

BULLFUNKZOO

The Dubai Years

Long before Bull Funk Zoo (BFZ) came bursting out of Dubai and onto the international music scene, he knew that music, and playing it, was in his DNA. In the mid 70s, BFZ's family decided to leave their war torn country Lebanon for a safer haven back when the Lebanese Civil War was raging on. They moved to Dubai, where BFZ was born and where he spent a his childhood and teenage years. At the time, Dubai was nothing more than a rudimentary oasis in the desert, with pretty much nothing to do but go to the ocean. Even before he discovered music, the ocean was his second home. He soon discovered his parents' record collection, and given that they had pretty good taste in music, BFZ grew up listening to the best the 60s, 70s, 80s had to offer; Motown, James Brown, Earth Wind and Fire, The Boney M.

While watching TV one day, BFZ stumbled on a Kiss concert when he was just 4 years old, and he knew that playing live to a crowd of thousands was something he wanted to - and would - do, but it came with a lot of fear attached. It didn't matter though, he just knew it would happen. That it was his destiny.

When he turned 10, all hell broke loose, in a way. He discovered skateboarding and all the fast times that come with it, and the doors of musical knowledge it would open and how to unleash his creativity. Skateboarding got him listening to the death metal greats. Megadeth, Slayer, Anthrax, Metallica, all of these were constants on the skateboarding scene, and that's when it all started coming together. Being the odd kid out at school, he took skateboarding as a way of life. It was the perfect outlet for him. Needless to say, his parents weren't too happy about the whole skateboarding situation, especially given that he wasn't doing too good at school.

Knowing that, he brushed it aside and got into shaping his future. BFZ would sit and listen to the records and dissect the music, sometimes note by note and instrument by instrument. He would listen to the music, memorize it, sing it and come up with different variations of it that he would make up in his head; how he would like them to sound as opposed to how they sounded. Growing up in Dubai didn't hurt his musical education neither. It was a country - even at the time - that was a melting pot for many cultures. His friends and neighbors were a who's who of nationalities and he absorbed all of it, especially the sounds of each and every one of them.

When it came time to ask his parents for a guitar they, naturally, told him to go do his homework. But, knowing he'd abandon his studies completely, now that his one and only request was denied, they decided to start him on piano lessons. Suffice it to say, they weren't rock n roll enough for him. Unsurprisingly, he failed school that year when he was 13, which was no big surprise given that all he did was roll on his skateboard, play air guitar while watching Headbangers Ball religiously, smoke and find ever more creative ways to drink alcohol without getting caught by his parents.

He didn't get busted, but his dad smashed his skateboard to pieces before his eyes and ordered him to quit skating and get his shit together in school. But, what do you expect from a rebel? To rebel even more! To him, his parents had taken his passion and broke it into a million little pieces. That was about

the time when BFZ's creativity was dying for a way to unleash itself, and his imagination was on a war path with his reality.

"I would have done anything for a guitar," he says. And, that's what he did. All he wanted to do was play the guitar and let it all loose. But, that's what friends are for. BFZ had a friend who owned a guitar. He would go visit him to just touch it and learn how to play.

The piano lessons he was forced to take a few years back now came in handy. That was about the time when his friend got sick of him coming over every single day without fail to play the guitar and kicked him and the guitar out. As great as that was, he now had to figure out the challenge of stashing the guitar at his parents' house and out of their, admittedly, long reach. Being a creative kid, BFZ would hang out with some of his friends at an abandoned house not far away from his parents where they would get up to no good. So, he made it into his own makeshift studio and hid it there, and he would get up every morning at 5 am and head out and play till it was time for school.

At that same point, more or less - his last years in school - being mostly out of cash, he would go into record stores where he would listen to all the records he could listen to and, on some instances, liberate some records from the confines of the record store. Naturally, he was banned for life from these stores upon getting caught. But, he had listened to enough music at home, the record store, the skateboarding scene, to make out every note, instrument and variation. Listening to albums had become not just a hobby or a creative outlet, it had become a revelation!

The U.S. Years

All grown up, BFZ managed to graduate from high school and start university in the U.S. Needless to say, he couldn't wait to get out of Dubai and to the epicenter of rock n roll. There, he knew, things would be different and he'd finally get the chance to find himself and his own sound. He wanted to study music professionally. But, of course, his parents knowing what's best for him, said no.

That, however, did not put a dent into his will to do what he wanted to do, and BFZ was off to the States. Once there, reality starting biting. Armed with his US\$4,000 in tuition money, and a room at his uncle's house in Boston, Massachusetts, he literally had nothing else. No cash and no guitar. Not one to let a minor hiccup like that get in the way, he got a job at a gas station where he pumped gas for 6 whole months to save enough money to buy his own guitar.

With his fiddle in hand, BFZ met punk rock through a university friend, and that's when things started to really take shape. The dream had come true. Well, part of it anyway; his foot was now in the door and it was all up to him from that point on. And, it was the right genre at the right time; full of rage that he could harness from his earlier years and run with.

BFZ would jam for hours on end at his friend's basement, getting shitfaced and consistently landing in all kinds of trouble. The legal age for drinking was 21, and at 17, that was a problem. But, as usual, it didn't stop him, and he found new and very creative ways of procuring alcohol and, more importantly, sneaking into clubs with fake IDs to listen to live rock n roll. Though he ended up listening mostly from the sidewalk by the club, the music somehow always made sense.

A year into Boston, BFZ realized Boston was too expensive for his taste and bankroll, and he decided to move to Minneapolis, with a friend who told him it was a cheap place to live in, but failed to mention the harsh winters. Plenty of partying, working odd jobs like cleaning toilets to manual labor while studying got him through them, with music being the fuel that kept him going. At the same time, BFZ didn't meet a concert he didn't attend. Going to hundreds of concerts quickly became his favorite pastime; the ultimate experience where the aura of mystery that surrounded all the voices he heard on those thousands of records was being slowly unraveled and he was putting faces to the voices and techniques and styles to the notes. Page and Plant, Alice Cooper, Steve Vai and hundreds more.

Minneapolis was a blessing, it turned out. It was a city with vibe. All kinds of music was there. Rock, punk, jazz, soul, funk. It had it all, and he would listen to all of it. He picked jazz as his new interest for the time being. "It was the free form expression that only jazz has. I needed that freedom. As much of it as I could possibly find." And, that's when he met an old cat his dad's age named Batume.

Meeting Batume

BFZ and Batume met in the toilet of a grungy, dim lit dive where they were taking a leak. Batume, drunk out of his mind, said "Hey man, do you know where all this piss goes to?" BFZ looked at him, even more drunk out of his mind, and said "Yeah man! It gets recycled back into the tap where we drink it again". With those words, the friendship had begun.

As his luck would have it, Batume turned out to be pretty big in the jazz scene. He was a kick ass jazz drummer, and he invited BFZ to come down and jam with the boys. When he finally took up Batume on his invitation, it turned out the boys were all Batume's age, and he realized he was in the company of some heavy hitting veteran musicians. They were giving him the "Who the fuck is this kid?" look, with his rock n roll getup, guitar and amp ready to blow out the windows. Be that as it may, BFZ didn't really give a fuck. All he wanted to do was play music, and though he couldn't understand any of the music being played, he got caught up in its freedom.

After that jam session, Batume officially took BFZ under his wing and initiated him by throwing him into the deep end. There was no excuse now. He'd finally gotten the chance he'd been waiting for all those years and this was it. He started studying and learning music theory and how to play forms and harmonies, but deep down he knew this wasn't going to be his thing, but it would come in handy - just like the piano lessons did - and it would teach him how to tune his ear, write and compose.

Batume introduced BFZ to another musician by the name of Glen Burris. He was a veteran horn player who'd played and record with Miles Davis on the "Man With The Horn". Seeing the explosive potential this kid had, Burris also took BFZ under his wing alongside Batume's. These guys intrigued him. Not only musically, but personally. The way they carried themselves; they were unhinged punk rock rebels that gave no fucks, and he found himself right at home with them.

Every time they would hang together, something would go down. Their favorite sport became hitting the clubs - knowing there was a band already booked - and ask for the manager for their money up front and where to set up. When it worked it was great. They would play 4 or 5 songs until the actual band

showed up. From that point on, it was either they'd get kicked out of the club or the club manager would tell them to keep on playing.

Eventually, BFZ wanted to start experimenting with other forms of music and find his own sound. During his final years in the U.S., he met Arkology's Eric Bailey, a spoken word artist, who was open to jamming with BFZ and experimenting with different sounds and forms. He would sit in on any jam session he could find, play a gig with any band that would take him, and go on to annoy other musicians, whom by that time, knew he wouldn't stop asking them question after question to learn whatever he could.

Before leaving the U.S. for good and returning to Dubai, BFZ recorded a fully improvised album with Eric Bailey and Tim Donahue; an experimental, soundscape, funk and spoken word record. It was called God's Pager - Heavy Water Blues.

The Man Behind Bull Funk Zoo

Assaad Lakkis is the man behind Bull Funk Zoo. He is a composer, creator, and founder of BFZ, Abstrakt Collision and many other musical projects. In his own words, "Creativity is my drug of choice. It has me in its vise." And, that pretty much sums up BFZ and why he makes music.

BFZ got his name when he took some time to contemplate the kind of music he wanted to make. To him, Bull Funk is the perfect description of the energy in almost every funk and rock tune he ever listened to. Attitude, heart, grace and above all else, music that doesn't beat around the bush. It hits you hard. In your face. Then came the Zoo - the collective that is Bull Funk - and the name became him. Think of it this way, in BFZ's own words, "Imagine a big bad bull rocking out, fornicating & wildly stompin' the blues into rubble. Hendrix havin' a drink with Tom Waits & Rage Against The Machine and decided to tear it up!", and you pretty much get the idea of the essence of BFZ.

Originally a guitarist, BFZ's musical style is firmly rooted in rock, but he takes music however he can get it, experimenting heavily with different genres like jazz, funk, hip hop, EDM, etc. His influences are many, but topping his list would be Frank Zappa, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Rage Against The Machine, Audioslave, Soundgarden, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Tom Waits, Royal Blood, Led Zeppelin, The Police, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Medeski Martin & Wood, Mike Keneally, Radiohead.

After moving back to his hometown of Dubai from the U.S. in 1999, where he spent a few years that would shape his own sound, he decided to record some of his work he composed under the 'Abstrakt Collision' project. After struggling for a while to find equally eager musicians that shared his willingness to experiment, he persevered and the Abstrakt Collision crew began to take shape and develop a sound. Since then, they've released three albums; "In the meantime of tomorrow...", "Morfine" and "Polidix".

One of his tracks from 'Polidix' was a collaboration with E.G. Bailey on his album 'American African'. The track, 'America', was nominated for the Independent Music Awards (IMA) in the U.S. by a panel of judges made up of Seal, Suzanne Vega, and the late Prince. Also, 'Last Poet', another tune from 'Polidix', was featured on the 'Papers' movie soundtrack.

Assaad and his 'Abstrakt Collision' concerts have attracted a large fanbase. Opening for Stanley Jordan

at the Dubai International Jazz festival, Curtis Fuller at Jazz at DMC, Courtney Pine at the Dubai jazz Fest 08, Gilles Peterson at the Bacardi festival, or throwing down with MCs and top turntable artists in indie shows, Abstrakt Collision have proven themselves a force to be reckoned with, shaping the musical landscape around them as they went along.

Alongside his work with Abstrakt Collision, and since he returned to Dubai in 1999, Assaad collaborated with a few bands - Abri, Stroobia, Moist Luscious and others - as a session guitar player.

Bull Funk Zoo

Assaad formed BFZ in 2011. His idea was to bring together musicians from different backgrounds and combinations of people and music that keep listeners at the edge of their seats, trying to figure out where the music is going next, keeping them dancing and grooving. Bull Funk Zoo brings together individual vibes of creativity that keeps everyone guessing – even them! After experimenting with a few types of music, he showcased the band with Hamdan Al Abri - an MTV Awards nominated vocalist - opening for Sade at Abu Dhabi's Yas Island. Their sound was new and groovy, so much so that Sade called them, "The best band I've had open any show during the 2011 World Tour."

According to Assaad, the music is "a collective of funk, rock, hip-hop, soul, reggae and others, basically The Meters meeting The Roots meeting Hendrix meeting James Brown meeting all kinds of grooves!"

By April 2013, BFZ was ready for his debut album, he went into the studio to record songs he had written, composed, and played most instruments on, with a couple of tracks written by Hamdan Al Abri, his long term collaborator. The self titled album went on to be released for digital distribution internationally in May 2013. The album became an instant hit and was named by Rolling Stone Magazine as the highest rated album for any unsigned band, and was nominated at the Independent Music Awards (IMA) in the U.S., significantly expanding BFZ's reach through multiple interviews on TV, radio and in publications. The song 'Oblivion' reached the semi finals - 20 songs out of 19,000 song entries - in the IMA awards for the rock category. The response to the album was incredible, and was perfectly timed with BFZ opening for Sting in Mach 2013, playing Sting material with a BFZ twist to over 10,000 fans.

His second album, 'Dangerous Radio', released in September 2016 was an even bigger hit, bringing BFZ into the international spotlight and earning them rave reviews from major rock n roll magazines and stations in the U.K. and other countries. The album was written, produced and mixed by Assaad, with him playing guitars, bass, drums. It was also the first album where Assaad decided to sing. Although he does not consider himself a singer, Assaad wrote the songs that matched his vocal abilities.

His third album, Down and Dirty, is set to be released in early 2018.

Among his other work, BFZ also produced a music video with Adnan Mryhij of CTG productions, and Hadi Sarriddine for the track 'Shit House Blues' from his self titled album, released in February 2015. He also produced and released a single featuring the Queen of Arab Hiphop, Malikah with a video directed by Fares Sokhon that went viral across the Middle East in July 2015.

Bull Funk Zoo played almost every venue in the region of UAE and toured internationally. Concerts with audiences from 5,000 to 30,000 people. His albums are available for download or streaming on major music portals and stores.

Stay tuned for more on BFZ's upcoming projects.