

Memories of Hossam Ramzy

by Phil Thornton

About me

When I was a child I lived in a large house with my widowed mother. To make ends meet she took in students from all over the world. It was normal practice to have three or four religions represented round the dinner table. My strongest memory of those days was hearing all sorts of music which was bought in to the house by the students. The music of the middle East (Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, etc.) found a special place in my heart, so from an early age I had a sound and feel in my head that I wanted to explore.

My mother played accordion in a local dance band so there was always music in the house. I was encouraged to take up the accordion at the age of nine. By the time I was a teenager, however, I had switched to electric guitar and, as soon as I was able, I started experimenting with electronic sound and recording with old junk shop tape recorders, etc. The dream of combining the electronic sounds with the 'World' music of my childhood was there in my head for as long as I can remember. In 1986 I signed a contract with New World Music Ltd in order to set up a home studio to produce a series of 'New Age' albums for their catalogue. To date I have recorded over 35 solo albums for that label.

Working with Hossam Ramzy

Hossam Ramzy has been a good friend and musical collaborator for the past 24 years. I first became aware of him back in 1989 as a result of his contribution to Peter Gabriel's album *Passion*. The following year my interest in his style was

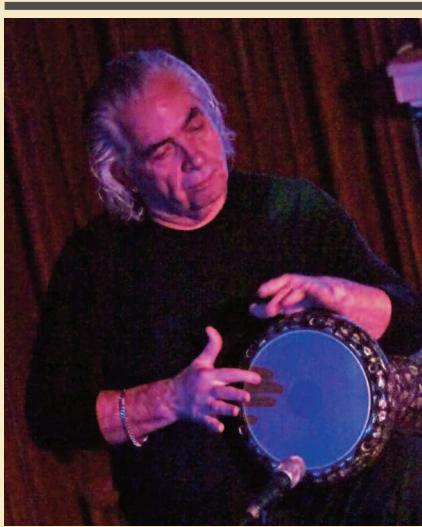


Photo: RoyCano.com

cemented due to his contribution to the album *Songs from the victorious city* written by Anne Dudley and Jaz Coleman. This fed a growing dream of collaborating with him to produce a new style of music with Egyptian rhythms and instruments at its heart.

Six years later my dream came true when I happened to be sharing a studio session with him, while working on James Asher's album *Globalarium*. I was then able to arrange a collaboration to produce the album *Eternal Egypt*, our intention being to combine the Egyptian 'sound' with my already established World music influenced 'New Age' style. At that time Hossam was on a world tour with Page and Plant. While he was in Cairo he was able to book a studio and record a couple of local session players creating

improvised performances to bring back to the UK. It seemed only natural to include a Zaar rhythm (track two: *The land of the Pharaohs*) inspired by Peter Gabriel's *Passion* album. Hossam had the idea of layering the rhythm on top of itself at half the speed, an idea that I loved! To my surprise when I suggested we add a Tibetan thighbone performance to this, Hossam agreed with some enthusiasm. This was the first hint of the kind of creative directions we could take together.

Hossam's touring schedule dictated the project's progress. I remember on one occasion I had been waiting around eight weeks for his next visit to the studio. When he arrived, he had a cup of coffee and promptly fell asleep! I left him to it for a couple of hours as I imagined he had been burning the candle at both ends, as it were. When Hossam woke up he was clearly not in a fit state to carry on, leaving me to wait another couple of months for the next chance to make any progress. This went on for two years until we finally delivered *Eternal Egypt* to New World Music Ltd for release (1996).

The success of this album gave us the chance to plan for a deeper exploration of this new musical fusion. Now we had a budget to go to Cairo and book time in a suitable studio and bring in a wider range of session musicians. Hossam encouraged me to steer the compositions into a more dancer-friendly format, shorter arrangements with a more up-tempo feel overall. On these sessions it became clear that the track that was to become *Derwood Green* was going to be special, this was THE sound I had imagined as a child! Of course I wanted to turn it in to an epic, but thankfully Hossam reined me in and we kept it to a reasonable six minutes. At this time we only had a vague idea what the new 'Tribal' style happening in the US was all about. Hossam thought that it would be liked by the tribal crowd and of course he was right – this one track took on a life of its own as a result of Carolina Nericcio encouraging it to be used in American Tribal Style performances. It was years later that we realised how far it had spread through the tribal community. The result of all this was the 1998 release *Immortal Egypt* which



Phil and Hossam



Hossam, Phil and dancers

became our best-selling album to date and won the NAV award for that year's best 'World music' album.

Hossam had such a busy schedule at this time that it was to be seven years before we could arrange a follow up album. We did however manage to record a one-off track during this period: *Desert Dream*. This track appeared on my 2002 album *Dreamscapes* and later a shorter version of it was included on the *Bellydance for Fitness and Fun* compilation album. This came about due to Hossam being in Cairo to record sessions for Ricky Martin and Shakira, if my memory is correct.

During that time Hossam had built a studio at his house in East Grinstead, he also had a room at his apartment in Cairo set up for recording, so by the time we were ready to work on our third album *Enchanted Egypt* we were no longer tied to the regime of hiring studio time. This allowed us to use the budget to bring in an even wider range



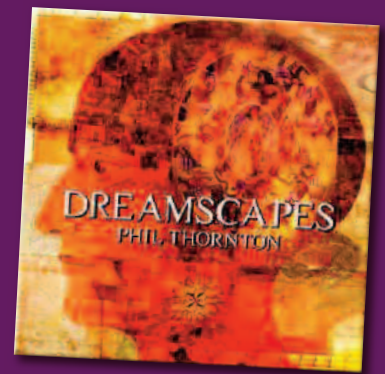
Hossam Ramzy, Serena and Phil on a break from recording the *Immortal Egypt* album in Cairo

of musicians, most notably the Gypsies of the Nile touring group. I remember we were both very happy with the creativity and workflow; we both had enough experience in working together to create a smooth and creative experience. Much of the arranging and mixing of the music was done at Hossam's house. There was always an inspiring energy with Serena's dance classes going on in the house alongside our endeavours in the studio. Serena's students would often be invited into the studio for a sneak preview. Hossam and Serena created a lovely family atmosphere, perfect for the creative process.

Another seven years went by before our next chance came along to create a full album. This time the recording contract was with ARC music (the label responsible for all Hossam's solo projects). The result was *Egypt Unveiled* released in 2011 alongside Hossam's long awaited solo project *Rock The Tabla*, in which I was honoured to have a small part. Track six of that album was a collaboration from the same sessions that became *Egypt Unveiled*, an interesting musical experiment combining the ancient sounds of the didgeridoo and mizmar over an evolving 7/8 rhythm. I still can't quite believe that I performed on an album with the legendary drummers Billy Cobham and Manu Katchel!

2011 also saw the release of the compilation album *Bellydance for Fitness and Fun* which, among other things, featured a great bonus composition *The Tower Of Babel*. We continued to work together on side projects and live shows and made many plans for a fifth album but sadly it was not to be.

RIP Hossam, it was a lot of fun, thank you from my heart.



- Eternal Egypt*** NWM Ltd, 1996
- Immortal Egypt*** NWM Ltd, 1998
- Dreamscapes*** NWM Ltd, 2002
- Enchanted Egypt*** NWM Ltd, 2005
- Music For Bellydancing (compilation)*** NWM Ltd, 2006
- Egypt Unveiled*** Arc Music, 2011
- Bellydance for Fitness and Fun (compilation)*** NWM Ltd, 2011
- Rock The Tabla*** Arc Music, 2011
- Mystical Egypt (compilation)*** Arc Music, 2017

