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Naïssam Jalal's Quest Of The Invisible



by Jeanne Lucaille
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Club de la Danse in Paris.


The flutist and composer Naïssam Jalal signs Quest Of The Invisible, a major, intimate and transcendental work – an appeal to meditation whose amplitude and narrative power draws from sources of an all-encompassing free spirituality.

To meditate is to resist

A fighting woman and a combative flutist, Naïssam Jalal travels the world and the world travels through her. Inquisitor, acts of violence and inequalities collide with the musician who gathers the excellent quartet Rhythms of Resistance round her to give substance to its revolt as the Syrian revolution erupts, bloodily repressed from the start.

Together, they helped promulgate the remarkable Odeobé Hayati and then Almot Wala Almazala in 2018 whose charged fury perfectly transmits the slogan: death rather than humiliation. While Naïssam Jalal normally uses her pain as a tool of composition, on *Quest Of The Invisible*, she utilizes a much more interior register: after all, in this capitalist and materialistic world, to turn towards the spirituality of the being is also a type of resistance. It's hard to be angry all the time."

She elucidates this view at the table of an old garage-turned-social club cafe in Saint-Denis, a communist stronghold north of Paris where she now lives. "In the circles of thought that I move in, that can be very angry, very left, very anti-religious, I haven't necessarily engaged my spiritual life." Although today, Naïssam Jalal seems to understand that in order to carry out her struggles against inequities, she must also cultivate a form of inner peace – *Quest Of The Invisible* works in aid of this, drawing lines in space, air and silence: the essence of meditative music.



Naïssam Jalal - Quest of the Invisible "Al...
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Mystic Modal

Born in Paris to Syrian painter parents, Naïssam Jalal grew up in a melting pot of cultures and fell in love with the flute, seeing its noble posture as a conduit for timeless exhalation: "I look at how Ganesh doesn't play the drums." It pushed her to embark on the initiatory pathways.

"When I arrived in Syria to study the nay [wooden flute] at the Arab Institute of Music in Damascus, I was nineteen years old and I discovered new ideas: the importance and splendour of silence in traditional Arab music. I understood that it came from the cantillation of the Koran" – the *Onkr* (melodic recitation), which lies at the heart of the *Sufi ritas* – something she will engage with most notably in Cairo with the eminent Sheikh Yassin Al Tohami, mouchouf (Sufi singer) and mourib (producer of ecstasy).

"It's often in my thoughts. I don't fully understand classical Arabic but I perceive all the meanings, the depth, spirituality, love." Among the many musical traditions tending towards communion with the divine, Naïssam Jalal readily cites those of the futeil Banoouai Harfousad Chaurasia, the nocturnal Gnawa trance of Morocco and the mystical jazz of John and Alice Contrane from their *Journey in Satchidananda* to the temple of their inspirations. She, too, experienced god.

A brilliant composer and virtuoso instrumentalist, Naïssam Jalal also considers improvisation as a spiritual experience in itself. "During the recording, there were magical moments. On "The Prayer" for example, we did it once and Imani said to me: "right there, you were in the baraka (spiritual flow and revelatory access) a genuine conduit!" She laughs in reflection of the moment. "I hate grids, and well-trodden harmonic pathways. It is out of the question that the intrinsic structure of music would impose my pathway."

She has been intimately linked to modal jazz since her first improvisation with the bassist Michel Touzot who begins with a cue of just five notes and a drone sound – "Hypra-modal you see" – but also since experiencing Coltrane's "Oia" on a roof in Bamako, her musical language has been free, wild and brave.

Making peace

For *Quest Of The Invisible*, Naïssam Jalal surrounds herself with musician friends, major arcana who, like her, "are not afraid of silence or trance": the Brazilian pianist Leonardo Mortana, the bassist Claude Tchamitchian and Imani Drake on percussion, respectively referred to as "softness, depth and power." From the contemplation of the "Chant des Nuages" to the ecstasy of the "Furdenous 'Ivresse'" and "Les garçons espèrent l'avenir", the quartet progresses on their quest for the sounds of the invisible – "it is a force that is in me, and that binds me to others," united by the same powerful flow: that of elevation, of self-forgetfulness. Even without the compass conjured by George Russell at the first glimmers of modal jazz, Naïssam Jalal smoothly overcomes the rhythmic structures of a not-always-free jazz and the pitfalls of scholarly music to elevate *Quest Of The Invisible's* repertoire to the kind of expressive summits where doubts, anxieties, nuances and raptures arise.

And while, over the course of the disc Naïssam Jalal indulges in singing "gél in touch with the invisible," she is overwhelmed by the time "The Prayer" comes, and with it, the first words: "Oh my God, Oh God, protect me from myself," a mantra repeated many times in her falsetto voice which, gradually declining, dissolves in peace in a perfect breath. Love supreme.

