

TRACE

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up



INDIE HINDI

U2-loving, Indian classically trained Falu breaks fresh ground

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Recognizing her fortune in being selected by her guru, and "God of Indian classical music," Ustad Sultan Kahn, New York-based singer-songwriter Falu poses a question: "I mean out of one billion people, how many can you teach?"

When I meet Falu at New York's Tamarind teahouse, she is vivacious, smiling and determined, by any scale of the imagination. Her black hair cascades around her face and blue, black and silver bangles sit gracefully up and down her arms. Our interview, over comforting cups of chai, lasts about an hour; it's a laughing, bustling stream of a conversation in which she unabashedly shares her many "missions." While some up-and-coming artists may want to sign a lucrative deal, boast of a platinum record, or have longevity in the industry, Falu, is not simply interested in dreams — dreams are too fleeting. Here are missions: clear, succinct and willed to happen.

Born Falguni Shah in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) to a musical family — her mom and grandmother were both classical singers — she began her training early. "Since I was three years old," she says. "My mom made me sing scales up and down for seven years, that's all I did." She grew up listening to all the "legends" — Billie Holiday, The Beatles, Paul Simon and Ella Fitzgerald. Later rock music by artists such as U2, Nirvana and Radiohead struck a nerve with the young woman just beginning to find her voice. After earning her master's degree in classical music at a prestigious music college in India, she knew that music was her career choice, but she also wanted to combine the musical influences she'd been exposed to and loved. "The idea for a new genre came when I heard all this Western music which is harmony based, and Indian music is very melody based," she says. "I was wondering, 'What are these chords?' I wanted to study them, to learn more, to do something new."

That learning opportunity arose in 2001 when she was offered a music lectureship at Tufts University. She made the move to Boston and studied "those Western chords." Now, she not only had an idea to blend Indian classical music and Western music, she began to understand how it could all work. As she explains, Indian classical music is based on "ragas" — mood-based scales that evoke certain emotions and are sung at particular times

of day, whereas for Western music, harmony rules the scales, major and minor. "The approach of music is different in both styles but it's the same notes," says Falu. "After I got here, I studied that and then I understood."

Two years after arriving stateside, she formed her band, an eclectic blend of musicians. Her keyboard player contributes the hip hop elements, she has a jazz-inspired guitar player, and rounding her sound out is a funk drummer who happens to be Wu-Tang's Ol' Dirty Bastard's brother. "We put all these people in one room and then blended in my Indian classical, and what happened in that studio was a dream," she recounts. Creating a new genre was not easy though, and her mission has been to "push towards innovation while staying true to the 5,000 year-old traditional roots."

After perfecting her clever mix of what she's termed "Indie Hindi," she began to record her self-titled debut, *Falu*. She wrote or co-wrote all of the tracks on the album and maintained her mission of staying true to the music of her homeland. "The purity of the raga is not destroyed, but at the same time, American audiences can enjoy the music," she says. "Take 'Hey Baby,' because the lyrics are in English, the melody is catchy — you can sing along to that."

Falu has continued to perform and build on her range of experiences. She performed as part of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project, collaborated with Wyclef Jean on a song for the soundtrack to Angelina Jolie's documentary *A Place in Time*, and she performed for the Dalai Lama. And still, she craves more of these learning experiences. "I would love to collaborate with every talented musician possible, from U2 to Madonna," she laughs.

She's currently serving as one of Carnegie Hall's Music Ambassadors to New York City, an opportunity to perform throughout the city and to teach music workshops to high school students. It's also a way for her to fulfill one of her missions to "spread the culture" of Indian classical music around the world, one borough at a time. When Falu speaks, her enthusiasm enralls the listener. Her missions — to create a new genre of music, take her classical culture global, and work with every talented musician possible — come across as effortlessly daring and infectious.