

Picking It Apart

Interview with Mish'aal & Isyraf (The Psalms), Az & Phid (Stellarium) / Words by Cher



Cross talk. From left: Horacio Pollard, Mish'aal, Reggie Perera, Darren Moore and Phid / Photo by The Observatory

“Play Freely” means exactly like it is. Pretensions cast aside, the six-part series organised by The Observatory sees a convergence of musicians from diverse backgrounds bringing in their own unique elements to the mix. With the first instalment held just two weeks ago on April 15, instruments as atypical as the stick, veena, and didgeridoo were matched with more “conventional” offerings of guitar, bass and drum – pushing all involved out of their comfort zones. The result: an improvisational cacophony that was split into four separate sets, each delivering something distinct, yet feral and discordant. Therefore, it would seem apt to speak with some of the musicians involved that night, to get a sense of their perspectives and perhaps, to make a tentative grasp of what unfolded before us the audience.

First things first, introduce yourselves.

Mish'aal: Mish'aal, bass player from The Psalms.

Phid: My name is Firdhaus, a.k.a. Fid or Phid, whichever. I'm one of the two guitarists for Stellarium.

Az: Az Kadir, I, Noiseferatu, 32, male, outer rims of Orion's Belt.

Isyraf: Isyraf and I play drums for The Psalms.

Reflecting prior to Playfreely, how did you feel about getting invited to be a part of it? What role does improvisation play in your usual band practices/arrangements?

Isyraf: When Mish'aal told me I was going to be playing with a bunch of musicians I'd never seen or heard of prior, I got all juiced up. Add a veena player into the mix, and immediately I knew that the entire event was going to be interesting and fun; a real eye-opener. In The Psalms, we rarely improvise due to lack of time. Usually one has a song or riff in mind before practice.

Phid: I think me being in Stellarium got me invited to Playfreely. I had mixed feelings, both honored and unsure – mostly honored to be in the mix with talented musicians. Improvisation usually takes place during

live shows for Stellarium, making noises and guitar feedback which I did during some parts of my set.

Mish'aal: Initially, I was pretty excited when The Psalms got invited for Playfreely thinking that we'd be collaborating with other musicians as a band. Later, I found out that the band members would be separated, which I was fine about at first, but the closer the event loomed the more nervous I became. It didn't help when the first thing I saw when I walked into the Black Box were Andy's effect pedals which I thought was on an epic scale. Regarding the role of improvisation within the band, I'd say it's pretty much on a "safe" level where we'd come in with a song or basic structure ready, which we'd try out before making any changes. The entire band has an input on everyone's parts, thus improvisation is kept at a minimal since we're helping one another out.

Az: It was great in a sense that the people behind Playfreely made it such a fun thing to explore. It's different than say, being invited just to session or play something as is; this is definitely well thought of and considered and planned. In Stellarium, we don't require much improvisation really, it's always diagrams and structures and sounds in my head prior.

Did you "cheat"? Did you do anything to prepare for your part(s) during the set? If so, what?

Az: Yes, some honey, and I took a rocket-ship first to my home planet near Orion's belt.

Isyraf: No. Basically whatever that comes to mind will automatically go into my drumming. All the preparation I had was to keep telling myself to maintain eye contact with the other musicians, and also to really dig in and listen.

Mish'aal: Didn't have the chance to cheat or come out with parts before the set. Sorry.

Phid: Nah! There's no way one can cheat or prepare for such events. That will only backfire.



Starburst: Az (left) and Isyraf / Photo by Andy Yang

What kind of feelings did you experience during your set(s)? What did you find coming out? Were there riffs or chord patterns that you were familiar with? Did interacting with the other musicians

push you to places you hadn't been before?

Phid: Mine was the first set, with Darren Moore, Mish'aal, Reggie and Horacio. So it was pretty awkward for us I guess. No one knew when to start and what to expect. Not sure if they had eye contact but not me. I just looked down and did my thing using what I heard as a guide. I'm not a very good guitarist so I mostly did familiar things which I'm used to with Stellarium while accommodating to the other musicians.

Az: I felt a clash of elements, it was like an amalgamation of chaos, bliss, harmony and conflict. What came out was a kaleidoscope of thoughts and uncertainties, as well as aggression and reluctance. Also a tinge of frustration, maybe 'cos some of us failed to gel while some did; and when given room but not having the opportunity to, I found that I had to take the lead, which I think was the main brunt of this element of tension coming about. I kind of enjoy playing and exploring different areas musically with other musicians, regardless of the outcome. It's good for growth of abilities and also widens the perspective.

Mish'aal: During the first session I was in my comfort zone – I was basically playing droning riffs which I was used to without really pushing myself. I was worried that if I tried to do something different, I would spoil the set, especially when I didn't know the other musicians at all (except Fid whom I went to secondary school with and finally got to see/play with him after all these years!). However, the last session really threw me outside of that aforementioned comfort zone, as there was no sense of common rhythm that I could fall back to. Plus there was no communication between the four of us which then required full concentration.

Isyraf: It was awesome! I wanted Arun to kick off the set and he really did. I didn't even tell him what I had in mind! That was really weird. When everyone came in after he gave count, that was it. I can't tell you how much fun it was. Everything sounded great from where I was. We were playing as a unit, we weren't playing individually. I could hear the guitarist (Az) pulling his sound back a bit to give way to the veena player (Arun) and also vice versa. I tried my best not to overplay but then again I don't even *know* how to overplay. I love beats that are plain and simple. Anders and Az made the whole thing sound sick and twisted. It was suh-weet! It felt like I was in an asylum but in a good way. Then again, I've never been to an asylum before... hahaha. Plus I totally lost track of time. The melodies which came from the veena really got me hooked. Arun was like the pied piper slowly reeling me in.



Search & destroy: Isyraf (left) and Anders Hana (MoHa!) / Photo by Andy Yang

How was it collaborating with the other musicians during your set? What did you think of them?

Mish'aal: Collaborating with the others was pretty awesome, especially knowing who they are (I'm not a groupie but I'm usually in awe of musicians or performers with talent). I thought each and everyone of them came in with their own definition of "play freely" and applied it during their sessions, which was rather varied.

Isyraf: I don't know any of the musicians personally except for Mish'aal but I'm more than willing to work with them in the future. I'm really curious about their thought processes when it comes to music.

Phid: From where I was, I couldn't hear what Horacio and Reggie was playing but a friend watching said our set was really good. Darren Moore was great on drums and Mish'aal was spot on at getting the groove going. There was a lot of respect amongst us. I felt a great sense of accomplishment after our set. It felt great.

Az: It's always great to collaborate with people, albeit the negative results. It's a matter of luck, chance and chemistry, despite existing talent and skill. I think everyone had their own contribution from whatever musical backgrounds they came from.

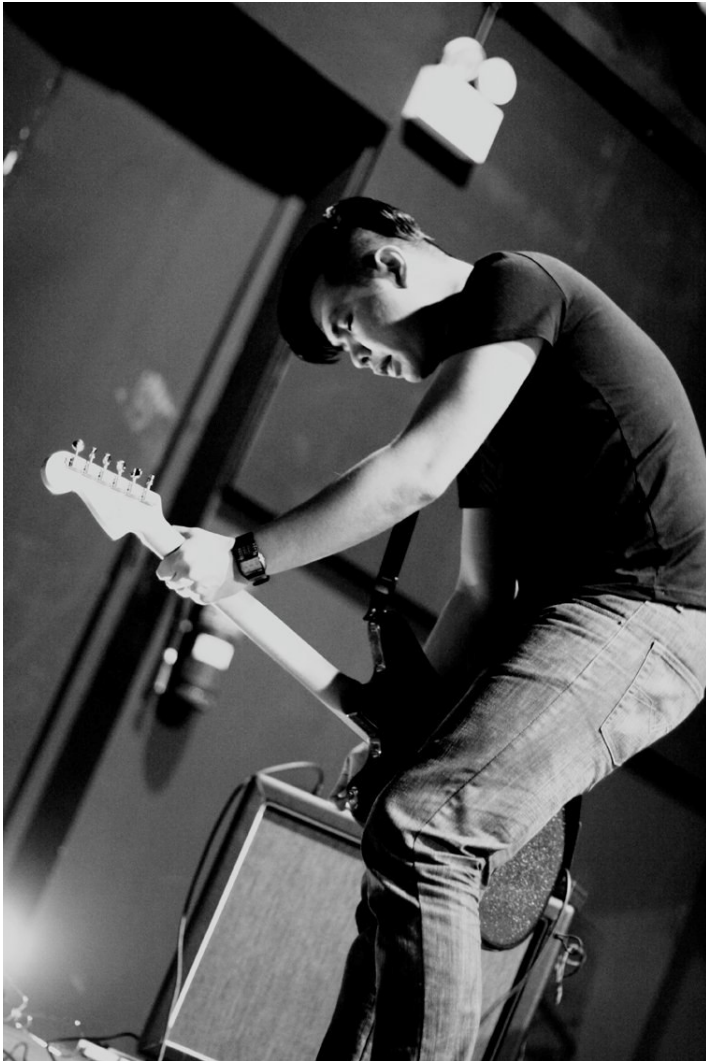
What did you think of the other sets? Of the entire event in general?

Mish'aal: I really enjoyed the whole event, it was fun watching individuals who had never played with each other prior get thrown together. I really liked how the veena player blended in nicely with the drums during the second session. Also, the event allows musicians to interact with those whom they may not have a chance to in regular circumstances.

Phid: I loved the sets featuring Mr Arun Kumar on the veena. I was sure he was nervous based on his body language during the briefing by Dharma before the show. But he kept his cool and played like a true master. Andy's "stick" was very interesting – I didn't know of its existence till that day. The event itself was well-planned, and the turnout was good. I applaud the idea and I'd love to witness the next one. I personally wish to see more exotic instruments at future shows.

Az: I think some of the sets were better and had more tandem chemistry, but I also thought that it was leaning too much in one particular area. I think it's best to try and step beyond yourself and connect, and not stay within one's own boundaries.

Isyraf: In general, the entire event was very memorable. I miss it already. Loads and loads of thanks to Dharma and the rest of The Obs for giving me an opportunity to be a part of the event. I really appreciate it.



Phid slinging it low / Photo by Andy Yang

How much of a challenge was this for you considering how you are not “improv” musicians in the specific sense of the word?

Az: Everyone does some “improv” unconsciously, when they are tuning up their strings or noodling at home, composing, etc. I guess as a songwriter I’m inclined to improvise? Yeah.

Mish’aal: I think most of the Psalms would know that I pretty much suck at improvising, as I’m very bothered by criticism or what people might think. Therefore I hardly step out of my comfort zone and venture new styles. So participating in something like this without knowing at all what to expect was something really nerve-wrecking for me.

Isyraf: I didn’t take it as a challenge in the first place. This may sound cheesy but it was more like self-exploration for me. I wanted to know if I could gel with players coming from different musical backgrounds. I seriously have no idea when I’ll “graduate” but I’m still learning and exploring. The best way is to just keep playing/reading/listening and learning from other players.

Phid: Yes, I’m not really an “improv” musician per se. I tried to make some improvisations at times during my set but I was more focused on blending with the other sounds. The challenge really was to get out of my comfort zone, play the guitar unconventionally, but what IS the conventional way?

Can one make mistakes in an improv set? If so, what constitutes a mistake in such a performance and did you find yourself making mistakes? If there are no such thing as mistakes, why not?

Phid: Yes definitely. When one gets carried away trying to outshine the others instead of working together. I can't tell but I really hope I didn't make that mistake. Which reminds me of what Dharma said when he noticed that I was nervous: "there are no mistakes; there are only good and bad choices."

Mish'aal: I don't think you can say mistakes happen in an improv set, because I think when you are improvising the lack of a template or structure allows you to basically play off of other musicians, against the backdrop of what they are playing.

Az: Well, I don't think there are mistakes in the avant-garde doctrines, but as far as me – being purely a musician – yes of course. I can't say much about this as I'm not schooled well enough in its concepts and frameworks; I'm from a place much more primal than that. In the end, does it matter whether what a heart and soul expresses is a mistake? I think not.

Isyraf: I don't think one can make any mistakes during an improv session. Music has this weird way whereby everything will just fit in nicely. You just have to follow the flow.

This one is for Mish'aal only. Elaborate on how the two sets you played in juxtaposed against each other. How were they different?

Mish'aal: The first set was pretty straightforward. It was something I was very comfortable with, compared to the second one which literally had me going through a whirlwind of emotions just trying to anticipate what was coming. During the first session there were a lot of points where the each musician kept the structure consistent.

I usually play through drummers but for session two, there was no common rhythm or direction that I could fit into (except during one part where the drummer slowed down his beats as if he was following the bass line, but only to shift to patterns that took me by surprise). Each of us were just playing on our own and I was just struggling trying to think of any riffs/things. The two sessions put together really showed how different each musician interprets their idea of improvisation jam.



Mish'aal sh'miles... at Dharma (The Observatory) / Photo by Andy Yang