



## Desert rhythms find common ground at Festival Place

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By Roger Levesque, [edmontonjournal.com](http://edmontonjournal.com)



India Calling: An Evening with Kiran Ahluwalia and Rhythm of Rajasthan

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EDMONTON — Her New York home is a long way from the deserts of West Africa and North India, but Kiran Ahluwalia is tapping the music of those far-flung regions with an innovative spirit that's bound to win her greater international notice.

The title of her spellbinding new album *Aam Zameen — Common Ground* alludes to the unique melding of her own roots in Indian song forms with the trance-inducing tribal funk of Mali's nomadic Tuareg people. And now on her current Canadian tour, she's forging ties with the rhythms of another desert region, the north Indian state of Rajasthan.

Indian-born, Canadian-raised Ahluwalia has become something of a musical nomad, a fearless collaborator whose common ground with others is defined only by where her creative curiosity takes her.

"If there's one thing that collaborating at the Canadian folk festivals has taught me, it's that you don't have to understand first. You can just feel and listen and find a place for yourself in someone else's music. You have to just jump in."

In the literal sense, that common ground was a recording studio in Paris, where Ahluwalia and her core band with husband-jazz guitarist Rez Abbasi met up with Mali's world beat stars Tinariwen and British producer Justin Adams early last year.

"It was amazing that we wound up forging a very deep bond in what seemed like 10 or 15 minutes of getting together," says the singer.

They began singing one of Tinariwen's Tamashek songs, part of the same music she first heard and fell in love with in 2003 when she saw the African group in concert in Toronto. Then the roomful of musicians started jamming on *Mustt Mustt*, a global hit by the late Pakistani qawwali singer Nusrat Khan, and a tune she had picked to cover for its universal formula of call-and-response vocal patterns.



The results – in three separate versions on the new album – may be the first time ever that two threads of Muslim music from Africa and Asia have been so seamlessly sewn together.

“The differences between those parts of the Muslim worlds are vast. There were a lot of musical similarities in the use of the call-response chants and clapping but when the Tuaregs pick up their electric guitars and bass, they approach the music totally differently than a Pakistani would approach it. Still, I knew the song could make that journey.”

Days before, Ahluwalia and her backing quartet had already recorded a few other tracks with another Tuareg group, Tekakaft, in a refitted farmhouse in rural France. All this comes together on the new album she’s releasing on her own label in Canada via Outside Distribution. While she was a guest singer with Tinariwen in New York, they can’t be with her on tour, but either way she says “they left their imprint on all of us.”

“There were no boundaries for me. I was willing to learn from them. Once they started singing I jumped in with Indian improvs and they found that very endearing.”

Common Ground also marks a personal innovation for Ahluwalia, who had drawn from ancient and contemporary poets in Urdu and Punjabi to find the lyrics for her four previous albums of ghazals (all Juno-nominated; she won a Juno for *Beyond Boundaries* in 2003). This time she found herself writing original lyrics, taking off on inspired solos. “It’s a very big step in my evolution as an artist.”

Though Ahluwalia was born in North India, it’s only since her teens – when her family moved to Canada – that she began to seriously study Indian music. And before her musical career took off, she got an MBA and worked as a bonds trader. If she needed any more confirmation that she made the right career switch, it came in 2009 when she won the Best New Artist category in the BBC-Songlines World Music Awards.

Ahluwalia’s cross-country tour is a double bill affair with the group Rhythms of Rajasthan, four musicians who create irresistible grooves on percussion, flutes, strings, harmonium and vocals, all from two ancient tribes, the Langas and the Manganiars.

India’s large northern state of Rajasthan is largely Muslim but its desert landscape is home to a diverse culture, including the eastern roots of the Gypsy people. The group’s fifth member is dancer Suva Devi, who was featured in the award-winning Gypsy music documentary film *Latcho Drom*.

They come from a long lineage of professional musicians and a tradition that used to cater almost exclusively to nobles of the court. But for several years now they have been drawing rave reviews on international tours, appearing at venues like the Hollywood Bow.

After both groups have performed their own sets, they will collaborate on Thursday night.

## CONCERT PREVIEW

Double-bill: Kiran Ahluwalia, Rhythms Of Rajasthan

Where: Festival Place, Sherwood Park

When: Thursday, 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$30 – \$36 from the [box office](#) (780-449-3378) or [Ticketmaster](#) (780-451-8000)