

Karla Tallas

INTERVIEW

IF THERE IS NO MUSIC, THERE IS NO LIFE



MYRATH

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A legend called MYRATH ("legend" in the Arabic language) began to be written in 2001, at that time under the name X-TAZY. MYRATH is still the only internationally successful band on the music scene from Tunisia, a country so atypical for rock and metal music. Some members of the band live in France and one even in Georgia (Zaher Zorgati, vocals – Tunis, Malek Ben Arbia, guitars – Tunis, Anis Jouini, bass guitar – Georgia, Elyes Bouchoucha, keyboards – France, Morgan Berthet, drums – France). The band has undergone several line-up changes during its almost twenty-year history. The line-up has completely changed since the beginning of their career, with an exception of the only member, which is the founder and guitarist Malek Ben Arbia. The year 2006 is a complete turning point for the band. MYRATH get the opportunity to perform in front of former LED ZEPPELIN frontman, Robert Plant and the French progressive band ADAGIO. At the concert, they meet the keyboardist of the ADAGIO band Kevin Codfert, who becomes the key person for MYRATH on their future journey.

Kevin Codfert became the producer and later the manager of the band. Thanks to his approach and humanity, he is one of the rare exceptions in the music world. He has been supporting MYRATH selflessly from the

very beginning, and instead of the typically tough business model, he treats the band members as if they belonged to his family, and their music became part of himself. As a producer, Kevin Codfert has already participated in their debut album „Hope“, released in 2007, and since then he has been behind every release of MYRATH. The band has received favorable reviews from music critics since their first album was out, and fans' interest in their work is growing rapidly with each new release.

From the outside, it may seem that these musicians are at a disadvantage due to their background. But the opposite is true. Although they come from a country like Tunisia, they were not raised as Orthodox Muslims. As they themselves emphasize, they have nothing to do with religion except the fact that they were born Muslims. Their work and personal mission have nothing to do with religious topics. They were capable of making full use of their Tunisian origin and the culture of North Africa in which they grew up. From an early age, they were also influenced by the music of the Western world, so they easily combined everything into one whole, which they called BLAZING DESERT METAL. Thanks to their own unique style, they are completely different from all



other bands of the rock and metal music scene. Enormous perception and openness to various musical genres and cultures also enrich their work. Stylistically, MYRATH cannot be unambiguously categorized, as they combine not only the influences of their native culture, but also hard rock, metal and blues, enriched by elaborate parts of progressive rock. The uniqueness of MYRATH is underlined by the vocals of frontman Zaher Zorgati. Zaher is one of the singers who has perfectly balanced both fundamental levels, technical and emotional. Only someone who can really absorb the specifics of North African culture and, at the same time, the specifics used by the singers of the Western

world from an early age, can really sing like him. In this matter, I highly recommend going in depth by listening to the studio recordings of the band MYRATH. What you will hear is, in many cases, not at all easy to sing live.

MYRATH is not one of the bands that builds its image on exaggerated poses and artificial self-presentation. Their expression feels natural and spontaneous, whether it is a concert show or a personal meeting with them. Through the music and their performances, they symbolically transform us to a different world than the one that often sets the harsh reality for us and, above all, they fill us with positive energy and hope. **KT**



Rock and metal music are not really common genres that are being supported in Tunisia. How were you introduced to rock and metal music?

Zaher: I remember the first time I heard about rock music; it was from my father. He introduced me to THE ROLLING STONES and LED ZEPPELIN. I think I was 7 years old. At the same time, I was listening to Tunisian folklore music and the eastern music they played on the radio. It was something natural for me. My father preferred more western music such as I have already mentioned, but also PINK FLOYD and other rock bands. At the age of 10 or 12, I started to discover other rock music, but also the blues, more deeply. I started listening to ERIC CLAPTON or BB KING. And at the age of 17, my cousin who lives in Köln, Germany, borrowed some CDs of METALLICA, PANATERA, SENTENCED or HAMMERFALL for me. He introduced me to more hard stuff, and I liked it. I liked the subject they were talking about. Music is something that hits your heart really deeply. That's how I started listening to metal music. Music has always been an important part of my life because my parents used to listen to it a lot too. This kind of music is not typical for Tunisia. But it also depends on the region you come from and the way you are raised. It depends on the environment you live in.

Malek: My father was a big fan of BLACK SABBATH, JUDAS PRIEST and stuff like that. I remember the first song I heard was "Iron Man" from BLACK SABBATH. I remember it well because it was really easy to learn. You can play it only with one string so it was easy to start with. That's the main thing that stayed in my mind in connection with my musical beginnings. I also started to listen to more progressive bands such as SYMPHONY X.

I cannot imagine orthodox Muslims would support their children in listening to rock or heavy metal. What kind of environment were you raised in?

Zaher: Yes, orthodox Muslims, they do not even listen to music in general. They only listen to their religious chants. I do not come from that sort of background.

It feels like you are musically very open. Apart from Tunisian influences and rock/metal music, what other genres do you like to listen to?

Zaher: We actually listen to all kinds of music. We listen to classical music. We also listen to a lot of eastern music like Indian, Japanese or Asian music. We listen to a lot of native music from each country. We listen to many kinds of Middle Eastern and North African music and the music

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of our region, Tunisia. Tunisian music is multicultural. We have Middle Eastern sound, we have western sound, we have Andalusian music from the south of Spain, and we also have native North African music. It is a whole bunch of multicultural music, various parts joining together to make the whole feel and sound that is our music.

The North African influences are apparent in your music, and you also use the traditional instruments from the region. Can the members of the band play those instruments themselves or do you hire other musicians as well?

Zaher: I play the lute which is an ancestor of the guitar. In MYRATH, we do not play traditional instruments. We have connections, and also some of our friends can play them for us. For example, our last album "Shehili" was recorded in collaboration with the Tunisian National Orchestra. They play the Tunisian violin which is quite different from the western violin. They also play the North African flute and the Middle Eastern clarinet, and of course, North African percussion instruments. We hire the musicians who recorded with us on "Legacy" and "Shehili" albums so far.

Let's go deeper into the topic of religion. You come from Tunisia where the biggest part of the population are Muslims. You say you don't come

from an orthodox background. What is your attitude towards religion, and how much does this topic influence your lyrics?

Zaher: To me it feels the same as coming from any other country in the world. If somebody is born as a Christian or Buddhist, to me it is the same thing.

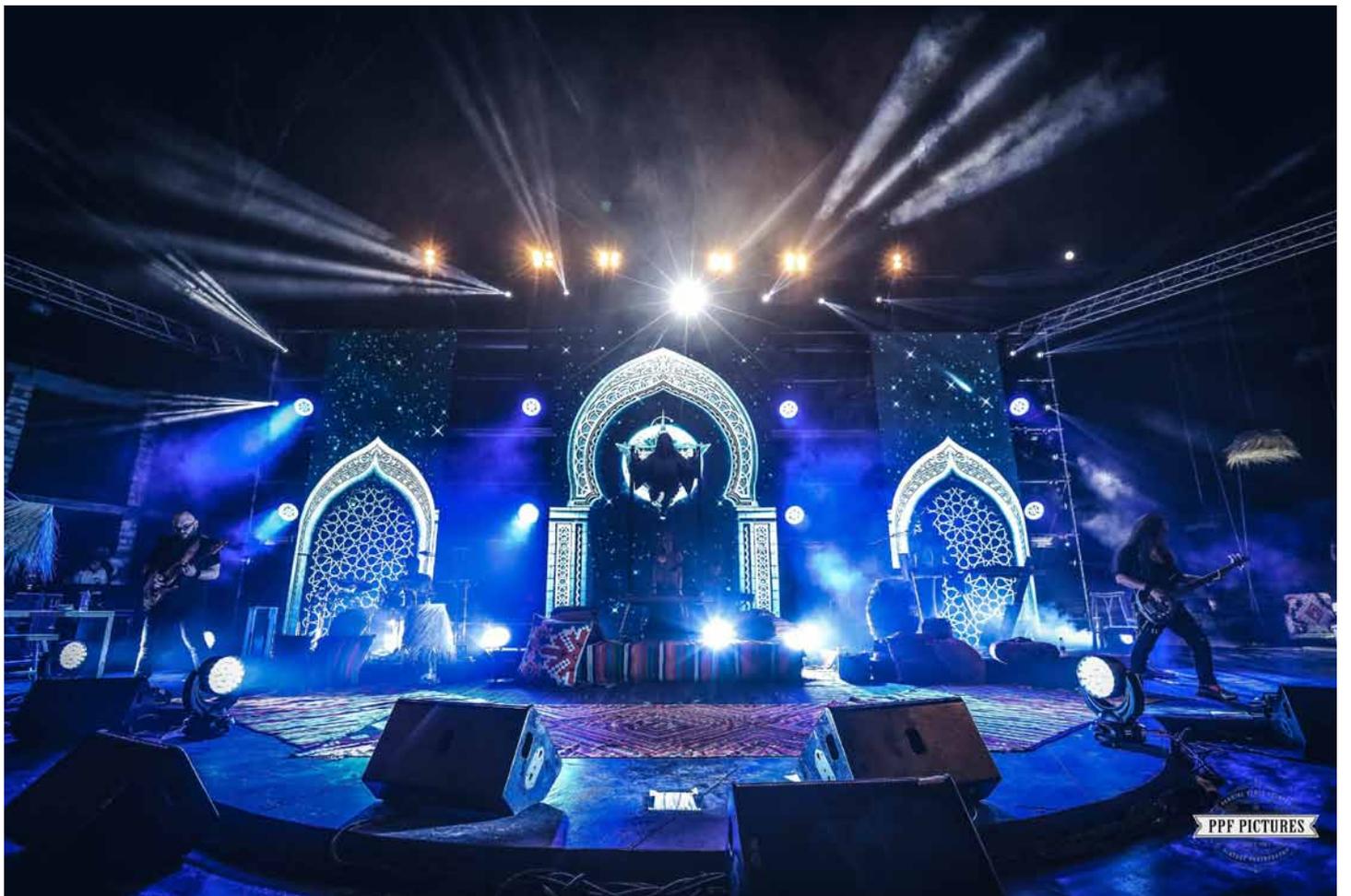
Malek: Also, our families have a European mind set.

Zaher: Yes, we were raised in a very western way of thinking. In Tunisia, there are a lot of families like us. Their children are also raised in a very western way. Even if we are born as Muslims, in real life, we don't live that way. We have no other attachment to religion except being born as Muslims. And that's it. We live our lives the way regular human beings do. Many people who are born as Muslims or some other kind of religion, continue to be orthodox or fanatics. Even in the Jewish religion, for example, it works the same way. In Tel Aviv, you can meet very liberated and open-minded people. In Jerusalem, there are a lot of orthodox Jews who don't even watch TV or listen to music. It is the same with Christian countries. You can find many orthodox Christians, but on the other hand, many very openminded people. I am personally more spiritual in the way I believe

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in humanity. It all depends on our deeds. When somebody dies, it depends on the deeds of the person. If you are a good person in your life, you will maybe be good in the afterlife as well. If you are a bad person, maybe you will be bad even in the afterlife, I don't know. I believe in the continuation of life after death as the ancient Egyptians used to believe. In terms of religion, we are not religious in MYRATH. We are five guys who believe in music, in metal and in music in general. We do not want to talk about religion and politics that much. Maybe we want to talk about the human things that are happening in everyday life such as wars or other critical situations. About stress and how not to give up or how to fight against the bad things in life. You might be in a bad situation in your work, for example, and you think life is against you. We would like to speak about hope and positive stuff such as fighting for the joy in life. For example, in our song "Dance". The word "dance" refers, of course, to dancing, but I do not mean to dance. The word "dance" means to fight against the negative vibes. Like fight against oppression. Some horrible things are happening in the world right now, and we have to talk about it. For example, there are acid attacks happening in the south of Asia. Poor and miserable people are being chased from their homes. Some people are killed and burnt. We

also want to talk about the people and children in Syria who are often killed by religious extremists and ISIS. Nowadays, also the fights between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza where children and babies are dying. I have a lot of friends in Israel, for example the members of the band, ORPHANED LAND, who are against the war and all the massacres. The Israeli fighters and the Palestinian Muslims who are fanatics, are wrong. The two sides are both very wrong. The victims are still civilians, mostly babies and children. This is really very inhumane. Another topic we are really interested in is climate change. If we do not care about ourselves, and we are selfish, we should think about the future generations of our children, and their children too. These are very important matters that we would like to talk about in our lyrics. Probably not in a direct way because we prefer to use metaphors. In my opinion, this is the best way we can do it. I know the band MYRATH or our lyrics cannot change the world; this is for sure. I'm 100 percent sure that our music can elevate the consciousness of the people who already listen to MYRATH or will listen to our upcoming album. Even though it will not change the world, good music and good lyrics can elevate our consciousness. We try to be ourselves. We try to transcribe what is inside us, in our hearts and in our minds, into our







music and lyrics through our own experience. This is very important to us. We never calculate during the writing process. We maybe have 35 ideas combined all together. We just take the best of the best from all of them and try to make a good puzzle out of it. In the end, we have a very clear and transparent image of the song in terms of melody, arrangements and lyrics. Everything must be true and in harmony. When I want to sing something to people, I want to be convinced I made it wholeheartedly. I do not sing it just to sing for example a metal song. The song is not just an interpretation to me. I have feelings. My own feelings and my soul literally go into the music. I give my heart, my soul, my humanity to the song. When Malek plays a guitar solo for example, it is not just about a guitar solo. The guitar solo is part of him. Each of us has this kind of relationship with our music.

Malek: Music is a kind of therapy, and we can use it in the best possible way.

This is actually what impressed me a lot when I saw you live at Sweden Rock 2019. Compared to a lot of metal bands, your show is not based on posing. Watching you feels very natural, and you spread a lot of positive vibes that come direct from within you, and it is not just part of the show...

Zaher: Unfortunately, people nowadays, not people like you, but most of the people like those poses. Everything is calculated and mechanical. This is exactly what we do not like, and we do not want to push ourselves that way. We want to be ourselves. We are not obliged to perform that way because synchronized posing just isn't us. If we played like that, we would not enjoy what we are doing. Our shows are very spontaneous. We just look at each other and communicate with each other. I can turn my back to the people for a while and sing to someone in the band. Nothing is calculated or prepared just for the show.

What is the role of Avatars in your music videos and during your live shows?

Zaher: Avatars are the essence of our souls that have moved to a parallel world. It's a very simple story. Behind the story, as I have already mentioned, there is a metaphoric depiction of the fight against oppression and the presence of war or fighting for the joy of life. This is the main subject that we talk about. The use of Avatars was the idea of Kevin Codfert and our touring management. They tried to come up with a way to bring out this beautiful concept. We also wanted to get away from the monotonous, unchanging way of shooting metal videos. We do not always want to shoot videos in the snow or in

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the forest or at the old castle. We want to not only create stories, but also their sequels – free music videos and the continuation from the first video to the second and so on. This is something quite new that doesn't happen every day on the metal scene. We wanted to do something revolutionary. We know it does not look like it was done in Hollywood, but it is our best effort. We tried our hardest to give something out, to bring this fantasy to people. As I said, we never calculate; we want something that comes spontaneously from our hearts. When it comes from within ourselves, we transform it into reality in the form of a song or a music video.

To understand it correctly, Avatars are part of the story, they are not there as illusionists...

Zaher: Yes, it is part of the story. Even part of our show. Sometimes, we cannot afford to bring the whole production to the show. We have to talk to the promoters in the case of a headline tour. Some venues are not allowed to use pyro effects, for example. We really enjoy what we are doing. Not for the show, but we want to spread the message of unity and hope. Many people come to us after the shows, and they say it was the first time they had seen us, and it felt like we had transported them to another world through our music and show. They say they are travelling

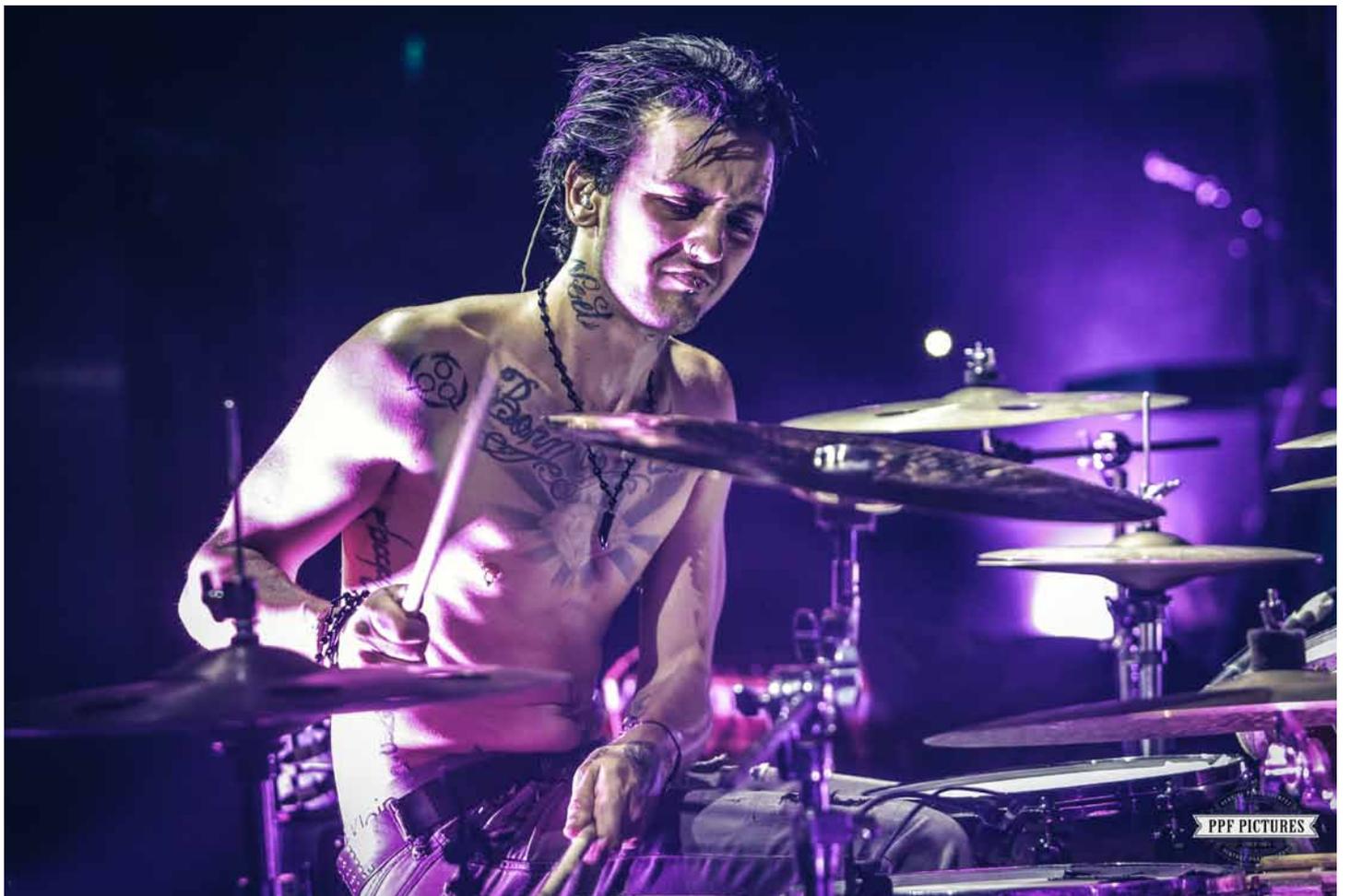
with us, that's really like a trip for them. I always say MYRATH are the producers of sensations. Sensations are the most important things in music. People often say we are very different from other bands, and that they feel something special. It is not magic, it is honesty. We have had very positive feedback so far, and we are really happy about it.

You have already mentioned you are friends with ORPHANED LAND. You also toured together. I heard some people saying MYRATH and ORPHANED LAND are very much alike, but I think you are completely different in terms of the final sound, arrangements, message, and emotion in the music...

Zaher: Yes, it is maybe because of the oriental influences. If you listen to the music of ORPHANED LAND and to the music of MYRATH, of course, we are both defending oriental metal; we are defending the Tunisian and the Middle Eastern touches in metal. But it is not the same style of writing, it is not the same style of arrangements, and it is not the same style of melodies. They are doing a great job. As we are.

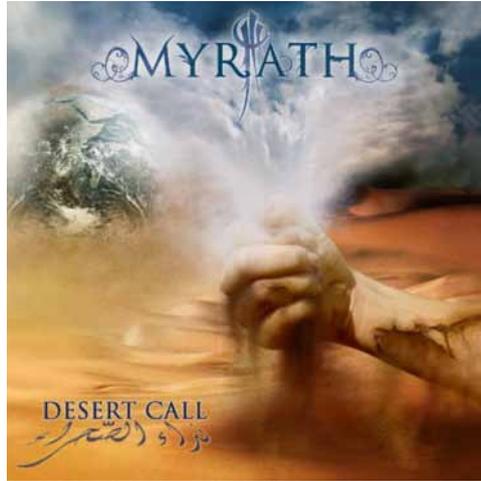
They are really brave with their mission because their lives are always at risk...

Zaher: Yes, this is true. Even me, sometimes I am

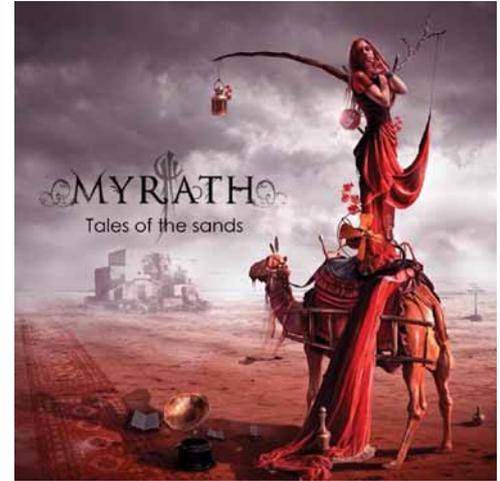




Hope (2007)



Desert Call (2010)



Tales of the Sands (2011)

afraid because there are extremists or racists around. They say, because we are from Tunisia. that means we are radical Muslims. Sometimes I think about it when I am on the stage. Maybe there is someone from an extremist group there. We have no relationship with religion. We believe in our music; we believe in what we are doing, and we believe in ourselves. We just want to be part of the peace process in the world.

You have already mentioned some of your western music influences. Are there any musicians or artists from Tunisia who also influenced you?

Malek: Lotfi Bouchnak is the most popular singer in Tunisia. He also collaborated with us on the "Shehili" album. He sang the song "Mersal" with Zaher. He is not known just in Tunisia or the North African region. He is very well known in the whole Middle Eastern region.

Zaher: He is like the Frank Sinatra of the Arab world.

Anis: I would also mention the singer Mehdi Ayachi. He sang the intro on our album "Shehili". He is the winner of the Tunisian version of The Voice competition. He is not that famous, but he is a great musician and a great singer.

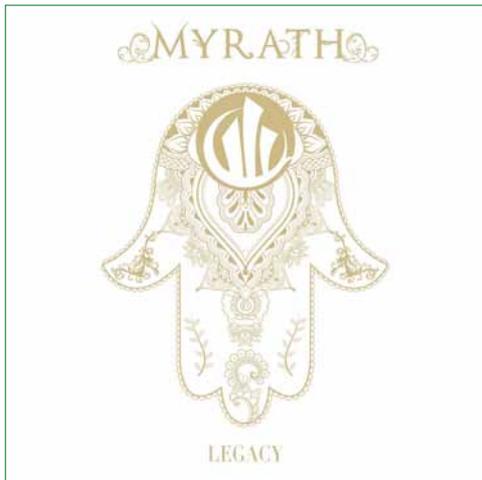
Zaher: We also have a bunch of great metal bands as for example BARZAKH. They are great friends of ours, but they do not sing in English, they sing in Tunisian. They are not active at the moment. I have talked to their lead singer, and he said they were going to reunite just to record their old songs in a better way.

What is the meaning of music in your life, not just the music you personally create, but music in general?

Zaher: Personally, for me a world without music would be like not living. You are not alive. If there is no music, there is no life. It is the same for all of us in the band. I am not now talking from a musician's perspective, but as a human being. Even though you are not a musician or a singer, how could you not sing sometimes in your mind, in the car, or how could you not listen to any kind of music? I think music gives hope to people. Music helps, music is a therapy.

I agree, on the other hand, music can be damaging as well...

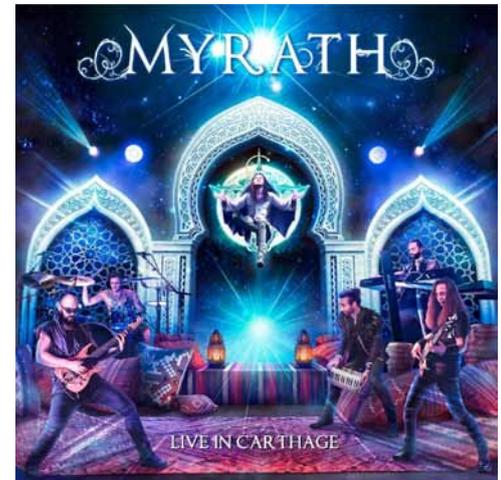
Zaher: Of course, as musicians, we have a big responsibility in raising a generation of young people. It is like raising children. You can help raise a bad generation with your shitty music, or you can help raise a good generation through



Legacy (2018)



Shehili (2019)



Live in Carthage (2020)

your good music, positive messages and positive vibes. I do not judge anyone. There are black metal or death metal bands who are satanic, but for me, we are responsible for the current, and also for the upcoming, generations of people who come to listen to us. I want to tell them something important. I do not want you to go out from my concert and just say, it was good music. I want you to feel the music and understand the lyrics, to have a message in your mind. This is very important to us. I listen to any kind of music. I used to listen to some black metal or death metal bands too, as for example CRADLE OF FILTH. I did not care about the lyrics. I used to listen a lot to the band DEATH even though they were a death metal band, but they were very progressive at the same time. There is something really mystical in their way of playing, and their lyrics are very philosophical. What I do not like for example is in pop, when they sing about love in a very cheap way. Or in the rap industry, they talk about fame in a very cheap way. The same thing is, of course, happening on the metal scene with some bands. From my point of view, I hate the bands who are writing stupid lyrics in a cheap way with poor subjects.

What are the collaborations you are most thankful for so far?

Zaher: I would say the most important collaboration is with Kevin Codfert who has been with the band for over 15 years. For the first four years, we collaborated as a band with the producer in a very professional way. After the sudden death of Malek's father who used to be our producer, may he rest in peace. We had no income and no possibility of paying Kevin Codfert for his services. For more than two years, we stood by, doing nothing.

Anis: Malek's father died in 2013, and then we found ourselves in a state of chaos. He had managed the band. He had been responsible for all the communication with other people, including Kevin. We were a bit lost. We gave this responsibility to some of our friends for a while. Kevin was happy to handle the band as the manager and producer too, without requesting any fee for it. Now, he is like the sixth member of the band. He is more than a band member. He sacrificed and suffered a lot with us. Sometimes, he travelled from France to Tunisia or, for example, to Sweden within a month. We recorded the album "Legacy" in this period of time. I remember it was a very hard time. Anyway, we released the album. From that moment, everything started to work little by little.



“We have no relationship with religion. We believe in our music; we believe in what we are doing, and we believe in ourselves. We just want to be part of the peace process in the world.”

You have mentioned your album “Legacy”. How much was this one inspired by the “Game of Thrones” series?

Zaher: Only one song on the album was inspired by “Game of Thrones” and it is called “The Unburnt”. By the way, I was really satisfied with the finale of the “Game of Thrones”. Nobody expected it would end up this way. I know many people were disappointed. I was a fan of Khaleesi, but her ambition was too much in the end. She had to die. This is called karma.

You said that only one song was inspired by “Game of Thrones”. How about the song “The Needle”, wasn’t this one inspired by the sword called Needle?

Zaher: No, the song “The Needle” is about narcotics, about the inner fight of someone with the needle.

What are your goals and the most important things for you in life?

Zaher: I personally want to spread the message of MYRATH in one or two years. And how can we spread it? We have to play big venues and open-air festivals with big bands. This is the most important thing to me. We do not care about how many CDs or T-shirts we will sell. All those years, there are two most important things for us which

are always the same. We are always waiting for a phone call from Kevin to say that we have the next recording session or a tour announcement. I would love to go to some of the places we have never been before like North America or South America. We have been to the United States only twice so far, in Atlanta for Prog Power festival, but I would like to discover more in North America or Canada. I would also like to discover some more places in Asia and, of course, Japan. We have been to Japan three or four times so far, and it was amazing. Every time we go there, the concerts have worked very well for us. I also would like to go to South America, to Brazil, Chile, Argentina, but also to Australia. To all the places we have never been before. We have a lot of fans in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, also in China. We also want to play in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Iran, Egypt or Kuwait. There are so many fans there who are thirsty for music, but they are, let’s say, oppressed people. They cannot go to shows. They cannot organize festivals or bring foreign bands there. They have no music scene there nor a music industry. They only have the big music industry with Arabic music. There are a lot of metal fans who want us to play there. I hope one day we can do a tour in these countries. I want us to play as much as possible. That’s the best thing we can do.

KT

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MYRATH



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