

TESTIMONIO

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In June 2010 I saw a performance by the Somali musician Abdi Mohammed Abdi in Melbourne, Australia. Abdi, who operates under the stage name Edile, escaped from Somalia with his family in 2000 to Kenya and was living in Kakuma refugee camp until 2007, when the Australian government accepted him and his family as refugees. Abdi writes songs in the Somali language that he plays on electronic keyboards but his history as a musician dates back to the late-70's when as a teenager he played in the seminal group Dur Dur who specialized in a unique style of raw Somali funk. In the early 90's, Abdi formed the Sunshine Band with an eighteen-year-old singer Daacad Rashid which eventually became the Somali Peace Band. The Sunshine Band played in the relatively stable Kismayo region in Southern Somalia during the nineties until persecution from the radical, militant Islamic group Ithihad culminated in the assassination of one of their singers, Yassin Tarash during a performance. I was incredibly impressed by Abdi's performance and wanted to find out more and through a quick Internet search found a newspaper article that detailed Abdi's story. In particular, I was drawn to the mention in the article to Abdi's hope that he could 'send the recordings back to Kenya for his band to record over and complete as an album'. As I was myself traveling to Kenya in August to participate in the Kuona Trust artists residency in Nairobi I thought it might be possible in some way to assist him.

Armed with just the phone numbers and names of the singers from the Somali Peace Band I arrived in Nairobi and found a Somali/English interpreter from the University of Nairobi who helped me contact the musicians. Fortunately, Daacad and Sahra were both living in the suburb of Eastleigh in Nairobi which is a sort of little Mogadishu in the city where the majority of Somali's living in Kenya live and we arranged a meeting with them there the next day. Arriving in Eastleigh I found a typical Middle-Eastern city on the edge of Nairobi replete with a minaret ornamented skyline, burqa clad women doing their shopping and men in thobes sipping tea in street side cafe's. However it was the pitiful state of the roads and infrastructure which was most shocking. With little street lighting, crumbling pavements and pot hole ridden roads Eastleigh is chaotic and un navigable and at all hours clogged with busses, matatus, taxis, cars and handcarts. At the same time, I

was confused by the contrast between this and an apparently bustling mercantile trade going on in the brand new malls and markets selling large quantities of cheap Chinese goods and imported fabrics. Following the experienced lead of my interpreter we navigated the chaos and made our way to the meeting place, which incidentally happened at the Dur Dur cafe. Here I met Daacad, a tall, young and very charismatic Somali with a velvet voice and Sahra, a middle aged woman immaculately dressed with an effortlessly regal bearing. With the help of my interpreter Abdifatah, I introduced myself and explained that I wanted to help Abdi make an album for the Somali Peace Band by recording their vocals in Nairobi and bringing them back to Australia. Both singers were happy to do this but the plan was presented with two immediate challenges; the first being the prohibitive expense of studio time in Nairobi and the second that August was the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan which meant that they would only be able to work for a few hours each evening. After some discussion I made the decision to build a recording studio in the gallery space of the artists residency using locally sourced hardware and the basic recording equipment I brought with me from Australia. We made a plan to record in a few weeks to give me enough time to build the studio and when it was ready, the musicians would take a taxi to the other side of Nairobi where my studio was and we would record as soon as they had broken their daily fast each evening.

At the meeting, Daacad had a request of his own to make as he proceeded to explain his own precarious situation in Kenya. Basically, the key factor motivating Daacad and Abdi's enforced migration from Somalia was the persecution against musicians by the militant Islamic group Ithihad which was the precursor to Al-Shabaab, the al-Qaida backed group currently in control of most of Somalia which brutally imposes Islamic Sharia law on the population, and enforce a strict prohibition against all forms of music. As a result, musicians in Somalia have been violently persecuted and Daacad has had various attempts on his life. Daacad escaped to Kenya in 2007 so that he could perform as a musician freely and since then he has built an international reputation as a singer amongst Somali diaspora communities all over the world. However, last year Daacad received a phone call from a person in Somalia claiming to be a member of al-Shabaab who said that they knew he was in Kenya and that they would kill him if he didn't stop making music. A few months later, he received an even more threatening phone call from someone in Kenya also claiming to be an agent of al-Shabaab saying that they know where he lives and

that if he didn't stop performing they would come to his house and slaughter him. Since then, every time he has tried to perform in Eastleigh the sheiks at the mosque would pay children to come and throw stones at him and at one performance he was hit in the head and received a serious wound which required hospital treatment. He has essentially become a prisoner in his own home and can only leave the house at night and cannot walk in the areas around the mosque as he is recognized and gets attacked by violent mobs. Daacad has applied for and received a United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) mandate, which officially recognizes him as a refugee, and has submitted an application for refugee asylum in Australia. He gave me a copy of his application and asked if I could pass it onto anyone in Australia who might be able to help support his application from our end. I sent the application back to Australia to lawyer Ronald Koo and to Abdi Mohammed Abdi's case worker Niall McKinnon who have both been working with Australian immigration lawyers to improve Daacad's application.

My next immediate concern was how to build a temporary studio with the limited resources available in Nairobi and eventually I settled on putting together a semi-sound proof tent based on the design of the mosquito nets which hang over most beds in Kenya. I chose to stitch the tent together from the cheap clothes and fabrics imported by charities from the West which are readily available at the Toy and Kikomba markets in Nairobi. Using the materials I collected at these colourful and hectic markets, where my partner had her bag slashed and I spent much time haggling down the tourist prices, I laboriously hand stitched the tent and decorated its sides with mural sized clothe collages of the members of the Somali Peace Band. Fortunately, I was able to borrow most of the other equipment for the studio from the helpful staff of the artists residency where I was working.



On the first day we had arranged to record with Daacad and Sahra I had only just managed to finish the studio, install it in the gallery, arrange for a chef to prepare a Ramadan meal and booked a taxi to come and pick everyone up in Eastleigh. Our intent throughout the project had been to video document the whole process of working with the Somali musicians in Nairobi and to this end, I asked a Kenyan artist Sidney Mangongo to accompany me to Eastleigh to film everything. The reason for asking a Kenyan to film rather than filming myself was that as a *mzungu* or foreigner in a place like Eastleigh, an economically though not necessarily ethnically white person like myself is seen as both an intruder and a target walking down the street with a camera. Therefore I was taking a calculated risk in order to get some video footage of Eastleigh and I reasoned that having a Kenyan filming would be the relatively safe option as the locals would be less likely to bother a local. As it happened, Sidney and I arrived in Eastleigh and proceeded to navigate the streets to make our rendezvous with Abdifatah then pick up Daacad and Sahra while filming and not attracting too much attention. When we met with Abdi it was close to prayer time and he asked us to wait in the taxi while he went into the mosque. As we were waiting in front of the taxi and watching the footage we had just filmed I noticed we were getting a few suspicious glances from passers-by and when prayer time finished, a throng of people emerged from the mosque. Almost immediately, one older man saw us and began shouting at us, gesticulating at me in visible anger. A mob started to form around us composed of people exiting the mosque and local children who joined in the game of pointing and shouting and trying to intimidate us. Sidney

attempted to placate them in swahili but the crowd continued to grow larger and more threatening. At this point Abdi emerged from the mosque and saw what was going on and started apologizing in Somali and pushed us into the taxi. When we got in the taxi, we realized that our taxi driver had disappeared when the commotion started and for a few panicked moments we contemplated our next course of action when our taxi driver suddenly re-emerged from the crowd. The car slowly pushed its way through the crowd with angry children and adults pounding their fists on the doors and windows, and we later found a dent on the taxi where someone had smashed a rock against the side of the car.



As we were drove away from the mob, Abdi explained how close we were to getting seriously hurt or killed as people who come to Eastleigh to film will always be accompanied by security guards armed with guns and tear gas. We were lucky there weren't any rocks on the ground in that area as we probably would have been stoned. Abdi himself said that the people from that mosque were 'crazy' and very suspicious of anyone with white skin. After we picked up Daacad and Sahra, Daacad said that he himself could not go to that mosque because the same thing would happen to him because he was so well known as a musician and target of al-Shabaab in Eastleigh.

After this inauspicious beginning, the recordings for the next three nights went smoothly and the evenings we spent with Daacad, Sahra and Abdi eating and listening to them sing inside the tent were moments I feel extraordinarily privileged to have shared. This was an unintentional work and perhaps defies categorization with its combination of social activism, music production, installation and documentary and it is incomplete as the act of giving the recordings to Abdi for him to make his album, and the continuing work of trying to bring Daacad to Australia for a reunion of the Somali Peace Band is an ongoing project whose conclusion cannot be foretold in an uncertain future.