

A New Age in Bangladeshi Sound: An Idiosyncratic History

By Arafat Kazi

The past five years have seen an incredible change in the Bangladeshi music scene. It's too vast a movement to describe in a nutshell, but you guys know what I'm talking about. The "bigger" bands like LRB and Nagar Baul, playing their own kind of Bangladeshi Rock, don't have a monopoly among the consumers anymore. There are a lot of new bands releasing albums, and most of them are good albums by great bands. We actually have to redefine what "success" really is. Back in the day, you were either a famous band or you weren't—and the famous bands were less than a dozen. Nowadays, however, we don't know whether Aurthohin is "underground" anymore. We don't know whether Cryptic Fate, Black and Artcell, with their thousands of fans but fairly unknown outside of Dhaka, are "underground." It's a great thing. I love the fact that you could be a bunch of young upstarts, talk to one of the biggies in the underground scene (no pun intended but that list includes Sumon bhai and Shakib bhai) and get a record deal. You have a chance to prove yourself. Whether your band is good or not depends on the ultimate testing ground—the open market and the shows. I mean, we even have a website with hundreds of people (including members of the bands themselves) talking things over in a public forum!

How did we get so far in a relatively short time? Well, buddy, like Salman Rushdie said, "In order to know me, you'll have to swallow a world," and taking his cue, let me give you guys my version of the history of this "underground scene" as we know it now. It's a very personal history, and I might get a lot of facts wrong, so please bear with me as I struggle with the dates, people and places. If I've forgotten to mention your third cousin who once shook hands with Rahat Alam Joy bhaiya of Buzz sound, it's because I'm stupid, not because it's intentional. That being said, let me start. And if you're wondering who I am, I play drums in a band called The Watson Brothers, and I've been to most of the great concerts during the early days of the music scene. (Nota bene: by "early days" I mean the early days of the NEW scene, not the "golden era" of Bangladeshi metal with Rockstrata, Phantom Lord and Jolly Rogers etc. You'll have to talk to our very own BlackDog for that.)

The First Beginnings: Thrashold, Deth Row and Psychodeth

The "underground music scene" as we know it now started off as an "underground *metal* scene." This is very important because for a long time you only had two kinds of concerts—either the big shows featuring LRB or the then Feelings or Ark etc, or small heavy metal concerts in venues like the Russian Cultural Center. The first metal concert I remember was in late 1996 (or was it 95?) at the Mirpur Town Hall. There was a band called Thrashold playing. I think

Deth Row played in that show, but I'm not sure. But it's where I met Deth Row's Gibran bhai, later on to become one of my best friends. In retrospect, Thrashold wasn't a very good band. But they were one of the only bands around, and Mirpur's always had a cult of metal fanatics who listen to the most obscenely hard music and seem to like it. Thrashold was a band from that group of people. Their practice sessions were fantastic because they used to practice in a half-constructed building with heavy machinery all around. They weren't much, but they were pioneers. After this first show, there were two or three other shows—mainly Deth Row and Psychodeth playing together. I remember a show at the ICMA where Deth Row's drummer Galib (our very own Stripped) broke through the bass drum head. He was brutal! Deth Row was THE pinnacle of heavy, brutal rock.

I was trying to form a band with a guy called Muntasir, and we'd hear of bands like Maestria, who I never got to see live, and Cryptic Fate, who I hadn't seen in concert either. (Muntasir and I formed Koprophilia, but I was kicked out of the band in less than a month). One day in 1997 or thereabouts, Muntasir came to my house all excited, saying that he'd heard a band playing Sepultura in some off-road in Green Road. We were very excited and went over, where we banged on the windows until they let us in. It sounds really funny now but we were fifteen, and that's how the music scene was at the time. If you liked the music, you were a friend and a brother, and strangers would give you cigarettes and buy you tea as long as you listened to the right bands. That band was Psychodeth, but I've already talked about Deth Row and Psychodeth. They were always just slightly outclassed by Deth Row, but I might just be emotional and biased about this. I used to write for the Daily Star back then, and every other week there would be an article about some completely unknown metal band that nobody—except a very small group of psychotics—cared about. But that's the way it was, and it was good.

Cryptic Fate and Sreshto:

Around this time, my friend Anon told me of a bunch of A' Levels students from Scholastica who'd released an album called Ends Are Forever. (The band has never really been able to outlive that appellation). There were only 2000 copies made, but I managed to get one and I loved that album. The band was called Cryptic Fate, and among other great songs in that album (like Captors of Fate, my personal favorite, and Withered Alive, and Apprehension, which Farshed bhai unfortunately sang) was Odious Zephyr, which we now know as Lobheri Agun. But I'd only heard of Fate, I'd never seen them.

Anyway, in 1997 I saw Cryptic Fate play live for the first time. There's a rather funny story attached to this. The first time I saw the Fate gang, I talked to them about Ends Are Forever, and apparently I was so obnoxious that Shakib bhai

wanted to punch me in the face! It's good that he didn't, although I'm sure he'll tell you that this was one historical meeting which frequently repeated itself. That's also the concert where I met Farhan, later to become Fate's guitarist and Watson's bassist. I hated him for the next four years because he was a jerk and beat me up one time (but we're best friends now!!!). But anyway, I saw Cryptic Fate perform with Thrashold. Things didn't go well with Thrashold, with many comic incidents including their going on stage with a distuned guitar, breaking a string in the middle of a song, etc. But—and I've been building you up for this—Cryptic Fate was AMAZING!!! I actually cried in that show, as did many others I'm sure. They were the best thing that had ever happened to Bangladeshi metal (with the exception of Rockstrata's first album, ten years ago), and it just blew me away. I couldn't f**king believe that Bangladesh had musicians of this caliber. I can't stress just how much @\$\$ these guys kicked!!! Even though they didn't have long hair!!!

Summer of 1997, Cryptic Fate recorded Sreshto. This is vitally important because that album was the first example of what we now take for granted—Bangladeshi musicians playing at an international level. I was lucky enough to go to SoundGarden during the recording of Nisshongo and Dream Sayer, and it was just something that we could not for the life of us believe. I mean, it sounds really funny now since everybody and his brother knows Shakib bhai, and he cuts such a prominent figure in the concerts and the restaurants, and we're all friends with the band. But in 1997, it was just beyond our conception that anybody could produce anything remotely like this. Of course, there was a secret trading of Sreshto tapes, and pretty soon everybody had heard the album. Cryptic Fate had achieved god status. You might accuse me of being too emotional over this, but the way I see it, this was a milestone, and I was and am a huge fan. So shut up and read on.

The Attempted Band - Don't Give Us a Migraine!!!:

Around 1997-8, a band called The Attempted Band was formed by a couple of fairly talentless losers fresh out of their O' Level exams. I was one of them, the others being Imran (Watson guitarist) and Daniel (Fulbanu's Revenge). After going through more lineup changes than Iron Maiden in the 90s, we found the perfect singer in Jisha. We started doing small concerts, namely at the Alliance Francais but including other places. Since we had no shame and we weren't really that good, we'd play at friends' birthday parties, friends' sisters' engagements, the most pointless occasions imaginable— all for a free meal, sometimes even less! But we never paid money to people for hearing us play, and the other good thing that came out of this was that we were soon joined by other bands that were equally bad, played equally small shows and were equally enthusiastic. This would include bands like Part of the Scenery, Wire, and innumerable others. We found the perfect partner band in Migraine when they

first invited us to play a show in Uttara. (Migraine had Risalat, Bariul, Tahsin, Shaikat, Shaon— they play in Ajob, Sellout and around 4974929234 other bands nowadays.) The Attempted Band and Migraine played a whole lot of shows together, and soon our rock concerts had metal bands participating too, namely Koprophilia (who were some of our good friends) and Axe-Uranium (featuring Masum bhai, Adnan bhai and Shagor bhai). At the same time, Alliance-Francais was organizing a lot of concerts by itself, and this meant that we were playing with older bands such as Faith (i.e. Tithi bhai's band at the time) and Bangladesh (featuring Mr. Rumi who originally wrote Temporary Love, and his daughter Laura). This was great, and for the first time there were rock concerts at small venues. Thus the "underground scene" was born.

At the same time, there were a lot more of metal concerts, and bands like Cryptic Fate, Koprophillia, Deth Row, and countless others were doing regular shows. One of these bands was Clovermind, which later turned into Tantrik, which eventually became Artcell as we know it. These were good times. Then as now, all these bands were friends with each other. We'd get together over tea and cigarettes or just to jam. It was great— even metal gods like Shakib bhai would jam with young upstarts like Imran and me, and we had some AWESOME times playing with Gibran bhai or even Wasif (Koprophilia) and Ershad.

Coming Together

Probably the greatest show of these years (i.e. 1999-2000) was the Cryptic Fate show in 1999, where all the greatest bands got together and played one hell of a show. We came on after Fate (mostly because Shakib bhai's a jerk!!!) but I remember, we were almost in tears after that concert.

1999 also saw the inception of the Benson and Hedges Star Search. Not much came of it, although we played there (we called ourselves Zoloft for reasons too complicated to get into), as did Cryptic Fate and the Glad Tidiers (featuring Daiyan Mir, greatest drummer ever to play in Bangladesh). The first time around, the Vikings won the prize with their version of Slaughter's Lone Star. As we have seen, they're not really well-known now. In the 2000 Benson and Hedges Star Search, a band called Steeler won, and nothing much came of that either. B&H did hold a lot of shows back then but they'd be at expensive restaurants where you had to pay 500 takas to get in. We'd go to those shows every time Glad Tidiers played. It's a great thing to have, but I guess they should streamline the way they run things. A lot depends on your band's submission cards being arbitrarily picked up from the lottery, and that's really not a fair assessment. Anyway, in the 2000 Star Search, The Watson Brothers came in second, and I (yr pal!!!) got the Best Drummer Award. Luckily, Artcell hadn't made it to the finals. (I find that a stupid decision since they ROCKED, and Koprophilia made it to the finals— ki ar bolar!) and so Shaju couldn't kick my ass. I haven't kept up with the Star Search awards, so all I know is that Tony got the Best Drummer award later on (a fair decision for once!) and Subconscious got the last Best

Band award. (I actually love their CD, but it's not something I should admit in public.)

But the year 2000 was important too for other reasons— first of all, the great Sumon bhai, i.e. of Aurthohin, i.e. our very own BassBaba, decided to form Aurthohin, and officially join the “underground scene.” This was a HUGE deal, since this meant that we were invincible. (Just a side note— and now, looking back, we can all see just how much the man has done for all of us— not excluding the biscuits with egg cream!!!) We now had a roster of great bands for any kind of show— Aurthohin, Cryptic Fate, Shahed bhai, Artcell, The Watson Brothers and so on.

In November 2000, a guy called Rahat Alam (Joy) organized an open-air concert at the RAWA club. This was to be the crowning glory of that year, but it failed miserably because of circumstances beyond his control. (He was a fantastic guy). While it was a financial mess, it brought all the bands together in a way that I guess only massive failures can. Cryptic Fate was the last band to play, but they only got to play one song— Nisshongo.

Here's what Shakib bhai has to say about it—

“Ami chorus gawar shomoy dekhi hotat ekta mota golar awaj. Jaataa! Tarpur side-e takiye dekhi Koprophilia'r Onkur amar pashe dariye. Tarpur dekhi pura stage-e manoosh bharti.” And everybody sang Nisshongo together. It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

In Conclusion

Basically, the floodgates had been opened up. Concerts were happening everywhere, and great bands like Black were beginning to find their voice. The next massive step for the “underground scene” (now not so underground anymore!) I guess was Charpotro, Onushilon, and the collected album releases by Aurthohin, Cryptic Fate, Black and Artcell (dare I mention The Watson Brothers too?). And we can't discount Amadergaan.com in the grand scheme of things either!!! But anyway, that's not my job to tell you!!! Shakib bhai will be here with the next installment of this article, i.e. from 2001 to what's happening now. Until then, keep on rockin' out and ridin' free!!! We're BORN TO BE WILD!!! YEAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!!!!!!