

Hope - Zain Bhikha

Album Review by Fatima Bulbulia

It has been almost six years since Zain Bhikha has released an album which comprises completely new songs (bar one), but if first impressions are anything to go by, it has been worth the wait. Combining the rhythms and melodies that made him a household name in his early years, with a more upbeat, "modern" sound, Hope is, in a way, a cultural melting pot. The biggest revelation on this album is the combination of English, Arabic and Zulu lyrics. While Zain has used ethnic sounds on his previous albums, most notably Our World, the two Zulu tracks on this album lend a rather wholesome African spirit to Hope.

Music without purpose is simply noise, and Hope certainly has a purpose. From the title we gather a feel of the direction Zain Bhikha was aiming for with this album. The title was in part inspired by a Hadith mentioned in Tirmizi that says "the pens have been lifted and the ink has dried", which describes the inevitability of fate. As Zain emphasises, "While this means that what has happened and what will happen is beyond us and set out by Allah, we can shape our responses to events and what we always have is hope." The focus of this album is on the actions we as man can undertake that shape our lives and those around us in a constructive way.

A number of the songs have a strong social message and all of them inspire in the listener the feeling that hope coupled with action can alter our destinies in a positive direction. Having worked with his son Rashid on First We Need the Love which was released last year, Bhikha has nurtured his talent, and on this album, Rashid Bhikha definitely comes into his own.

Aside from the inclusion of First We Need the Love, which spoke of the need to find the love for ourselves along the way to learning to love others, Rashid features on two other songs on Hope. Listening to him sing the funky, contemporary nasheed Heartbeat, the similarities to his father are rather amazing; he sounds distinctly like Zain. As per usual, I let the harshest of critics- my children- give me their opinion about Hope. Not surprisingly, Heartbeat garnered a heartfelt thumbs-up. This was largely due to its content, which is centred on the youth, and the quick tempo and beat of the song, which mimics that of a human heartbeat. The strong message that pulses through Heartbeat is, essentially, the fact that we only have a specific amount of time on this earth, and with every heartbeat we are approaching our death and the journey into the next world, so we need to make every moment count.

Rashid features solo on the heart-wrenching Broken. The nasheed paints two different perspectives of youth who have faced abuse and are "broken". Once again the theme is sketched out with the reminder that while things may seem to be hopeless, Allah (SWT) is always there and we need to place our trust in him. The inclusion of the girls from the Masakhane Girls School is in keeping with Zain's goal of promoting and nurturing the youth. Funded by Middle Eastern donors, Masakhane School, based in KwaZulu Natal, caters for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. They attend mainstream schools during the morning and have afternoon madressah classes at Masakhane. Although not all the girls are Muslim, Masakhane is based on Islamic principles and the girls who featured on Hope had all recently become Muslim. It is wonderful to hear their amazing passion and enthusiasm for Deen shine through as their voices sing out in praise of Allah(SWT) on Sizomkhonz' UAllah. The strong, captivating Zulu vocals on Sizomkhonz' uAllah invoke vivid images of the South African landscape. The nasheed's overriding theme is one of praising Allah (SWT), and the soaring, stirring melodies seem to reach up to the heavens in praise of our Creator. The Zulu lyrics, sung by young Nafisa Jasson from the Masakhane Girls' School, emphasise how love for Allah can be expressed eloquently in any language. It is a wonderful testament to the South African heritage of the artists, and is very expressive of our common bonds. The other Zulu nasheed on Hope, Thula Sizwe, is one of two nasheeds which have strong social messages that resonate with echoes of the South African struggle. This nasheed, which used to be sung at funerals during the Apartheid era, outlines our need to appeal to Allah (SWT) for help, guidance and protection.

The slow, haunting tone of Thula Sizwe is very similar to my favourite nasheed on Hope, Guantanamo Bay. While the title of the nasheed clearly indicates the focus of the nasheed, Guantanamo Bay is written in an abstract form that forces deep introspection. Surprisingly enough, it is this nasheed that has gotten the most airtime on our way to school, topping the list of requests from my children. Although they did not initially grasp the meaning of the nasheed (two of them were born post-9/11), it was the outstandingly haunting melody of the song that piqued their interest, along with the references to the "ghosts of Guantanamo Bay".

As I have often found with Zain Bhikha's compilations, this offered us the opportunity to discuss the meaning of the nasheed, and allowed for some valuable, educational discussions around the rights and wrongs that abound in our world. In essence, this is the overall gist of Hope, for while it does entertain, it also educates and enriches the listener by way of its myriad messages.

This nasheed once again pairs Zain up with his long-time friend Dawud Wharmsby Ali, and the deep bond that exists between the two artists is evident throughout. Their shared sense of social responsibility and passion for highlighting pertinent issues comes through very strongly. Guantanamo Bay was written by Jeremy Karodia and Ayub Mayet, and Karodia mentioned how the parallels between Guantanamo Bay and Robben Island were in part what spurred them on to pen this nasheed. As such, it is a stark reminder for every listener that it is important to stand up and be heard whenever human rights are violated.

The strong focus on the youth is carried through in the nasheed Muhammad (SAW) which is described by Zain as more of a story than a nasheed. It's somewhat of a six-minute seerah lesson, he says. The nasheed gives a short, concise history of the Prophet's (SAW) life that will be sure to inspire many a youngster to delve further into the history of the life of our beloved Muhammad (SAW).

There are two nasheeds which inspire us to be in constant remembrance of Allah (SWT). One God, the first track on the album, is vintage Zain Bhikha and harks back to some of his older nasheeds. Ellahi is a wonderful combination of Arabic and English, featuring the amazing vocals of Middle Eastern artist Fadi Tolbi. Also included on Hope is Michael Jackson's Heal the World which is highly appropriate in the context of Hope, as it talks about the need to reach out to our fellow man, thereby helping create a better world. Overall, this is the constant refrain that runs through Hope, our ability to be able to make a positive contribution to those around us. One of the more unusual features of this album is the cover, which features a montage of faces that were posted online on Zain Bhikha's site 1000 Faces of Hope. This adds to the universality of the album as people from around the world were able to post their pictures on-line and the collage encompasses a variety of different looks.

While Hope has a very strong African theme about it, the eclectic mix of artists and nasheeds on the album attests to the fact that no matter what our background, it is our common beliefs and ideals that bind us. At the end of the day we are all a part of humanity and our ability to find those ties is what gives us, hope ...