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## Urdu Love Songs and Tuareg Grooves with Kiran Ahluwalia



"It was one of those things where you don't know you've fallen in love," says Kiran Ahluwalia about her music's new Tuareg influence. (Photo: Sahiba Kaur Chawla)

By **Andrew Gilbert** (<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/author/agilbert/>)

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[EVENT INFORMATION \(HTTP://WW2.KQED.ORG/ARTS/THE-DO-LIST/KIRAN-AHLUWALIA/\)](http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/the-do-list/kiran-ahluwalia/)

### Kiran Ahluwalia

A contemporary approach to an ancient art.

**MAR. 20, 2015**

SFJAZZ

- [Details and tickets \(http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/the-do-list/kiran-ahluwalia/\)](http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/the-do-list/kiran-ahluwalia/)

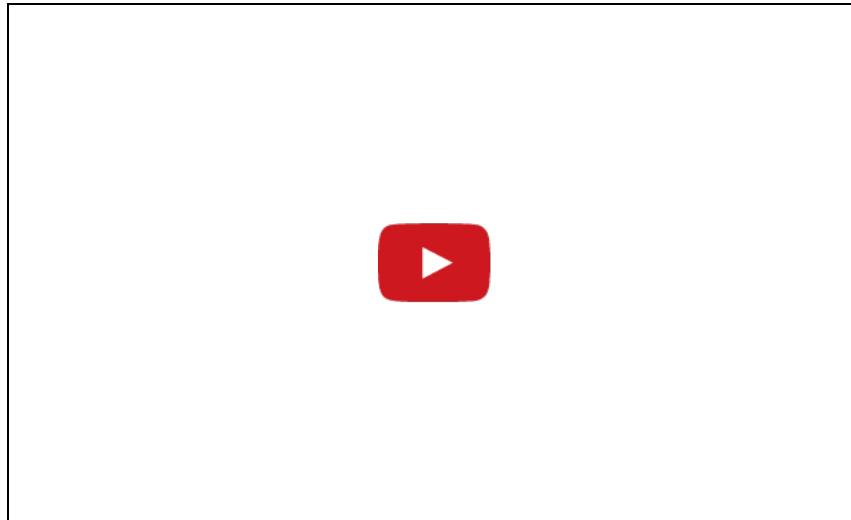
Kiran Ahluwalia can't explain exactly why she was smitten by the sinewy desert blues of Tinariwen, but ever since she encountered the legendary Tuareg rock band from northern Mali, their guitar-driven grooves have increasingly infiltrated her music. Not that she's abandoned the strikingly beautiful sound that made her a world music star, but when Ahluwalia celebrates the release of latest album

*Sanata: Stillness* (Magenta) at the SFJAZZ Center on Friday, March 20, she brings a stripped-down rhythmic sensibility that was just becoming apparent at her last Bay Area performance in 2011.

Born into a Punjabi family in the northeastern Indian state of Bihar and raised in Toronto, Ahluwalia first made an impression on the world-music scene in the late 1990s with her beautiful ghazals, a love-besotted Persian poetic form that flowered with Sufism in the 11th century. Rather than focusing on classical repertoire, she composed new ghazals by searching out contemporary Urdu poets in the Indian diaspora and setting their verse to music (while also lacing her sets with flirtatious Punjabi folk songs, delivered in rippling clear-water cadences).

If she apprenticed herself to ghazal masters in India to connect with the culture of her birth, Ahluwalia says that her music's penchant for cross-cultural fertilization flows from Canadian multiculturalism. Many of her first public performances took place at Canadian folk festivals where "they put you on the stage with three or four other bands and expect you to collaborate," says Ahluwalia, a two-time winner of the Juno Award, Canada's version of the Grammys.

"Those festivals were my proving ground," she continues, speaking by phone from her apartment in New York City. "You have to figure out how to enter their songs and make room for them in yours. I've collaborated with Celtic fiddlers, Portuguese fado players and Afghan musicians. Then the Tuareg influence came along and it just hasn't left me. After the honeymoon, there's this deeper love that inspires me and refuses to go away."



Like so many relationships, Ahluwalia's bond with Tinariwen was sparked by an unexpected encounter. She and her husband, Karachi-born jazz guitarist Rez Abbasi, were in Toronto after a trip to Portugal and decided to take in a fado concert. When the music didn't grab them, they ended up at catching last three songs at a performance by Tinariwen. She liked what she heard, but wasn't thunderstruck. Over the following weeks though the music burrowed into her mind, though, and ended up surfacing on her fourth album, *Wanderlust* (Times Square Records), which won the 2007 Songlines/WOMAD Best Newcomer Award in the UK.

"It was one of those things where you don't know you've fallen in love," she says. "I slipped into it and ended up composing something influenced by that music, "Teray Darsan." We recorded it with electric guitar, and it's very different than the rest of the *Wanderlust* CD."

A few years later, she ran into British guitarist and Tinariwen producer Justin Adams in Copenhagen and mentioned that she'd been immersing herself in North and West African music. After she mailed him a copy of her album he suggested that she work with Tinariwen on her next project. The resulting album, 2011's *Aam Zameen: Common Ground* (Avokado Artists Recordings) earned a Juno Award for World Music Album of the Year.



Kiran Ahluwalia credits the spontaneous collaboration at Canadian folk festivals for her cross-pollinated sound. (Photo: Swathi Reddy)

The fact that Ahluwalia studied French in school (like many Canadian grade school students) facilitated communication with the band in the studio, and helped forge a close connection with the multi-generational collective. She made the trip to northern Mali to perform with Tinariwen in 2012 at the last Festival In the Desert (a massive musical gathering which is still on hiatus due to unrest) and again joins forces with the band this summer at the Festival d'été de Québec.

One reason her music melded so gracefully with the North and West African influences is her superlative band. Abbasi is one of the most creative guitarists in jazz, a brilliant bandleader and composer in his own right who's played an essential role in saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa's groundbreaking Indo-Pak Coalition.

Tabla player Nitin Mitta and bassist Nikku Nayar have worked hard to master incantatory Tuareg grooves. But the key instrument is the accordion, a chair usually held down by the stylistically expansive Wil Holshouser or Rob Curto. For Friday's show, Ahluwalia's working with Julien Labro, a French-born conservatory-trained master who's equally at home playing Piazzolla as collaborating with jazz vocalist Cassandra Wilson.

In many ways, Ahluwalia turned to the accordion out of necessity, following the 2011 death of her regular harmonium player Ashok Bidaye. In Europe, she still uses the harmonium, but in North America she's yet to find a player who can comfortably step out of classical contexts.

"That's why I had accordion come into my music," she says. "Now I develop many of the songs with accordion. In 2011 I was asking the accordion to mimic harmonium, now I'm asking harmonium player to mimic accordion. I look for two things in accordion: to do the ballads and to create beautiful melodies, but also to bring a sense of chaos. I'm looking forward to seeing what Julien can do."

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