

Politics, the World, Music and Everything

Nebulai's *Odd Man - Out* is a "queer conscious, socio-politically driven" alloy of funk, soul, and world music

BY TANIA KUPCZAK



There is a specific talent that not many of us are granted – the ability to bring people together in an activist cause while maintaining firm resolve to make sure everyone is also having fun. My long-time friend Nebulai has been blessed with this flair among a multitude of other gifts. He writes songs of power, performs music with passion, and speaks clearly to issues of social justice. His most recent musical manifestation is a record label/activist coalition he calls Re-Perkussions of Sovereign Art. The collective organization's first record release is *Odd Man - Out*, Nebulai's "queer-conscious, socio-politically driven" album.

He's traveled to Africa, India, and Hawaii – among other places – attracting music and connections. One listen through the album and it's obvious that besides a strong desire to inspire social change, Nebulai also has an incredibly sense of musicality. With *Odd Man - Out* Nebulai, directing a group of talented musical allies, has created and produced a masterfully crafted alloy of funk, soul, and world music, with samples from his travels carefully inserted into the interstices. The first track is an overture, asking "Why do you do the things you do?" It's quickly followed up with Nebulai's potent musical and conceptual answers.

The most immediately memorable track, but certainly not the only one of great merit, is "Pledge Allegiance to the Newfangled Banner." It's part toe-tapping liberation song, part social critique, laced with radio broadcast samples of such events as the Harvey Milk assassination, and part personal history. Nebulai sings a version of the Star Spangled Banner in which "that Rainbow flag was still there ..."

"Coulda Woulda Shoulda" calls for justice with an "army of sonic weapons" to battle the social inequities in our culture. The drum-laden "Don't Bite the Hand" responds to the deforestation taking place all over the world, turning it into a metaphor for a political strategy of resistance. It is this kind of ideology, along with incredibly proficient musicianship and deep sensitivity to field recordings, that inspires me to support Nebulai's cause with matched enthusiasm.

Nebulai and I met a few weeks ago over kimchi and noodles to discuss the evolution of Re-Perkussions of Sovereign Art, the role of music in his life, and his wishes for a sustainable society.

Tania Kupczak: I first want to talk about R-PSA, and what it means to you and how you came to this place with wanting to not just perform, but also to consciously create community and solidarity.

Nebulai: It started when I was traveling up in the bush in Gambia ... I think that I really saw that there's just so much art out there, not at the corporate level. Corporate art is

prepackaged, commercialized, diluted from its true poetry. It's harder to not go after that easiness and financial abundance. It's a lot of work to get it off the ground in a grassroots way. I feel like it's so important that we navigate our own work, our own creative service, whatever it is.

As I've started to pull R-PSA together, people are stepping forward that have different things to add to it. It's going to take its own course, the endpoint of which I don't know.

Whether it's housing for other musicians who need a space to be represented or an alliance of consciousness and knowledge and information, like an information center, [R-PSA] is hopefully going to be a hub of communication, of alternative, conscious, sustainable collectivism. The community board on the website (www.nebulai.com) is already turning into that. My music is a vessel to get my messages out there.

On the level of R-PSA, this alliance supports that place of pushing art and boundaries. That's where the name comes in – the Re-Perkussions of Sovereign Art ... getting art back to where it once was, free, where now it's just a commodity. It's a very activist alliance. It's confrontational in a way that's not destructive.

TK: I also see using the word "repercussions" as the effects of what you're doing in your art. How is it going to affect people? How will it change the world? It's going backward and forward at the same time.

It sounds like you're working in this loose organization, R-PSA, on two levels. You're the facilitator, the boat captain, but you're also a musician. Is that all the same for you, or are you split between the administrative aspects and performing?

Nebulai: It's two different things, sure, but at the same time my music is so pro-active, and speaks directly to issue and is innately socio-political. What I'm doing musically is pulling people together, and addressing issues and spreading awareness and consciousness. Oftentimes when I write it comes out as an issue, and let's bring sustainable solutions. It feels like the same work, just two different forms. Bringing people together that way, I feel it's my service to extend it further, whether it's environmental, or political, or in the queer movement, so that it's not just a musical thing.

TK: Did your experience of playing music in Africa have an influence on this idea?

Nebulai: I think not so much playing music in Africa, but just going to Africa. For the most part, in my experience in West Africa, people were so hospitable. When I traveled to Gambia, a friend sent me to some friends. I went down in search of this woman and got

directions from people in the neighborhood, someone's grandson took me over to her house, and I stayed with this family for three days. When I traveled back to Senegal, I find out I didn't stay with his friend at all. And the strangers had totally welcomed me in just because I said I knew them. I've had many experiences like this in Africa.

I've always been very communally oriented, working with people, trying to dissolve separation. I feel that in this culture there's so much separation – emotional, mental, social, so much judgment. Africa is so not like that. You're on the bus, someone is yelling out to the bus driver that they have a problem, that they missed their stop or whatever, and so many times I've watched the whole bus problem-solve for this one stranger. And it's normal.

TK: I think a lot of artists, regardless of their medium, feel really isolated and feel that there's a lot of hostility. I've often wished for that kind of collective where people will support you and tell you that your work is good and valid rather than compete with you. I know you don't have a specific vision for R-PSA, but you must have hopes.

Nebulai: When I look forward, there's not really an endpoint. Creation just keeps moving, it's all about us being present with that and recognizing the beauty. As a musician, you have to be pushing for certain goals, but it's important for my vitality and livelihood that there's no endpoint and that I really have to be doing what I love. And so I feel like that's the point of R-PSA. It's a place where people can come together, can drop off information and keep going or stay and keep networking.

TK: So since this interview is going into *OITM*, I think we should talk about your experience and identity.

Nebulai: So much of the emotion that comes through my music really comes from struggling with my sexuality when I was younger – really struggling with being in an oppressive environment that was not conducive to being gay. It was very difficult growing up in suburban Connecticut, where I was singled out and I took daily abuse ... It's really huge for me. It was the whole catalyst for me. It's strong foundation underneath my drive.

Coming from that place, anyone that struggles with anything, when we get out from under that place – I gained perspective in my own liberation process. By expressing my struggle, I can help other people feel they're not alone and that we all struggle as human beings. But specifically on the level of homosexuality, I feel really driven to confront that head-on and it's really scary. When the writing comes through, it's like, "I don't know if I should write that because then I'll have to sing it ..."

My lyrics are very direct and don't candy-coat it. I express things in a very raw way. It's really important to me to speak to the queer community and share my experiences, and we can identify with each other. Again, I feel it's my service, knowing myself and what I've been given, I'd be doing a complete disservice to myself and the world around me by not expressing and doing what I'm doing – singing about my sexuality and the ways I've been oppressed or the ways we're oppressed in queer community.

TK: I think there's still a lot of work to be done in the queer community around dissolving borders and differences. There are so

many barriers that still exist.

Nebulai: It's so ironic, that reverse judgment that happens in the queer community. It's not cohesive and it's only because that's what we're taught. We have to have compassion. [Otherwise] it's just bringing ignorance to ignorance. It's the exact same thing we were oppressed with, or rather that we were up against, since I really feel we're the only ones that can oppress ourselves. I want to address it with sustainable solutions and not hate or ignorance.

TK: Or greed. So let's talk about *Odd Man - Out*. Now that the album pretty much finished, what's your sense of it?

Nebulai: How do I feel about it? [laughs] I feel really curious about the response. I feel an excited curiosity because I am really passionate about it. What I'm doing, what I'm creating is really different stuff and I'm really thankful that it's finally finished. So many things that I pulled together for the album are things I've wanted for a long time ... I feel really settled and appeased in a certain way.

TK: What's the difference for you between recording an album and performing live?

Nebulai: I love both; I like the aspect of recording that it's so intimate. I love to sing in whatever capacity I'm allowed to do that. I love it.

I really prefer live performance in the sense that you're interacting with people and there's an energy exchange. Also, it can be so heavy in the studio, and I really tried to stay away from that with this album. We did everything we could to not compromise the art with the things that have to happen in the studio, while maintaining a certain level of professionalism. To me the art comes first and whatever that dictates, then we have to work within those boundaries. I guess I mean *that setting*, because I think there are no boundaries [laughs]. I like getting into that raw performance space more than anything because it's so in the moment. Nothing I ever do is the same. It's not just prepackaged and put out there. This is my project. It was really empowering and really maturing.

TK: Are you looking forward to performing now?

Nebulai: Yes, I'm battling not being at peace because it's been a transition for me musically, and since I started this project it's been building. I'm really ready. This is my service, my creative offering to the world. It gets me in touch with my freakishness, all the ecstatic parts of me that are not simple or passive or unexplosive.

Odd Man - Out was released on R-PSA records on January 1 and is available at music stores and on Nebulai's website: www.nebulai.com. Nebulai will be playing a number of CD release parties in the latter part of January: Thurs. Jan. 23, 9:30 pm at the Flywheel, Easthampton, MA (413-527-9800); Sat. Jan. 24th, 8pm, at 135 Pearl, Burlington; Sun. Jan. 26 at the Unitarian Universalist Church, Keene NH at 8pm with Antara (info: 603 352 1719); Weds. Jan. 29 at the River Garden in Brattleboro, VT at 7:30pm with Derrik Jordan (254 8100). ▼

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