

the Shadow MAJLIS

What did early life look like for you Ali, did you grow up in Canada?

I did grow up in Canada. I was born and raised in Toronto, in the Greater Toronto Area. I was born in Toronto proper, but I did most of my growing up in Mississauga, Ontario just outside of Toronto and I was raised by Pakistani immigrants. I was the only member of the family born on Canadian soil. My brother was only a year old when my family landed and it was a lot less culturally diverse at the time when I was growing up, so, there were some difficulties with culture clash and racism and just feeling very confused because I was very much a member of my family, but I was trying to find my way in a western world and a western country and there were a lot of confusing moments growing up. I am grateful for it all though because there were a lot of great things about my cultural heritage from which I have been able to extract a lot of wisdom and it has been very helpful to my life. Conversely the West as well, the West has a lot of good qualities that have informed a lot of ideas that I have and philosophies and outlooks on the world. I am quite a fusion of the two and Toronto is a good place to do that because I am not alone. There are so many of us here in Toronto and elsewhere. There are a lot of multicultural centres around the world, but Toronto I think bears the multicultural capital of the world title. I have heard people refer to it as that. I don't know who is the authority on ordaining that on Toronto, but I feel as a Torontonians with the mix that I have had, not just in my life, not just Pakistani and the West, but I have been exposed to so many other cultures. I have friends from various cultures. I have learned a lot, I have eaten a lot of different foods, I have heard a lot of different languages, I have been immersed in a lot of cultural traditions just by existing in a place like Toronto which informs a lot of what The Shadow Majlis is about and this project is very much a reflection of my life of growing up in Toronto.

You've played in a few bands and projects over the years, do you have a favourite performance and if so, why?

That's a tough one. There's a few. The first one that comes to mind is when I played at Lee's Palace here in Toronto with my band Ariel. We played with a Japanese Tyko drumming group called Yakudo and that was incredible. Back to the fusion conversation, we as a band blended East and West and then we had this Japanese drumming troop added to the mix for the show and it was incredible. We had nine drummers on the floor and around the stage and the show was different in that they would do a piece, then we would do a piece, then we would do a piece together and then we would go back and forth so, when they were playing we would just sit down on stage and they would be on the floor doing their thing. Then when they would finish, we would stand up and do a song and then we would throw in collaborative numbers and then we ended it in a big collaborative epic finale. It was an incredible show! People still talk about it. I still have friends bringing it up from time to time, "Do you remember that gig?" It was really an amazing show. I am very proud of that.

When scrolling through my emails I stumbled upon a press pack containing a pack from "The Shadow Majlis".

First thing I do is pick three random tracks off an album if included, and listen to them all the way through; yes even if it is making my ears bleed. If two tracks sing to me I will then look at the artist. All "The Shadow Majlis" tracks sang to me on different levels and thus I approached for an interview, as I'd like to know more.

Thank you, Ali, for agreeing to an interview. I'm excited to be sharing you with a wider audience.

I have to ask why the name "The Shadow Majlis"; does it have Arabic origins?

Yes, it does have Arabic origins and I chose the name The Shadow Majlis because it combines multiple languages, which speaks to my identity. I guess what I am trying to do with this project is to fuse cultures and blend styles and try to find a name that represents the fringe. I like the word shadow because it suggests mysticism and mystery. Majlis means a gathering or a collective or a sitting room. So, for me it suggests a shadow counsel which I like because I feel like the ethos behind the project is about speaking from the shadows. If the shadows could speak, what would they say?

You have an extensive repertoire of instruments which you're credited with. When did you first pick an instrument up or use your voice to create art?

When I was 21 years old, I came to music late. When you think about how many of the musicians I have collaborated with, a lot of my friends and collaborators have been playing since they were children. I came from a background that didn't support music education. It was religiously forbidden. So, when I was old enough to move out and be away at university, I pursued music on my own terms in my own way and it came at the age of 21. I didn't expect to be a singer, it sort of just happened to be that way. I guess I was the only one that was willing to try. It was just me and my friend Pete at the beginning and that was it and I just started singing. There was no big revelatory event it was just out of necessity.

Another favourite is Kosmic. We played at Carleton University in Ottawa. The architecture students set up this fantastic party and we played that. It was just an amazing event! The way the architecture students had to reconstruct the interior of this building and it became this massive multiroom event space and we got to play that event in one of the rooms. It was amazingly done! Really really really fun! Lots of crazy created environments and them applying their architectural building skills and making weird environments. It was kind of like fashion in that wasn't necessarily a practical way to build, but it was very artistic and there was practicality too, but it was architecture and art, and it was temporary so, they had to build it and tear it down. That was the kind of beauty of its temporary nature, kind of like life. The event was called Kosmic. I loved the name too.

And of course, Lollapalooza '95 with Ariel was a standout thing. That was huge! It still is a big confidence boost if nothing else.

And I would be remiss if I didn't mention playing the 38th anniversary of Bela Lugosi's Dead with David J. We were playing outside and just as we started playing that song, these bats started flying around our heads and you can't make this stuff up. We were performing Bela Lugosi's Dead on this 38th anniversary with bats, actual wild bats just showing up and flitting around our heads! It was really, really cool!

Also the last Pigface show before the pandemic at Thalia Hall in Chicago. The lineup had so many greats on stage, it was really good fun!

Before we get into "The Departure", I'd like to ask about how you found out about FACTOR, and the process for getting funding for your album?

Many artists that I know have talked about Factor. Some of them have even benefited from receiving financial support/grants through Factor so, I decided to have a go at applying and see if I could be able to fund a serious project like this. Without Factor I don't think I would have been able to do the album the way that I did it and conversely also engaging with a person like David Bottrill. His involvement helped with the application and Factor's involvement helped with approaching somebody like Bottrill. It was in the conversation from day one that we were going to apply for grants and Factor being one of them and the only way I would be able to afford doing anything was if something happened and it did. I just found out through the grapevine. I guess that's the short answer of how I found out about Factor.



Now on to "The Departure" which David J says, "I believe that there are certain tracks and moments that act as portals into another dimension - I'm not being fanciful here!"

It really does feel like you are being taken on a spiritual and worldly journey.

How was it working with David Bottrill?

It was really great! It was highly educational. Clearly, he is a professional, top-level producer who knows what he is doing, and it sounds cliché, but he did the producer thing where he pulled the best performances out of me. He pushed hard when he needed to and took his foot off the gas when he needed to, he's very intuitive that way. He has a really good way of running a production. Everybody that came in to work with him and I were very comfortable. I was very comfortable. He had a lot of great ideas because the circumstances in which this album was made wasn't the easiest. I was emotionally in a difficult place, mourning my son and there was a lot of stuff going on, I had deadlines imposed by Factor that I had to work with, and I didn't exactly feel ready, but of course when is an artist ever ready? I really didn't feel completely ready, but I had a timeline and fire under my feet and Bottrill really helped with getting things going and helping me emote, find, and dig. He used certain techniques to get me to find melodies. One example is, as a Sufi musician I know a lot of Turkish and Persian songs, so I would sing Turkish and Persian songs on top of the music I had created, and I would massage those songs around to create melodies and I then fit words in and it would just evolve and morph from there, the starting point was that. It was an amazing tool to help get the juices flowing. He had a lot of little tips and tricks like that up his sleeve and guitar parts too, recording different ways, trying different techniques and methods. It was great! That's the long answer. The short answer is, working with him was really, really good! I feel this is the best work I have ever done. I am really proud of what we have made.

Any interesting story you can share during the process?

Lots of interesting stories. I went to Turkey and recorded some parts over there. I was there in February 2023 when the massive earthquake happened. The earthquake happened four hours after I landed. I landed at midnight and the earthquake happened at 4:00 a.m. So, after I landed, I went to sleep, everything was fine and when I woke up the country was in distress. It really coloured the trip, naturally. Massive tragedy like that is not fun, obviously, and it affected the mood. I was there intending to work with a specific artist who couldn't do it because of the circumstances. He is fine physically, but emotionally it was not the right time all of a sudden, so, I understood that and respected that, but another artist was able to between relief efforts. He made time to record with me and that really was something powerful and meaningful because as artists we stand and face these moments, this is when we get to work. This is when you really need to dig, dig deep and find something to say, there is purpose in it, and I really felt purposeful. I already had a purposeful feeling paying tribute to my late son and this grief tragic earthquake situation was something. The instrument that I recorded was a kamancheh with Kerem and it's a very, very sad sounding instrument and I really feel like it really captured the grief of the Turkish people and I'm glad there was a voice for it a spot for it amongst this album, which is about grieving.

Going to the recording process, did everyone involved record together or was it done in separate studios?

We did the bed tracks together as a foundation and then everything happened separately after that. So, the rhythm section was together, and the rest was not. It was put together in different locations. Soriah recorded in Portland, Olena did stuff in Kyiv, I did that stuff in Turkey, Mark Gemini Thwaite did stuff in L.A., Ravi Naimpally did his tabla from home in Toronto, he just did it from home because it saved on costs. He knows how to record tabla, he's a pro and he was able to just do it at home, so we did it that way and it sounded great, and I wrote my vocals as we went along because of the timeline I didn't have completed songs to start with, I had a whole bunch of musical sketches, probably thirty and we paired it down to the ten tracks that you see on the album and those were what we felt were the strongest of the thirty and we developed those. It was great to see Rakesh and David J. and I got to play a bit with them too, but we didn't record me, the recording at Union Sound was about capturing the bass and drums and getting those bed tracks down.

What is your favourite track on the album and why?

That's a question I can't answer. I can't have a favourite. It's like asking which one of your kids is your favourite. You can't answer that question. It's impossible.

"The Departure" seems to come from a deep emotional place. Is it fair to say this album has been a form of therapy for you?

Yes, it has. It has been majorly cathartic, you don't have to take my word for it, it's a known fact that art is therapeutic, art making is therapeutic. Music in particular has its healing qualities, and I am a sound healer so, of course, I find a lot of healing in sound and to create music and to find the expression was extremely therapeutic indeed.

You have a free space here. Is there anything you would like to say to new and existing fans?

Thank you! I am very grateful to all the support that I get and will be getting as I move through the world with this project and this music. It's all about the exchange that we have between artists and the audience, but I don't like saying "fans" because I find "friends" is a better word. The artists I loved growing up, I felt that they were making music for me, they were doing things that I would have done. There was something likeminded, there was something, I felt like I was cut from the same cloth, and I hope I can do that for people. I hope there are people listening to this, that can hear it and say "If I was to make music, this is what I would do" and I am honoured to be the one to do it and to basically represent us because I think we are in this together and just because I recorded it, I feel like I'm just a conduit for it and it has come through me and my "friends" or "fans" who are resonating with it. We're on the same wavelength and there is no separation between us, I just happen to be in this role and I am very proud to be and happy to be in it and I am grateful to those who recognize that.



Photo by Justin Minister (Secondhand Daylight)

Thank you, Ali, "The Shadow Majlis" for taking your time to speak with me.

If you haven't already you should check out the album "The Departure". It really is a soul inspiring, powerful, harmonious masterpiece of a debut.