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Music

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Falguni Shah

Falguni Shah's voice is ravishing—maybe too ravishing for CD. Listening to her first track on Karsh Kale's debut CD *Realize*, I try to locate the shivery extra-sound that made her November performance at Joe's Pub with Kale so memorable. Her singing, and the other performances on the CD, are technical and perfect, but something's missing. I realize it's got nothing to do with the voice. To experience Falguni sing you need to see her. Onstage she's beatific: she looks like something Disney would animate into a full-length film. She loves her audience until you love her too; she's the happiest performer I've ever seen live. Joe's Pub, on that night, with its velvet deep ottomans and handsome turbaned Indian men, swelled for her, cheering when she got onstage and then continuously throughout her performance. Evocative, at times preternaturally high-pitched, almost a ululation, but not sad. The opposite of sad. With her voice you don't hear that Arabic mournfulness sung out of desperation. Instead you feel manic, endorphined, well-functioning; she puts your brain chemicals back in their proper position.

Shah's a welcome addition to the Asian Underground movement, a mid-90s British phenomenon that wended its way to the States first through tabla players Talvin Singh and Karsh Kale (though Kale is from the U.S.) and Badmarsh & Shri, and now through a host of Anglo-Asian musicians who fuse techno/electronic beats with traditional raga singing. Shah was first introduced to Kale through her mentor and guru, Ustaaad Sultan Kahn, a well-known raga singer who performs on several of Kale's tracks. Shah had been studying with Kahn when he got a call from Kale asking if he might perform on his album, "and he said to Karsh, if you want a female vocalist I know a singer who is really not bad at all." Shah met Kale, tried out for him and now sings on three of his tracks and performs with him onstage along with a rotating group of vocalists.

Shah began singing in her native India when she was three years old at the prompting of her mother, also a Hindustani singer. One of her earliest gigs, at four years old, had her singing with a chorus of children on a soundtrack to an Indian movie. "That's when I thought to myself, this is fun. I could really do this." She received her master's at Bombay's SNDT University in Hindustani classical music theory, a seven-year program that had its students practicing upward of 15 hours a day. After graduation, she started freelancing, singing "everything from pop to devotional to classical music" before returning solely to classical.

She moved to New York two years ago, and now divides her time between New York and Boston, where she and her husband, an internist at Harvard and the flutist/keyboardist/vocalist and songwriter in their band Karyshma, are finishing up their first album. She teaches a class on Indian music theory at Tufts, recently performed with the Arab/Indian fusion band Takht in a show at Joe's Theater and sings on the soundtracks of two Indian movies.

But her focus now is on Karyshma. "It means divine coincidence. Two of the band members met on a train. My husband came to India to study music and found me. When I got here, I said, I want to try something. Let's do something new." The band had been a mostly covers four-person side project for a group of doctors, architects and MBAs. Under her influence they began to experiment with traditional ragas, incorporating them into Western songs with Western melodies and American lyrics. Most of the band members are American-born, and only she and her husband are classically trained in raga. Where Asian Underground is fusion, but not synthesis—joining raga with techno beats but keeping each relatively intact—Karyshma wants to make raga into pop.

Ragas, Falguni explains to me, aren't taught on paper; they've been passed down orally for 5000 years, paradoxically beginning with the Sam Vedas, the Hindu scriptures. As one theory goes, the sages located the first note of the Indian scale, Sa, from birdsong, and from there developed the rest of the scale, SA RE GA MA PA DHA NI SA, mirroring the American DO RE ME FA SO LA TI DO. But the scales were further divided into a total of 22 notes. Classically trained singers perfect the vocalization of these microtones until they are seamlessly incorporated in the singing of the ragas. Indian music is spontaneous, with a notational system that differs from written music, but the spontaneity develops within and not despite a raga.

The ragas are in defined melodic scales similar to the Western modes, and there are about a thousand of them, each one developed and performed for a particular mood, climate or time of day, and taught to singers as a kind of alphabet. There is, for instance, the Ahirbhairav, the morning raga, or the Malhar, the monsoon raga, of which there are further variations depending on the type of monsoon. Part of the art is performing the raga with the effect for which it was created. Shah sings in the North Indian style of Khayal, meaning imagination, where, she says, "you spontaneously create what you feel." Call it Indian scat. But always within a raga. "Khayal belongs to raga. You can't have Khayal without raga. If I am a raga, Khayal is my face. You can't have a person without a face." She demonstrates, taking my tape recorder and singing two variations of a Gujritodi, an afternoon raga. The first version is tender and circuitous, the second is crisp and sad. She sings a single note and then shifts it slightly to explain how the difference in sound depends on its subtle change. "By changing that one note, the mood of the entire raga shifts."

Karyshma takes one of these ragas and makes it into a melody, so that a basic American rock/pop song has a raga bass and a composition derived from English. She sings the melody for their song "Empty."

"I had been improvising on a Jaijaiwanti, a night raga, one evening, and then my husband wrote the melody for it. He wrote English lyrics for it, and then I translated it into Hindi." The song has her singing first the English, then the Hindi, of the original night raga. "The trick is writing a song that doesn't disturb either tradition. It's a fine line between disturbing and crossing over. But what matters are the notes, not the language."

Karyshma performs around the U.S. at national associations and benefit concerts. Their violinist and songwriter, a neuroscientist based in San Diego, has been flying in six days a month—"he comes in and we don't eat or sleep, we just record"—until the album is completed in March. Shah thinks this kind of music has major crossover potential, comparing it to the success of Latin music in this country. I get the feeling that Shah's interested in crossover, through Karyshma and Asian Underground, as a way to get people back to the source. "You give people the original and ancient raga in their own way, at least visibly, in a way they'll understand. You don't want to lose the beautiful sound but you still want to deliver it to the Western ear in such way without getting confused."

Because there's something "fishy and cheesy," she says, about Indian bands singing American with Indian accents, the band members take Western diction and movement lessons. "You look awkward if you don't move onstage," she says, "but we're not used to it. We sing ragas sitting on the floor. They're not meant for entertainment. They're devotional music, for God, to obtain eternal truth." That's what makes you such a good performer, I say to her. Religious didacticism often makes the best music. The raga singer is part performer, part amateur psychologist. With Falguni, you don't scream out your favorite song; she chooses it for you.

"If I sing a sad raga and people cry, I am doing my job. The idea is to share with the world the divinity of the sound of music." You really sing to the audience, I say to her. "With my audience, I love them. I don't care who they are, I love them."

Falguni Shah performs with Karsh Kale this Weds., Jan. 9, 11 p.m., at Joe's Pub, 425 Lafayette St. (betw. 4th St. & Astor Pl.), 539-8777.