Ghazal Original

Kiran Ahluwalia's own contemporary Canadian spin on the Indian art of the ghazal makes her truly unique, reckons Ken Hunt.

Listening to Kiran Ahluwalia's debut Kashish (Attraction) made it clear that she was distinctive, yet the assurance that she has developed since 2000 is astonishing. Nothing prepared listeners for the paradigm shift for Indo-Pakistani diaspora music that she launched with Beyond Boundaries in 2003. However, that was when she broke through into the wide blue yonder. She is already demonstrating that she has the potential to become one of the great ambassadors of Indo-Pakistani diaspora music, not from Canada, but from anywhere. Plus, if somebody gets judged by the company that they keep, then her choice of collaborators in the sarangi maestro Ramesh Misra and the Cape Breton Island fiddler Natalie MacMaster on her latest CD Kiran Ahluwalia (Triloka) speaks volumes for her future as well as her good taste. She has already gone beyond 'unusual' and 'distinctive'. She is unique in the proper sense of the word.

Unlike with the waves of immigration that arrived in Canada as a consequence of the fall-out from the Vietnam War or the topping of the Shah of Persia (especially on the West Coast), and Vancouver, BC, with its Vietnamese musicians such as Khac Chi or the city's Ryan label releasing material by the Iranian classical vocalist, maestro M R Sharjarian), I knew next to nothing about the socio-historic background to Indo-Pakistani immigration to Canada. One of the first things that intrigued me about Kiran Ahluwalia was the fact that she was part of a subcontinental, specifically Punjabi diaspora. "I think in most countries when you look at emigration," she offers, "it comes in waves. The very first Indian emigrants to Canada in the 1800s were labourers building the railways. Then came a wave of farmers - not just Indian, but from everywhere. Next there were more labourers. In the 70s the wave was another block of people who wanted greener pastures economically. My parents were part of this wave. They came to Canada to have a better standard of living, to have more freedom economically. Now, it's a different wave."

Kashish's press release based her in Ontario province. Now, when discussing the Punjabi diaspora in musical impact terms, bhangra has generally hogged the headlines and limelight. Kiran Ahluwalia was different. She roots her art in a different terroir, so to speak. Hers concentrates on ghazal and Punjabi folk songs, the former informed by having undergone the rigours of classical training with Padma Talkwalkar in Mumbai and ghazal studies with Vithal Rao in Hyderabad. Kiran Ahluwalia was born in Patna in Bihar, in July 1965 the only child of her Rawalpindi-born father Dr Jagjit Ahluwalia and her Lucknow-born mother Dolly, while her father was posted there. Whilst she was still a babe-in-arms the family moved to New Zealand where her father earned his PhD in microbiology. Five years later the Ahluwalias returned to India. In 1974 when she was nine the family moved again, this time to Canada. Before they moved she had already been introduced to a variety of music including light-classical, religious and popular Indian forms coupled with local listening experiences that included tapping into Maori fusion.

"There was no prejudice against music in our immediate or extended family. My parents both learned music as children and as teenagers and participated in music competitions in colleges in India. My father played tabla in his family. My mum sang - and played harmonium too, but it was mostly singing. Harmonium would have been to accompany herself. On my father's side they would have these huge musical gatherings where there'd definitely be a few instruments in the home. You know, a keyboard, a couple of violins, a couple of tables. And somebody would play something. Music was very much a part of life on both sides of the family. They both had a love for ghazals. They would certainly explain what lyrics meant. But as a child I don't really remember analysing what they meant. I just remember listening to everything that they exposed me to. Whatever I understood, I understood. I don't really remember trying to make an intellectual connection with any sort of music; it was really an emotional connection with the mood that any sort of music, and especially ghazal, creates."

Ghazals often seem like emotions momentarily crossing or flickering across a face. The observer will suspect if the person is feigning, concealing or sending deeper or secret signals. For example, on Beyond Boundaries, Ahluwalia drops in couples that even in translation suggest motivations masked, desires disguised and transience reigning. On Main Dhoondta Hoon (Eternal Search) she sings, "The arrows that have pierced my heart have been discovered! But the hands that pulled the string cannot be found." (If that sounds like a ruminative refrain on a theme by Rumi or Kahlil Gibran it is merely lading from the same pot.) More obliquely on Vo Kuch (Passion) she remarks, "He has completely gripped my emotions! As if taken hold of my thoughts." Who the 'he' or 'He' is, is open to interpretation. Ahluwalia appreciates ambiguity.

In the Mughal sphere of influence, ghazal became the pre-eminent literary form and poetic fountainhead. Its progress across the subcontinent was shepherd by its absorption into Sufi utterance; that connected with Hinduism's mystic and reforming movements like Hinduism's Bhakti reformation, Sikhism or the Baul faith. Meditations addressed to the beloved or talking about the unattainability of love are particularly important in the realm of ghazal. Ghazal's themes of love will present love in multi-layered ways. Love may be presented as secular or spiritual, chaste or erotic, physical or sacred, profane. Specific names and particularities - events, dates and personalities - are generally taboo, not because they compromise ambiguity but the better to communicate a higher love or divinity. Not unnaturally, in a ghazal the beloved being addressed, frequently stands for God. Or in the case of Sufis - since they are in the scheme of all things Muslim after all, Islamic freethinkers and pantheists - the mystic's love for the mursul or guide.

"For me my interpretations are quite secular, about carnal love, but Rasheed Nadeem, the very first poet with whom I composed who was Canadian, writes them in the Sufi mystic tradition, which is all about getting closer to God. So when he says how much I respect him I get close to you, the distance between us remains vast, he's talking about God in the Unsung Ghazal, to give the English title of Kina Nere; the gist of the ghazal is that no matter how close I try to get to you, the distance between us remains vast. When I'm composing, and it's not to say that I'm not spiritual, for me my inspiration is love between human beings. For
me, that ghazal is about a man who's shy, who's not able to communicate those three famous words. He's not able to tell her how that's how he feels for her. Something holds him back. He's having such a hard time expressing with her and telling her how he feels about her. He's trying so hard in his mind, yet the distance between him and her is growing because he's just not able to blurt the words out."

On the variability of interpretation, she says, "In Yeh Nahin [Wandering Dusty Paths, on the album Beyond Boundaries and 2005's Kiran Ahluwalia], Rafi Raza is saying, 'It is not that I intended to come here, but this is where I ended up.' Once a poem is written, it is open to many interpretations. There are different meanings. One possible meaning is that he is talking about his journey from his native Pakistan to his adopted homeland Canada. Of course, I'm much more of a romantic, so when I was composing the ghazal, for me I always imagine it in romantic terms about it being about someone who's had an argument with his lover. It's not quite about being ready to say sorry, but unconsciously about wanting to be back together. The person is wandering the streets of the city but they end up at their lover's doorstep without a conscious intention of doing so. They go on to explain that they know their soul is dusty but they've travelled so long and they've tried so hard to shake the dust from their soul, so please look beyond the dust, please try to understand me. For me, that was my interpretation of the ghazal when I was composing it."

Ghazal has traditionally not only been a written or printed but also an art form, performed at symposia of poets known as mushaira. Unbeknownst to the family, Toronto was hosting them too. "After I released the first CD my parents found out what are called mushaira. You've probably heard the word mehfil which means 'musical gathering'. Mushaira means 'poetry recital by many poets', a gathering of poets. They heard there was a mushaira happening in Toronto, so, of course, I wanted to go. We went and the first mushaira we went to was run by an organisation called Punjabi Kalma da Kaif. Translated, it means 'Caravan Of Punjabi Pens'. I thought, 'Leave it to writers to come up with a beautiful name for their organisation'. It was Punjabi-speaking poets from Pakistan and India. There were Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. The Punjabi language and their love for it united them. There were about 40 poets. Some of them were really, really good."

It was a breakthrough of a far-reaching kind for her. "That's where I heard my first so-called Canadian ghazal or what I call Canadian ghazai, because these were South Asian Canadians, like myself. There was a person by the name of Rasheed Nadeem. He recited this poem Kina Nere there and I fell in love with it. I'd been tapping on my Walkman. Over the next couple of weeks I was composing to it. Then I phoned him. It was a big adventure in itself to get his phone number. I explained who I was. He was really anxious to hear my composition. He didn't want to wait to meet me. He asked if I could just sing a bit over the phone. He was so excited and said he wanted to introduce me to more poets. From then on I became very good friends with him and began composing more of his work. And talking to him, conversing with him about what kind of works I was looking for. Kina Nere is on Beyond Boundaries today using arrangements and sounds that are very much today. A lot of people when they hear that this is a genre that originated so long ago just equate it as being old music. The genre is old, but the music I'm doing is not."

She takes breath. "I find that it's not easy to articulate where it is I'm coming from. I'm not somebody who just lived in Canada. I did go back to India and India is where I received the majority of my musical education. I don't consider myself as doing fusion music. The ghazais that I'm doing, I've sung them in India, I've sung them with the same arrangements in Pakistan. People realised that it's something different only because of the guitar actually. But for my English being in a Canadian accent, they would never know that these ghazais hadn't been given birth to in India or Pakistan. It is very much in the genre, but I've developed my own style and put my own little stamp on the evolution of the genre. It's not fusion, it's original work, which is very, very much within the genre."