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ROCK IN A HARD PLACE

BY DANIEL J. GERSTLE

How Bashar Haroun is striving to keep metal alive in Syria

‘C’OMON, SYRIA!” BASHAR HAROUN, THE 28-YEAR-OLD SINGER OF heavy metal band Reaction, calls out from the stage to the restless crowd at Al Zahraa Cinema in the Syrian coastal city of Lattakia. “We’ll show the world that even in this crisis we still believe in metal.” Over the past decade, Haroun has become a driving force for the Syrian heavy metal community. He has run several bands, the Rock Cave concert series, and a recording studio during the crisis. While many Syrian artists have fled the violence in their homeland, Haroun’s concession has been to move from his hometown of Aleppo to the safer (relatively speaking) Lattakia so he can continue producing music inside Syria. Haroun, like his band and co-producers, doesn’t want to talk about politics. He just wants to make loud, furious music, and help Syria’s growing metal community go global.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HAZEM ABDUL RAOUF

While relatively small, this August gig in Lattakia marked the start of a new chapter in Haroun's efforts to continue his work in the face of extreme barriers. And more concerts would follow, with Haroun fronting yet another band, Slumpark Correctional.

"To be a metalhead in Syria," Haroun tells *ROLLING STONE*, "is to be surrounded by many dangers. I'm just a guy who still believes in music, especially metal and rock, and I also believe that Syrian society can lead an important movement in this area and join international metal, maybe just like the U.S.A., Norway or Sweden. I'll never stop before I get this done."

BORN AND RAISED in Aleppo, Haroun was 13 when Metallica's *ReLoad* (particularly "The Memory Remains") introduced him to metal. He knew right then that he would make music. He just didn't know how.

Syria – despite a thriving creative scene – was not culturally open to metalheads. But Haroun found a guitar and quickly learned to play several hard rock and thrash staples, before diving right into doom and death metal. He felt like the only kid from his neighborhood into this controlled noise.

"I was kicked out of school because of the way I looked," he says. "It's like society wants you to walk with closed eyes only on their path. If you open your eyes then you're different, and if you're different then you're dangerous. The first day I met a metalhead friend it was like an oasis in the desert."

As Haroun tackled his first thrash riffs in the Nineties, a band now considered the founders of Syrian oriental metal were starting to make waves in Aleppo; Nu.Clear Dawn. Around 2005, they were joined by The Hourglass, based in nearby Homs and led by guitarist and writer Rawad Abdel Massih, soon to be an ally of Haroun. The Hourglass landed cameos from Savatage members Jon Oliva and Zak Stevens on their debut album. Weaving traditional heavy metal spiced with thrash with theatrical vocals, The Hourglass showed local

kids like Haroun that there was a future in homegrown Oriental metal.

"In those days, it was very hard to be in a metal band because the government had a strong hand over metal bands and fans," Massih says. "There were huge misconceptions about us – assuming incorrectly we were into Satanism or drugs." Plus, he adds, social media and other online platforms for artists were not so prevalent in Syria at that time.

Many bands, Massih explains, would do some cover shows, record a few originals, and then decide they would have to leave

material and to play their own material at concerts, and then hit it big time to tour Europe," says Syrian metal journalist Sam Zamrik. "But Bashar Haroun and Orion gained their influential reputation due to the concerts they played and organized in Aleppo, and now in Lattakia. Haroun is a big – probably the biggest – name in organizing metal and rock concerts [in Syria]."

"I call us the survivors because it was really hard to play metal [in the early 2000s]," says Massih. "Bashar and other bands were active in Aleppo where black metal had a fan base. Some believe black metal music and culture hurt metal's position in the country."

Most lovers of black metal at the time kept it secret – behind walls or beneath headphones. Or they just stuck to more mainstream genres. Haroun, though, loved the energy of thrash, doom, and death, shifting his taste from the big names of the West to the more artisanal machine-gun bass drums of Scandinavia. Peter Tägtgren – founder of the bands PAIN and Hypocrisy, who ran a studio, produced and mentored other

Band Aid

Above: Haroun with the other members of Reaction in Lattakia, where he currently lives. Left: Onstage with Hisham Sabboh of Contradicted, one of several bands Haroun is working with online.

the country to fulfil their creative ambitions. Or they'd simply give up. Haroun formed his

bands, played drums, bass and guitar, and was renowned for his close relationship with his fans – was, he says, "my idol." "He played every kind of music and kept working all the time."

Heavily inspired by Tägtgren, Haroun began to model his work in much the same way. His goal was to create not only an influential band in Aleppo, but also a metal-friendly infrastructure. He set up a studio – U.Ground – and The Rock Cave, a rehearsal and performance space dedicated to heavy metal.

But just when it seemed Haroun had found a possible solution to the many problems faced by Syrian metal bands, a political crisis was brewing.

IN ORION'S "OF FREEDOM AND a Moor," originally recorded in 2008 when Syria was still peaceful, Haroun growls over light keyboard backing and a dazzling guitar hook: "Streets are boiling blood/Madness and chaos insane/Some are asking for their

rights/And some are just enjoying the flames/The more we're deceived/The more we slip inside their dirty Moor/For freedom through war/We lose our reason and chances no more/We will stand as one/Together and on our own/Nothing but our unity/Nowhere but our home." At the time, he was referring to Gaza. But two years later, with a little tweaking, the song was all too relevant to Haroun's homeland.

Not long after he wrote that song, Haroun says the Syrian police chose to single him out for arrest, closing his studio and seizing his equipment – perhaps as a warning to the growing metal movement. Ultimately, it only served to boost his profile, but at the time, spending two-and-a-half weeks shuttling between several different jails, he didn't know if he would survive the mental stress. "You don't know what's going to happen," he says. "You're not sure if your parents know where you are. Besides the humiliation of getting taken, you're afraid you could face anything and you just don't know what's going to happen."

"It's like society wants you to walk only on their path," says Haroun. "If you're different, then you're dangerous."

The charge was "Encouraging a Satanist movement." The evidence? A poster of Norwegian black-metal artist Varg Vikernes [a.k.a. Burzum] and a T-shirt with skulls on it. "They took me out in front of the neighborhood like a criminal," Haroun continues. "Then people in town started creating stories about me."

Haroun stresses that his music – with its macabre themes and artwork – explores humanity's toughest questions, but has nothing to do with Satanism. Nevertheless, neighbors spread rumors that this was somehow evidence he was luring youth into black magic and the dark arts.

"[The police] let me out, saying, 'We're gonna take you back real soon. Don't feel safe! Family, friends, old musicians, and society all looked at me like, 'You see! We told you, you have to grow up. Be realistic. Stop this bullshit.' Some people changed direction when meeting me in the street. It really destroyed me financially and broke my morale. After that, I tried to stay away from metal and live like a normal person. But I couldn't. I discovered that metal is the only place where I belong. So I started over, like I always do. People said, 'Are you out of your mind?' They didn't know the big show was about to begin."

WE WERE TRYING TO unite Syrian musicians back in 2012," says Ronnie Hammade, an energetic, witty bassist who helps Haroun and the studio produce shows. "So we created something called the Underground Syrian Festival. We had 11 bands – both big and small names in Syria. Like Tarek Al Fahham, the 50-year-old drummer, who's played drums all over the world, playing with an 18-year-old guitarist [and future bandmate of Haroun], Jawdat Al Atasi.

"All they want is for their voice to be heard," Hammade continues. "They want the world to know that Syria can make ass-kicking music. We want to show the world that we're talented, that we're not ignorant Arabs who still live in tents and ride camels. A festival is an amazing idea. We have the talent, but we're not united. We're trying our best, but without support even the greatest achievements turn into ashes and dust."

When asked why metal is so important to people who could potentially face such harsh consequences for supporting

munity, which had for so long explored music lamenting the horrors and hypocrisies of war, felt caught in the crossfire. While the conservative government hadn't made life easy for alternative artists, extremist rebels – flooding into the country to fight alongside the once-moderate opposition – also condemned them. Many artists moved to Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon in an attempt to continue their work. But Haroun and The Rock Cave pushed onward, even after fighting broke out in the city. Haroun insisted they had to keep doing the shows to prove they were still alive, that the crisis didn't have to change everything. "We have to stay alive and keep the schedule," he would say.

They managed to stage another three gigs. Those final concerts brought a vital sense of community to a city that was falling apart, and to youth who were united in their desire not to be forced to fight. But it had reached the point where even Haroun had to accept that the situation in his hometown had become too dangerous. It was time to move.

it, Hammade explains those consequences are actually part of the reason.

"We get sick of the strict society we're living in and want to go way beyond the stupid traditions. We found that metal is the only music that lets us actually express what's inside of us."

Haroun knew from the start that Syrian authorities and the conservative community would have trouble with him. But even leaders and musicians within the heavy music community saw his work as wildly quixotic.

"Every phenomenon," Haroun says, "when it starts, people make fun of it. In 2003, most of the old musicians said this was foolish. Then when it gets more serious they start fighting it. Many tried to stop the studio thing. But in 2011, something important happened. Finally they accepted that it's real and started dealing with it. The musicians my age and older, even the legends like Tarek Al Fahham, one of the most important jazz drummers, didn't just support us; they joined the family, just like excited kids, and offered all they have."

BY MID-2012, THOUGH, THE Syrian uprising – pitting government forces against a growing opposition movement – had torn Aleppo apart. And the metal com-

"Everything stopped because war started inside the city," Haroun says. "Now I'm not sure where I'm heading, but I'm trying to do something similar here in Lattakia. All I know is I can't stop, at least not now."

This summer, he moved to the coast, and shifted The Orchid, Orion, and his melodic death metal group Contradicted online so he could continue to collaborate with other musicians wherever they had traveled. He also joined Reaction – and, more recently, power outfit Slumpark Correctional – as featured vocalist and guitarist. Next, he hopes to put the finishing touches to Noisecore Records, a label which can distribute these projects beyond the Middle East. Once again, he's making the best of a shitty situation.

"One thing I feel proud of in my life," Haroun says "is not really about music but about the way I think my friends and most of the people that I've met in my life see me. They call me Mr. Positive. I get a phone call from a friend every now and then – from my friends who are now outside Syria, in Turkey or the U.A.E. or anywhere else. They send me messages saying: 'Hey Bash, I was talking to a friend yesterday,' – things like this – 'and I remembered how you always make things look so positive, so I did it, too.' That really makes me feel proud; like I really made something here."



FRONT TOP: IZ PHOTOGRAPHY; HAZEM ABDUL RAOUF