

interview by **Elizabeth Rhodes**
 photographer **Saryn Christina**
 creative director **Elizabeth Rhodes**
 fashion stylist **Azam Ali**
 makeup artist & hair stylist **Azam Ali**

Azam Ali

With her latest solo full-length release *Phantoms*, Azam Ali's impressive catalogue of work now features a deeply personal exploration of her identity as an artist with influences nodding to her love of alternative music from the 80s and 90s as well as her roots in the Middle East, notably featuring a cover of the **Cocteau Twins** song "Shallow Then Halo." Formerly a member of the world music group **Vaz**, Azam Ali is currently performing with Niyaz and a multi-disciplinary performance art group called **The Fourth Light Project**. She has also contributed to television, video game, and film scores using her unique voice and approach to music. We spoke with Azam about her journey as an artist, the process of creating *Phantoms* and opening for **Bauhaus** on their reunion tour.

How would you describe who you are as a musician?

Azam Ali : I think of myself as a multifaceted artist. Most people know me as a singer, but I don't think of myself as a singer; it's just one of the things that I do. I cover so many different styles that it's really difficult for me to box myself into one particular category. But I like the fact that the work I do defies any particular genre. So I think if I had to add any adjectives to the kind of music I create or the kind of artist I am, I think my work is cinematic, it's very introspective, it's the kind of music you can both relax to if you want to but if you also wanted to dance to it you could. It's very moody. It is dark, but not dark in a depressing way and I think there's a lot of optimism there as well.

As a listener, I find that I can drift or meditate in music and your music definitely could be described as a musical landscape wherein you can leave this world and go somewhere else for a bit.

AA : I think some of the best work or best art comes from being able to tap into your pain. I think when you do that there is a sort of dark element that you mine from, and the secret is then being able to take that pain that you are mining and be able to tap into something that is very universal because everybody feels pain. There are so many things that we cannot articulate but that's why we go to the arts. Because art articulates what we cannot. You create something universal and hopefully it resonates with people, and then it allows them to sort of transcend that pain and enter into a much higher state. That's the way I think of it mostly when I write pieces like that. I go somewhere else. I can't really describe it but it's somewhere outside of my body. It's somewhere else. In that place I don't feel pain, I don't feel joy, it's just something sort of in between all of it, you know?

This reminds me of artists who have created a persona for themselves as a performer and say this persona is the one who wrote the music and was the force behind the creativity. Sometimes these artists will credit another entity altogether for the work they've done. Essentially, some ethereal element was at play when the music was being written or the art was being created. It wasn't just the artist themselves creating it.

AA : Absolutely. A lot of times it feels like a radio frequency, turning the knob, trying to tap into something. It's like tuning in to a station. Actually, "Ode to Melancholy" [from *Phantoms*, 2019] was one of those really strange songs. I was on an airplane flying back from Europe and suddenly the lyrics came to me. It was something so bizarre. I was just watching a movie and the phrase "Ode to Melancholy" came to me. I thought, "that's a nice phrase, I should do something with that," so I just pulled out my iPad and started typing it so I wouldn't forget. As I typed, another idea came and I think I wrote all the lyrics to that song in about forty minutes on that airplane, then I came home and wrote the music for it. It's the most uninspiring place and that's when you realize "it" doesn't come from you. I never understand when musicians develop such an ego about their work because if you do it right, you should always feel like you did not have a hand in it, that you just kind of tapped into something. So, if anything, you should be humbled and feel incredibly grateful that you're wired that way.

The muse shows you.

AA : Yes.

That leads us to your latest release, *Phantoms*. Is this a change in direction for you as an artist? How would you describe *Phantoms* in general?

AA : I think most people would see it as a change in direction because most people know me for a certain kind of work, but for me it doesn't feel like a change at all. I feel like I've expressed something that's always been a part of who I am, but I never really had the time or the means. I had to develop my craft to be able to actually produce this album. So for the past ten years I've just been developing my craft, I've been able to produce music on my own and finally I've been able to do it. So I know people see it as a sort of detour from my work, but I finally got to do something that has always been a part of who I am. Most people know me from my

world electronic project or my film work, TV work, all that. It's called *Phantoms* because it's about how we, each of us, develop multidimensional selves in order to navigate in a multidimensional universe and how each of us has so many personas that live within us. We're different people with our friends than we are with our family, or our lover, and so on and so forth. So we learn to sort of move fluidly through all the characters that we create but they all inhabit us and that's why it's *Phantoms*: it's like living with so many ghosts that are inside yourself. This album, when I started to produce it, I realized I was tapping into a lot of the music that had inspired me in the 80s and 90s. It was a big part of who I am and it was kind of like bringing to life again this persona that was dormant inside myself. And it was also a very dark period for me so it was nice to resurrect that ghost and to reconcile with that ghost and forgive myself for mistakes I made and come to peace with every aspect of who I am. So that's really what *Phantoms* is about, it's kind of dedicated to all the ghosts that live within each of us.

And on a magical note, you released it on the 13th of September.

AA : Friday the 13th!

Full moon. Major day of releasing things that no longer serve you, of recognizing the things you're holding that you need to put down. It's so perfect that this album was released on a day with so many connections numerologically and astrologically; your timing was right on.

AA : This album, I wasn't sure if people would even like it, I just thought they're either going to hate it or they're going to love it, but I made the album I've really been wanting to make. And I just kind of went with it. I let the universe sort of dictate where I was going to go and what was going to happen. What's so strange is originally a different release date was chosen and then I realized I'm not going to meet that date, so actually the date was chosen by the distributor. It was so arbitrary in that sense but when it got chosen, that's when you realize everything is so interconnected because it wasn't me sitting there and going "wow this is such a special date I'm going to go in there and make them try to release it on this day." I just said I would like to choose a date, and they came back to me with September 13 and I said, wow, it could not be more auspicious, really. It was a sign for me that you're on the right track. When things like that happen, I feel there are messages that come to you that say you're on the right track, just do it, just keep going. So it's just about sometimes stepping back and surrendering and making sure you recognize the signs.

What were you listening to when you were in that formative phase of really exploring music and what it is to think outside of what your family of origin or culture was exposing you to? What were those influences for you musically?

AA : When I came here [to the United States] it was 1985. I was born in Iran but I grew up in India and I went to an English boarding school there for eleven years.

Given those experiences, how many languages do you speak?

AA : Four: Farsi, Hindi, French and English. I lived in Montreal for a few years. Then, when I came here in 1985, it was a really difficult time for me because I was completely uprooted and the culture shock was just too much for me. I really isolated myself and I couldn't relate to people, so of course I found my family and I would just say 95% of my friends were gay men. I found my home with gay men as a teenager and they exposed me to a lot. They had great taste so immediately I got thrown into incredible music and one of my best friends at that time was a DJ, so we would go to a lot of clubs and I got to hear a lot of amazing DJs at that time. The kind of music I listened to was a vast spectrum so it was everything from that sort of heavy sound of Wax Trax Records, you know, [My Life with the] Thrill Kill Kult, Ministry, Meat Beat Manifesto, so many bands. KMFDM, you know all those bands. Everything from them to 4AD artists like Cocteau Twins, so it went from dark, heavy sounds to sort of ethereal, out-of-this-world pop or you know Dead Can Dance, Throwing Muses... This Mortal Coil was a huge influence on



me. So it was going back and forth between those two and that was pretty much what I was absorbed at that time. Even though those influences didn't 100% come through in the world music stuff I did, I think there's still a lot of that. I mean, I can hear the moody, introspective aspect of it that is so dominant in all that music that I just mentioned. I think I carry that with me. I think that's when I really got into electronic music as well as listening to a lot of industrial music.

I assume Depeche Mode was in there, too.

AA : Yeah, Depeche Mode was the first. I'm talking about when I got into the really dark stuff, but Depeche Mode came even before all this. Depeche Mode came into it as soon as I got into America. I think I was sixteen and I discovered Depeche Mode. He [Dave Gahan] may be the only singer I still have a crush on! I don't think that crush is ever going to go away. I remember going to see them live. I was sixteen when my friend took me and I may have cried the entire concert. So that was kind of the beginning for me.

Depeche Mode is a fantastic gateway band to discover so many other bands from there. What a great back catalogue to revisit those songs and think about how so many bands were influenced from what might be considered the 'lesser known' albums, like *Construction Time Again*. I believe that was a hugely influential album.

AA : That's actually one of their best albums for me. I still have it on vinyl and I listen to it. I think what was incredible about them for me was being a gateway band for me getting into all this other stuff, it was the first kind of music I heard when I came to the West that had such a strong emphasis on melody. The melodies were something I could relate to because I was coming from the East and you have these sort of dark minor keys and really melancholic sort of lyrics and melodies and so it resonated with me I could relate to that. That combined with technology, I know now for a lot of people it sounds dated—but I can still listen to their records and it's so relevant.

You mentioned This Mortal Coil and I'm interested to know more about that because as a "supergroup" it pulled from different bands that you've just mentioned. What was so influential about This Mortal Coil for you?

AA : When I look back... I've recently become very good friends with John Fryer who was the producer of This Mortal Coil and now getting to know him it kind of makes sense. I was not attracted to it so much in that it was all these bands that I liked were forming a supergroup, but the concept of it is something that I wish I would see more happening today, where you have really amazing artists coming together and just sort of teaming up. These two will do a track, then those two and then creating a body of work that encompasses so many different artistic sensibilities and visions. That's what I really loved about it most. And then, of course, there are those iconic tracks, you know, Elizabeth Fraser's "Song to the Siren" is probably the most popular but for me "Another Day" is probably my favorite track from This Mortal Coil. That was a phenomenal track—that is a phenomenal track for me. If I had to say one thing that I took away from This Mortal Coil, it's that music is so personal, so you end up having a very personal experience. You can listen to the same song and something different is going to happen to you, but for me listening to This Mortal Coil was when I started to experience music not as something auditory but as something very three-dimensional. I felt like music became a space that I would enter into. Suddenly I realized it's not something that I'm hearing, it's something that I'm experiencing, I'm feeling it, my environment has completely changed. My approach to music now and when I started to create music; I always think of music as an environment. When I sit and I'm looking at a blank canvas and I don't know where to start from, I imagine an empty room and then I imagine what I want to bring into that room. One by one I start adding elements and I try to imagine it at the end, so at the end I want to feel like I'm in a space and I'm surrounded by these sounds. These sounds are going to make me have a very particular out-of-body experience and I want people to feel that way. When they listen to a song, I want them to feel like they're entering a room, al-

most. So that's kind of my approach to how I like to create music, and how I want people to feel when they listen to my music.

With all of these influences, what led you to writing and performing music?

AA : Actually, I never wanted to be a singer! I wanted to be an instrumentalist and I wanted to learn a really old instrument, so I went to study this Persian instrument, the Persian zither [Santour], and about two-three years into it I had to learn a few passages that I had to sing while I was learning the instrumental parts. There were some aspects that had poetry attached to it by Rumi or another one of the famous poets, and I would have to memorize those. It's actually a Persian dulcimer, it's easier like that. I had to sing those poems while I played. So one day my teacher just said to me, "Have you ever considered singing?" And I said, "No, not really." He then said, "There's something about your voice. I know it's not trained right now and anybody can go and train their voice, but there's a certain quality that triggers people's emotions, and that's something you're born with, and I think you have that in your voice. So why don't you go explore that?" So I thought, okay, I'll go. So I went to Santa Monica College and I took a course in singing, and at the end of the semester the teacher asked me to stay when it was done. We did our finals and all that, so at the end he asked me to stay and he said, "I think you should do this seriously. I've been doing this for many years and I only tell students if I think they should pursue things seriously. It's up to you whether you want to or not. But if you would like to, I'll teach you once a week, I'll give you private lessons." So once a week I started going to see him. A few years into that I discovered the music of Hildegard von Bingen, she was a German composer and she was also a nun. She was amazing, a remarkable woman. I discovered her compositions, started learning them and I joined the Early Music Choir and it kind of took off from there. Once I started singing seriously nobody wanted to hear me play an instrument.

Do you still play that instrument?

AA : I still play it. I use it on a lot of compositions but it has such a distinct sound that you can't use it on every single song, you know. So just on some compositions I use it.

How did you choose the Cocteau Twins song "Shallow Then Halo" for *Phantoms* and how did you approach reworking it?

AA : When I said that [I was covering the song] to a couple of my friends they were like, "Are you sure you want to do that?" The weird thing is that it was the very last song I did for the album. I finished the album and I felt like it was such a cathartic experience when I was done. I felt that I had finally expressed something I had been wanting to express for so many years and I should pay tribute to one band that really influenced me a lot on this album. I didn't even have to think about it for a minute because I thought, well, what would I do? I don't really like doing cover songs, my entire career I've maybe done two. I've covered a Cure song once for a very specific project and then I did a cover of a Twilight Zone song that nobody on Earth would know unless you're a hardcore Twilight Zone fan. So then I thought, okay, it's going to be a Cocteau Twins song, and I didn't want to do one of their popular songs. I wanted to do something that would be a silent nod to other hardcore fans like myself, so it was before the time that they became really popular and "Shallow Then Halo" was always one of my favorite songs. It was just one of those songs that, although my favorite albums by them are *Victorialand* and *Treasure*, "Shallow Then Halo" was just a magical song for me and I thought, you know, that's a song that I can take and really make my own, and once I decided to do it I really didn't think about it. I told myself, "You know what, I'm going to go in without any judgment, the only thing I'm not going to do is try to copy it and redo what they already did." Because you don't do that. It's just not the right way to do it. So I thought, okay, the first thing I have to do is create my groove, what is my groove going to be? What am I going to sing this against? And as soon as I came up with the beat and the rhythm section, I just knew that I got it. I'm going to go and turn it on its head and do something completely different, but I'm going to preserve the soul of the song. For me the soul of the song is the vocals and the

auxiliary music

guitar. Once it came together, I just felt it, I knew it was good because I wasn't trying to be something that I'm not and at the same time I was coming at it with so much reverence for them that I knew it was a good tribute. That's how I felt. I felt like if I had to play this for them I would be really honored, which I did get to do.

What was the experience of having your cover heard by the band that created the song?

AA : I got invited by Sonic Scoop Magazine to write an essay after they heard the song. They said, "Can you write an essay on the Cocteau Twins and what they meant to you?" So I wrote this essay and which turned out beautifully and they published it. The day it got published, Simon Raymonde from Cocteau Twins wrote on my Facebook Page wherein I shared the post about the essay. He wrote to me and then I just... I was screaming into my pillow! I said, "Can I send you my record and send you the song? I would love to hear what you think." I sent it to him and he ended up writing a statement that just blew my mind about the track. It just blew my mind. I thought, if I don't get any press from my record, I'm happy. Simon wrote a beautiful quote and how he started it was, "Tackling a Cocteau Twins song is regarded by many to be either very brave or very foolhardy. I know there haven't been many covers attempted of our songs that's for sure, but any really great cover version of any song needs to shine a new light upon it." So I felt really honored.

Do you find that the Cocteau Twins cover is how a lot of people are finding you these days?

AA : I think it has exposed me to my own people, those who may not have been so interested in other things that I did but they were my people, you know. I did it for them because those who are coming to me because of that particular song, they are the old hardcore fans. So actually, I hope more discover *Phantoms* through that but that's not even the reason why I did the cover. I wanted to pay tribute and I wanted something like that to be part of my album because it's one of the personas inside me. Their music was such a big part of who I am. When I uploaded the live video of the performance of "Shallow Then Halo", a lot of people discovered [me], but what's more touching for me is those who know and love that song to really love this version. One of the reasons I don't like doing covers is, first of all, you have to cover something you really love. There's so much nostalgia for all of us attached to any given song that when somebody else does a cover of it, there's a part of you that feels like, "Now why'd you have to go mess with something that's perfect?" But it does happen in that rare occasion when someone covers a song and then you feel like, "Wow this is adding a new dimension to something I already love."

It's telling a story so it continues to be told, which is so important in our lineage as humans and as creatives, too, to say, "I'm nodding to this elder who influenced me." That's important.

AA : Absolutely. You could also say it's very modern sounding, the version that I did, and I wanted it to be very relevant to what I'm doing right now. I didn't want to recreate an 80s song.

Tell us about the fine art composites you create in addition to your music.

AA : I got really interested in photography, just as a hobby. Originally, when I was younger I used to paint and I was really into miniature painting, so really fine detail. I kind of gave that up because I got very serious about music. I don't remember what album I was working on, this is more than ten years ago, we were on such a low budget and the artist who was doing all my graphic art at that time, my album packages, I went to him and suddenly he upped his price. I just didn't have the money. I thought, there's no way we can afford that, so I got really angry that here is someone that I worked with for so many years and suddenly he was asking for that kind of money, knowing I didn't have it, so I went and got Photoshop and I said, "How hard can this be?" [laughs]

Famous last words.

AA : When I started this it was even before I got into producing music myself, programming and all that. So Photoshop was my doorway into becoming a hard-core technology geek because I got Photoshop and I went in a little bit on my own and I thought, "Wow, this is a rabbit hole," it's so vast. So I got a private tutor, this friend who is a painter and a genius. I was living in Montreal at the time and I was like, "Hey, do you want to come to my house? I'll cook really good food for you and I'll pay you to teach me how to do Photoshop." He didn't care about the money, it was the food! He would come over once a week, we'd have wine, we'd eat, and he would give me these lessons over the course of a year. I became addicted to Photoshop and then later After Effects and all that. But it was just such a phenomenal tool. Once I got into Photoshop, I thought, "You know what, I underestimated myself because I always thought 'oh I'm never going to be good at anything related to technology, it's just not me,'" and before I knew it, it just all kind of connected. A majority of my favorite artwork is all really dark and surreal. But when I say 'dark' I don't think of it as 'negative', it's the same when we talked about the music. So I started doing the fine art composites again as a hobby because it became my escape from touring. I've got so much pressure on me with agents and band members and everyone's depending on you. You have this pressure, you go on tour, pressured to make a new record, and everything became about pressure and earning money and all that. And I just needed a creative outlet where no one expected anything from me and there was no judgment. I didn't have to share my work with anyone, it was just something for me to escape and kind of heal myself. So I started doing that and then people started telling me, "You really should put this stuff out there, it's really good." I shared a couple of them and then I realized, wow, people actually like it. I'm really interested in blurring the boundaries between different artistic mediums. So one of the things I'm doing right now is I'm creating the fine art composites then I'm animating them and composing individual pieces of music for them. So that's kind of where I want to go with them.

What do you think are the top challenges or factors that take you away from the creative space that you want to be in? Working in this industry where it is about what you're putting out there, who you're going on tour with, or performing in front of, what are the challenges you face as a musician?

AA : The biggest challenge is always how to earn a decent living so that you can continue doing what you do. The majority of artists that I know who are incredibly talented, whether they're musicians or painters or photographers or writers, the majority of them have to go and get a regular job so they can earn money in order to be able to express themselves artistically. For me, there's nothing more criminal than living in a society that prevents creatives from being able to express themselves because that is what makes life worth living. So I think this challenge of always having to earn a living is very hard and certainly in this era it's even worse because of Spotify and how little they pay artists, and the majority of people are on Spotify. People don't buy records anymore, so I feel like I'm constantly having to educate people about the reality of what it is like. For example, I worked on my record for four years. To date, I've invested over forty thousand dollars in producing it, everything from beginning to end, mixing, mastering, promotion, all of that. Trying to convince people to go download a song for ninety-nine cents is... I tell people, you're willing to go and buy a latte at Starbucks for under five dollars and you're going to piss that out in one hour, but you won't buy a record for ten dollars that will give you a lifetime of enjoyment? And streaming, that's okay but do you know how much somebody has to stream your music in order for you to even be able to make one dollar? So that's my biggest challenge, honestly. I'm not crazy about touring, I do it because I have to. My happy place is in the studio. I like creating and going on the stage is kind of monotonous for me, singing the same songs every night, it becomes like acting.

Do you find that you are influenced by aesthetics or visual mediums in your music? For example, how you present yourself on stage, in press images or in other ways, does your music change or evolve when you change something about your aesthetic?





AA : It's a very good question. I'm just trying to think of how I've presented myself aesthetically for this album than I have maybe for the others? If you look at all my past works I wear a lot of heavy jewelry and I love, especially old silver, a lot of tribal jewelry. One of the things I did for *Phantoms*, because I was talking so much about ghosts, for both the music videos I made as well as for all of my publicity shots, I'm not wearing any jewelry, no earrings, no necklace, no rings, nothing. It became very important for me to be very bare. Of course, with makeup and all that, but it was kind of like letting another part of myself through. But if I had to describe how I always like to present myself I think we all as artists in a way like to be captured as a persona that we would like to be. That's why we become so obsessed with image; it's tapping into an innate need to be something bigger than what we feel inside, and I think in my own way, that's what I tried to do. Maybe something ethereal, something out of this world, because I feel that way so much, or I want to be there.

What's next for you?

AA : Well, I'm not doing too many shows for *Phantoms* because honestly I've paid my dues so much in nightclubs that it's hard for me to go back to playing nightclubs. I've now spent fifteen years in the US just trying to get myself to a level where I'm performing at the Performing Arts series level. I'm doing that with my world electronic band [Niyaz] and we have this immersive multimedia project that we've created. It's called The Fourth Light Project. It's an immersive experience with visuals and music and it's exactly where I'm more interested in going towards. It's theatrical, so that's kind of been taking off the last couple of years and we've presented it at some amazing venues. Next year we have around ten shows and one of them is at The Met in New York and we're bringing it to Royce Hall in June [2020] I believe. That's the level I've always wanted to perform at and where you're really just creating high art. At the Performing Arts level you're not just hustling to sell tickets. So next year is going to be a year about taking The Fourth Light Project on tour and here and there I'm going to try and mix in some dates to perform *Phantoms* live because a lot of people want to see it. It's actually a beautiful show live, it's just the trio, and if you come see the Bauhaus show you'll see it. It's a beautiful show, I just don't have it in me to do that level of touring again.

Will that be your next live performance, opening for Bauhaus here in Los Angeles?

AA : Bauhaus is going to be my next live performance, yes.

What a great show to be part of.

AA : It's so exciting. You know what it is, it's everything coming full circle. It's meant to be. There's no other album, because Peter [Murphy] wanted originally for me to go open for him when he was doing his solo tour a few years ago in Europe. We just couldn't make it work. He said, "Wait, the right time will come," and then *Phantoms* comes out, they [Bauhaus] reunite to do these shows and I thought there is no other album I would want to open for Bauhaus with except for this album.

Everything falls into place. That's a really great place for us to end this, I think.

AA : Yay! **A**

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