

If rock is the Devil's music, a corporate factory or fashion show, someone forgot to tell Tom Connelly.

A teacher and reverend of Psychic Horizons Church of Natural Grace in San Francisco's Mission district, Tom also plays bass for a local band now releasing their first album.

"Kazamoze," the multilingual, self-titled debut of the "world rock" band (the name is the band's invention, derived from "cosmos") plays like an interfaith hymnal. Harnessing the diversity of the band's four core musicians, Kazamoze draws from a range of musical energies and motifs, from the casbahs of Damascus, to the holy festivals of Rajasthan, to the Tennessee hills and the bayous of the Mississippi Delta. The result is a surprising—sometimes mesmerizing—pastiche of recognizable sounds, which together are new and refreshing. The 13 ballads re-invent classic rock themes—estranged lovers, outgrown friendships, existential woe, et al—transforming familiar narratives with sacred elements from various international folk and spiritual music traditions.

"*Lagalee*," the fourth track, could be the album's tour de force. Opening like a traditional Arabic ballad, sharp strums of four-string tenor *uke* give way to the synchronized chants of the four band members—all vocalists, each with lead credit on at least one track. Ziadeh, the band's drummer, and the first of two lead singers on "*Lagalee*," comes in with a stanza or two in Arabic, above the other voices maintaining

the repetition of chants. Then the steady beat cuts and the song opens like the sky after the Flood, revealing God's rainbow-sealed promise. The strings, *tabla*, *bia*, trap set, jazz bass, *cuattro* and other percussion all shift seamlessly as Dru Rodgers, the second lead, delivers the first refrain in English:

Far away from here
My dreams are tied
With twisted fear.
It's hard to know.
How to ask

Then the chorus, as the speaker asks:

Where are you now?
Are you in light?
Is there love in the sky?
I'm standing here
In my home
All alone.

The theme is familiar. Two lovers are separated; one pines for the other. It's one of several timeless tales repackaged on the assembly lines of mass media. Everyone—from Lionel, to Britney, to the pre-pubescent Casanovas serenading other tweens on MTV—knows something about it.

"Lagalee" is different. There's none of the whining, the gloating, the threats or the life's-not-worth-living-without-you-s—no vanity or desperation.

What's left then? Music and poetry is all. And love.

That's what I mean by "sacred."

“It just kind of reaches this level of flow—some kind of *specialness*—when you’re in the moment and those musical confluences, or ‘mash-ups’ happen, and all you can do is smile,” says Connelly, Jazz/Punk bassist, describing the band’s creative process. Tom likens moments of the collaborative fugue to flashes of synchronicity while forging a spiritual path in the world, and recognizing your soul’s rewards as you manifest them consciously.

“It’s amazing that I’m in this space,” he says, “and that I am part of what’s being created, and I guess on a grander scale when one can realize that about life—that everything you’re doing is something that you’re creating—that too is amazing.”

I caught up with Tom recently for a conversation on music, spirituality and the band’s foray onto the SF music scene. The interview took place at the Psychic Horizons Church of Natural Grace. The church, while ministering to the community as a house of worship, also runs a school for meditation and healing. Tom has studied there since 2002, and now teaches meditation. Located for more than a decade at one of the busier corners of Valencia, one of San Francisco’s busiest streets, the school, its patrons and adherents remain mostly hidden. A modest knee-level laminated cardboard sign beckons curious seekers for a “free introduction to meditation class” in a mustard yellow Victorian. One enters up a flight of old wooden stairs, to a quiet hall of parlors and smaller, adjacent sitting rooms: a sanctuary secreted above galleries, curiosity and antique shops, designer

ice-cream boutiques with unpronounceable names and popular coffee dens with branded-flags, neon signs and flashy displays.

A Southern Cal native, Tom began playing bass there in high-school punk and classic 60s rock bands. He describes his musical style as “a mix of jazz and punk,” citing influences from Mike Watt and John Entwistle to Flea and Stanley Clarke. Tom met Kazamoze guitarist Yousef Saàdeh back in 1996, when the two played together in bands on the SF bar circuit. No more, says Tom. Kazamoze has so far limited performances to out-door festivals and select clubs—brighter and more salubrious as venues go.

Tom describes Yousef, his friend of many years, as Willie Nelson meets Lenny Kravitz with accents of Arabic. He likes to bring some of his culture to the music he plays, experimenting with Arabic beats. Songs like “Down on My Knees” and “Gone,” which Yousef sang and wrote, vary the album’s pace with a twangy dose of Southern rock.

Tom’s own unique style and background compliment “Kazamoze” with songs like “Stream,” a slow moody dirge. The track features Connelly’s low-pitched voice filtered craftily through a Fisher Price toy microphone for a tinny, ghostly drone a là Tom Waits, or an older Johnny Cash. The lyrics generate a lonely tension—or confusion—of opposites (time vs. place, noise vs. silence, movement vs. stillness, and so forth):

In that moment between here and now
Turning ‘round

In that moment between this and that

And all life's streaming

In that moment

You wake

You get called home

In that moment between all's quiet

And everyone screaming

The solitary *oud* and strums of ukulele produce the effect of an incantation to night spirits. You can hear the pangs of a solipsistic consciousness imagining a world beyond itself, which it longs to discover.

Tom began in the fashion of many a proud punk-rocker: channeling his adolescent rage and rebellion through his bass and a little whiskey. He says he is far more grounded and aware while playing his instrument today, after years of meditation, than ever before.

When asked to account for peers in the industry producing brilliant recordings, or delivering great performances under the influence of a great diversity of mind-warping drugs, Tom shrugs.

“People are very creative,” he says. Playing over the years, he has learned there are many ways to “use your muse.”

“Some people find it by being unconscious—getting drunk and high. And it works great.”

Work as it may for some, or once did for him, these days Tom never carries his muse in a bottle.

“It’s just not a connection I can create anymore. Drugs and alcohol just kind of pull me away from where I want to be [as a musician].”

He admits feeling sadness while shifting from old ways to “healthier” means of inspiration. He describes having felt “a loss of youth” and “a way of life—a loss of something I was so dependent on, which seemed to work so well.”

In the end, Tom embraces the shift.

“I’d rather wake up the next day and do it again, than wake up the next afternoon and go ‘Ugh, we didn’t do *anything*. We’ll do it tomorrow.’”

Kazamoze (the album) is available now at www.kazamoze.com, iTunes, CDbaby and Amazon. You can follow the band at facebook.com/kazamoze.

– Article Written by Isaac Constantine, Freelance Journalist