


## Memory Theory, Exile Culture Snake Through Sholi's Math Rock

By Scott Thill  February 20, 2009 | 10:13:00 AM Categories: [Current Affairs](#), [Music](#), [Politics](#)



Payam Bafava, singer and guitarist of San Francisco-based band Sholi, has channeled his experience working at a neuroscience research company into jagged, post-rock songs that explore the nature of memory.

"I was thinking about the ways we process information, recycle and retain ideas through selective recollection," Bafava told [Wired.com](#) in an e-mail interview. "I wanted to impress some of those ideas through lyrical narratives, song structures, repetitive melodies and sound samples recorded in different environments."

Mission accomplished. Bafava, along with [Sholi](#) drummer Jonathon Bafus and bass player Eric Ruud, has bridged the gap between theory and practice with arresting results on the band's self-titled, full-length debut, released Tuesday by Quarterstick Records.

*Sholi's* mathematical music is a self-aware exercise in brainy, energetic sonics that also reflects Bafava's exile upbringing. Raised on a steady diet of traditional Persian music as well as a cosmopolitan cocktail of Bob Dylan, João Gilberto and Joe Pass, the Iranian-American musician attempts to span the cultural divide between East and West. As such, *Sholi* is a logical extension of the band's *Hejrat* EP, which repurposed the music of banned Iranian pop singer and actress [Googoosh](#).

Wired.com caught up with Bafava to discuss memory-influenced music and the cross-cultural leap, as well as a share an exclusive full-album stream of *Sholi* (below). Crunch the tracks and the chat to see if the band makes the grade.



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**Wired.com:** You worked for a mad scientist? Do tell!

**Payam Bafava:** I worked for a neuroscience research company as a digital-signals-processing engineer. Most of the work we did had to do with capturing and analyzing EEG (brain waves). The research director had some really interesting ideas about sleep and memory, and some of what we did was try to model these ideas using computers.

**Wired.com:** How did this experience snake its way into your music?

**Bafava:** I guess just thinking about sleep and memory at work all day started to inspire some ideas for Sholi. I would bus from Lower Haight to Marin County where I worked, and on one of those bus rides I wrote "Spy in the House of Memories" (the title taken from a Joshua Clover poem called "Hunger in St. Petersburg"). I had this image of a child doing a connect-the-dots drawing, but drawing the picture how he wanted to see it rather than how it was supposed to be -- his perversion of truth by memory, so to speak.

**Wired.com:** Was that inspired by your research?

**Bafava:** Yeah, we did this experiment on some subjects at the lab. We flashed a screen full of dots slowly, and between every couple of frames one of the dots moves slightly. At a slow animation speed, you can't tell which dot is moving, but at a faster speed it becomes easy to notice. The experiment is supposed to show the differences underlying the mechanisms of short-term "fusion" memory and slightly longer-term "flash" memory and, in some cases, how the former is more helpful to perception. Anyway, I was just thinking about the ways in which we process information, recycle and retain ideas through this sort of selective recollection. I wanted to impress some of those ideas through lyrical narratives, song structures, repetitive melodies, and sound samples recorded in different environments. There are only a few tracks that play with this theme overtly, but I suppose it's one of the more interesting topics to discuss.

**Wired.com:** How does Sholi's cultural diversity inform its music, if at all, and what are some of its sonic predecessors?

**Bafava:** My parents predominantly played traditional Persian music in the house when I was younger, but I'm not sure if that influenced me any more than Western music necessarily. Early on, I was into Joe Pass, Bob Dylan, Shajarian, João Gilberto, a lot of '60s music. Jon came from a more jazz-oriented background; Han Bennink and Elvin Jones are among his influences. Now we all share a pretty broad range.

**Wired.com:** Your cover of [Googoosh's "Hejrat"](#) was a nice touch.

**Bafava:** Obviously, that was our way of paying direct homage to some Persian influence. That being said, the influence of Western music is actually already felt in some of Googoosh's original recordings. So it's difficult to attribute specific elements of the sound to specific cultural or geographical origins.

**Wired.com:** Did the move from Davis to San Francisco change your music at all?

**Bafava:** I think the main impact was on the actual sound of the album. We recorded it in so many houses, apartments, lofts and even live venues around the Bay Area, so I think it has a pretty dynamic range.

**Wired.com:** How about working with Greg Saunier from Deerhoof? What did he bring to the table?

**Bafava:** We wanted a producer who would be able to mold Jon's intricate, complex drumming style with these melodic songs without making them sound too dense or overwhelming, someone who could balance expressiveness between instruments and vocals. Having listened to Deerhoof's music, which does this very well, and knowing that they record and produce their albums themselves, we decided to send Greg some demos.

To our pleasant surprise, he really liked the songs and was enthusiastic to work with us. He actually sent us suggestions via e-mail while he was on tour in Europe, and when he got back to the Bay Area he joined us for our studio sessions, at New and Improved in Oakland. From there, we took the album home for a year

or so and deconstructed the songs, re-recording and mixing in different spaces. We'd work on the songs for a while, then send stuff to Greg for his thoughts.

**Wired.com:** What was his focus?

**Bafava:** He helped un-stick the gears when necessary, but his focus was always on how to better express ideas that were already embedded in the music. It never felt imposing or too foreign an influence or anything. In the end, I think Greg's work ethic and attention to detail rubbed off on us in a very positive way. He's a really brilliant and incredibly kind person, and we're lucky to have been able to work with him.

**Wired.com:** Sholi landed early love from *The Believer*, and the Iranian-American community as well. Thoughts on that art-culture merge?

**Bafava:** I think that exile cultures specifically have a great need for the arts and media to sustain a sense of cultural and national identity.

**Wired.com:** Are you optimistic about Iranian-American relations going forward? The last eight years kinda sucked.

**Bafava:** I am cautiously optimistic. I think that setting a tone is important in establishing any kind of relationship, and I'm hopeful that Obama can reinvent the "attitudes of evil" that have tarnished the last eight years. That said, there are so many complex issues in the Middle East, so many historic conflicts affecting today's news, that I don't think that anyone is expecting drastic change anytime soon.

But I do think that Iranians -- and Iranian youth specifically, who make up the country's majority -- are excited and hopeful about Obama, and see America in a different light now. If this positive energy can stir Iran's government as it is stirring its people, then at least a door will open up where one previously, at least in recent history, didn't even exist.

**Wired.com:** Is it one of Sholi's goals, so to speak, to bridge that divide?

**Bafava:** Part of what inspired [our \*Hejrat EP\*](#) was an attempt to introduce a different tone about Iran than that which was constantly circulating in the media, circa November 2007. I thought that by turning a certain niche of American audiences onto Googoosh's music and history, some of the negative rhetoric could be redirected. I'm hopeful that our new leadership can redirect some of the negative energy of the last decade as well.

*Photos courtesy Peter Ellenby/Quarterstick Records*