

India calls

Kiran Ahluwalia brings the rhythm of Rajasthan to Calgary
 Published January 27, 2011 by [Christine Leonard](#) in [Music Previews](#)



India Calling: An Evening with Kiran Ahluwalia & Rhythm of Rajasthan
[Jack Singer Concert Hall](#)
 Saturday, January 29 - Saturday, January 29
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In this age of borderless technologies, scouring the globe in search of exotic sounds has become an internationally favoured pursuit of avid world music lovers and curious musicians alike. Inspired to seek out new rhythms and melodies as she revitalizes her own ethnic traditions in song, renowned Canadian singer-composer-musician Kiran Ahluwalia has plucked some surprisingly connective threads from the tapestry of India and Africa’s mutual musical heritage. A glimpse behind the veil, Ahluwalia’s latest album, *Aam Zameen: Common Ground*, released via the Outside Music label, reveals the compelling yet largely unexplored intricacies that bind cultures and countries across decades and desert sands.

“I do take in influences from all over the world. I’m not worried about sticking to my two cultures, being born in India and brought up in Canada, if there’s something out there in the world that appeals to me esthetically I use it,” Ahluwalia elucidates. “I’m not about lines and rules and boundaries, and my ears are always open.”

“The first time I saw (legendary Malian musicians) Tinariwen was in 2004 in Toronto at Harbourfront (Festival), and right away, like many people around the world, I loved them,” she continues. “Even then, I composed something inspired by them and that composition, ‘Teray Darsan,’ wound up being recorded on my previous album *Wanderlust*. But that influence wouldn’t shake off of me and I found myself listening to them and other Tuareg groups, and then I met their producer and talked about my fascination. Lo and behold, we started talking about collaboration and it happened. It was exceptional. It was life changing.”

A fresh take on ancient acoustic mores, *Aam Zameen: Common Ground* relies heavily on the talents of Tinariwen, which graciously puts itself in the capable hands of Ahluwalia and British



guitarist-turned-producer Justin Adams (Robert Plant, Brian Eno). Cross-pollinating her Hindu band with the modern-primitive sounds of these mysterious desert Muslims, Ahluwalia has struck upon a fascinating cultural fusion that has surpassed all expectations. In bringing South Asian and West African artists together in an unprecedented amalgamation of spirit and song, she has found her common ground.

“Tinariwen are a group from the part of the Sahara Desert that falls into Mali and Algeria,” Ahluwalia explains. “These musicians are from a marginalized group. The governments weren’t very good to them, and they’ve had to fight a civil war. So, they’ve used their music to unite their tribesmen to fight a common enemy. Their songs are of political dissent, but also of the actual hardships of life in the Sahara. For me they have a unique music – they’re influenced by American guitar rock, but there’s no need to find a comparative genre in order to understand what they’re doing. They’re more bluesy than anything else.”

Undaunted by the challenges inherent in fully realizing the magic of a studio recording in a live setting, the Juno-winning chanteuse plans to treat her audience to an unforgettable evening. Pairing her cross-cultural explorations with the pageantry of western India’s Rhythm of Rajasthan, Ahluwalia plans to present a vibrant vignette of the Paris, New York and Toronto recording sessions that resulted in the avant-garde Aam Zameen. Melding the trance-inducing percussion and guitar of Tinariwen – which famously opened for the Rolling Stones in 2007 – and Tuareg up-and-comers Terakaft, Ahluwalia pilots her ensemble through a wealth of material, including three versions of “Mustt Mustt,” a fitting homage to Pakistan’s ‘King of Qawwalis,’ Nurat Fateh Ali Khan. Ahluwalia enjoys mixing things up for the crowd by alternating between Saharan and Punjabi tongues. Whether she’s singing her own original lyrics or those penned by some of Toronto’s hottest Desi poets, her passionate delivery provides ample fuel for an ecstatic experience of global proportions.

“‘Mustt Mustt’ is a classic Pakistani song about Sufi mysticism. It’s not about carnal love; it’s about divine love, spiritual love. We had so much fun recording this song, the first take we did came in at over 11 minutes,” Ahluwalia recalls with a chuckle. “We managed to trim it back a bit, but included a kinda loungey version and an extended track on the album, as well. With the other Tuareg group, I wrote the lyrics to two of the songs and one I composed myself. I also did a cover of a Tinariwen song with Tamashek words, ‘Matadjem,’ that talks about how to get the Tuareg people to unite, and I paired it with a poem I had written about the partition of India and Pakistan. The song’s message is that you can keep fighting amongst yourselves, but really the world surpasses you. It’s up to us to unite and make a better life for ourselves.”