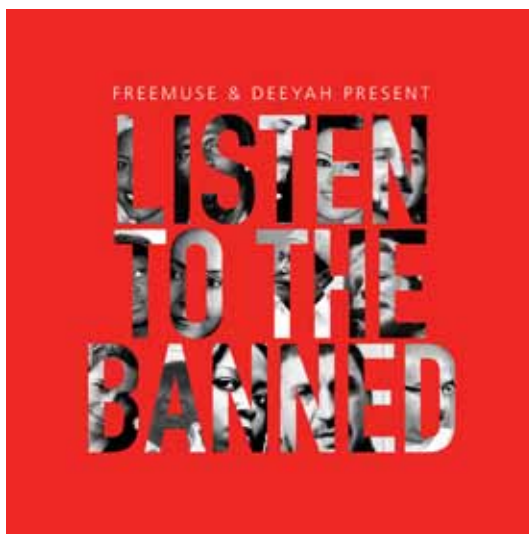


CD Review

A Megaphone for the Disenfranchised

Kjell Skyllstad Editor in Chief

“Music is life. It is devotion. It is the voice of history, culture and tradition, the purity and honesty of music makes it among the most powerful languages that speak to us all, regardless of socio-economic background, irrespective of racial, political or cultural identity, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Music speaks to our emotions and to our core as individuals. This very direct and powerful form of expression can make music and its practitioners the target of those who fear what music can invoke in people and therefore has become an artistic expression that many want to silence through different means.”



These very engaged lines introducing a CD newly released by Freemuse, an organization of musicians, journalists, researchers and human rights activists advocating freedom of artistic expression, were written by Deeyah a Norwegian born artist and civil rights activist of Pakistani origin. At an early age she started on her career as a musician, participating at the age of twelve in the project Resonant Community working with immigrant artists for intercultural dialogue and conflict transformation through music.

Coming from a Muslim family and having chosen music as her profession, Deeyah has had to dodge severe criticism and even persecution, suffering threats and being attacked at one of her concerts. This made her leave for the US where she now devotes her time as an advocate of human rights and freedom of expression in cooperation with Freemuse. This CD is a result of this cooperation, giving voice to fourteen artists living in Asian, African and European regions and countries who share the same humiliating experiences in their artistic lives.

The songs are born out of personal experiences of religious persecution, banned performances, sexual abuse, ethnic discrimination, cultural marginalization, and social exclusion. There is even an example of a song becoming an unofficial anthem of protest against an oppressive regime. In spite of this background the character and message of the music is not one of bitterness and revenge. It is a plea for justice and an appeal for solidarity, a forceful tool for empowerment and social change.

Daniel Barenboim, the world famous conductor and peace activist sums it up in his description of the contribution from Cameroon: “ His songs constitute a cultural megaphone by which the disenfranchised and politically endangered can vicariously exercise free speech.” These are voices that require to be heard.

Freemuse and Deeyah: “Listen to the banned” 2010 Grappa Musikkforlag at www.grappa.no and www.freemuse.org.

Music Star Deeyah Speaks Pride and Multiculturalism in Norway
as interviewed by Eva Fernández Ortiz of the Women News Network (WNN)

From: womennewsnetwork.net/2011/11/14/deeyah-pride-multiculturalism-norway/

(WNN) Oslo, NORWAY: As Norway’s 32-year-old right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik looked out at a Norwegian public courtroom in Oslo, Tuesday, November 14, 2011, he made a formal statement before the court in an attempt to place himself at the head of a “resistance movement” against immigrants and multiculturalism in Norway.

In spite of Breivik’s attempt, Norway’s Court Judge Torkjell Nesheim stopped Breivik from completing his statement. Breivik’s court appearance was the first public one made since his arrest and confession to the killing of 77 people during his July 22, 2011 attack against pro-immigrant advocates inside Norway.

“My goal is that the hearing be carried out with dignity, not least out of consideration for the plaintiffs and survivors,” said Judge Nesheim in an interview with Norway’s daily newspaper, Dagens Naeringsliv, one day before the court date. Lining up in freezing weather for over four hours in front of Norway’s public courtroom at the Oslo City Court (Tingrett), 300 seats were made available for journalists; members of the press; families of the deceased and injured; as well as the public. Under high security the seats were made available on a first-come-first-serve basis.

Before Breivik’s violent attack against Norway’s multiculturalism only one death and 13 injuries have taken place from politically based attacks in Norway since 1979.

To find out more about the immigrant experience in the country WNN (Women News Network) journalist Eva Fernández Ortiz talks with Norway-born music celebrity Deeyah, producer of the acclaimed album, ‘Listen to the Banned,’ and winner of the 2008 Artventure’s Freedom to Create Prize through a nomination by Freemuse — the only global organization dedicated to musicians’ and composers’ rights to “freedom of expression.” In 2011 Deeyah launched a searing and ongoing website – Memini (Remembrance) that acts as a memorial to immigrant women worldwide who have died from honor violence.

Identifying herself as a Norwegian who grew up inside Norway but “currently lives outside the country,” Deeyah comes from a diverse Sunni Muslim background with Punjabi/Pahtun parents — which includes a mother and father who are both first generation immigrants to Norway. Her family heritage spans generations with a proud cultural background that is a mixture of Persian, Afghan, as well as Pakistani descent.

Deeyah’s album “...is a collection of songs from artists around the world who have faced censorship or had their music banned.” “These artists and other like them in the different corners of the world must have the right to exist and freely express their feelings and opinions through their art,” says Deeyah. “We can not allow our freedom of expression to be compromised. Music must not be silenced.” Speaking from her own personal feelings and insights and as a member of an immigrant family living inside Norway, Deeyah also talks about Norway’s nationwide struggle with multiculturalism. . .

WNN: You were born and lived for many years in Norway, what is your opinion on the July 2011 violent killings? The killer argued that he was protecting Norway and Western Europe against Muslims and multiculturalism, how big is the presence of the Muslim community in Norway? How do you think multiculturalism influences society?

Deeyah: Extremist violence of whatever background is detrimental to us all. The enormity of the hatred this man carried with him inflicting such violence and

carnage on the people of Norway was extremely shocking to us all. It is nothing short of evil actions, evil intentions with gut horrifying wrenching consequences.

The severity of the shock and pain this man has brought on all the people of Norway could have broken the spirit of Norway and its people by crushing its innocence with such violence but instead what fills my heart with such joy, pride and admiration is the reaction of the Norwegian people and Norwegian leaders being one of love, unity and deep courage.

As our Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg mentioned we will react to this not with fear, hatred, violence or revenge but instead with more democracy, more humanity and more openness. This is the greatness of Norway that I love, admire and support with all my heart.

I agree deeply with what so many have said in Norway that the world that hate cannot drive out hate — only love can do that . Darkness cannot drive out darkness — only light can do that; and that if one man can unleash this level of violence just watch how much love all of us can give and stand for.

The response of the Norwegian people is tremendously inspiring proving that we will not be broken by this and we will not be provoked to resort to violence but instead we will stand up for human rights, for freedom of expression, for equality, for democracy and peace and all the values that we all hold so dear to our hearts.

My heart is broken for the ones who have lost their nearest and dearest in this tragic event. I whole heartedly support and wish to honor what the youth on Utøya (Norway) were there to celebrate and what they believed in. They believe in a society that is open, accepting and unified in its diversity; a society that believes in the future of a multicultural Norway. I believe the outcome of this brutality will be the exact opposite of what the killer intended.

What is important is to not look away from the fact that many of his beliefs are shared by thousands of people across Europe and that is something worth looking at and openly addressing; not for fear of such violence but for the hope of overcoming these prejudices and hatreds.

His actions do not reduce or excuse the difficult conversations and questions we do face within all our communities, but rather highlight the real need to openly address the challenges we all face together.

The Muslim community in Norway consists of around 100,000 people. Like most other countries in Europe, Norway is a multicultural society and like others it has experienced its own growing pains and challenges when it comes to fostering a positive, open and accepting multicultural society.

On a state and official level Norway has always had a real commitment to nurturing an inclusive society, the will is definitely there and judging by the response of unity and togetherness from the Norwegian people in this painful time I am very hopeful that Norway might find itself at the forefront of moving this dialogue forward in a positive, fearless and productive direction, setting a very positive example for the rest of Europe as well.

Groups like the EDL (English Defense League), BNP (British National Party) and their equivalents in Europe have been gathering momentum as well as figures like Geert Wilders have been gaining popularity in Europe. I feel the success of such populist voices who are trying to appeal to a sense of lost national identity is a part of creating a divided society rather than an inclusive one.

Also with several prominent mainstream European leaders declaring that multiculturalism has failed and using rhetoric that resonates with a right-wing perspective when discussing multiculturalism I feel is not useful. Similarly we have seen what I would call the equivalent right wing within Muslim communities in Europe also exercising similar tactics of division, segregation and fear mongering fanning further fear of each other. Both sides if you will seem to fear each other in the very same ways fearing their identity being compromised and changed by the presence of the other and the extreme factions within both sides seem to act out their fears of each other in the same violent, divisive and discriminatory ways.

In my view this is contributing to the widening gap between the Muslim communities and white Europeans.

I feel we are not taking the time to really understand each other. The majority of us on all sides wish and hope for the same as each other which is a safe, enriching and peaceful coexistence.

However this mutual fear, mistrust and suspicion of the other is preventing us from really moving this dialogue forward. It allows us to build walls between people and accept that we should lead segregated and parallel realities. Instead of becoming a more unified open, informed society where we support our common humanity instead of holding on to what the world looked like pre immigration, this is not realistic. Instead we could encourage dialogue about what it means today to be Norwegian, to be English, to be Dutch, French and re-imagine a new identity that includes all of us.

Moving the conversation away from the right wing, extremists in both communities is needed, those voices should be acknowledged but should not get to be the anchors of the dialogue.

Diversity is a reality now and pretending like Europe can go back to it's pre-immigration state or for immigrants to expect Europe to become a copy of the

countries left behind is not only unrealistic but a bit delusional. I believe firmly that diversity is strength and not a weakness.

For any real progress to be made in this context the conversation about these issues will need to become less negative and become more honest instead, even if that's uncomfortable at times. However there has to be a real will to address this. We also need to take the dialogue out of the hands of groups and individuals who shut down conversation and take topics off the table instead of allowing it all to be openly addressed.

I believe we need to move away from such reactionary and restrictive representatives. People have to feel ok about being honest and speaking out about their fears and concerns and questions, there has to be real honesty if we are to get beyond this mutual and revolving cycle of fear and distrust of each other.

WNN: Can you talk about the struggles of being part of an immigrant family in Norway, especially since the July violence in Norway was part of an attempt to attack the progressives in the country who want very much to accept and include all of Norway's incoming immigrants.

Deeyah: My grandfather was among the first immigrants to come to Norway in the late 60s.

My experience growing up in Norway was generally a very positive one, of course there were challenges but overall I am deeply thankful to have had the opportunity to grow up in a liberal society like Norway where a strong fundamental emphasis is placed on freedom of expression, women's rights and equality- all values that I hold very dear to my heart and are principles that have formed my outlook on life and also my work.

I was a part of the first Norwegian born generation, children of immigrant parents. Growing up being from an immigrant family and a part of the non white ethnic minority community, I was always aware that I was different and at times not accepted or treated as an equal by some white people.

In the 80s and 90s we definitely felt a presence of various white right wing groups- as a teenager I actually used to participate in marches and demonstrations against skinheads, anti-immigrant and white supremacist groups. Knowing in a very personal way the level of hatred such individuals and groups carried for people of non white ethnic communities. One of the points that always used to grate on me growing up is how we were referred to in the broader mainstream society, we were referred to as foreigners and I remember always being confused why when I was born in Norway, held a Norwegian passport, spoke Norwegian like any white girl did why were people like us still referred to as foreigners...

Immigration changed the face of Norway over time and with it there have of course been some challenges and difficulties, however what has been essential

is Norway's leaders have consistently made efforts to build initiatives where inclusion and diversity was the prime focus of celebration. How successful one of the initiatives have been is hard to say but what is necessary is a genuine will to do something about the challenges we face.

I believe Norway's leaders have always had the will and I think are now going to explore even more ways of addressing the issues on an even deeper level.

Obviously things have changed significantly since I was a child, the Muslim community in Norway now is around 100,000 and the country has developed into a far more colorful and multicultural society.

I have experienced discrimination from some white people and also from some Muslims in Norway.

When I was about 11 or 12 years old a grown white racist Norwegian man spat in my face telling that I was a black paki bitch and that I should "f" off back to the country I came from. At the age of 16 I was spat in the face by a grown sexist Muslim man telling me I was "a whore" for having become too "westernized."

I know my experience of being exposed to discrimination from this fear mongering minority within both communities that hold deep rooted prejudices is not a unique one, but these are the sort of attitudes that do exist in some small quarters of both sides that we need to be aware of and deal with – it's also important to be clear that one form of prejudice does not reduce or excuse the other in any way, both need to be addressed honestly, fearlessly and openly.

I am looking to the future with great optimism and hope based on the love, openness and unity the Norwegian people and leadership has shown in its most difficult time. I feel so much pride, admiration and love for my little country of big-hearted people!

WNN: Sisterhood, the initiative you established in 2007, had the aim of empowering young Muslim women by giving them a platform to express their creativity. Which are the current bounders limiting Muslim women today? How can they be empowered?

Deeyah: I think one of the feelings at the core of the work I do and believe in strongly is to support women and young people to fulfill their potential, for women and young people to dream and aspire to lead a life and walk the path of their own choosing, to be who they are and to be the best they can be, underlying the thought behind Sisterhood as well.

Gender equality and women's rights are the fundamental challenges Muslim women face today. They are the very same challenges women of other communities face as well in the same context by (other) strict patriarchal societies.

Millions of lives are sacrificed every year and the oppression of women manifests in glaring problems like domestic violence, child marriage, trafficking, FGM, forced marriage, honor based violence and honor killings, infanticide, dowry killings, rape as a weapon of war and humiliation. All this happening in the name of culture and in the name of religion and in the name of tradition, tribalism, local customs and “social morality”.

There is a real need to encourage education for our girls, to empower them and encourage women’s participation in these societies.

Muslim society will prosper, flourish and progress once its women, gain the rights to have an equal voice and place in our families, in our community, country and our world. Women are the single most important key to progress in our societies. The biggest barrier to our women having the opportunity to lead a safe, equal and fulfilled life free from violence is the societal rigidity that is rooted in parameters of long standing attitudes and concepts of masculinity, honor and the cultural hierarchy of male supremacy.

What is encouraging is that there are so many wonderful and passionate people men and women out there in different corners of the world working on improving these dire circumstances faced by women every single day. My wish is to create a global network of such courageous activists, NGOs and passionate individuals to connect with each other and see if there are ways we can help, encourage and support each other in our common and very essential goal of strengthening women’s rights and women’s voices.

WNN: In 2011, you founded Memini, a digital memorial for the victims of honor killings worldwide, what motivated you to do that?

Deeyah: I have worked with this topic for many years and what has always made my heart hurt in addition to the horrors and violence the victims of such crimes face is the intention of the killers to wipe out all signs of any existence of these young women. Not only are these murders so brutal and not only are the victims subjected to the ultimate betrayal of their family and community but the sheer tragedy of the people closest to them who should have loved them and cared about them and mourned them instead showed their very limited and conditional love and stole their life, their dreams and potential.

I wanted to create an online space where we could mourn them, think of them and acknowledge their life and that they were in fact here, to respect them, honor them and remember them. I told a dear friend of mine that I wanted to build such a place online and he immediately so kindly and graciously agreed to build it and help me start this space of remembrance. Since its launch we have received the time and support of volunteers from all around the world who are helping us in writing, researching, documenting and honoring these martyrs of love and courage by remembering them. I am deeply thankful for everyone’s support, dedication and care.

We of course cannot bring back these young lives but what we can do is defy the intentions of the murderers by honoring, respecting and remembering the ones who have been so brutally taken away.

WNN: Despite being born in Norway, you have always kept a strong identification to your Muslim roots both in your professional and personal background, how important are your origins in someone's / your life? What made you maintain them despite having grown up in Europe?

Deeyah: I have always felt a strong sense of pride and connection to the heritage and ancestry of my parents. It was something that was taught and encouraged in our home and also reinforced by the very strong presence and emphasis placed on a deep connection to the culture, music, arts, spiritually and languages in our home. It was always very important to my parents that I had a real sense of what their ancestry and culture was all about, they also encouraged that I learn about other religions and cultures as well in order to gain a broader perspective but also understanding and respect for others.

I have never viewed my identity from an either or perspective but rather as a fortunate combination of beautiful and essential and common values of love, respect and understanding. My personal influences are deeply rooted in what I was taught by my parents and what I learned growing up in Norway.

A core spiritual center was always important to me and is not something I feel conflicts with the social values of Europe. Despite the challenges and difficult times I have always felt fortunate to find myself in a cultural junction where I thoroughly understand and relate to both cultures and perspectives—my multicultural upbringing and identity has gifted me with a unique and diverse lens through which I view the world and the way I understand it and the way I appreciate it deeply with great deal of humility.

On the instructions of my father who was a music lover I started singing and receiving my music training when I was 7 years old. The reasoning behind his decision was he felt that in Western societies two professions where I would not be judged or discriminated against based on race, sex, religious or cultural belonging but rather be measured by talent and hard work, this in his opinion was sports and music.

Sports he knew nothing about so he decided I should study music. I was immersed in extensive music training, rigorous practice schedules and had the honor of studying under some of the greatest masters of North Indian/Pakistani Classical Music, Ustad Bade Fateh Ali Khan (of Pakistan) and Ustad Sultan Khan (of India). As a child and teenager I rarely had any time to spend with friends, instead of participating in most activities people my own age I followed a very disciplined and strict regiment of music practice, study and very soon performing and recording.

WNN: In 2007 you stopped performing as a singer for producing projects for other artists, why did you chose to focus your career on giving voice to others?

Deeyah: I feel I am of much better use and service supporting others instead now. I have been singing and performing since I was 7 years old, despite some of the challenges I have faced I am have been fortunate enough to have enjoyed a very fulfilling music career I have had the privilege of collaborating with some of the most fantastic artistic and musical geniuses and legendary figures within the international music industry.

Although I no longer sing or perform I continue composing and producing music projects. Music is a part of my heart and soul and will be something I will always be involved with on some level but I no longer wish to be on stage or be at the forefront and am much more satisfied in the role of a composer and producer today instead.

I feel it is my duty to what I can to be of some service to my fellow sisters and brothers. I am fortunate to live in societies where I do have a voice and the right to seek equality and the ability to be useful to my sisters who may not be afforded some of the same freedoms as I am afforded, I feel it is my duty to do what I can with the rights I have been given. What is the point of these freedoms and rights if I can not use them in the support of others who also need and deserve them? I feel it is my obligation to do what I can to contribute toward positive change.

Three days after the massacre in Norway on July 25, 2011 Over 150,000 people gathered on the streets of Oslo to take part in a 'rose march' vigil against cultural intolerance and violence. During the vigil any faces echoed the emotional outpouring of concern in Norway following the violent attack by Anders Behring Breivik against who he perceived as Norway's 'tolerant' progressives. Before the rose vigil, Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg stated, "In remembrance of the victims... I declare one minute's national silence."