Alfa Mist – Variables Bio

“I’ve been focused on who I am in my music, but now I’m exploring where I am,” Alfa Mist says. “I’m asking: how did I get here?”

This is the journeying question that underpins Alfa’s fifth album, *Variables.* Traversing luscious, big band swing, head-nodding boom-bap rhythms and yearning vocal melodies, the record is expansive, soulful and moving, in both body and spirit. On *Variables,* his second release for **ANTI-**, Alfa achieves his most fully-realised, expressive musical work to date*,* coupling his keen ear for looping, memorably emotive piano melodies with intuitive grooves and a free-flowing jazz improvisation.

The musical mood spans the Duke Ellington orchestral feel of opener “Foreword” to the rhythmic thump of “Borderline”, where Alfa spits verses on the battle between our nature and how we are nurtured, the dark introspections of groove-heavy “4th Feb (Stay Awake)”, and the seven-minute free improvised expressions of “BC”.

*Variables* also features several standout appearances. Longtime collaborator **Kaya Thomas-Dyke** sings on the soul-inflected “Aged Eyes”, blending her gossamer vocal over a finger-picking guitar melody to swell into a strings-laden, cinematic chorus. While South African folk singer **Bongeziwe Mabandla** pens the yearning love song “Apho”, producing a call-and-response through his crystalline falsetto that skips over drummer **Jas Kayser**’s frenetic beat. There is even a family affair on the incantatory “Genda (Go Away)”, where Alfa’s nine-year-old niece sings a polyrhythmic chant that harks back to the Ugandan phrase his mother would softly tell her children.

Throughout, Alfa questions how it is that he has landed in a position of artistic success when other peers have not, or are even incarcerated. “What makes us all go into completely different directions when we come from the same place?” he asks. “There is luck, your upbringing, so many different factors. I’m glad I found music as my purpose early on – it is the voice that calms the chaos. It’s my one focus.”

Since the release of his first full-length project *Nocturne* in 2015, Alfa has established himself as one of the UK’s most focused, in-demand and distinct musical voices. He has worked with the likes of **Jordan Rakei** and **Tom Misch***.* Artists look to him for his unique blend of intimate bedroom production and expansive jazz group orchestration, since Alfa is yet to be boxed into a specific genre. His music spans everything from hip-hop beat-making to producing for artists such as rapper **Loyle Carner**, composing neo-classical works for the **London Contemporary Orchestra**, and reworking tracks from composer **Ólafur Arnalds** and pioneering jazz label **Blue Note.**

Growing up in east London, Alfa’s journey to jazz was an unexpected one. “There’s no access to jazz where I come from,” he says. “Society made us think that there were only three options for success for Black kids who had the same amount of money as me: be a musician, sportsperson or criminal.” Naturally drawn to music thanks to the vitality of the grime scene that was breaking across the capital, Alfa would play with music production software during his break times at school, learning to put together fast-paced grime instrumentals. As he dug deeper into UK rap and hip-hop, he became curious about the samples used on records by the likes of Blackstar, Madlib and J Dilla. “Those producers were the gateway to jazz,” he comments. They ultimately led him to teach himself piano by ear to break down the harmonic intricacies of their formative tracks.

By 2017, Alfa had written, arranged and produced the eight tracks that make up his debut album, *Antiphon.* Featuring bassist and singer **Kaya Thomas-Dyke** and guitarist **Jamie Leeming**, who are still members of his band today, Alfa blended snippets of conversation with his two older brothers on the importance of family amidst intricate, driving instrumentals and luscious acoustic arrangements. It was a breakthrough success, amassing over 10 million views on YouTube and millions more on Spotify, marking Alfa out as a fresh talent with a remarkably mature and self-assured poise in the studio.

Following albums, 2019’s *Structuralism* and 2021’s debut for ANTI-, *Bring Backs*,continued Alfa’s musical introspection. *Structuralism* produced nine searching yet deeply soulful tracks,questioning how we formulate our identities through Alfa’s experience of being raised by his Ugandan mother. *Bring Backs*, meanwhile,featured groove-based explorations and meandering fragments tied together by a remarkable poem written by **Hilary Thomas** expressing the sensuous realities of creating community in a new country. Always drawing on his own experiences, *Bring Backs* is Alfa at his most unguarded, expressing the constant concern of being unable to escape the uncertainty of poverty, even when success is at your door.

Where his previous work might have largely traded in a mid-tempo, meandering feel of self-analysis through instrumentation, *Variables* now finds Alfa driving forwards with renewed intensity and purpose. “The whole album is more uptempo and influenced by the freedom of returning to gigs,” Alfa explains. “It feels like I’m coming back to my early days of making grime beats and creating tracks that make me want to bop my head fast.”

The return to live shows has been a welcome one for Alfa and his fans, resulting in an instantly sold-out run of debut US shows in 2022, as well as a headline gig at London’s **Barbican** in 2021, and an expanded run of US shows slated for 2023. The urgent energy of Alfa’s six-piece band provides an infectious vitality to his gigs, as well as producing instinctual responses to his music in the studio. “We always have limited time and we record to tape, which means we can only get two takes – if you want a third, we have to delete one,” Alfa says. “That means I make really meticulous decisions before recording but once I give the music to the band, I let them bring their own expressions in the moment.”

It is a balance between feeling and perfectionism that ultimately gives Alfa’s music its depth and capacity for repeated listening. It is also an ethos that has enabled his remarkable work-ethic to date. “I’ve never been a ‘one album every four years’ artist – I want to put out new projects every year,” he says. “Music is an extension of my life; it is the practice of creating.”

That practice is certainly fruitful. Alfa currently heads up his own label **Sekito**, releasing records from Jamie Leeming, trumpeter **Jsphynx** and bassist **Rudi Creswick**, with more slated for 2023. He also has plans for more solo piano records to follow the storytelling minimalism of 2020’s *On My Ones* EP, and continuing to host the **Are We Live** podcast with **Barney Artist** and Jordan Rakei.

“Music is the gift that will never stop giving because I am always trying to figure out something new,” he says. “There will always be a question and I’m just searching for new ways to answer it.” We are the lucky ones, left to listen to Alfa’s soulful responses.

**SHORT EDIT:**

“I’ve been focused on who I am in my music, but now I’m exploring where I am,” Alfa Mist says. “I’m asking: how did I get here?”

This is the journeying question that underpins Alfa’s fifth album, *Variables.* Traversing luscious, big band swing, head-nodding boom-bap rhythms and yearning melodies, the record is expansive, soulful and moving, in both body and spirit. On *Variables,* his second release for **ANTI-**, Alfa achieves his most fully-realised, expressive musical work to date*,* coupling his keen ear for looping, memorably emotive piano lines with intuitive grooves and a free-flowing jazz improvisation.

The musical mood spans the Duke Ellington orchestral feel of opener “Foreword” to the rhythmic thump of “Borderline”, where Alfa spits verses on the battle between our nature and nurture, the dark introspections of groove-heavy “4th Feb (Stay Awake)”, and the seven-minute free improvised expressions of “BC”.

*Variables* also features several standout appearances. Longtime collaborator **Kaya Thomas-Dyke** sings on the soul-inflected “Aged Eyes”, blending her gossamer vocal over a finger-picking guitar melody to swell into a strings-laden, cinematic chorus. While South African folk singer **Bongeziwe Mabandla** pens the yearning love song “Apho”, producing a call-and-response through his crystalline falsetto that skips over drummer **Jas Kayser**’s frenetic beat.

Since the release of his first full-length project *Nocturne* in 2015, Alfa has established himself as one of the UK’s most focused and distinct musical voices. He has worked with the likes of **Jordan Rakei** and **Tom Misch**, drummer **Richard Spaven**, producer **Lester Duval** and singer **Emmavie***.* Alfa is yet to be boxed into a specific genre as his music spans everything from hip-hop beat-making to producing for artists such as rapper **Loyle Carner**, composing neo-classical works for the **London Contemporary Orchestra**, and reworking tracks from composer **Ólafur Arnalds** and pioneering jazz label **Blue Note.**

Building on the success of 2017’s debut album, *Antiphon,* which has amassed over 10 million views on YouTube, 2019’s *Structuralism* and 2021’s debut for ANTI-, *Bring Backs*, *Variables* now finds Alfa moving forwards with renewed intensity and purpose. “The whole album is more uptempo and influenced by the freedom of returning to gigs,” Alfa explains. “It feels like I’m coming back to my early days of making grime beats and creating tracks that make me want to bop my head fast.”

The return to live shows has been a welcome one, resulting in an instantly sold-out run of debut US shows in 2022, as well as a headline gig at London’s **Barbican** in 2021, and an expanded run of US shows slated for 2023. The urgent energy of Alfa’s live presence speaks of his restless creativity – a driving force that has enabled his remarkable work-ethic to date. “I’ve never been a ‘one album every four years’ artist – I want to put out new projects every year,” he says. “Music is an extension of my life; it is the practice of creating.”

That practice is certainly fruitful. Alfa currently heads up his own label **Sekito**, releasing records from Jamie Leeming, trumpeter **Jsphynx** and bassist **Rudi Creswick**, with more slated for 2023. He also hosts the **Are We Live** podcast with **Barney Artist** and Jordan Rakei.

“Music is the gift that will never stop giving because I am always trying to figure out something new,” he says. “There will always be a question and I’m just searching for new ways to answer it.” We are the lucky ones, left to listen to Alfa’s soulful responses.