

# Naser Mestarihi, Naser Mestarihi



SLT Rating: 4 pearls

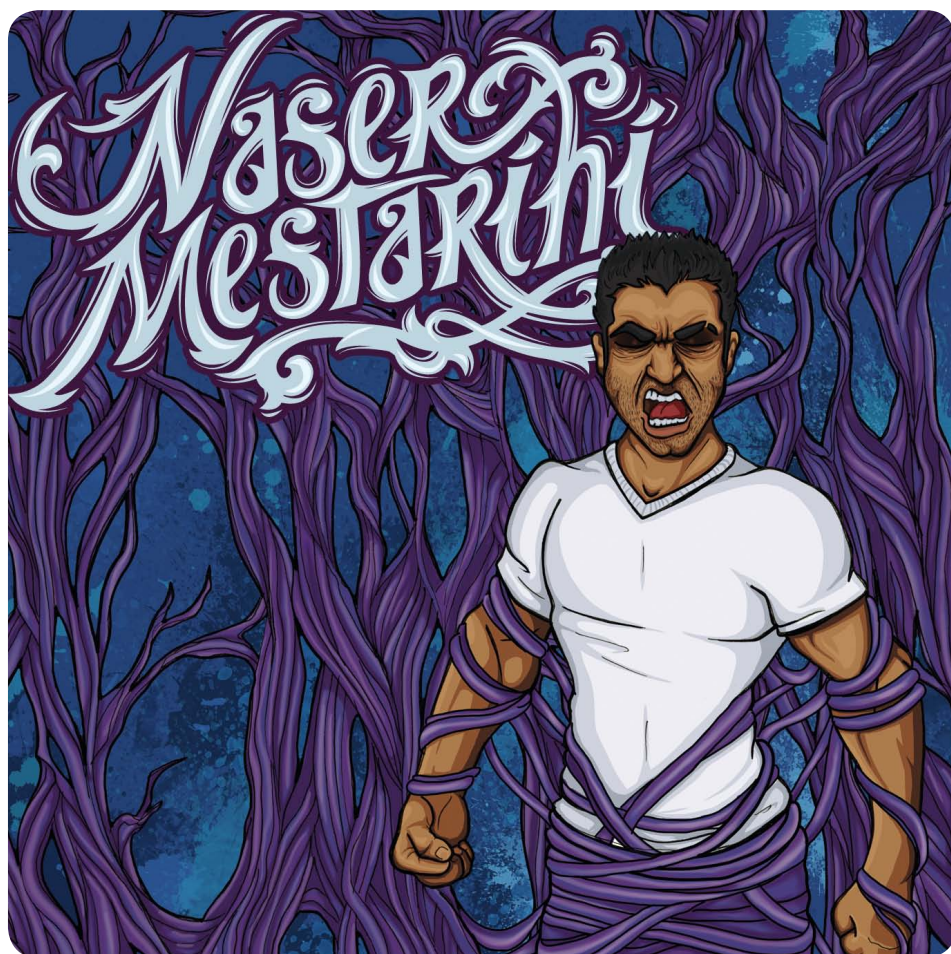
A local boy makes good... by rocking our faces off!

>>> In his self-titled debut EP, locally-based Naser Mestarihi (*Up Close & Personal, Page 66*) is testing his strengths and learning to play to them. It's easy to hear that Naser is a man who revels in being a musician and, while he takes things seriously lyrically, it's clear that he is having all kinds of fun with his instrumental innovation.

His song "Phoenix" is a perfect example of this. As a song that verges on the epic, it's obviously the direction in which Naser wishes to tread. Lyrically, "Phoenix" feels a bit rushed. Although it doesn't kill the song, his lyrical thread comes across as both precursor and afterthought in a heavy, hard race to practice the magic of his instrumentals. And they are magic. When the solo kicks in at about three and a half minutes in, it's clear what cranks Mestarihi's tractor: guttural riffs threaded beautifully, if not maniacally, with the screeching whine of fast licks.

Even though it's a somewhat similar song, "Blazing Temple" is a completely different animal that is more lyrically sound and musically experimental. It seems to be a sort of recurring theme in the album that Mestarihi seems interested in showing us the way through the range and diversity of his talents, and the more we listen to his songs, the more we dig the journey.

"Blazing Temple" is a methodic (but not plodding) build into a much more structured, yet fierce explosion that lets the tune break out and become more wild, allowing Naser more room to play, a position in which he excels. Again, he shines in a strong peppering of fret-tickling, almost computerised-sounding builds that you can't help but double-back on and listen to over and over again.



"Salvation" is by far his best and most versatile song, and the one that will resonate most with a wider audience. Even though it's the album's least "rock & roll" offering, it's also, almost ironically, its strongest. He keeps his vocals within an obviously more comfortable (though still quite impressive) range, and benefits from a more relaxed musical cadence than in other tunes.

The way he casually strolls across the frets, particularly around the two minutes and forty five second mark, shows his ability to throw in an equal parts gorgeous and dynamic bluesy technical acumen, and solidifies for us that his is a destiny of becoming a modern minstrel (definitely regionally and hopefully internationally) within the coming years.

Our verdict: make some room on your iPod for Naser Mestarihi, and not just because you "should" support local music, but because he's just really quite good, and if this debut album is any indication, he has a great future ahead of him, and *Sur la Terre*, for one, is looking forward to hearing every step.

# Rock in a HARD PLACE



>>> Modest. Unassuming. Personable. He may not seem like a budding god of hard riffs and slick licks when you first meet him, but make no mistake, Naser Mestarihi IS rock music. Sporting skinny dark jeans and a leather jacket, he wears his genre like a black badge, breathing it in with the same metallic skin hiss his fingers make as they absentmindedly garrote the strings between frets. It's a role he wears naturally, almost as if he was born of music, which basically, he was.

Born and raised in Doha to a Jordanian father and Pakistani mother, Naser was raised in a household often visited by the seven uncles on his father's side, all of whom were professionally-trained musical virtuosos in instruments like the guitar, violin, keyboard, and the lute. Given this close proximity to proficiency, you would be forgiven for thinking it was this environment that inspired Naser to become the multi-faceted musician he is today, but you would be wrong. In fact, it was a family friend's Guns N' Roses album that truly awakened his "appetite for destruction."

"He was a dangerous dude," Naser laughs, remembering his mother's brother's family friend. "I remember sneaking into his car and seeing the cover of this GNR cassette [*Appetite for Destruction*] and going, 'Whoa!' I mean, it had this big cross and this snake, it was crazy! So I put it in, and that was it, man. From the second I heard it, it changed my life."

In years prior to that moment, Naser's mother attempted to foster her child's musical acumen by plying him with an acoustic guitar and a few lessons, but this was a man who wanted more than just theory or to be more than the result of homework. "I wanted to be Jimi Hendrix, man," he says with a smile. "I wanted to be rock and roll."

When you hear his self-titled debut album, which was recently called a "huge-sounding, impressive debut" by Rolling Stone magazine, it's hard to believe that such technical strength and unbridled flourish could be self-taught, even though his passion for music comes from a sort of inborn inheritance. His style is a bit more difficult to pinpoint, however, as are his influences, which range from what you'd expect in rock icons like Eddie Van Halen and Slash, to the slightly more divergent Abu Baker Salem and Vivaldi.

That mix has bred an interlacing thrum of the unexpected, with 70s psychedelic rock licks suddenly shredding into epic 80s power ballads and bluesy threads, all tempered in the vast range of his modern vocals. Style being the subjective beast it is, we decided to go directly to the source for clarification on how he identifies himself, his style and his role within the new, and some would call desert frontier of rock music in the Gulf.

Local rock musician Naser Mestarihi talks with *Sur la Terre* about his history, his style, his highly anticipated debut album and the nigh impossibilities of creating a *music* revolution in the Middle East.



**If you had to define your style to those who haven't heard your stuff, how would that be and why?**

One of my favourite musicians, Phil Anselmo from Pantera, was on TV recently. He said that back in his day, there were like 10 bands, and that he used to rip stuff off of them. That's what I do. I take techniques from every guitarist that I listen to, from Randy Rhoads [Ozzy Osbourne, Quiet Riot] to Slash [Guns N' Roses] to Pete Townshend [The Who], and I mesh them together and come up with my own thing. I wouldn't say I have my own style, but I have an amalgamation of styles.

**So, would you give it a title or a genre?**

Well, I refer to my music as rock and roll, but you can get misconceptions from that. There are so many different elements to my music. In my newer record, my full length album, I have some pretty heavy riffs. In fact, the last song on the record is a heavy metal riff, which I wrote when I was in a heavy metal band.

But I don't like to categorise myself, man. I mean, I love funk music. I write a lot of funk pieces on the guitar, and if it grooves, if it's good enough, I'll put it on my record. I just want to be as diverse and versatile with my music as possible. But I dunno, if I had to, I guess I'd just classify my music as rock. Yeah. I'm rock.

**What are some other areas that you have explored in your music or plan on exploring in later songs or albums?**

Something I'm really looking forward to right now is my full length album. I'm pretty stoked, too, because I've got enough material to put out two or three more albums now. I also have a lot of material for an acoustic record - an EP for free - that I've been working on. I've been working on recording some covers, too. I love doing covers.

**Concept albums are popular again these days. Ever thought about doing one?**

One of the reasons I love The Who is because of their concept albums. I think my third record will probably be a concept album. I've been thinking about it a lot. I just wrote four new tunes in the past few months; they're pretty epic and long, and are all based on these events that happened to me in my last summer in England. That'll probably be a mini-concept thing on my next record, at least for right now. But yeah, definitely a concept album is in the future.

**The Middle East's first rock concept album. We like it! Is there anything else unusual you'd like to try?**

I want to write a song for the World Cup in 2022. They better not let Shakira do it, man. I will do the song, and I will make it a killer anthem. I've already got a football song written [based on his favourite football team, West Ham United], so that's in the back of my mind, too.

**Speaking of all these things plans for the future, do you think that Qatar and the greater Arabian Gulf is a good place to be right now for your style of music?**

The thing about Doha is that there is so much potential here. There are so many great musicians, like my friend Nigel D'Souza, who plays the guitar, my producer Bader Al Sada (or BR) and Ramy Azizah, a guitar virtuoso that just shreds and also has his own guitar school right now. These were the guys I looked up to when I was a kid.

But I don't want to be 31 or 32 years old, working just to survive and not doing anything with my music. I want my music to get out there. That's the problem, though; it's sort of inevitable in Doha. It's horrible, but if you don't leave, you won't make it.

There's no exposure. There's no support. I mean, the reality is that I'm a regular guy, I'm a university student and I'm trying to make it big, but I'm doing it all on my own. I may be a rock musician, but out here, no one sees that as a lucrative genre of music, so nobody's willing to back me. They don't understand that there's a crazy rock scene here. The Filipino community ALONE could have a powerful impact! If it were marketed correctly, you could have a pretty decent rock scene. It's all about marketing.



Who/what are you listening to right now?  
Mastadon and the Badlands

What is your preferred instrument to play?  
Guitar

What is the best show you've seen?  
Queen (with Paul Rogers)

Who do you wish would come here?  
The Who

What would be your perfect show to play in? Who (alive or dead) would you want to jam or play a show with?  
Guns N' Roses

If you were a song, what song would you be?  
"Paradise City" by Guns N' Roses

#### So you don't get much support from local media?

Well, look, the national television network of Denmark came to Doha once, just to make a documentary about my band, then they screened it throughout Europe. Denmark has shown us more support than our own national radio station. That's crazy to me! It's politics, and I know that, but it's also why musicians like me will never have a proper chance to break through here, unless they're lucky.

#### Would you say then that rock is dead here? Was it ever given a chance to be alive?

I'll tell you something, when I started my old band back in 2004 or 2005, we started doing these battle of the band type gigs. We had a pretty decent following, and I was really proud of what we did. I mean, there was no one else doing heavy metal music in Qatar and we were the first heavy metal band here. When we started playing, we saw this incredible boom of new metal bands everywhere. That was the time we actually thought that there would be some sort of revolution with music. It was a cool time to be around. Looking at it now, though... realistically... it was just us getting our hopes up.

#### Do you think things will change?

In ten years time, things will change. Qatar's going to be huge. It's not just going to be Doha anymore; there will be other cities, like Lusail. There's also going to be a huge influx of foreigners coming in thanks to 2022. What I want to do with my record and my music is start a scene here again. That's my dream. The friends that I jam with have talked about this. We're ready to gig and to tour. We just need access and opportunity.

Man, there is so much potential in this country; in everything, not just music. Whether it's photography or the arts, everything, you will find incredible talent here. I don't know what it is or why these people are being shut out. Is it the traditional conservatism? I don't know, but if they just give people a break or a forum, you would see things flourish. You would see things change. ●

\*To follow Naser via social media, go to [www.facebook.com/nasermestarihi](http://www.facebook.com/nasermestarihi), [www.myspace.com/nasermestarihi](http://www.myspace.com/nasermestarihi) or [www.twitter.com/nasermestarihi](http://www.twitter.com/nasermestarihi). You can search for his album on iTunes, Myspace Music, Napster and Tesco Entertainment.

