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Big Kitty Delves For Gold, Muslimgauze Channels Dubstep

by Ernie, Paik
April 6, 2016

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Big Kitty is as odd as always, Muslimgauze dubs Middle Eastern angst

Big Kitty

Better Than Gold

(Teaberry)

The arrival of the new album, *Better Than Gold*, from Big Kitty is bittersweet. You see, it's the first album released since Clark Williams—the man behind Big Kitty—moved to Sebastopol, California from Chattanooga, after establishing himself with his off-kilter quasi-folk offerings on the short list of the city's most imaginative and charming singers and songwriters.

While previous releases featured full-band configurations (Florence) and electronic whimsy (TR-002), *Better Than Gold* strips things down to a bare simplicity, with songs recorded live with no overdubs; three tracks are a cappella, while the others feature either acoustic guitar or banjo. If you've not experienced the joys of Big Kitty, Williams offers clever and magical songwriting with modernized folk tales, delivered with his distinctive voice that is deep, with a slight reedy quality.

Better Than Gold features an assortment of odd stories, including "The Ballad of Almond Robin," sung to the tune of "Fair & Tender Ladies," concerning a talking lobster who saves a person's life by a salad bar,



and “I Didn’t Kill Elvis,” a bizarre dream with a surprise genealogy. “A Father’s Warning to His Son” is a cautionary tale about a hay-stacking accident caused by being distracted by a smartphone (“If you own an iPhone, you surely will die”), while “Two Little Girls” takes a dark turn, where the titular schoolgirls set off fireworks and allow the blame to fall on two boys who are then accused of terrorism.

“The Ballad of the Lost Levels” is a fictional account about the creation of the sequel to the video game Super Mario Bros. that was known for being punishingly difficult, and it becomes a story about adversity and inspiration, with the lines “I made this Mario as hard as life / You’re going to fail, but just don’t stop / Let Mario be your guide, and you’ll come out on top.”

One of the highlights is the upbeat, tongue-twisting “Backward Knees” about a nanny goat, complete with bleating, and the 10-minute sprawling epic a cappella track “The Ballad of the Queen of Ancient” features time travel and an orangutan and giant mouse named Jesus who re-populate an empire with people created from grass and raisins.

Once you’re a Big Kitty fan, nothing else can scratch that itch, and Better Than Gold comes as welcome as a phone call from an old friend.

Muslimgauze

Abyssinia Selasie

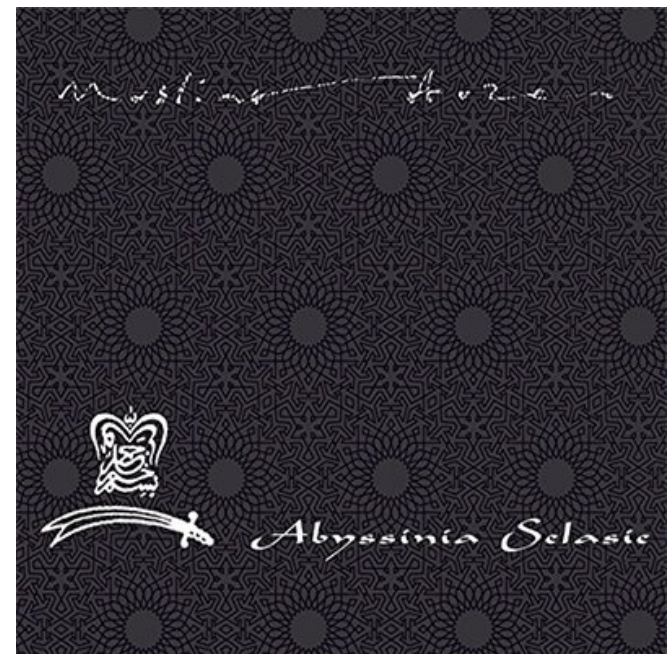
(Staalplaat)

The case of the late British musician Bryn Jones—the solo artist behind Muslimgauze—is an unusual and astounding one. After being profoundly affected by the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982, his calling was to create a form of musical protest with sympathies clearly siding with Palestinians (title examples: The Rape of Palestine, Vote Hezbollah), and some may find it odd that Jones never visited the Middle East and was not a Muslim himself.

His life was cut short at the age of 37 in 1999 due to a rare blood infection, but he left behind several lifetimes worth of material: over one hundred albums, plus unreleased material that’s still being plundered today.

As conflicts unfolded in the news, such as the deadly “Black Monday” Temple Mount riots of 1990 or the 1994 Hebron Massacre attack at a West Bank mosque, Jones would respond with his distinctive music, made from tape loops and analog equipment with heavy, infectious rhythms, synthetics, samples from Middle Eastern sources, and hand-struck percussion.

Separating the political views from the music, when listening to Muslimgauze, is not always simple, although the political expressions were primarily done as dedications or through album or song titles. However, it’s easier to do so for the recent archival release *Abyssinia Selasie* than most, bearing a deep Jamaican dub influence, hinted by the title.



A few tracks have been previously released on the double-CD version of *Syrinjia*, and certain elements including vocals and rhythms had been used on other songs. "Arab" and the title track come straight from the King Tubby playbook, with a deep bass grooves, reverberating beats and echoing notes, and "Benzedrine Wallah" has a prominent rhythmic tug and vinyl-record crackle with a clear vocal sample of a woman singing in Arabic. "Mea Culpa" is one of the album's more interesting tracks, with the sound cutting in and out abruptly, enhanced by static blasts.

Abyssinia Selasie works just fine as a dub album or as part of the vast, complex, controversial catalog of Muslimgauze.

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Amani Chattanooga

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Binji Varsossa

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Cancun Restaurant Downtown

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Chattanooga Choo Choo

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Westin Alchemy Bar

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No Shave November Finale

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