

Buffalo's Drea D'Nur sends message of love with new recording project

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Drea D'Nur at GCR Audio, where, during the peak of the pandemic, she recorded the album "This Love Thing" with collaborator Rami Nashashibi and a crew of Buffalo musicians.

Derek Gee

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Jeff Miers

A simple text message, with an audio file attached, started the ball rolling.

"Hey, wondering if you'd check out this song I've been working on," it read.

A soul-stirring marriage of R&B, gospel, neo-soul and hip-hop stylings thematically linked by ruminations on love's role in personal and communal healing, "This Love Thing" has already garnered acclaim from the likes of NPR's All Things Considered, the Chicago Tribune and Al Jazeera. The video accompanying the collection's first single – the hauntingly beautiful "Mama Please," its title echoing the last words uttered by George Floyd before he died at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, after allegedly attempting to use a counterfeit bill – has been added to the rotation on BET Soul.

That an album that so ably captures our national moment was written and recorded almost entirely in Buffalo, smack in the middle of a pandemic and a season of immense social upheaval, is a testament not just to the power of the music itself, but to the shared belief that underscores that music.

The creation of this music was a labor of love. As D'Nur sees it, "Love is the only thing that's going to carry us through."



An unstoppable flow

D'Nur has been a part of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network for four years. She was awarded a yearlong artist fellowship in 2020. Once a year, there is an artist retreat in Chicago that includes workshops, making art together and jam sessions.

"When we gather, I'd end up on the piano, playing behind everyone all night," D'Nur said. "Rami would be sitting close to me with his guitar, and we'd just be jamming. Guitar has always been a passion of his, though he never really wrote songs before.

"One day last year, he texted me a song demo. Very low key, not like, 'I'm about to write an album,' or anything. I just happened to be at GCR (Audio, Robby Takac's recording studios in Buffalo) working on finishing up another session with (producer) Elijah Hooks. Elijah merged my piano and vocals with Rami's demo. We sent it right back to Rami, and he went crazy. He was like, 'I can't believe you did this, it's amazing. Do you hear anything else on it?' I said, 'I hear strings, I hear bass, I hear drums.'"

They went to New York City to record strings. Buffalo drummer Carl "Flute" Johnson and bassist Chuck Brown were brought in at GCR. In Chicago, recording involved Rev. Otis Moss and the choir from Trinity United Church of Christ, Barack Obama's old church.

"Soon, we'd moved from having a single, to having an EP, to recording an entire album," D'Nur said.

The songs came fast and furious. Even a pandemic couldn't halt the flow.

"Covid hit in the middle of this," D'Nur recalled. "Rami would get tested and then come to Buffalo and we'd be locked away in GCR with Elijah, working away. We just hunkered down and got it done."



From left: Rami Nashashibi, Drea D'Nur and Elijah Hooks.

Photo by Mustafa Hussain

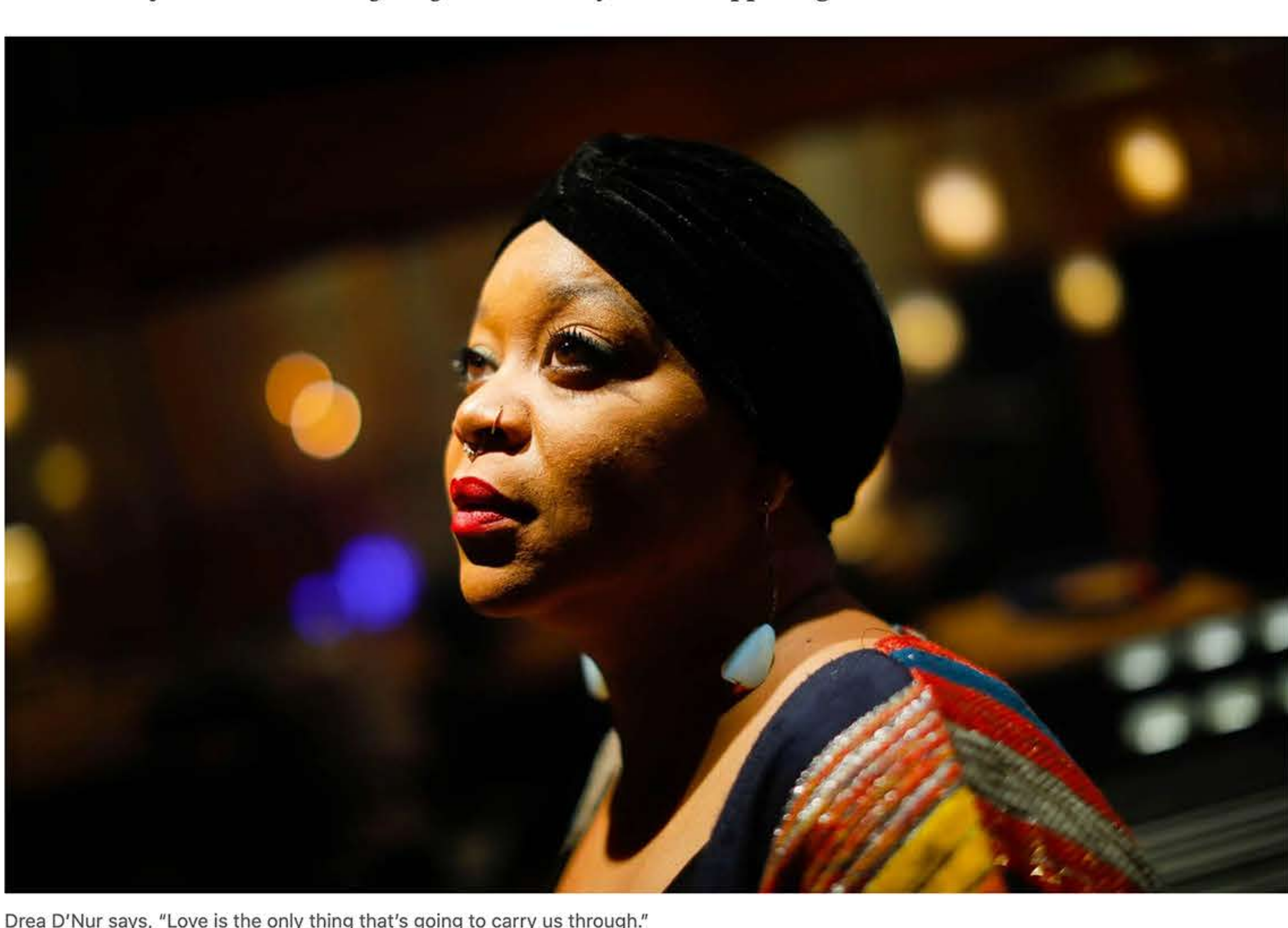
'Umi Says'

The album's title, "This Love Thing," has personal resonance for D'Nur, a mother of five. In her view, music, art, motherhood and activism all spring from the same source.

"If there's any driving force that will take us back to a place where we can work together, to exist as one people, then love is going to be it," D'Nur said. "With 'Mama Please,' we're talking about a mother's love. We're reflecting on the role of the mother in community-building. In Islam, the Arabic word for community is 'Ummat,' and the root of that is 'Umi,' which means 'mother.' Mos Def taught us that (with his song 'Umi Says')."

"The mother is the first community leader. So, a mother's love is the force that can help us to turn back toward where we once were as a people. Love as a solution. Community love. Working together to fight for justice. We learned this in 2020.

"Yes, Black people have been oppressed from the beginning, but the solution is for all people to join together in the fight, all races and statuses. An injustice to one is an injustice to all. *Everybody* is affected by what's happening."



Drea D'Nur says, "Love is the only thing that's going to carry us through."

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Love in action

When she wasn't busy overseeing the development of "This Love Thing," D'Nur spent much of the past year running **Feed Buffalo**, an organic Halal food pantry she opened in 2018.

"I reopened my doors in March, and I wasn't quite sure how to operate during all of this," she said. "I knew that healthy food could be a solution in fighting this pandemic. My love for community made me do it. Then that community rallied around me in support, with food donations, monetary donations, volunteerism. Who would ever think that in the middle of a pandemic you could actually help so many people, and do well?"

The experience convinced D'Nur that "combining art with community for the purpose of healing" would be her path forward. Love as activism, involvement, engagement and action, with music acting as a vehicle for all of these things. For some, this is simply naive idealism, but D'Nur sees the interconnections as screamingly obvious.

"For me, art is activism. Art documents history. Art is our storyteller, our narrator, how we know what's happening. Not just our dark history, but also the progress we make, as a society."

"Mama Please," both the song and the video, carry on this artist-as-documentarian tradition. D'Nur drew from a deep well of emotion and experience to create a song about a mother's grief that she calls "transformative."

"We recorded that song right after George Floyd was murdered. I was imagining what the transition of the spirit leaving the body and returning to its spiritual form might *sound* like. I wanted to focus on that idea more than the fact that we all became witnesses to this public lynching.

"I believe his spirit returned to his mother. Perhaps when he was saying, 'Mama, please,' he saw her. I imagined her hand reaching out to him and welcoming him home. That brought me great comfort."

D'Nur is undaunted and determined.

"Love is the answer. Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, David Bowie, Nina Simone – they all taught us that. Love is the only thing that's going to carry us through. That's why this project is so important. It addresses love on many different levels, with many different layers, interwoven with a pure intention.

"It's an expression of love. People need that right now."