

It's not every day Haitian witchdoctors and North Shields can be mentioned in the same sentence. And it's not every day you meet someone like the softly-spoken yet powerful singer Ajimal, or, as his parents named him, Fran O'Hanlon.

We meet in North Shields and as we walk towards a pub, he points out favourite parts of his home town, proudly indicating a second-hand book store where he spends time. It's a house of inspiration for much of his music.

Although fond of Shields, the roots of the Ajimal story lie in a different hemisphere, in the Caribbean country of

Haiti. Here Fran, who is studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh, spent nine months working in a field hospital following the tragic earthquake of last year. "Religion is a huge, fundamental thing in Haiti. It's everything and it's quite a beautiful thing to witness," Fran says. "Religious Masses would be held at the hospital and patients would come down and rejoice. It was quite exuberant and inspiring. All of these people pouring out their suffering and joy at the same time was a hugely emotional thing to see."

While in Haiti Fran encountered a preacher and former witchdoctor, a man who was once feared under the regime of the country's ruthless former president, Francois Duvalier (Papa Doc). Though the witchdoctor had reformed through Christianity, his story amazed Fran and his voodoo name, Ajimal, struck a chord.

"I loved the phonetics of it and the sound of the word," the 23-year-old says. "Then I found out the history behind it and it's not something that's positively inspiring. But I don't think that for something to be inspiring it has to evoke a positive emotion, it just has to produce some sort of extreme feeling within you. For me that was disgust mixed with curiosity. That's where the name came from." On Fran's return home he decided to turn his experiences and inspirations into a music project, going it alone instead of recruiting a band. "For a while I was just performing solo acoustic stuff and it was easy. Plus, I'm constantly moving around," explains Fran, who also spent a year living Paris. "When I record the music, I plan to layer it up and have people play on it, and sometimes I will play with others on stage."

"With Ajimal, the idea is to take the music and break it down to a really basic level where you can focus on a certain musical idea - lyrics particularly - and communicate that idea in its simplest form." Merging literature with science

Ajimal magic

Expect the unexpected from the enigmatic voodoo-named singer-songwriter Ajimal, advises **Ian McCabe**.

and sometimes hallucinations), Ajimal's lyrics are mysterious and ambiguous. As well as his experiences in Haiti, his ideas emanate from his love of vivid imagery and literature, such as Hermann Hesse's 1927 novel *Steppenwolf*.

"I like basing songs on anything that inspires me, books being one of them," he explains. "As an artist today you're rarely going to create anything truly original. It's nice to look at other people's thoughts about things and come up with your own spin. I like basing my art on other people's art, taking an idea, an interpretation and giving it a sound."

Fran is currently working on an EP entitled *Childhood* and is gigging in Newcastle and at Sunderland's Split Festival before returning to his studies. "Newcastle is so strong for music at the moment," he says. "Bands seem to overlap too, so you get to know everyone within the scene. There is a social cohesion here which is very inspiring musically. It's so diverse and with so much potential for collaboration, it rubs off on you."

"Split Festival is a great event, the people behind it are directly involved with music and they know what they're doing."

"It's lovely to see a nice balance of local acts and nationally acclaimed acts too, and it works because the scene up here is really strong."



➡ To find out more about Ajimal, including downloads and gig listings, visit <http://soundcloud.com/ajimal> He is playing Cluny 2 in Newcastle with The Jezabels on September 9. On September 10, Ajimal is at Cluny 1 at an event in aid of the charity Children North East. He is appearing at the Lit & Phil on September 23.

Split Festival is held at Ashbrooke Sports Club in Sunderland on September 17-18. Ajimal is performing on the fringe stage in a line-up curated by The Futureheads' Ross Milland. To find out more visit www.splitfestival.com

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