

MUSIC

Minor Empire: East meets West

Group addresses Turkish roots in entrancing musical project

PREVIEW

Minor Empire

With guests: Latin-funk-reggae band La Luna de Santiago
Where: Festival Place
When: Wednesday, July 25; opening act, 7:30 p.m.
Tickets: \$8; 780-449-3378 or festivalplace.ab.ca



ROGER LEVESQUE

Sometimes you have to distance yourself from your own roots to appreciate exactly what's there in the first place.

That's how it was for two award-winning Turkish musicians who are partners in art and life, singer Ozgu Ozman and guitarist Ozan Boz. They moved to Canada and settled in Toronto a decade ago. By 2006 they had started writing for their own alternative pop project, Auxetic Pulse, exploring the trip-hop style. That band was performing and the couple actually released an EP and recorded another still-unissued album before a critical factor changed their direction. It was all about heritage.

"We got distracted with the idea of integrating Turkish elements into our music by about

2009," explains Ozman. "If you're in Canada from somewhere else I think you automatically start to think about contributing to the diversity here. I began to realize that we were lacking something in not addressing our roots, and that we had something unique to say."

They had been listening to Indo-jazz and other Middle Eastern bands and were inspired to add some of the odd rhythms, vocal techniques and ornamentation of Turkish music. In the end it made more sense to set aside the first band and create a new project. Minor Empire was born, so named after two older designations for Turkey's place on the globe, Asia Minor and the Ottoman Empire.

"People often ask us if we studied Turkish music," explains Boz. "We haven't, but we realized we had absorbed so much of it by osmosis, just by growing up in it. It was everywhere around us and on the radio, but we took it for granted. So trying out those traditional aspects was like second nature."

They used their contacts to draft a few other Turkish Canadians into the mix, including the brilliant Montreal oud player Ismail Hakki Fencioğlu along with Toronto jazz guitarist Michael Occhipinti. In the end nine musicians filled out Minor Empire's superb self-produced 2011 debut effort, aptly titled *Second Nature*.



Toronto-based band Minor Empire brings its unique Turkish-crossover sound to the Festival Place patio series Wednesday. SUPPLIED

Ozman and Boz were thrilled when *Second Nature* won in the world/group categories at both the 2011 Canadian Folk Music Awards and the Independent Music Awards for 2012, awards that helped them mount their current national tour. They underline that the album is not a fusion, but more of a deliberate look at Turkish music that happens to incorporate some electric instruments. Either way, it's entrancing stuff.

Perhaps it's ironic that they feel they came to really appreciate their musical roots through jazz and the medium of improvisation, also a big part of the Turkish tradition.

As a teenager back in Turkey Boz actually started out on bass and later switched to acoustic guitar to learn harmony. He found himself playing classic rock covers of AC/DC and

Deep Purple in various bands before he discovered jazz and fusion. Finally he took up the electric guitar shortly before he came to Canada.

"I started covering Billy Cobham and Herbie Hancock tunes in this fusion band and that got me thinking about arrangements, meters and harmonies, about the deeper concepts in the music. That still plays a role in how I write and arrange today."

Ozman was exposed to singing through her mother's involvement in choirs. Her first real training started at 16 with a Bulgarian jazz singer who had moved to Turkey and began teaching vocal classes.

"I was already listening to some jazz singers and Turkish singers too, but those classes really opened my eyes to the idea that music could

be beyond a specific genre or nationality, that it's a global thing. When I moved here I was also listening to trip-hop bands and they made me want to break out of boundaries, to do something free."

The lyrics on *Second Nature* tend to involve traditional sources and Ozman sings in Turkish, but her exceptional emotional expression becomes a language unto itself.

■ The Patio Series at Sherwood Park's Festival Place offers a few intriguing shows this summer starting with Scotland's Shooqlenifty Aug. 1; the Ethiopian-style Krar Collective, Aug. 15; Ontario's Trouble & Strife, Aug. 22; and Dub Vulture, Aug. 29. Check the venue's website for details.

Group revisits early hits

IRON MAIDEN
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"Obviously now you can elaborate on everything. Especially now, I mean, this tour in particular, there's all these lights moving around and there's a load of pyro — more pyro than any time we've ever used it really — and the production changes a lot throughout the show, the different songs so you get a different feel."

"But it's visual. Nowadays, obviously musically it has to be there, but then people are very visually orientated now so you have to go out there ... and stand out a little bit. Because there's a big foundation with the band, we're able to come out and put this sort of show on."

They also have the history to draw on to make the tour a little different than the traditional ones. This one is dubbed the Maiden England Tour, with the set list and stage show recalling the 1988 live album and video of the same name which were recorded in Birmingham during the band's support of its *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* album.

Murray says going back to the past for these rounds of shows provided a way to shake things up and make things fresh for Maiden, as well as their fans, and to allow them not to be tied to just touring in support of a studio release.

"We've got 15 albums or so under the belt and normally we'd record an album and tour that specific album and the production will reflect it and normally we'll play maybe four, five, six songs from the new album," he says.

"But, now, it's good to revisit some of the stuff from that era, from the '80s, because as time goes you realize how good the songs were and they really appealed to a lot of people."

"The fans have been wanting us to play a lot of the older stuff. This is just a part of the way we like to do things, to go back a little bit and play some of the older songs, because they sound fresh, they're great to play ..."

"It's good to revisit some of the early days ... and make it possibly better than it was."

And as for revisiting, yet again, those aforementioned favourites, which have been staples of their live repertoire for as long as most can remember, Murray says it's easy to keep those fresh, explaining that even the song *Iron Maiden*, which he can't remember ever not playing in concert, take on a life of their own when you add a metal crowd.

"There is a level of excitement that just generates when you get onstage, it just all powers up and off you go," he says.

Comedy comes first

BLOODSUCKERS
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The first episode (er, webisode) airs on Bite (www.bite.ca/tsbs) on July 31, with a sneak peek July 28 on Bite TV.

Truckstop Bloodsuckers is a 12-part series, with two new episodes available online each week (Tuesday and Thursday). Each segment is six to eight minutes long. Mosaic, which also brought us the popular sketch comedy *CAUTION: May Contain Nuts*, plans to turn this series into a feature film.

In *Truckstop Bloodsuckers*, the fanged waitresses are forced to play the good guys when a gang of big-city drug dealers take the diner hostage.

Local comedy darlings Mark Meer, Ryan Parker and

Donovan Workun also appear in the series.

The comedy-horror genre is in Pendleton's blood, to excuse a vampirish pun. He and *Truckstop Bloodsuckers* co-writer Lindsey McNeill came up with the idea for this series while working on the *Nightmare Island* film trilogy, also shot in Edmonton.

"It's always been my niche," he says. "Horror and comedy go together exceedingly well, it's becoming more and more popular."

Sure, a corny horror flick might make you laugh. This is different.

"It's not funny 'cause it's bad. There are planned-out jokes. It's set up like that. In comedy horror, comedy comes first, with horror elements."

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