

On humans, songwriting and production

Salim Nourallah is in demand to collaborate with multiple bands, as a songwriter and producer
by Tom Geddie

AS BUSY AS SALIM NOURALLAH REMAINS, and as much as he loves music, what makes the popular Dallas-based singer-songwriter-producer tick is his family.

Or, as he's called them — and the rest of us — in his playful way in a blog, the “humants.”

“That’s just an idea I’ve had for a long time, how strangely similar to ants we are,” he said, “collecting and foraging and running around and then we’re squashed and that’s that.”

Not that Nourallah is a fatalist.

He and his wife, Jayme, who is a photographer and artist, have a son, Gavin, who’s eight and a half years old, and a daughter, Miette, who’s two and a half.

Songwriter

BOTH KIDS ARE IMMORTALIZED in song in Nourallah’s new CD, *Hit Parade*; hers bears her name and his is called “Unstoppable,” which is the first single and was recently played on “World Café.”

Nourallah was born in Illinois and grew up in El Paso with a mom, Karen, who was an art major and a dad, Fayez, who was an accountant.

“Opposites attract and then raise dysfunctional children,” he said, laughing.

His music is — lo-fi, acoustic, ranging from quiet ballads to rave-up rock — remains heavily influenced by the Beatles.

“When I was nine, I saw the Beatles’ white album in K-Mart,” he said. “I got my grandmother to buy it for me. It changed my life.”

He began writing songs when he was 14.

He and his brother, Faris, released a self-titled album in 1999, quit music for a while, and then both got back into it with a quiet passion.

Hit Parade is his fifth since 2004.

“I was a strange kid when I was nine or ten. I knew what I wanted to do with my life,” he said. “Later on, I learned how impractical and ridiculous it is, but I just did it. I’ve never been anything else but a musician. It’s a dream I can’t let go off, continuing to play music and produce other people’s music and spend as much time with my family as possible. I’m pretty simple that way.”

“I was never interested in being famous and a pop star and all that, but just in earning a decent living.”

Producer

NOURALLAH RECORDED and mixed the new CD in Austin with his new band, the Treefort Five, with co-producer and engineer Jim Vollentine. The band is Jason Garner, Joe Reyes, and longtime collaborator Richard Martin — all three with San Antonio roots.

He produces other people’s work, too, coming from a song-based approach.

“Lots of producers are sort of drummers or engineers, but I’m a songwriter who got into production,” he said. “It doesn’t matter how fancy the studio is, but what are you recording? Is the song good?”

If it’s just one person with an acoustic guitar and who writes songs and wants to make a record, there are producers who wouldn’t do anything except mic their acoustic guitar,” Nourallah said. “I’ll find a drummer, I’ll play bass, we’ll do whatever production they want. I just love making music, and there should never be any limitations. I was sorta naive when I first started doing it. I was different that way.”

So a lot of singer-songwriters don’t just have to play acoustic guitar and sing. If they don’t have a band, we find a way to make it happen.”

Two things count in writing a song, he believes: melody and the intent.

“I’m a big fan of melody — not just rehashing melodies that have already been done — and what you’re saying. The lyric is so important. What’s the intent? To make someone feel sad or happy or what? When you’ve got them both right, you’ve usually got a really good song.”

“Production should never get in the way, should never make the listener apparent of the production. It should just sound pure and natural. Good produc-

tion never screams of gimmicks. Bad production is constantly drawing attention to itself,” he said.

“For me, that’s something that’s cool about the Beatles’ recordings — a timeless quality, classic sounding.

“I’ve never been into music that took itself too seriously, but serious music if that makes sense. The Beatles had a great sense of humor even though they were a serious band. I’ve always had a feeling that they didn’t take it too seriously. I love that. And the Kinks put a serious twist on their music. That’s something powerful about rock ‘n’ roll music, the way you can do that.”

Nourallah just produced a CD for Smile Smile and has started

one with Sara Hickman. He’s also working with Gabrielle LaPlante.

“Not a lot of people know about her yet,” he said. “We’re writing songs together, and I’m hoping good things happen for her.”

He’s also planning a new solo project, *The Skeleton Closet*, and a CD with The Travoltas, his newest band, this year.

Nourallah has his own surrogate family of musicians, too.

Mentor

“I’VE GOT MY OWN CLIQUE, I guess, friends and guys I’ve been running with over the years. I get to work with a lot of young bands, and there are a lot of talented young musicians.”

The Travoltas is composed of “old guys” — Paul Slavens and him — and three young guys who “are monster talents.” Nick Earl on guitar, Mike Hodges on drums, and Emsy Robinson bass; all play other instruments, too.

The Dallas area remains a strange place to make music.

“There’s always been a ton of talent here,” Nourallah said. “I’ve traveled all across America, and we have as much or more talent as anywhere.”

“Fort Worth has a great, thriving scene; Denton has all kinds of talented people; and Dallas. Among the three, there is a serious amount of world-class talent. KXT has been a really good push. Dallas has a long way to go to be like a Seattle or Portland or

Austin or any city that’s really behind its local music.”

Another part of Nourallah’s extended family is his record label, which is the German company Tapete Records, which lures him to Europe for gigs.

“They are really cool people and it’s a wonderful relationship. I’ve never understood artists who’ve had adversarial relationships with labels. I love Tapete and want it to be successful.”

“We’ve toured three times in Europe in the past five years, and every time I’ve brought my family,” he said. “That’s really cool, but also different. Most musicians can’t afford to travel with their families.”

He’s going back in July, and figuring out how to bring the family again. ■

In the meantime, in May, Nourallah has several Dallas gigs. He and Chris Holt are opening for Shawn Mullins at the Granada Theater on May 17 and The Travoltas play at the Lakewood Stock Festival on May 20 and the AT&T Patio Sessions on May 31.



He and Chris Holt are scheduled to perform at the Granada Theater on May 17: Salim Nourallah

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