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# EN XAVIER MET JOHNNY

Using Skype online, we connected Xavier Rudd (touring Spain)

and Johnny Clegg (in Syria), for a chat. We started by asking

them questions but then just let 'em speak

By Gordon Glyn-Jones

**IN LONDON: What do you ask for in your dressing room?**

**XAVIER:** I have salads, a bottle of wine, plenty of water and some clean towels.

**JOHNNY:** Coffee, rum, whisky or red wine, fruit, nuts – and if possible, a couch to sleep on.

**IN LONDON: How do you cope with pressure of coming up with a better album than the last?**

**XAVIER:** I don't think about it. My understanding is that I have an old woman spirit with me on my journey. She is very strong, she may be my grandmother or my great grandmother on my father's side, or maybe not, I am not sure. But she is definitely Aboriginal and a huge part of this journey. I have always had a strong connection to country and the emotion of country music was always my way to express this. Out of respect for the music that comes through me, I just let it come, however it comes... and I hope that people dig it.

**JOHNNY:** I prefer to think of albums as different rather than 'better'. This idea of better is linked to a notion of linear progress in the development of an artist. I disagree strongly with that. We sometimes go backwards, sideways and we remember things that we heard, that we forgot on the previous album. If we develop, there is a certain random aspect to this. For instance, we have just played in Damascus and I heard a Touareg band called Tinariwen. I heard certain rhythms which are unique to this tradition and now my drummer is in big trouble (adds smiley). Because I am a beginner at this particular rhythmic framework, I will probably struggle to fit the Zulu and English lyrics to the rhythm and so my progress will be sideways and my resultant offering will be a struggle to find a place for everything that feels natural and comfortable. Xavier, tell me a little bit more about the learning to play the didge and Aboriginal rhythms.

**XAVIER:** My style of playing Yidaki is self-taught and very much my own, I guess. Traditional Yidaki from north-east Arnhem Land is based on Yongul language from somewhere around 60,000 years

ago. When I go to Arnhem Land and listen to traditional style, I close my eyes and sometimes I feel like what is being played is an instrument that I have not even tried. I have been playing circular breathing fast for around 15 years and I still have this feeling. The spirit of Yidaki traditional style clearly has the strongest presence for me of any instrument I have ever heard. Traditional players are also respectful of how I play and use the instrument in my music, so it is a great exchange.

**IN LONDON: From here on in, we just let Johnny and Xavier talk:**

**XAVIER:** I enjoy the challenge of making my live performance my own and therefore use many of my own instruments, but it costs a lot of money to freight all my gear around the world. I imagine you have faced one or two challenges in your time?

**JOHNNY:** Yeah, well I once wrote a song called 'Bullets for Bafazana'. Bafazana is a friend of mine who worked production on all our tours with Juluka, in the 80's. However, Baf was also a famous 'shinga' – a great warrior from his district. As it happens, from time to time, feuds break out between different warrior clans amongst the Zulu, either over a murder, competition for scarce resources, where warriors compete for status. >>

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## INTERVIEW



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In this situation, a war is declared between the two clans which immediately triggers other clans to choose their alliances. Thus an entire district or region can be split down the middle. In this moment, the *shingas* from each group will identify members from the other side who they believe, if assassinated, would cause the other side to sue for peace.

On this tour, a war broke out in Baf's home district and he was identified as a target for assassination. He came to report to me that somewhere down the road on tour, an assassination squad was lying in wait to kill him. The entire tour from this moment, took on an air of the surreal. Baf, as we called him, became the last person one wanted to be standing next to in the Kentucky Fried Chicken queue and, strangely, he was always alone...

In my discussions with him on how this would unfold, I learnt that it would be a messy affair. Access to firearms was limited and so, he surmised, he would be set upon with either a war axe, a machete or an *ntshumentshu* (a sharpened bicycle spoke).

Six shows into the tour, Baf asked me to call a band meeting. He informed us gleefully that the spies in his district had found out where the ambush was to occur and he was preparing a counter ambush, where he would aim to kill possibly three or four of the other assassins in Umlazi township near Durban. Let's just say Bafazana was thunderstruck when I told him he'd have to choose between his destiny as a *shinga* versus his destiny as a tour manager.

Incidentally, Bafazana now acts as the security and driver for the Johnny Clegg

projects in SA, lives with me and is in charge of all the Zulu dancing technical co-ordination. He has two wives and eleven children.

**XAVIER:** I have no experience in South Africa except for stories from friends, but the oppression of our Aboriginal people in Australia has been, and in many ways continues to be, one of the biggest oppressions of the modern world. Is it fair to say that musically at least, the challenges facing the indigenous peoples of both Australia and South Africa are similar?

**JOHNNY:** Yes. Globalisation has meant that many indigenous people come to feel awkward about their own music because it has no outlet, receives no radio play and cannot compete successfully in any way against global and modern music forms. This music becomes hidden and lives in a parallel universe and one has to look for it to find it. This is also amplified by the power of the information culture itself, as most traditional music practitioners do not have the ability, skill or knowledge to create their own websites and promote their musical offering on any modern platform.

This music is part of the deep structure of human sound genetics and we should be at least collecting it and marking it out as part of our unique human cultural DNA.

**XAVIER:** You're known as the White Zulu – how does that feel?

**JOHNNY:** This is a throwback to the bad old apartheid days where cultural segregation reinforced the idea that the black and the white 'races' shouldn't, by law, have access to each other's culture and language. When I began

singing and dancing Zulu cultural styles, I was given the nickname 'White Zulu' by township people to emphasise that I was an anomaly. I took it in the good humour it was intended, but it no longer has relevance in the new South Africa.

**JOHNNY:** Apparently you were named the 'world's sexiest vegetarian', what about that?

**XAVIER:** It's not very accurate. It is kind of funny, but there are plenty of much sexier dudes. Like Dave Tolley, my drummer!

**XAVIER:** I think sometimes that the press could improve their act by focusing more on the music, what's your experience?

**JOHNNY:** I agree, the level of journalism and ability to write, as well as the fact that most people given the task of writing or commenting on music often have no knowledge of music nor a deep passion for it, can be an issue. The only time the press get too much for me is when they are looking for the different angle on the same subject. A recent incident is press and radio phoning me for a birthday message to Mandela. They all want a unique message. In the end, I put out a full statement, which, of course, is not quoted, because once one newspaper gets it out, the others will not carry it. 📢

**Xavier Rudd at The Forum, August 21.**

Tickets: [www.livenation.co.uk](http://www.livenation.co.uk)

Info: [www.xavierrudd.com](http://www.xavierrudd.com)

**Johnny Clegg at The Forum, August 28 & 29.**

Tickets: [www.ticketmaster.co.uk](http://www.ticketmaster.co.uk)

Info: [www.clegginlondon.com](http://www.clegginlondon.com)