

## Spirit in the Machine

New technologies are transforming our planet into a global music village where styles mix and Fusion creates a link between the traditional and the contemporary. London with its rich ethnicity is the perfect place to observe this musical trend. Describing their music as ‘no pop crap’, world-fusionists Fun-Da-Mental have collaborated with Qawwali group Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali, nephews of the great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and this collaboration culminated in a breathtaking concert at the East London Mela.



Aki Nawaz on stage



Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali

For the past twelve months Fun-Da-Mental have toured with Pakistan’s most exciting young Qawwali group Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali. In a powerful collaboration Fun-Da-Mental combine the soaring vocals of these young Sufis with thunderous beats and electronic soundscapes taking in an eclectic range of influences from gospel to punk.

Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali were disciples of the great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan who taught them the art of Qawwali until his death in 1997. Rizwan and Muazzam come from the direct family line of Qawwali vocal music (devotional praise and love songs based upon Sufi texts) that spans five centuries. After their success at the WOMAD festivals in Reading and Seattle in 1998, Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali released their debut album ‘Sacrifice to Love’ on Real World Records.

As a major force in the Asian underground scene in the UK for the past ten years, multi-cultural band Fun-Da-Mental, have always been both musically and

politically confrontational. Their originality lies in the manipulation of soundbites and samples as well as their political approach to music. Fun-Da-Mental's core member Aki Nawaz talks about Fusion, World Music and last but not least, samples and beats.

### *Fun-Da-Mental: the story*

Fun-Da-Mental was formed in 1991 specifically to play the Notting Hill Carnival, the biggest of its kind in Europe. As a multi-ethnic group they draw on Indian, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical forms but highly politicised as the name indicates. 'The name came to me in about 1989, I was managing Talvin Singh at the time and it seemed to make sense coming from an Asian background and a strong religious culture. But there is a lot of humour as well. Yeah, we are Mental and we do have a lot of Fun. There is a serious side and a humorous side to it, to balance it out; because of the intensity of what we do if we don't have humour we would go crazy.'



Fun-Da-Mental

Fun-Da-Mental, meaning 'basic principles' and 'foundation', is composed of six members from various musical backgrounds. 'We have Nawazish Ali Khan a classical Indian violinist, harmonium player and vocalist, then the Dhol and Tabla player Jash Pol Puri who is only 18 years old, Lloyd Sparkes on vocals and bass, Mush the rapper, Dee the DJ, who does also vocals and myself on keyboard, sequencer and vocals. That's Fun-Da-mental. But when we do collaborations we are usually two, Dee and me.' He adds: 'Fun-Da-Mental is actually more of a project than a band.'

About his musical career before Fun-Da-Mental, Aki says 'I am 38 years old and from my punk days I used to play in bands like Southern Death Cult (who became

The Cult) and have been through commercial music and big record deals with RCA and EMI. I was involved in bands like Getting the Fear who were influenced by ideologies similar to Charles Manson and Psychic TV. But they never really made sense to me. They were too dark, too arty, too pretentious and not just enough celebration. They weren't right and I was involved in them. But now I feel like I am going in the right direction.'

### *Qawwali and World Music*

Labelling their music as 'global chaos', Fun-Da-Mental has experimented with Qawwali and other traditional musical forms since 1996.

How did Aki get into Qawwali? 'Obviously it has something to do with my roots, my tradition, and my family. My parents have been listening to Qawwali music all their lives. My background is Punk music. The first group I ever saw was the Sex Pistols. I spent all my life in the Punk movement. And then slowly when we founded Nation Records, I got more into World music and traditional music, but I saw it in a very anarchist way.'

Qawwali, an Arabic word meaning 'recited', is the devotional music of the Sufis of Pakistan and India, the mystics of the Islamic religion. It is seen as one of the world's most passionate and vibrant forms of music, using music as a vehicle to enlightenment and inner knowledge (Gnosticism). The Chisti Qawwali ritual is recited or chanted poetry and usually performed on Saint shrines. The sacred performance is based on improvisation and trance-inducing repetitions. It is best known for the late, great artist Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

Social ambiguity has always been a central theme in Sufism and Sufis operate from a strong sense of the limitations of conventional social values. Therefore Sufism has often been persecuted over the ages, in different parts of the world: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when most Muslim countries were conquered by Christian Europe, European colonialists saw Sufism as a dangerous cult. The Sufi Sunni order has been heavily

persecuted because in their musical ritual - often held in private – men and women participate. Shi'ism and other Muslim reformers put Sufism into disrepute. Nowadays for Sufi groups in the West and especially in the USA it is not unusual for men and women to participate in rituals, musical performances and gatherings. In some Sufi groups women have taken on position of leadership.

Why have religions often tried to oppress music and dance? Aki explains: 'I think to a slight degree it is giving out the wrong idea because I don't think that religions do have a problem with music and dance. I think religions do have a problem which even people who are from a non-religious background have a problem with and that is when music becomes exploitative, mindless and like porn. I take an example like MTV. The only videos that you see day in, day out, are videos that exploit women. It is like somebody - a man - sitting in an office at MTV, and I think the problem is the male, who thinks 'Oh, I really like this. We want to show more videos like this where women are almost naked'. He is living out his sexual dreams. We are exploiting women and I think that is where the thin line is for me. And I kind of agree that music shouldn't be used, because music was used to abuse women even in Islam and in Christianity. And whenever I watch Indian films and I see the women all dancing around and the men all watching, it is almost perverse, it becomes porn. Some of the oppression against women actually rebound and come back to man. They are actually oppressing man. I went to Pakistan and I have got long hair, people would look at me and say 'That's a girl'. The men have oppressed their women in such a way that they have oppressed themselves and their love. They don't know how to love women. And then I sit down and talk to some women and ask them 'What do you think about the veil?' And they are saying 'I don't want these men to look at me. I used to go out without a veil and they look at me. If I have the veil they don't know who I am, I could be their mother or their sister, so they are not looking'. I think it is a context thing and you have to understand the sadness of the male opens up a whole big thing. I am not saying it is right, but I am not saying that it is right in the West. Because I think males are so sad. We haven't come to terms. We haven't balanced out what is right and wrong, if you look at porn and things like this. It is really bizarre. It is always mainly the domination over women. It is a lot deeper than we look into. I think all religions are

cool, it's just the interpretation and the human error, which are the biggest problem and the power base obviously. So it depends how deep you want to go into things. But generally when you switch on the TV more than likely music and dance is not used as a beautiful thing but more of an exploitative thing. I set down with Sufis and talked to them and they said 'Aki you don't understand, because you don't understand that music is very sexual and there are certain levels of music, which are kind of dangerous'. Maybe I can feel some of it but I can't feel all of it because they are mathematically working with music. They say that -4 dB or -40 dB is a very sexual frequency. So there must be something. Maybe we are just arriving of thinking about it, but maybe centuries ago people have already worked it out. But we always think that these times were uncivilised until we find things on the web. So why do we ignore them?'

When asked, if his music has evolved from a political to a more spiritual issue, Aki replies: 'I think the spiritual and the political are the same thing. The only reason why people in the West generally see Qawwali as devotional music is because they don't understand the lyrics. They just see it as spiritual, but it is political in its make-up. The whole politics of Qawwali is in their lyrics, not like party politics, this is a misconception. It's life's politics. People will talk about how culturally they are being restricted and not being able to love a woman and what they have to go through to love that woman. Spiritually it talks about the only way to get to God is through loving a woman. It is always talking about oppression. It can be oppression of love, political oppression, any kind of oppression. Aspects of politics that is what Fun-Da-Mental is about anyway. So it works well alongside Fun-Da-Mental.' He adds: 'I like the chanting of Qawwali and the trance element in it; the power of it. The flexibility of some of the singers who can touch really high notes and come back down into harmony. The spirit of Qawwali is very up lifting.'

What is his experience collaborating with Qawwali groups? 'In the past three years we have worked with various Qawwali singers from Pakistan. The first Qawwali we worked with was a hero to my parents. We started a collaboration with him - it was amazing because he was a real master - but he couldn't keep time with the machines.'

For twelve months now, we collaborate with Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali.’ Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali is made up of two lead singers (Rizwan and Muazzam), five secondary singers leading the choral response and vigorous hand claps, two harmonium players and a tabla player. ‘Last year we did a few concerts just as a little trial. After that I went across to Pakistan to record in a studio with them. They were absolutely brilliant and so we arranged this year’s tour to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Spain, France, Belgium, Norway, the Canary Islands, America and the UK. There is a real spiritual aspect to this collaboration that is to make the machines work with the Qawwali singers and also to make sure that technology does not hold back and restrict their spirituality. When we do collaborations it is really important to give the audience the time and especially young people to hear the traditional element, in this case the Qawwali and to keep the integrity of the tradition. This music is so important. So they start the concert and after 40 minutes we (Fun-Da-Mental) join them on stage. I always tell them to push the real thing, not just something just to please people. I told them: ‘Go really deep into the whole mathematics of Qawwali and give me the most spiritual aspect of it in this collaboration.’

But what are the mathematics of Qawwali? ‘The Qawwali singers work from a scientific approach, which is very spiritual thing, not a restrictive thing. Qawwali is not just simply reciting lyrics. The whole Asian music is based a lot on mathematics and repetition. But repetition is not just repeating the same thing in the same format. It moves within the scale; just slight changes from one chant to the next one. And it keeps changing until it reaches a high point, then it celebrates the high point and goes off into something else. There is a lot of mathematics involved especially in classical Indian music, i.e. tabla playing. The rhythmic cycle can be five, seven, six or  $\frac{3}{4}$ . It might change from five to seven time, to six or three time. Things change. I think it connects a lot more easily to the soul. So I say to the Qawwali singers: ‘I want you to do these cycles and I will change whatever you need me to change rather than you have to change and work within the simplest format which is  $\frac{4}{4}$ . Being brought up in the West, you learn music in a very simple way, you know  $\frac{4}{4}$ , if you go really experimental you might go  $\frac{6}{4}$ . We approach music very, very simply and so I try to learn as much as I can of the Qawwali.’

Classical Indian music is based on the concept of moods. The key elements are the 'raga' (also called tune, scale or composition), the melodic structure which creates a certain mood or emotion, the 'tala' which is the rhythmic structure and the drone, the background music. There are about 250 ragas and 360 talas in Indian music. Generally the musical performance is improvised and not composed.

'There is a kind of misconception regarding how to act in front of World music when it comes to the West,' Aki reckons. 'When we go to World music concerts here, people sit on chairs and applaud at the end. But to see the same music in the environment that it comes from is completely different. I have been to religious shrines in Pakistan where people are going mad, trancing out to music, dancing and head-banging.'

Aki concludes: 'All this fusion side of things has actually benefited young people and it has also created more space for traditional music. I think we served a purpose because now you have people like Zakir Hussein at the Royal Festival Hall where you see maybe 40% of an older generation there and 60% of young people.'

### ***Equipment stage and studio***

What equipment did Aki use for the stage set up at the East London Mela? 'My stage set up is very minimalistic. All I use for the sounds is four machines: two Akai S3000XL samplers, an Alesis DM5 drum module, a Novation bass station and a Yamaha MDF 3 sequencer. Then you are talking about 12-13 microphones on the Qawwali singers and musicians. The samplers have 10 outputs together, so that is 23 channels already. But for this concert 99% of my work has been programmed up before I went on stage and that is the only way for it to be smooth. I do much more live work from the machines when I am playing with Fun-Da-mental. I don't do as much with the Qawwalis, because the problem is if I make too many different noises from the bass station, it might knock them off key. So I have to be very careful.'

Did he experience any technical problems on stage? ‘Sometimes some of the Qawwali singers complain and say ‘Oh that was out of time’. But I didn’t have any major problems because I use a very simple stage set up.’

And his studio equipment: ‘In my home studio I have two Akai S3000XL samplers, two Ensoniqs DP/2, an Alesis DM5 drum module, a Novation bass station and a Novation Supernova (analogue sound modelling synthesiser), the latest E-MU Proteus 2000 sound module, a Yamaha MDF3 sequencer, two Dac ring modulator, a Roland SDE-1000 delay machine, two Behringer Autocom effects processor, an Alesis 3630 compressor, a Behringer Virtualizer effects processor, a Vesta Kaza Dig-411 digital delay machine, an Art Multiverb LTX effects processor, a Aiwa Dat machine, a Mackie 32-track mixing desk with 24 expander with 66 individual outputs, Tannoy system 800 speakers, NS10 studio monitors, a Mass 250 amplifier, two Alesis Adats, Shure SM57/58 microphones, a Philips CDR, Technics turntables and tape recorder. I am still working on the old Atari creator program. I really do love the Atari sequencer. People say you can do so much with Logic Audio or Cubase on Macs, but the Atari is so easy to use and you can work very quickly. It’s very efficient whereas you get much more into detail with Logic/Cubase. I think that for a long time people will really be worshipping the Atari.’ The workstation in the office equipped with a new G4/Logic and an Akai S5000sampler is set up to teach the young and unemployed, explains Aki.



Aki’s Studio Equipment



The two Ensoniqs DP-2 are his favourite equipment. ‘If I didn’t have the DP/2s, I would have a lot of people running after me for sample clearance. The DP/2s really saved my arse and they really make me be creative. But I just got the Novation Supernova and the EM-U Proteus 2000 sound module. They sound amazing, especially the Novation Supernova. I am not a very technical person, but that just



leaves me to experiment with anything. Technically I have not known what to do for the past ten years, yet I have actually done about 400 songs, four or five albums, remixes and producing for major labels.'

How does he create his particular sound? 'If I hear something good I put it through the Ensoniqs DP-2 and fiddle through different sound settings/effects or through certain filters of the sampler. Then I often put it through the Mackie desk. You almost change the nature of something really quick into something else and sometimes it works. It is just very flexible. There is actually not any rule. I'll take a guitar effect pedal and put it on a tabla loop, and it just works. I just try anything. The only restriction is your mind.'

What does Aki enjoy most in the work process in the studio? 'I am like a little kid. I enjoy all aspects of it. I used to work a lot with engineers, but I found that because they knew so much it would almost be a restriction. So I started to do a lot myself and try to get a complete picture. I love the whole aspect of it, I just wished I had more time. I need to experiment more. The technical side of things is the most important aspect for me at the moment, but I still have to be free to experiment.'

### *Sounds and samples*

Fun-Da-Mental's various ethnic backgrounds are not only perceptible in their use of pan-global samples but also in the treatment of political issues like racism and human rights in their songs. Their controversial single 'Dog Tribe' which was released in 1994, began with a recorded answer phone message left at the offices of Youth Against Racism by a member of an arch neo-nazi organisation, Combat 18. Targeted by the likes of the British National Party who were forced to apologise after printing their picture in one of their magazines with the caption 'a gang of Asian thugs'. Fun-Da-Mental's position is to confront racism and not tolerate it.

How does he find these kind of samples? 'You will be surprised, how many major record companies used to release these kind of records. On the album 'Erotic

Terrorism’ the first sample that we used is from a record which was released by EMI in 1979 where young children were singing ‘10 little niggers’. It is bizarre, because in your contract it says nothing will be defamatory, nothing will insult anybody. But they release records like that. Then I start to look at moral obligations of record companies to a certain degree. See what is important. And some people say that they are all into money and sometimes you think yeah it is true. They only seem to be in it for the money and they have no moral obligations. But do we need morality in music? I don’t know.’

At the concert Aki used outstanding voice samples of Mahalia Jackson and Lata Mangeshkar. ‘I came across Mahalia Jackson two years ago. I love Gospel singing and I wanted to make the connection between Qawwali and Gospel because from a spiritual aspect it is exactly the same. Their way of singing is different though. Mahalia Jackson sings from the throat and the Qawwali sing from the stomach. I also used a sample of a beautiful woman’s vocal, the famous Lata Mangeshkar, who appears in the Guinness Book of Records as the world’s most recorded artist. She is definitely the best female singer for the last thirty years in Bollywood (India’s Hollywood). I really liked the sweetness of the Gospel choirs, almost like a trance, and then Lata’s vocals over the Qawwali singers. But there is a real problem in finding a woman’s vocal, because the music business is so male dominated. There are ten Qawwali singers and no element of beauty in a feminine sense. So I brought in a sample of this brilliant female vocal which just knocks the Qawwali singers. They can’t even get there. To me it is brilliant, it is balancing things out. It is just breaking every rule but showing connections between different forms of music. If you listen to Fun-Da-Mental there are a lot more samples of vocals of Indian, South African and African chanting.’ He adds: ‘I must say I am a conscientious thief. We are very lucky because we travel around the world and wherever we go we try to pick up tapes, cassettes, bootlegs etc. It helps us to learn about different kinds of music. I listen to the weirdest music. I pick up little things, little phrases, symbols, little voices or rhythms and I just loop them. I am always listening out for rhythms and sounds.’

How does he work his samples? ‘I take a sample and then build on it. One

song is not completely sampled but there is a lot of sampling. The samples can be from many sources and it creates something completely new. I always religiously attempt to make sure I credit people, art styles and talk about some of the people I have sampled. Once I sampled a tabla player and I put it through masses of distortion, flanges, phasing and things like this. I just turned it all around to make it something totally different. But I had to sample ten to thirteen minutes of tabla playing to get there. I used to be a drummer and I just really like great rhythm. There are no rules for Fun-Da-Mental. Certain bands live within parameters, but to me if there is a common thread and a certain style in the production then we can break all the rules. We have had Blues singers, banjo players etc. There are some mad samples on the Fun-Da-Mental records.'

Where does his inspiration come from? 'It's from everything and anything. When I wrote the last album I started to do a lot of things very slowly. Then politically things started to change and got more intense on a global level. I was angry and frustrated again and so I made more crazy tracks, added more guitar. It is just mood. I have the concept in my head but I am not musical enough to lay it out on paper.'

Which sound does Aki pursue for the new Fun-Da-Mental album? 'I am looking for a very intense, majestic and epic sound for the next Fun-Da-Mental album. I have actually invested in a few more machines, the Proteus 2000, the Novation Supernova and some weird effect machines. I am not very good technically so everything is more of an experimentation. I am not competing with anything other than trying to discipline myself to work creatively as much as possible. Maybe programme some of the drums instead of using pre-programmed loops or program them up in order to get some movement going on in the loop. Things that I am doing people have been doing all the time. I am not doing anything special but I am trying to break every rule.'

### ***The Future***

The next Fun-Da-mental album is Aki's main priority at the moment. 'I did

six tracks with the Qawwali singers and other tracks with Siberian singers, South African choirs, South Indian peasant singers, probably a Bosnian choir, I might even get pure Gospel. And every single song is political but in a different language. They are talking about unjust systems, but it is not unnatural for them. At World music festivals nobody talks about the politics where the music comes from, but a lot of traditional and folk music have their roots in political oppression. Now I am about to go to South Africa doing a collaboration with a forty piece Zulu tribe. For me doing the African thing is as important as doing the Qawwali thing. I just find that working with different musicians makes the music of Fun-Da-Mental better. The naivete excites me. It's brilliant because you suddenly hear people doing things that you couldn't even imagine, but then it's reality. On the new album I want to keep the integrity of all the traditional forms of music within the fusion. I try to learn something from the traditionalists because I have everything to learn from them, they have nothing to learn from me. The album is more and more fusion and should be released by march 2001 which will be perfect if we do any concerts together or festivals, because a festival seems to be the best place to do this kind of collaboration. You have got a very mixed crowd there, young and old.

What does he think about new technologies like the Internet? 'I think the whole Internet thing is really interesting and there is no point being against it. But my bottom rule is make sure your machines work for you and they are not working you. You are working them and you make them as human as possible. You should not let machines control the feeling of the music. People have to understand that what you put into a machine is what you get out of it. If you have got no spirit going into it, you ain't got no spirit coming out of it. It is as simple as that. The Internet can be destructive or constructive. It depends on how you want to use it. The Internet: use it, abuse it in a good way rather than letting it abuse you.'

And what about MP3? 'Last week I was at a seminar where I saw some musicians writing tracks together, one in San Francisco and one in London. And I couldn't believe what was happening. But it was working and they were downloading things on MP3s. Technology to me, I am just totally frightened of it, but technology

has also a moral role. As computers get cheaper and people in the Third World will be able to afford them, they don't have to learn all that we had to learn to get where we are now. So we reach the same level.'

What is his philosophy? 'Oh, GOD'.

Fun-Da-Mental's experience collaborating with Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali demonstrates that today's music technology gives us the possibility to gain knowledge about music from other places and cultures, but also about our own culture and history. Will music give us the possibility to connect with our roots in a high tech age?

### ***Fun-Da-Mental's discography***

May	1992	Debut single 'Janaam – The Message/Righteous Preacher'
Nov	1992	'Ghandi's Revenge/Azaan - The Calling'
		'Peace, Love and War'
March	1993	'Wrath Of The Blackman/Sista India'
Nov	1993	'Countryman/Tribal Revolution'
April	1994	'Dog Tribe'
June	1994	Debut album 'Seize The Time'
Sep	1994	'Cointelpro/Mr. Bubbleman'
Oct	1994	'Gold Burger'
July	1995	'With Intent To Prevent The Cause Of Injustice'
Nov	1995	'Mother India'
Sep	1996	'GodDevil'
May	1997	'Ja-Shataan'
Feb	1998	'Demonised Soul'
April	1998	'Erotic Terrorism'
August	1999	'Why America Will Go To Hell'

***Equipment studio/stage:***

2 Akai S3000XL samplers

2 Ensoniqs DP/2 (parallel effects processor)

Alesis DM5 drum module

Novation Supernova (analogue modelling synthesizer)

Novation BassStation

E-MU Proteus 2000 sound module

Mass 250 amplifier

2 Alesis Adats

Yamaha MDF 3 sequencer

2 DAC ring modulators

Roland SDE-1000 delay machine

Vesta Kaza Dig-411 digital delay machine

Art Multiverb LTX 16-bit digital multiple effects processor

2 Behringer Autocom effects processors

Alesis 3630 compressor

Behringer Virtualizer effects processor

Mackie 32-track mixer with 24 track expander (66 individual outputs)

Atari creator and Logic on Mac G4

Aiwa Dat machine

Shure SM57 and SM58 microphones

Philips CDR

Technics tape recorder

Technics turntables

Tannoy system 800 speakers

NS10 studio monitors

copyright by yvonne bahn 2001