



A VOICE FOR GAZA

VIVA CHATS WITH MICHAEL HEART,
SINGER/COMPOSER OF "WE WILL NOT GO
DOWN (SONG FOR GAZA)."

The radio waves have been recently overcome by the moving, heart-warming song composed by Syrian-born singer/songwriter Michael Heart, "We Will Not Go Down (Song for Gaza)." With some even writing thank you notes to him with the sound of bombs exploding in the background, this song managed to resonate not only with the Palestinian people, but with people all over the world - as over half a million views thus far on YouTube goes to show. It has become the theme song of protests against Israeli aggression around the world, "from London and Vegas to Sydney," even moving some to tears. **VIVA** has been lucky enough to contact the incredibly busy artist, asking about his life, his background, and the song that has touched the hearts of people round the world.

Tell us a little about yourself and your background.

I was born in Damascus, Syria, and grew up mostly between Geneva and New York - where my father was ambassador for Syria - and Vienna - where he was the director general of the U.N. I only lived in Syria for about a year or so, when I was very young. I was lucky to have been raised in these various places, though. After I finished university and got my business

degree, I studied recording engineering in Florida, and then moved to Los Angeles to work in music.

You've been a musician and working in the music industry nearly all your life. What is it that draws you to music?

I don't really know. It's not easy to explain. I have been obsessed with music my entire life and it's hard for me to spend an entire day without it. Even when I'm not listening to it, I always have a melody or a rhythm going through my head.

How has being raised all over the world and travelling so much affected you and the music you make?

Well, growing up like this exposes you to many music genres, all of which I love equally. At first, I started off listening to French "chanson" and the big singers back then (such as Claude Francois and Michel Sardou); and eventually, when my family moved to the U.S., I discovered pop music and hard rock and I really loved it. Today, I still listen to classic rock bands like AC/DC. When I was a teen, someone played me a tape of Paco de Lucia and Camaron de la Isla (the giants of flamenco), and I was hooked. Of course at home Arabic music was always playing. I still think Wadi El Safi is amazing. And when you live in Vienna, it's almost impossible not to be exposed to classical music, which I also enjoy.

I've assimilated all these genres, although I don't necessarily blend them into my own music. In fact, I like authenticity and purity in music; I love melody and strong rhythms; I love great, meaningful lyrics. Depending on my mood and on the day, I could be sitting at a piano singing love ballads one day, and then playing hard rock music through a Marshall guitar amp the next. Music is inseparable from my life.

So who is Annas Allaf and who is Michael Heart?

Annas Allaf is my real name, and Michael Heart is my stage name. It's as simple as that. It's not unusual for singers to have a stage name. Elton John's real name is Reginald Dwight. Sting's real name is Gordon Sumner. The list goes on.

Obviously, you've had huge success with your recent song about the Israeli attack on Gaza, "We Will Not Go Down." What has been the reaction to this song so far?

It's been amazing! In less than two weeks, the song reached half a million views on YouTube, with thousands of comments posted there and thousands of emails sent. The MP3 was being downloaded around the clock. More importantly, the content of most of the personal messages was overwhelming. A lot of emails came from Gaza residents themselves, saying they could hear the bombing from their homes

as they were typing. Others came from exiled Palestinians or from supporters of the cause. There were a lot of messages that said "I am literally in tears as I'm typing this..." It has been an incredibly emotional and intense few weeks. I had a feeling, as soon as I had finished composing and recording the song, that I had hit a sensitive nerve. I don't think it's an accident that it spread so fast all over the world. I should mention that I had a small team helping me, working incessantly for several days to spread the song and the clip on the Internet (on social networking sites, on blogs, on media forums, by email, etc). I think the power of the song stems from its simplicity. It is strong and direct. It was clear that people needed to hear it. Many Palestinians tell me it brought them comfort to know they were not alone in spirit, and others shared their emotions and their support for the cause. In fact, every day we receive emails, photos and recordings of the song being played in demonstrations around the world (from London to Las Vegas to Sydney), and of the words being written on banners. About 100 new video clips have been circulated on YouTube to accompany my song. As I said, amazing.

How have you been handling such a massive upswing in your popularity? I hear you're struggling to field all the emails and phone calls.

Yes, I'm almost afraid to open my inbox these days, because every message I read makes me want to reach out to the sender, and this has proven impossible so far. I wish I could respond immediately to all!

Though the song is very emotional, there is a resilient theme to it, as the name suggests ("We Will Not Go Down"). What brought you to include this determination and resilience in the song?

I think that stemmed from knowing that for decades now, Palestinians have been attacked repeatedly, with little done from the outside world to help them. Still, they have shown they are not going to give up fighting for their rights, no matter how hard they are hit. They are the inspiration for the message of the song.

You've asked that anyone who downloads the song donate to UNWRA. What else can people do to help or raise awareness about the humanitarian situation in Gaza?

I originally wanted to sell the song and donate the proceeds to Palestinians in Gaza, but there were technical and logistical issues. So I made the song free and hoped people would do their bit, because timing was critical. I'm not quite sure what else people can do, but continuing to spread the song around the world would be a good start, regardless of whether or not Gaza is still in the headlines.

Is there anything in particular that you feel people who live abroad, particularly in countries like America (since you live there), fail to see about the situation in Gaza?

Absolutely. I think the average American doesn't have a clue about what's really going on in Gaza. They just flat out don't know. The media in the U.S. are extremely biased. I can confirm that on some of the worst days of these events in Gaza over the past couple of weeks, the local TV news stations in Los Angeles merely mentioned a blurb about Gaza for a brief 30 seconds, and even then, the facts were distorted and misleading. Sometimes, you have



to do a little more research on the Internet to find more objective and accurate information. I hope people begin to do that because they are seriously misinformed.

A few of the songs you've written before this one were also about serious issues, such as war and adultery. Why do you think it is important to write music about these topics?

I don't necessarily think that. The songs you are referring to were released on my recent Pop/Rock CD "Unsolicited Material." One of the songs, "Damaged World," is basically an anti-war song. Another song, "Living in Sin" is your basic cheating song. I try to write about subjects that everyday people can relate to. The job of a songwriter is to reach people's emotions through music and lyrics. Once in a while, I can also write a Rock 'n Roll song that is lighter in spirit and just for fun. It depends on my mood.

What are your plans for the future?

All my plans are music related! I'm constantly striving to improve my songwriting and music production work, and hoping to reach as wide an audience as possible. I'm also eager to expand into other music outlets, like television series or even movies, for which I'd like to compose. And last but not least, I'm looking forward to going on tour and performing live.

On a more lighthearted note, I was intrigued by your colorful experience. You've worked with popular artists such as Hillary Duff and K-Ci & Jojo and you've also toured as a flamenco guitarist opening for Dire Straits. What has been your most interesting experience to date?

Every experience is unique. Playing flamenco guitar in stadiums of 50,000 people was exhilarating, as expected. But studio work (as

musician or engineer, or both) is also full of surprises. With K-Ci & Jojo, we actually did an impromptu jam session in the studio, after I had recorded my guitar for their song "All my life" (which was a #1 hit); we were playing the blues, like you could hear on the streets in the South of the U.S. That was a cool moment! There are many more, including playing ping-pong with Will Smith, between recording takes, and singing on stage with Shania Twain in front of 12,000 screaming people in Las Vegas.

Who is your favorite musician today?

I can't pick just one; there are too many musicians and too many music genres I love. Rock-wise, I like a lot of current artists like Daughtry and Green Day, as well as classic artists and bands like Don Henley, Bryan Adams, Foreigner and Boston. Calogero (who I've worked with a long time ago) is probably my favourite French artist these days. The list is long.

Where has your favourite place to live been thus far?

I haven't found the ideal place yet, as there is always something I love about another place. For example, I love Switzerland and I love California, two very different places. I miss the warmth of the people in the Middle East. I miss the sidewalk cafés in Europe. And I miss snow!

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I'm grateful for the support and encouragement of everyone who listened to my song, and I appreciate all the wonderful messages I received.

Learn more about Michael, view the lyrics or download the MP3 for "We Will Not Go Down" at www.michaelheart.com