, beauty, strength, longing and God that ran throughout all the music I had recorded in Sudan. I am excited by the fact that my approach seems to transcend our cultural differences.

2.3 Production refinement and arrangement

The next phase consisted of working with co-producer Devin Abrams in Wellington on selecting what we considered to be the best tracks from the large pool of work I'd created. In keeping with the collaborative manifesto I'd created for myself at the beginning of the project I remained completely open to Devin's opinion on each track, what he thought should be pursued and which tracks he thought should be discarded. Once we had settled on the 8 tracks that were to make up the final album we set about refining each

arrangement, adding extra instrumentation where needed and working on the overall sonics (i.e. the characteristics of each recorded sound, their tonal quality and overall balance in relation to each other) of the chosen tracks.

During this process, depending on whether or not we wanted a particular track to be sent out to a potential collaborator to work on, we spent time stripping away the original Aghani Al-Banat loops from the finished arrangements to provide potential collaborators with a workable canvas. This involved giving them the space in which to work with both lyrically and melodically and beyond that, in a form that they were probably more familiar with.

As stated above, because of the nature of what I'd written around the original loops, this would sometimes work almost instantly as an entirely new piece of finished sounding music opening up an entirely new musical avenue for me into how songs could be composed. The tracks that worked liked this (Take It On The Chin/Boomtown/That Gold) were essentially, in compositional terms, reverse engineered – starting with a piece of music, writing music around this piece to accompany it and add to it then finally taking away the original thing that had inspired all the additional bits of music layered on top to be left with something completely new entirely, something I had never tried before. Sometimes we would have to re-arrange things and add extra instrumentation to make the track work without the original Aghani Al-Banat loops in there but on a whole the music I had added stood up on it's own as 'finished' sounding tracks.

On other tracks such as 'Haja' where we wanted to use the original Aghani Al-Banat group recordings as the main vocal line we concentrated more on making sure the arrangement worked from start to finish (i.e. that it maintained a momentum of it's own without the need of another collaborators vocal.). Also, because of the lo-fi nature of the iPhone recordings of the Aghani Al-Banat groups a lot of time was spent working on getting the EQ of these recordings to a certain level in order to match the sonic quality of the musical instruments we had overdubbed on top without losing the intensity and immediacy of the original recordings.

2.4 Collaboration with New Zealand musicians

The process for finding potential New Zealand based collaborators was based around 2 main factors. The first being that my overall idea behind the project was to find out what the common and/or unifying themes that ran through both the Aghani Al-Banat music of Sudan I'd used and the music and experiences of my contemporaries working in my home country NZ actually were - especially, given the gender specific nature of the source material and where possible, female NZ musicians, producers and songwriters.

The 2nd factor in choosing the NZ collaborators was that they were doing something genuinely inspiring to myself as a musician whether that be in the form of songwriting, singing or performing live. In other words, they were all people I thought were doing great work on their own right and I wanted to hear what they could do with something that may be a little out of their comfort zone or current frame of reference.

Once chosen I would send out the music to prospective collaborators via email, Facebook Messenger or txt with the back story of where the music came from, what it's connection to me was, what it's cultural relevance in Sudanese society was and, most importantly what the song(s) were about, the lyrics, their context and the meanings behind them were. Beyond that I pretty much left the artists to their own devices to see what they could come up with and what they could add to the tracks we had made.

It is worth mentioning that several of the NZ collaborators I chose to work with have shared African heritage. Raiza Biza is of Rwandan decent, JessB is of Kenyan decent and Estère's Father is from Cameroon. While this had no conscious bearing on my selection process it was definitely an interesting coincidence considering the Northern African nature of the source material, and points to the diversity of those making new and exciting music in contemporary multi-cultural New Zealand.

Being that I cared so deeply for the music it took a leap of faith on my part to let go of the reigns at this point. However, since I had come this far using a collaborative manifesto I felt I had to see the process through to the end in this way. Thankfully, my faith in both this process and the talents of the artists I had chosen to collaborate with was well rewarded by the results of what they came back with.

2.5 'Bloodlines' Case Study

In order to exemplify the creative process further, in this section, I will provide a detailed description of the production of one track, 'Bloodlines.' I chose this track for exploration here, because it provides an in-depth look at the typical techniques employed in the construction and arrangement of the finished musical elements of a song. Furthermore, it gives a detailed overview of the collaborative process in terms of lyrical context and composition. This is done in order to give an insight into the merging of the two different musical forms which are *Aghani Al-Banat* and contemporary western popular music.

This song was put together quite late in the album writing process. Like the other tracks on the album it is based around music recorded at the recording sessions in Khartoum, Sudan January 2015 with the 2 Aghani Al Banat groups I ended up working with. The first group I recorded was the group led by Gisma that performed at our wedding. This was recorded live on an Apple iPhone 6 in the front living room of Dana's family home and consisted of the group performing numerous songs running into each other without stops - as they would at a performance at a wedding – this being because it is all about providing the soundtrack to the dance performed by the bride which is done in long passages with no breaks.

The 2nd group I recorded with played in a slightly but distinctly different style from the Gisma group. I originally met them when they came to the family home to audition for me. This also gave me my first opportunity to have a hands on experience with the instruments played by the Aghani Al-Banat musicians and explanations on their correct usage directly

from the mouths of the musicians via a translator. This all took place outside in the front garden as it was a beautiful Khartoum day and there were too many musicians and instruments to fit inside the lounge I had recorded Gisma in. They were also using a couple of larger different instruments, such as baths filled with water in which gourds of different sizes floated (the larger the gourds, the deeper the sound). These were then struck with large sticks which created a percussive underpinning to the rest of the music - much like the kick drum and tom toms on a western rock drum kit.

I recorded this initial audition on a couple of iPhones - 1 visually and 1 purely audio – both of which I went through later, after importing them into Pro Tools sessions to find sections that would work as 4, 8, and even 12 bar loops in a contemporary western dance/pop format. Once I found what I was after I edited these loops and started playing with them in Ableton Live which enabled me to throw in loops from different sections of the original sessions to see what could work with each other without the constraints of the linear source material.

Bloodlines is all based around a couple of loops taken from the audio I extracted from video shot at the audition with the 2nd group in the the garden at the family home. Both

loops were part of a rhythmic introduction to a song called *"Al-loul Aloul"* (a nickname given to a bride used to encourage her as she performs the subhiya or bridal dance) which I made a mental note of at the time as being particularly catchy and even muscular in it's approach which appealed to me because of my love of the tribal rhythms of British post punk acts such as Killing Joke and Adam and The Ants[22] plus, closer to home, NZ experimental Flying Nun band The Skeptics[23] who also used a lot of jerky, tribal tom tom patterns in their music.

Using these loops as a backbone for the track in Ableton I then started playing around with introducing loops I had made from the original Gisma Group session to this based on finding sections with a similar rhythmic feel. In this case the original loop was based around a triplet feel (123,123 etc.) which seemed to be relatively common in a lot of the Aghani Al Banat songs I had heard and recorded. This made finding loops from another session and even song that would work rhythmically with the 'backbone' loop a little easier than I'd originally anticipated it would, meaning the process was extremely pleasurable and inspiring.

The 2 loops I finally settled on from the Gisma session to accompany the original Bloodlines track were taken from a song titled *'Al Razeena o Hafza esm Aboha'* – which translates as 'She memorizes her Father's name and carries it with pride'. This song included the following lines which are specific to the Bridal dance performed at traditional Sudanese weddings and deal with the family of the bride supporting her as she begins to dance for her groom.

for the chorus –

خالاتها و عمّاتها جان
Khalaataha wa 'Amataha jan

وقبلها تلملمان
wal gaba'el leha itlamlamen

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[22] https://open.spotify.com/user/jontoogood/playlist/785Hpex8045cwIaYFHIRxw?si=8nOKk4T2Sju4tAOCMGJVWg

[23] https://open.spotify.com/album/7EWbne4KaRo7L6Qlyx24Eb?si=Ee9uw8ZzRZ-YXzMtUkGGWg

Her Aunties (from her Mother's side) and her Aunties (from her father's side) have come/gathered;

and the tribe have gathered for her

and for the 2nd verse –

الله غادر يوم وقفوها

Allah gadir yom wagafoha

Allah blessed her the day they stood her up (on stage - for the Jirtik dance)

I initially chose these loops based on the melodic weight and overall catchiness of them based on my western music aesthetic/ear. To me they sounded similar to modern western contemporary indie pop/R&B hooks and I took sections that would work best in that format. I then placed these loops into a loose arrangement based on what would flow best in a contemporary western pop format. Because the music performed by the Aghani Al Banat groups consist of purely vocal and percussion instrumentation this meant that once I had settled on a very basic arrangement I could then play around with bass lines that worked both rhythmically and melodically with these chosen loops. The loops dictated where and what I would play as they were already singing in a particular scale and rhythm.

My basic process was to find three or so melodic bass lines that would all individually work with the chosen loops and then 'scan' through these using Ableton's live loop playing functionality to see what worked best as more traditional western 'verse', 'chorus' or 'bridge' ideas keeping things as simple as possible in the process. Once I settled on an arrangement that worked I then added extra keyboard and guitar lines, played using samples inside the Ableton software to enhance the differences between sections - making choruses stand out more from the verses and accentuating the otherworldliness or 'sideways' turn of the bridge section. When I was happy with what I'd done I put the track into a group of 20 or so other unfinished ideas all of which I played to Devin Abrams when we 1st started working together in early 2017. Bloodlines was one of the 8 tracks

highlighted by Devin as a track to pursue. We then worked on refining the overall arrangement of the track and getting the sonics of the tune to a standard where we felt confident to move onto the next stage which consisted of finding vocalists to collaborate on the track.

The first person I approached for Bloodlines was Wellington singer/songwriter/producer Estère who I had first seen on Youtube performing one of her own compositions in the Auckland Museum with 3 classical musicians from the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra. I was literally blown away by both the music and performance so wanted to send her a track to work on. Thankfully for me, after a bit of back and forth, she agreed and we ended up working together in Wellington at Devin's home studio in Island Bay.

Estère's lyrical approach centered around rising above set human definitions such as gender, race, religion and nationality/place - and focusing on the things that are universal to all humans. Things that unify us rather than divide us as a species and not settling for living in a world where the divisions seem to be more important than the commonalities. This was inspired by the idea behind the overall project itself rather than the specific lyrics of the Aghani Al Banat performers used in Bloodlines - although Estère was well aware of what they were while writing

seeds blow across the border line
over the boundaries we define
and I know I can make it
if we breathe higher than fear

I want to hammer at the stakes
until these roots begin to shake
and I know I can make it
if we breathe higher than fear

These melodic lines were written around the existing melody in the Aghani Al Banat loop that represented the chorus idea. We both agreed that the hook was incredibly strong and that it would be good to keep that musical theme running through the English language sections that made up the verses. Also, from a musical perspective, we already knew this melody worked with the music as the music was written around the Aghani Al Banat line.

The second New Zealand artist I approached was a young female MC from Auckland called JessB who I was made aware of when a friend sent me a link to a video of her performing live in an Auckland nightclub. Her voice was huge and her performance was pure, honest and extremely powerful. Whatever she was saying, I believed her. Unlike Estère, JessB was a bit more a gamble in the fact that she really had no frame of reference for the type of music I sent her - her current musical diet consisting predominantly of Hip Hop - which meant she was really outside of her comfort zone while writing. However, a situation like this, as I myself have found when writing in unfamiliar territory, can also make for a very liberating experience and, in my opinion JessB did some amazing work based around her own personal interpretation of the Aghani Al-Banat lines used in the track.

As stated above the original lines used in the Aghani Al Banat loops in the chorus were -

Khalaataha wa 'Amataha jan
wal gaba'el leha itlamlamen

Her Aunties (from her Mother's side) and her Aunties (from her father's side) have come/gathered;
and the tribe have gathered for her

Jess interpreted this as a commentary on the support that the Women of the family provide for the younger generation's females by way of acting as an example for them

and being there to support them as they move from adolescence into Womanhood - into living their own stories, fighting their own battles and blazing their own trails, and the debt that's owed them for that support and sacrifice. She drew upon her own personal experience and wrote the following lines to compliment the existing source material -

Tryna be support or be a stronghold for those those I love//

But if I crack I crumble and there's bombs coming from above//

Foundations hold strong I ain't never leaving this//

My stamina it holds strong I ain't never leaving this//

My bloodline runs strong//

Tryna to find it for myself//

And every time I fall down- a warrior gon' help me up, yeah

Growing growing growing growing growing in my depth//

And every time I'm waking up I'm feeling like I never slept//

It's feeling like I never wept- cause I am one and will be kept//

I got this feeling in my bones that i will repay all this debt//

running running running running//

Tryna be support or be a stronghold for those those I love//

But if I crack I crumble and there's bombs coming from above

My bloodline it runs strong

Bloodline runs strong

2.6 'Haja' Case Study

<div dir="rtl">

حجة كولن كولن
حجة كولن كولن
حجة خلي بنية
ماشاء الله
حجة خلي وليدي
حجة ست البيت
اللهماشاء

</div>

This case study shows the production process for the track 'Haja' which, unlike the song 'Bloodlines', does not involve collaboration with any contemporary NZ artists. This is due to the fact that I have kept the original recordings of the Aghani Al-Banat singers and the song they are singing as the main focal point of the track.

The word 'Haja' is used in Sudan as a respectable term to address an older, more experienced female.[24] Taken literally it means 'a female that has performed Hajj' - the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca which is a mandatory religious duty that should be carried out at least once during a Muslims lifetime, health and finances permitting - but in the context of everyday Sudanese life it is simply used as stated above - a way of addressing an older, more experienced and respectable woman. Because of this and because of my own feelings of respect and awe for the Aghani Al-Banat performers who play in these recordings along with the predominantly female artists who collaborate on the bulk of the album, it is also the chosen title of the entire album.

This track is one of two tracks in the project where I have used the original Aghani Al Banat musicians and music as the main vocal line rather than using a New Zealand singer to write something new over the top. This decision was primarily based on the strength and 'hookiness' of the existing source material to me as an 'outsider' with a Western ear and also, once I'd layered my own music over the top the arrangement, the fact that it

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[24] Malik, *Exploring Aghani,* 81

sounded 'finished' yet entirely new already, compared to the original performance I had recorded.

The origin of this track comes from a Sudanese Jazz group called Al Dyoum Jazz group. (Aldyoum is an old neighborhood in Khartoum) The group was a male group who appeared in the seventies when Jazz music was booming in Sudan, but this group were different because they used a West African rhythm associated with Nigerian tribes that immigrated to Sudan and who became known as *'Falata'* (a somewhat derogatory Sudanese term meaning 'black' or 'African') This track is another my Wife Dana danced to at our wedding and is a song that most Sudanese would know.

Lyrically 'Haja' is a simple love song. The main 'hook' line contains a distinctive mixture of classical Arabic "Haja" and what Sudanese consider 'nonsense' lines "*Collen Collen*".

حجة كولن كولن
حجة كولن كولن
Haja Collen Collen
Haja Collen Collen

After talking to a number of modern Sudanese women from the younger generation and also given their 70s Jazz group source I strongly suspect "Collen" is actually a bastardisation of the English word "Calling" (so in essence "Haja Calling Calling")

The lines that constitute what I would consider a verse (although this is not completely the case in it's original form) are

حجة خلي بنية
Hajja khal-lee banaya

May Allah save the girl

حجة خلي وليدي
Hajja khal-lee walaydee

May Allah save the boy

Said this way they are prayers directed to Allah asking for protection for both the male and female lovers.

The song has a 'call and response' format, commonly found in Aghani Al-Banat where after each main line sung by the group leader, in this case Gisma, the rest of the musicians in the group respond with the line

اللهماشاء
Mashallah
God has willed it

This phrase in classical Arabic means "God has willed" or "as God willing" and is used to express appreciation, joy, praise, or thankfulness for the person that was just mentioned (in this case either the bride to be or groom to be) In Sudanese culture it is used as protection against the 'Evil Eye' or 'Ayn'. When you compliment someone as being 'beautiful' or 'blessed' you say "Mashallah" after this compliment is given so as not to expose that person to jealousy, envy or any negative feelings that may cause someone to give that person the "Evil Eye" either consciously or unconsciously. So it is both a powerful and often used phrase in the Sudanese culture.

In addition to this Gisma added some of her own lyrics in this version. In Sudan Gisma is considered one of the pioneers of traditional bridal dancing and therefore directs the bride into where the bride should wear the traditional costume at the beginning of each song. that being the case she added -

أربطي
Arbouti
Put your toub on

In traditional Sudanese bridal dancing the brides change clothes for every set of dancing, this could be as little as two sets all the way up to as many costume changes as they want. Usually they end one of the dancing sets with the track "Haja Collen Collen" hence Gisma's direction to 'put your toub (costume) on.

Unlike a lot of the other tracks included in this project I set out from the very beginning to keep as much as the source material in the final track as it sounded, to my western ear, like a song that people in the west would relate to as something new or modern, even in it's original, Arabic language form.

From an arrangement perspective I started the process by splitting the recording I had made of the live performance into 8 x 4-8 bar loops that could be playable in the Ableton Live software I was using. From here I used the live loop playing functionality of the Ableton software to 'play' the loops until I'll found an arrangement that would suit the 3-4 minute western pop/dance format I'm familiar with and which I wanted to utilize to make something new and exciting predominantly for myself but ultimately for a western audience.

Like all the tracks the Aghani Al-Banat performed in the original recording session made in the family living room, the track consisted purely of vocal and rhythm parts with no melodic instrumentation yet I could immediately 'hear' the bass line I wanted to underpin the entire track which was something that could be played over all the different loops I had used in my basic arrangement. This line was ultimately dictated by the vocal lines the Aghani Al-Banat singers used but also what the percussive instruments were playing.

Like many of my previous work with the Adults the bass line was an exploration of the use of a two note motif as I had always been intrigued by just how much melodic detail and complexity could by mined from the simplest of musical themes - the simpler the better - so I tended to gravitate towards bass lines that are as simple as possible leaving

all the colour and complexity to be filled out by the accompanying instrumentation, whether it be guitar, keyboards or voice and, in this case, the original vocal lines of the Aghani Al-Banat singers themselves.

I also included what I would consider a western modern dance kick pattern which was again, entirely dictated by the source material, predominantly the hand clap pattern which was simply hitting on the first 3 beats of a four beat pattern with a pause or break on the 4th beat. To me this instantly reminded me of something I would have heard in the Boiler Room dance tent at a Big Day Out festival from a dance act like Underworld, LCD Soundsystem, Primal Scream or even something heavier like the Prodigy. So basically my western musical references were from the heavier, more 'Punk' end of the electronic dance movement of the 90s and early 2000's. And this is ultimately what I heard as being the direction to move in as the most effective and stimulating way to accompany and enhance the original material.

Devin kept the basic arrangement and instrumentation I had written and then enhanced this by filling out my sounds with larger sounding samples (kick, hi-hats and synthesized bass and keyboard parts) He also got me to overdub new guitar parts, hand claps and finger clicks to help emphasize the 'Michael Jackson' feel of the instrumental breakdown section which in my opinion was an extremely effective production decision and added an extra sonic and rhythmic dimension to the track.

Reflections and Conclusion

As I initially suspected, when I first heard the Aghani Al-Banat performers play at our wedding in Khartoum, the Kiwi musicians whom I consider my peers and who I collaborated with and the music they make has more in common with the Sudanese musicians and their music, regardless of the differences in environment and culture. They sing about the strength derived from the support of their family members and we can reply in kind. They sing about the bonds of love shared between two people and we can all sing the same. They make music to celebrate being alive and being in love and we can't help but celebrate with them because that's what we do too. They make music to dance to and so do we. They tell stories that speak truth to power and we strive to do the same. Their music describes and helps them make sense of their world and that's what drives us too.

I was brought up in a working class family by British immigrants in a new(ish) city at the bottom of the world and as such I've always been attracted to the underdogs and unfortunates in my own society. I play rock'n'roll because I love music and it gave me a means of communicating how I saw the world without censorship or any care at all beyond expressing myself as purely and unfiltered as possible and it's a form of expression open to anyone in society regardless of class, race or religion. The Ghayana and the Aghani Al-Banat music they played encapsulated all of this and more for me. They had nothing to lose therefore they could say what they wanted. They had harder lives and histories than most of the guests at the wedding therefore they had a wellspring of emotion and experience to draw from in their performance of the music. Music has always been an escape from pain for me. A means to transcend my problems. For me the songs of the Ghanayaat are this idea in song form.

Through this process I have also reaffirmed and deepened my belief in the fact that collaboration opens doors to new and far more interesting forms of art than one could achieve on their own. The more fearless one is when experimenting, the more chance

they will be rewarded with that life affirming feeling of being part of something completely new, a part of something far bigger than themselves. In essence, as the people of Sudan would attest to, this is really the process of submission; it is the importance of realizing you are not in control of the final outcome. However, if you set your intention from the outset for doing something for the betterment of mankind, something that unifies us rather than differentiates and use that as a starting point you can be rewarded with more than anything you could have imagined possible. Which in my case, is the music on this album.

During the making of this album I had moments of soul-crushing doubt and days where I was close to calling the record company to let them know I had just wasted the entire album budget for nothing. But that was because I put myself in a position where I didn't know what the outcome would be and from doing so I feel I've helped create something completely new and positive in the field of art that I have chosen to dedicate my life to, the world of music. And I couldn't have done that if I'd tried to control the entire process.

By truly submitting and putting my trust in the collaborators on this album I've been lucky enough to be a part of making something that in my opinion is truly magical and something that as a music fan myself I can listen to and enjoy and get those tingles down my spine like I did when I first heard the Aghani Al-Banat performers play, like I did when as a kid I'd listen to my parents Beatles albums, like I did when I listened back to Shihad's Killjoy album upon completion, like I do when I listen to my favourite David Bowie album. To me 'Haja' sounds like magic because I don't quite know exactly how it was made – even though I know better than most. It's bigger than me.

If 'Haja' can make any sort of contribution to music and culture both here in New Zealand or back in Sudan (or anywhere else in the World for that matter) I'd hope that it encourages people to be a little braver when it comes to making music. I'd hope that it illustrates that by blurring or even completely breaking down the boundaries that stand between cultures, races, religions, genres and genders we potentially open ourselves up

to creating something far bigger and far more beautiful than what we can create when we are separated.

*"seeds blow across the border line
over the boundaries we define"*

-Estère, 'Bloodlines'

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Appendix 1: Collaborators

Gisma – One of the biggest proponents and best-known performers of Aghani Al-Banat currently working in Sudan and around the Middle East, Gisma trained under one of main the originators of the form, Hawa al-Tagtagah who is considered the 'Mother of Ghanayaat' (women who play Aghani Al-Banat) Gisma is highly regarded in the modern Sudanese culture and it considered a great honor to have her and her group perform at a family's wedding therefore her work is highly sought after.

Devin Abrams – Co-producer – I'd known Devin since his days as one of the main songwriters in the NZ band Shapeshifter and had always been a fan of his work. In more recent years, after leaving Shapeshifter, Devin formed his own solo/collaborative project called Pacific Heights which demonstrated his skills not only as an arranger but as an engineer and producer making him my number one choice to co-produce this project.

Estère – Both an artist and producer in her own right, I wanted to work with Estere after coming across a Youtube clip (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2deRC1lb0Y8) of her performing with classical musicians from the APO at the Auckland museum. A world class singer and performer with a distinct voice of her own from my hometown of Wellington.

Aaradhna – In my opinion one of the purest, most beautiful voices currently working in NZ. However, I was initially drawn to working with her based on her speech at the 2016 NZ music awards in which she gave away her hip-hop award believing that she had "been placed in this category, because I'm brown" I thought it was brave, honest and totally punk rock. She's also from Porirua which is close to where I grew up.

Chelsea Jade – One of my favourite songwriters currently working from NZ, Chelsea Jade (Metcalf) is a South-African born NZ singer-songwriter and producer based in LA, California. Her song 'Life of The Party' was, in my opinion, a world class piece of pop songwriting that still managed to communicate Chelsea's completely unique view of the world.

Miloux – An Auckland-based modern, jazz trained musician and producer, Miloux has featured in Fly My Pretties but it was her self–produced single 'Pocket' that got me interested in working with her. Her voice is sublime and her songwriting skills are fantastic.

Kings – Rapper, singer, producer and bona fide hit-maker Kings was named as 'Breakthrough Artist of the Year' at the 2016 NZ music awards after he shot to fame with his single 'Don't Worry 'Bout It' which spent 27 weeks at number 1 in the NZ singles chart breaking all previous NZ chart records. I was actually put onto him through a friend at my record company Warner Music and our collaboration ended up being one of my favourites on the album. A true talent. A true gentleman.

Raiza Biza – A Hamilton-based rapper/MC of Rwandan decent, Raiza's family left Rwanda when his mother was 6 months pregnant. After a childhood spent in the DRC, Zambia and South Africa, Raiza finally ended up in NZ with his family at the age of 13. His music draws on both his life in Africa and his experience growing up as a young African in NZ. His perspective is unique and his flow is sublime

JessB – Auckland-based rapper/MC JessB's phenomenally powerful voice is one of the highlights of the album. She has played the Auckland City Limits festival, released her first EP Set It Off to critical acclaim and seems to be taking the NZ Hip-Hop scene by storm. I was first introduced to her work via a live video on George FM's website which was truly mind-blowing.