

Kiran Ahluwalia has released *Aam Zameen: Common Ground*, a collaboration with Saharan sensation Tinariwen, which arrives in stores next week.



Finding common ground

Heady mix of styles and traditions are the hallmarks of Kiran Ahluwalia's music

Kiran Ahluwalia has never stepped foot in the Sahara nor has she visited the northern Indian desert state of Rajasthan, but those places hold a powerful allure for the chanteuse.

This is evidenced in *Aam Zameen: Common Ground*, her recent collaboration with Saharan sensation Tinariwen, which arrived in stores Tuesday.

The heady, hypnotic mix of Indian rhythms and desert blues is easily the most convincing and engaging marriage of those styles — pardon the pun — on record.

And tomorrow, Ahluwalia performs at Koerner Hall with Rhythm of Rajasthan, a group comprising traditional musicians and dancers from the Indian state.

"I've been a fan of the music from both these places and with the audiences, I'll travel to both through the music," says Ahluwalia, who was born in India, raised in Canada,



and now lives in New York.

Since releasing her debut album, *Kashish*, 10 years back, Ahluwalia has increased the vocabulary and popularity of ghazals — a romantic form of song that originated in Persia around the 10th century and was introduced to India four centuries later — by collaborating with non-Indian musicians and introducing Western instruments into the mix.

I became a big fan of Tinariwen's layered, electric blues after hearing its second album, *Ammasakoul*.

The seven-member group belongs to the nomadic Tuareg tribe of northeastern Mali and has a fascinating history.

In the '70s, a drought and

civil war forced many of them to flee to Libya and Algeria and the founding members of Tinariwen met in one of Muammar Ghadafy's military training camps.

It was there they learned how to use a Kalashnikov and play the guitar.

They returned to Mali in the early '90s when a second rebellion over land and linguistic rights was launched. But a peace accord was reached and the fighting stopped in the mid-1990s.

Ahluwalia says she first saw Tinariwen when they played Harbourfront six years back, and like those of us who were there, she became an instant fan of their visceral, guitar-driven sound.

"I was wrapping up my CD, *Wanderlust*, at the time and ended up composing a song (Tera Darsan) for the album which was inspired by Tinariwen," she says. "After seeing them, I continued to listen to other Tuareg groups of the

African Sahara."

Ahluwalia says that about two years ago she met Justin Adams, the British guitarist who produced two of Tinariwen's four albums and who has worked with Robert Plant and Brian Eno, at a music conference and they talked about collaborating.

"My CD was sent to Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, the leader of Tinariwen, and I found out that my excitement to work with them was being reciprocated," she says. "Justin, my husband (and guitarist) Rez Abbasi and I travelled to France where we recorded with a Tuareg group called Terakaft and then with the lovely folks of Tinariwen.

"Their sound touches me, it enters my heart," she raves. "I love their hypnotic grooves and the style of Ibrahim's guitar playing. It's original and completely mesmerizing."

Ahluwalia, who's worked with artists as diverse as Jane Bunnett, Pakistani qawwali

singers and Portuguese fado musicians, said she studied Tinariwen's music before entering the studio to record *Aam Zameen*.

"I studied the grooves, the phrasings and other aspects of the music," she says. "Even though I compose the tunes with the collaborations in mind, what actually happens in the final event is always different. So many things were spontaneous — as they are with good musicians."

The recording experience, she adds, was emotionally bonding.

"We just finished a video for (the album's single) *Mustt Mustt* which I am about to upload to YouTube," Ahluwalia says. "It shows footage from the Paris sessions, and I'm so glad we have it because it shows how much we were in our own world."

Visit Errol's blog at www.musicinthemessage.blogspot.com

Now
HEAR
This!

Errol's can't-miss list:

1 Tennessee Voodoo Coupe and The Flying Bordelos play the third annual Surf & Turf rockabilly and surf rock blowout at the Cadillac Lounge Saturday. \$10. 10 p.m. 1296 Queen St. W.

2 Do not miss singer Ruthie Foster when she plays Hugh's Room Tuesday night. \$35. 8:30 p.m.

3 Sitar and tabla player Anwar Khurshid performs at the Art Gallery of Ontario Wednesday as part of the **Maharaja: The Splendour of India's Royal Courts** exhibition. For details, call 416-979-6648.