POP *with a pinch of nostalgia*

'90s kid cuts through the layers



Photo by Alaa Ahmed

Singer, songwriter, and producer Omar Afuni is gearing up to release his third album this summer that will feature a set of catchy and soulful numbers aimed to appeal to young music listeners and especially hit an emotional chord with the generation raised on 90s chart pop. In this interview, he discusses the upcoming album, dishes on the local music scene, and delves into the challenges and constraints facing local artists today.

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Features



Omar Afuni

By Cinatra Fernandes
Arab Times Staff
Photos courtesy of Omar Afuni

Singer, songwriter, and producer Omar Afuni is gearing up to release his third album this summer that will feature a set of catchy and soulful numbers aimed to appeal to young music listeners and especially hit an emotional chord with the generation raised on 90's chart pop.

His debut album 'Resurrected' was released in 2011 and his sophomore album 'Soundproof' came out in 2013. With talent in spades, an unrelenting work ethic, and a formidable stage presence, Afuni is poised for big things and it won't be long before his voice spills over the airwaves. In this interview, he discusses the upcoming album, dishes on the local music scene, and delves into the challenges and constraints facing local artists today.

Question: When did you first become interested in music and singing?

Answer: It was a very natural thing for me. When I was younger, I had one of those toy Casio keyboards. I would pick up any song that I heard on the television and play it on my keyboard. My mother noticed that I had an ear for music and told my uncle who then got me a professional keyboard. Initially, I wanted to be a pianist, but I was unable to take piano lessons. I figured that if I couldn't learn the piano on my own, I could at least learn to sing on my own. At that time, I didn't know if I had the talent for it, I just knew that I loved it.

Q: How would you describe your musical style?

A: My style is essentially pop. I am a 90's kid, so I grew up with feel good music. I was especially interested in British pop music. I remember that as a kid I would go to the Manara Bookstore and The Video Club record store in Salmiya every weekend to pick up the latest music magazines and CDs. That is how I spent all my allowance. I'm sure that others my age, when they hear a song from that era, experience a sense of nostalgia. There is nothing quite like that and that is the kind of music I want to make.

Q: Is there an audience for pop in Kuwait?

A: Absolutely. When you're driving down the streets, you can hear pop music being played in cars. People request pop songs on local radio stations all the time and at live shows, the audience knows the words to all the pop songs and will sing along every time.

Q: How is your third album different from your earlier endeavors?

A: It is a different direction. The first two were more electronic based due to the fact that I produced them myself at home. I wanted to write feel good music for the new album, I wanted it to be organic. I got rid of all the electronic elements and went back to the music that I love, that of the 80's and early 90's. I am going for a retro sound, but at the same time I want it to cater to the music of today. So the album still sounds modern but with a hint of nostalgia. I want to awaken that sense of nostalgia that comes from feel good music, but at the same time I want kids today to be able to relate to it, find it fun and want to dance to it.

Omar Afuni

Q: How important is it to you for your music to have a message?

A: Quite important. I really care about that aspect of being an artist. Music empowered me and gave me strength to pursue my ambitions when I was growing up. I was encouraged by songs about self-awareness, confidence and believing in yourself. These are the songs that really resonate with people who have big ambitions. One song in particular from the first album, Layers, is about exposing yourself to others, peeling off all your layers and showing who you are. My second album is completely devoted to empowering listeners. I wrote that album when I lived in London and going to auditions, so it is reflective of that experience. The album is called Soundproof and it is about not listening to what people have to say about you, believing in yourself, and going forward, regardless of what obstacles you face.

Q: Who have you worked on your new album with?

A: I worked with a very talented producer whose name is Sarj. This is the first time that I work with a producer. His input was very valuable and helped steer the songs in the direction I envisioned for them. I also worked with Adel Al-Qattan who is quite possibly the best guitarist I've ever worked with; he played all the guitars on the album. Keys were played by Lester Rodriguez who I call 'Legendster'. There's not a single instrument this guy can't play. His talent blows my mind. What I loved about working with these guys is that they come from different musical backgrounds, and we were able to create a melting pot of all of our influences on this album. It's very diverse sonically. Every single song has a different unique identity, but they all sound like they came from the same era of music. I'm so blessed and grateful to have worked with these guys and I'm so honoured to call them my friends. The album wouldn't have been the same without them.

Q: How long have you been working on the new album? What is your daily routine?

A: I have been working on this album since the end of June last year. I work in project management, so my life has been waking up early in the morning, heading to work until 4 pm, and then going to the studio where I would stay until 11 pm sometimes. The next day I would do it all over again.

Q: Does your day job in anyway complement your musical aspirations?

A: Absolutely. I think it's important to be passionate about different things. I am just as passionate about project management as I am about music. To be honest, a lot of being in music requires project management skills; you have to work on a lot of different areas - with producers, other musicians, people at the live shows - so it is very similar. The content and product is different, but the process is similar.

Q: What is your songwriting process?

A: Usually I just write songs when I am in the moment. The best ideas come to me unintentionally. Often, I will wake up in the middle of the night or first thing in the morning with a melody in my head. I reach out for my phone, record the melody and leave it in my voice notes to dig up later.

However, the best songs come out in the heat of the moment, when I am feeling powerful emotions. In those moments of happiness, sadness or even anger, I can finish writing a song in 5-10 minutes with complete music and lyrics. This was the process for most of the songs on the new album. The song that I wrote the fastest on this album was 'Perfect'. It is my favorite song on the album.

Q: Who are your musical influences? Who do you emulate?

A: I look up to Stevie Wonder, Elton John, George Michael, and Freddie Mercury among male vocalists. From

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Music

People & Places

Music

Diverse Grammys

Lamar, Swift top favorites

LOS ANGELES, Feb 14, (AFP): Socially conscious rapper Kendrick Lamar leads nominations going into the Grammy Awards on Monday but he faces tough competition led by pop superstar Taylor Swift.

A diverse array of artists is in contention at the music industry's premier awards ceremony, an action-packed evening that will feature performances by leading stars and tributes to deceased legends.

Nominees for Album of the Year, the most prestigious award, include Lamar's experimental rap opus "To Pimp a Butterfly" and Swift's pop blockbuster "1989".



Lamar

Other albums in contention are "Sound and Color" by acclaimed bluesy indie rockers Alabama Shakes, rising Canadian R&B star The Weeknd's "Beauty Behind the Madness" and Chris Stapleton's "Traveller", the first solo album by a long behind-the-scenes country songwriter which he released at age 37.

Top-selling

Lamar is nominated in 11 Grammys, the most for any artist in a single night except Michael Jackson in the era of "Thriller", the top-selling album of all time.

"To Pimp a Butterfly" breaks free from commercial formulas by running for nearly 80 minutes with a jazz backdrop and lengthy interludes of spoken word.

Much of the album is a rumination on the state of US race relations, with "Alright" — nominated for Song of the Year — an unofficial anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality.

Lamar's hometown of Compton, the notoriously rough Los Angeles County city that gave birth to gangsta rap, on Saturday presented the 28-year-old rapper with an honorary key.

"Through all the pain and hardship — losing family members, losing homeboys — for some reason we always still love Compton because we have faith," he told students who danced to his songs.

The gala, which will be broadcast live from Los Angeles, will notably include a performance by British ballad singer Adele, whose record-shattering album "25" came out too late for this year's Grammys.

Lady Gaga will honor late rock icon David Bowie in a "multisensory" show designed with chip-maker Intel that Grammy producers have billed as one of the awards' most ambitious ever.

While Lamar leads in nominations, many pundits are betting on a successful night for Swift, whose "1989" was by far the top-selling album in the qualifying period.

"1989" marked the full metamorphosis of the teenage country prodigy into pop, with production by the Swedish hit machine Max Martin.

Critic

Swift, 26, also made waves in the rapidly evolving music industry by becoming the pre-eminent critic of leading streaming site Spotify, objecting to its free tier.

Singles on "1989" include "Blank Space", a dark pop song that plays on gossip about Swift's dating life and whose video, in which the star brawls in a castle, is the second most watched clip ever on YouTube.

"Blank Space" is nominated both for Record of the Year, which recognizes singles, and Song of the Year, which awards songwriters.

Also in the running in both categories is English singer Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud," a love ballad backed by acoustic guitar that has quickly become a favorite at weddings.

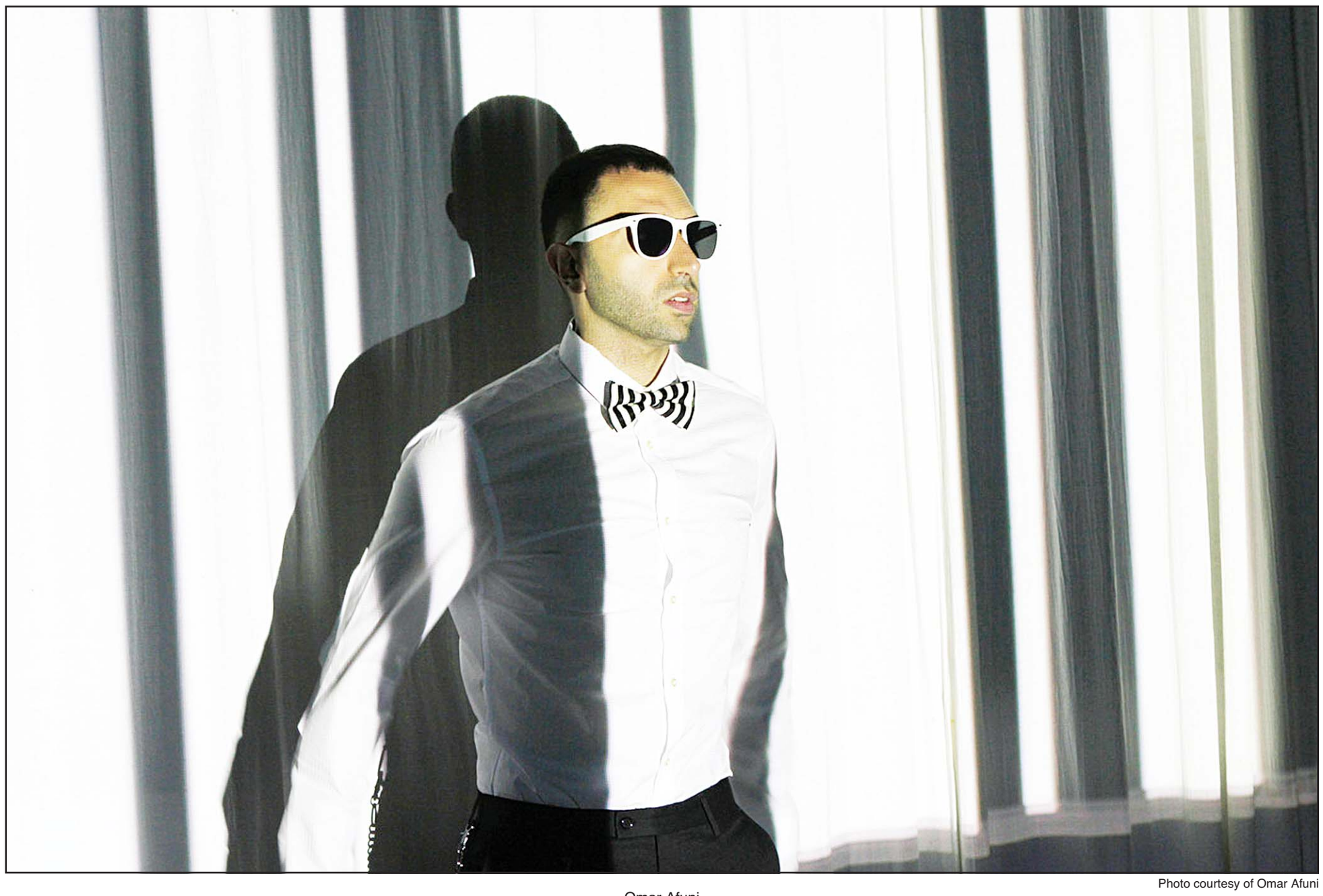
But a leading contender for Record of the Year is "Uptown Funk", the breakthrough single by veteran British producer Mark Ronson with vocals by Bruno Mars.

The instantly danceable song, which is reminiscent of the funky Minneapolis Sound popularized by Prince in the 1980s, spent 14 weeks at the top of the US singles chart, tying for second place on the all-time list.

Swift and The Weeknd each have seven nominations, tying for second place after Lamar.

The Weeknd, whose real name is Abel Tesfaye and was born in Toronto to Ethiopian immigrants, has enjoyed a rapid career rise since his start uploading songs on the Internet in near anonymity in 2010.

The 25-year-old, whose falsetto voice and pop R&B sound have invited comparisons to Michael Jackson, is nominated for Record of the Year for chart-topping single "Can't Feel My Face".



Omar Afuni

Photo courtesy of Omar Afuni



Iranian pop singer Mohammad Alizadeh performs on stage during the 31st Fajr International Music Festival in the capital Tehran, on Feb 13. (AFP)



Lawrence



Manilow

Variety

LOUISVILLE, Kentucky: Actress **Jennifer Lawrence** is donating $2 million to a Kentucky hospital where she visited sick youngsters during a recent holiday trip home.

The Oscar winner, a Louisville native, announced by video Friday that she's giving the money to establish the Jennifer Lawrence Foundation Cardiac Intensive Care Unit at Kosair Children's Hospital in her hometown, The Courier-Journal newspaper reported.

Lawrence says she and her family have met wonderful children at the hospital, and says their "strength and courage is inspiring."

She is urging others to match her gift.

Hospital executives unveiled a rendering of the new cardiac ICU with Lawrence's name affixed to the building.

Lawrence's mother, **Karen Lawrence**, says her daughter has visited Kosair patients during the last three holidays and spoke of how the experience was a special gift. (AP)

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LONDON: Hozier is giving his latest single to charity.

"Cherry Wine" — which features in a live version on his self-titled debut record — is described by the 25-year-old Irish singer as "a love song written from the perspective of someone who is in an abusive relationship." So Hozier and his record labels have decided to donate all of the single's proceeds to several domestic abuse charities, including Women's Aid in the **UK**.

Hozier also recruited fellow highflying Irish export — the Oscar-nominated Saoirse Ronan — to star in the video for the song, which will premiere on Valentine's Day. (AP)

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LOS ANGELES: Barry Manilow is out of surgery and doing well, according to his publicist, after the singer was rushed to Los Angeles following a performance in **Memphis** because of complications from emergency oral surgery this week.

The 72-year old, known for hits "Mandy", "Can't Smile Without You", "Could It Be Magic" and "Copacabana", had performed a show in Memphis on Wednesday as part of his "One Last Time — One Last Tour". His next two concerts were cancelled and are being rescheduled.

"His doctors report that the surgery was successful and they expect no further complications," said an emailed statement from Manilow's publicist, adding that he had been instructed not to talk or sing for the next 48 hours.

"Barry thanks everyone for their well wishes and concern," it said.

On Thursday, a statement posted on the singer's website and Facebook page said he had been rushed back to Los Angeles "due to complications from emergency oral surgery that Manilow had on Monday." (RTRS)

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NEW YORK: Disgraced US TV legend **Bill Cosby** on Friday appealed a **Pennsylvania** judge's refusal to dismiss a sexual assault case against him, according to a document seen by AFP.

The 78-year-old actor and comedian is accused by dozens of women of sexual assault dating back decades, but the vast majority of cases have expired under statutes of limitations.

The small number of cases that are proceeding are playing out in civil court — except in Pennsylvania where Cosby is standing trial for the first time on a criminal sexual assault charge.

Cosby's appeal centers on a decision in Pennsylvania earlier this month by Judge **Steven O'Neill**, who threw out an attempt by the actor's lawyers to have the case dismissed.

Cosby's lawyers filed their notice of appeal against that decision to the Superior Court of Pennsylvania on Friday. (AFP)



Lionel Richie gestures on arrival at the 2016 Musicares Person of the Year's 26th annual event where Richie was honored as the 2016 Musicares Person of the Year on Feb 13, in Los Angeles, California. (AFP)

Entertainment

Afuni eyes international fame with his new album

'Songwriting natural process for me'

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female vocalists, I greatly admire Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. I like real vocalists who take on the challenging bits of singing. I also love Robbie Williams and Justin Timberlake. I was also a big fan of boy bands growing up. NSYNC and Backstreet Boys are a huge part of the reason I learned to sing. I know all of their songs.

Q: How would you assess the local music scene?

A: I think we have a lot of raw talent, but it is lacking the environment to breathe and be refined. I think people don't give their local artists enough attention or credit, but to be honest, I don't blame the public because we don't get to perform as often as we would like so we don't have that much exposure.

Q: Do you think that your choice of language is holding you back from having a wider audience and following in Kuwait?

A: Possibly. The majority of people here do listen to Arabic music, but there is a good portion of society that is interested in English music. That is evidenced by the popularity of local English radio stations.

I think our main problem is the lack of English songwriting skills, not just in Kuwait, but in the Middle East in general. This is the reason that people who listen to English music do not take local and regional artists seriously — because we have a lack of good songwriters. Hopefully, we can work towards changing that.

I have a lot of high hopes for my upcoming album. I think it is my best work to date. The quality of music, lyrics and production competes with international standards. I'm excited to see how this next chapter will unfold!

Q: How do streaming services affect you as an artist?

A: For independent musicians, I think streaming services are a great blessing. Instead of people just downloading songs for free online or pirating them, they have the option of streaming them. Very few people buy records these days and I predict that less people will be buying digital music soon because it is so cheap to just stream music. For KD 3 a month, you have access to the entire catalogue of songs in history. Unless you're a huge artist like Adele or Beyonce, streaming is your best option.

Q: What do you think is necessary for a music industry to thrive in Kuwait?

A: I don't know if there is an industry for English music to begin with. In order for there to be an industry, you have to be able to sell products, make revenue and profit in order to keep producing content. That doesn't happen here or in the region in general. The people who are involved in music in Kuwait are those who are doing it because they love it. I'm hopeful that with time, there will be a proper music industry in the Middle East that caters to listeners of international music.

Q: Do you think the music scene is competitive in Kuwait?

A: I think it is competitive in a healthy way. The beauty of the music scene in Kuwait is that everybody is doing something different. Be it pop, reggae, punk rock, or rap, etc. We are all very different. The local music community is very friendly and supportive of each other. You can always count on the rest of the musicians to attend your shows, support and cheer you on.

Q: Which songs do you perform the most? What are some of the crowd favorites from your repertoire?

A: I feel that people gravitate towards a song called Blind which is from my first album. I have also performed Perfect a couple of times and the audience responds really well to it every time. I think it's the honesty and vulnerability with these songs that really allow the audience to connect to them. When it comes to covers I always seem to be asked to perform Faith by George Michael, Rehab by Amy Winehouse and All of Me by John Legend. These seem to have become part of every show I do. It really depends on the venue and the crowd I'm performing for.

Q: Do you practice any form of self censorship in your songwriting?

A: I have not so far; I don't believe it's necessary to use foul language to express yourself. I touched on a lot of social issues on my last album Soundproof and I let out a lot of anger & frustration, but I spoke my mind in a way that would communicate the messages I want to deliver. I don't think you should censor your ideas. That limits creativity and artistry in general.

Q: Do you have any upcoming shows?

A: Yes, I have a show at Bayt Lothan on Tuesday, February 16th 2016. It's going to be their final show, so please come and support this wonderful organization that has serviced the community for so many years enhancing the talents of the young children of this beautiful country.

Q: How can our readers gain access to your music?

A: My music is available on omarsings.com. My first two albums are also available on iTunes and streaming services such as Apple Music, Spotify and Anghami. You can also follow me on social media, my username on Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter is @omarafuni.

Q: What advice would you give to people who want to start a musical career?

A: I think the most important thing in starting any career — music or otherwise — is to be very passionate about your chosen career path. You have to want to do it for all the right reasons. You must also be unrelenting and stay positive & hopeful. Be prepared to work hard and put in the hours. Success doesn't come easily, but when it does it'll feel a hundred times better than if it did come easily. A huge part of being successful is self-awareness, you must be fully aware of your strengths and capabilities. If you can work on them and improve, please do so, don't wait. If you know you're not cut out for something, that is strength in its own right. Moving away from a losing battle is a win. Another important piece of advice is, no matter what you do, don't be mediocre. Always strive to be different and innovative. Stand out from the crowd and make people pay attention to what you have to offer. Be a person of substance, ethics, and be reliable. Keep your promises, show up on time, stick to your deadlines, create a plan, start today!

Q: What is your hope for the future?

A: I hope that my upcoming album allows me to achieve all the goals I have set for myself. I really want to spend every single minute doing what I love to do; making and performing music. I also want to prove all the people who have been supporting me throughout the years right and make them proud. I feel like I owe it to them. My aspirations are not just about me anymore.

EODM plays Stockholm gig ahead of Paris show

STOCKHOLM, Feb 14, (AFP): American rockers Eagles of Death Metal (EODM) took to the stage in Stockholm Saturday, ahead of their return to Paris next week to "finish" the fateful November concert that ended with jihadi gunmen killing 90 of their fans.

About 1,000 fans turned out as they relaunched their European tour in Sweden, with frontman Jesse Hughes alluding to the Paris tragedy, telling the audience: "After all these weeks, we needed you, we really needed you tonight."

But it will be the return to Paris that will be most emotional for the group and its French fans, many of whom lived through the carnage, including some who are still being treated for their injuries.