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Wednesday, February 25, 2009

Sholi



Band: Sholi

From: San Francisco, CA

Sound: A dastardly sleight of hand passing off dizzyingly complex rhythms and instrumentation as enchantingly melancholic pop songs

Similar Artists: Pinback, Deerhoof, Slint, The Dead Science

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[Sholi](#) lead singer and guitarist Payam Bavafa speaks in a manner that feels very much in harmony with the music

his band creates. Thoroughly articulate and thoughtful, he manages to hold forth with a casual grace that belies the furious firings of synapses and inner self-editing most likely looming beneath the surface. Similarly, the meticulous songs comprising Sholi's full-length debut (out now on [Quarterstick Records](#)) exhibit their own sense of ease and comfort upon first listen, the kind that can only result from countless hours spent herding startlingly complex and fastidious arrangements into a winningly approachable sound.

In answering pedestrian interview questions, there's a window of maybe a few seconds to demonstrate the linguistic version of this skill; in the dizzying highwire act of creating an album's worth of such musical moments, it takes a lot longer. As such, Bavafa and the rest of Sholi – drummer extraordinaire Jonathan Bafus and bassist Eric Rudd - spent over a year crammed in closets, attics, and bedrooms throughout the Bay Area fine-tuning, editing, and consolidating all the twists and turns first hinted at in the demos for these nine wonderful songs. And of course, it probably also didn't hurt to have [Deerhoof's](#) Greg Saunier on board to help produce the album either; if anything, his insanely intuitive approach to drums have found kindred spirits in Bafus' own melodic technique and its role within Sholi's broader sound.

But hey, rather than have me harp on all of this, why not take advantage of Bavafa's aforementioned gift for the insightful gab? We spoke on the phone late last week just a few days after [the disheartening news](#) of Touch and Go Records' (Sholi's parent label) decision to cease releasing new music. And while the conversation was destined to start there (okay fine, that was my fault), we focused much of the dialogue on more upbeat musings elsewhere. Such as? Well for starters, garbage art, child wrestling, the magic of Deerhoof, brainwave experiments, you know, the usual.....

EF: The first thing I wanted to hear a bit about from your perspective is the awful news about Touch and Go last week and what that means for you guys; you're on Quarterstick, right?

PB: Right.

EF: And that's a subsidiary of Touch and Go.

PB: It's a subsidiary, it's a sister label, it's essentially run by all the same people and has the exact same process in terms of distribution, manufacturing, and promotion, and I think the idea behind Quarterstick originally was to be a home for some of the more offbeat bands. In terms of what the Touch and Go news has to do with Quarterstick, I assume it's all the same. They treat everything the same, it's pretty much the same label, just a subset of bands. For the most part, the newer bands like [Mi Ami](#) and [The Uglysuit](#) and some others were on Quarterstick.

EF: In any case, I extend condolences to you guys and everyone else, I think everyone is reeling from it regardless of what your involvement is with the company because it's such a pillar of the indie rock community.

PB: Yeah, its definitely a big blow, but the one thing that's going to last is the legacy that T&G has created and the influence on indie rock in general. I know that they're going to continue the catalog promotion and the main hit was the distribution of all the sub labels like [Drag City](#) and [Kill Rock Stars](#), and so there's a pretty good chance that we're all going to be free agents at the end of our record cycles or perhaps even before. Regardless, they've been incredibly supportive and the most caring people I've ever worked with*.

EF: Well that's great testimony.

PB: Yeah, they're all very invested in the bands, in the records, they share your happiness when something good happens and vice versa.

EF: So let's talk about the band, I understand "Sholi" is a Persian word. What does it mean?

PB: It was a nickname that my dad gave my brother and I when we wrestled as kids. I wanted a Persian word, a

name that sounded nice in English, and Jon our drummer liked that one so we decided to go with it.

EF: Does it have any meaning or is it a term of affection or slang?

PB: It's just a funny nickname, really. If you look at the inside of the album artwork there's actually a picture that pretty much encapsulates the meaning of Sholi, it's of my brother and I when we were really young.

EF: That's great. What about the front cover, it's a really cool image, what's the story behind that?

PB: Oh thank you. [Michael Aghajanian](#), my good friend, shot a bunch of images, probably 30 or 40 images after hearing the album and we sort of threw those images together and finally one day he sent me this one image; he had knocked over this garbage can full of flowers that was right in his backyard and he took a picture of it and I thought it represented all the recordings, images, and ideas that went into the music.



designed by Michael Aghajanian

Sholi's album cover,

EF: So it's a photograph? I couldn't tell if it was a painting, or digital image, or drawing...

PB: No, no it's a photograph. He did watercolor for the logo too so it all came together pretty organically. I thought it was a nice representation of our sound, all these recycled ideas and images and sounds that went into the record.

EF: When I first saw it I thought ‘oh it’s confetti or something, it’s so happy, it’s so joyous’ and then I looked closer and realized ‘oh wait it’s a garbage can, it’s tipped over trash’....

PB: (laughs) I’m glad your first impression was not that it was a bunch of trash.

EF: What were some of those recycled influences that went into the album?

PB: There’s a pretty wide range of ideas that we were influenced by, a lot of it was personal and cultural experience, things we’ve read, places that I’ve traveled to; musically, Jon comes from a very jazz-oriented background, and I come from a background where I grew up listening to traditional Persian music but then coming into my adolescence and teenage years Western music, so to speak, took over. A lot of 60s music was the first thing that caught my ear, there’s a guitarist named Joe Pass that I really like, you know the Beatles, Syd Barrett, and then some of our contemporary influences are bands we’ve toured with, like the [Dead Science](#), seeing the complexity of their sound live, how engaging they are, they gave us something to reach for in terms of the instrumental challenge of making these tight-knit, somewhat experimental songs into a form which hopefully doesn’t require too much thinking or effort on the part of the listener (laughs).

EF: I think that’s actually a really excellent way to describe your sound, and I wanted to ask about that too because the arrangements are so painstakingly complex but then it just comes off as these beautiful pop songs.

PB: Well firstly, thanks for that comment, I’m glad that somehow it comes across that way (laughs). I think a lot of the core inspirations for the songs come from the rhythm sections, and once we have that core framework it’s a lot of editing. Eric (Rudd, bassist) came at a time when we had frameworks for probably $\frac{3}{4}$ of these songs and he really helped fill out the rest of the picture, and his basslines do a good job of rooting some of the more free-flowing elements of our music. A lot of my guitar playing is more rhythmic whereas Jon’s drumming is more melodic and weaves its way around my vocal lines. Getting a certain organic feel and incorporating the right number of elements to a lot of songs to breathe as songs and not as disparate technical performances, especially in the world of math rock or experimental rock, it’s easy to get caught up in the technicalities and we just wanted to present good songs.

EF: I noticed that Greg Saunier produced the album. How did that come about? Did you just send him your demo to see what he would say?

PB: Yeah we made a short list of people we thought would be could to work with, and Greg was at the top of it because listening to Deerhoof’s music it was apparent that they had an understanding of positioning expressiveness between instruments in this really balanced kind of way. Those songs really stand as songs and you don’t think of how incredibly diverse and complex the music can get, that’s the magic of their band. We sent Greg a letter and some demos and I think he was in Spain at the time touring but he wrote back and expressed interest and then we started getting feedback instantly from his emails. I have different tunings on a couple songs and he was picking them apart, I think he has perfect pitch or something, he was deconstructing the chords and focusing on concision.

I understand the magic of Deerhoof now, at least for one of their albums because they keep changing it, but they pack many, many ideas into three minutes. And that’s what we wanted to do too, rather than have a lot of songs, we wanted to create a continuous experience through the songs and pack more ideas into each one, which isn’t for everyone, if you can get into it, that’s great (laughs). It was a super rewarding experience and to have him involved in the mixing process, sometimes these 17-hour sessions, it made us realize that any amount of work we put into this was worth it because we had someone that diligent setting the pace from the beginning.

EF: Now, Jon is a phenomenal drummer, but do you think that he was ever like ‘holy shit, Greg Saunier is lording over the mixing console as I lay this down!’?

PB: (laughs) You know, I think we all have such respect for Greg and Deerhoof, going into it we were so excited. I think Jon was thrilled to be working with him; Greg is one of his favorite drummers. It's interesting, Greg is such a modest guy, he'd always make you feel like you're the star, there's never that awkward feeling or nervousness especially for Jon because Greg showed such kindness and modesty and appreciation to him that it made him really comfortable. So it was never 'Oh my god Greg is looking over my shoulder, how am I going to be good enough?' We just had a lot of fun going through the whole process.

EF: Another thing that I heard was that you used to do memory work at a neuroscience lab?

PB: Yes, when I first moved to San Francisco I worked at a lab as an engineer and I would bike from Lower Haight to Marin County every day.

EF: How far was that?

PB: it was a good hour and a half bike ride.

EF: Oh wow!

PB: (laughs) Yeah I'm a slow biker. But I had a lot of time for reflection on the journeys over, and thinking about the work we were doing in the lab inspired some ideas for music. The research director had some interesting theories about how memories are associated and how thoughts fire off of other thoughts. All of this resonated within the album a little bit, where the lines crossed with the creative side was when I mixed a bit of the personal memories with the work and sleep experiments we were doing. It's about repetition of certain ideas, selective recollection, it's definitely a hazy line.

EF: It is interesting though, not to impose this upon your own process, but I've been reading a Talking Heads biography and it spoke early on about David Byrne's fascination with cybernetics and mapping the human brain and how that informed a lot of his lyrics too.

PB: Yeah that's certainly fascinating, and I find anyone exposed to that on a daily basis, it's hard for them not to think about it. It was also interesting in that I got to bring my friends in to be the lab rats for some of the experiments (laughs). There's actually a WIRED.com article that I just got today where I went into a bit more detail about one of the experiments (read it [HERE](#)).

EF: That's great. Are you guys heading out on tour for the album?

PB: We're going to be announcing the dates soon. We'll be stopping in Austin for SXSW and then doing more dates in April.

EF: Do you think you'll be making it out to the East Coast?

PB: I'd love to, it depends on the tour package and the economic situation right now, it's so crazy, especially with the label's situation right now. We'd really like to come out there though, we played there last year at Mercury Lounge and Union Hall with this crazy Norwegian prog band, I can't pronounce their name, but it was freezing and fun.

**After our Q&A, Payam emailed me with some additional thoughts about the Touch and Go situation, writing: "It's sad news, especially since we've just begun to make a home here at the label. The announcement actually came the day after we released our first record with them, which is pretty bittersweet. We've had such a great experience working with them on this record, and the staff has been amazing to us. I think things are still in the air, but whatever happens we'll keep making music and can only hope that wherever we end up will be as great a home as Touch and Go has been to us."*

Listen:["Tourniquet"](#) (from S/T debut album)["Hejrat"](#) (from *Dreams Before People* Tour EP)**See Sholi LIVE:**

28 Feb – San Francisco, CA @ Noise Pop (CD/LP Release Show at Bottom of the Hill)

19 Mar - Austin, TX @ Bay Area Takeover @ Beauty Bar

19 Mar - Austin, TX @ Touch & Go Records Showcase

01 Apr – Europe/USA Tour TBA

- top photo by Peter Ellenby

Visit Sholi [on MySpace](#).

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