

# String Theory

In conversation, Abi Natesh and Susheela Raman unpack intimacy, rebellion, and the radical joy of letting music move where it wants.

By UPASANADAS



The KulfiGirls opening for The Wonder Years at Underground Arts in Philadelphia

PHOTO CREDIT: GABRIELLE RAVET

As Abi Natesh stepped onto the stage and the strains of her Saraswati veena boomed through the stadium, the crowd went wild. Last year, Philadelphia had emptied out on that October night to reminisce The Wonder Years, but they screamed for the opening alt-pop veena rock of the KulfiGirls. Within three years of jamming out with bassist Steph Bruning, drummer Ade Ogunleye, and guitarist and her partner in life Joan Gizzio, Natesh is ready for the big stage, unwilling to collaborate with anyone who sees her veena as a gimmick.

It's a similar energy we heard in the strains of *Ye Mera Deewanapan Hai* as the credits rolled in Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006). When Susheela Raman initially started amalgamating Carnatic and South Indian classical music or sacred melodies with music from other regions, to come up with something radiant, she wasn't exactly pleasing culture gatekeepers, even as she was nominated for the Mercury Prize in 2001. Ahead of Raman's performance in London, she and Natesh get on a call to talk about Carnatic music influencing their performance and the joys of being independent musicians.

**Abi Natesh:** When did you first start getting into music? My grandmother would come from Chennai for months at a time to help raise me and my elder sister, and she listened to so much Carnatic music. I feel she passed that down to me, and one summer I went to Chennai I proclaimed I wanted to learn an instrument. I saw there was a veena in the house—so I picked it up.

**Susheela Raman:** My earliest memories of music are of my mum listening to MS Subbulakshmi. My dad was more eclectic, collecting recordings of popular film soundtracks including Tamil, Hindi, and English films. He had a beautiful voice singing Beatles songs, but mum was firm in wanting to keep her Tamil culture alive. I learnt the rudiments of Tamil music from her.

**AN:** I was in choir, but I started taking Carnatic singing lessons very young—I wasn't amazing, to be honest!



Susheela Raman

**SR:** I was also in choir when we moved back to Sydney, and my teachers were a bit confused as to why I kept sliding up to the notes while singing *Country Roads*! My Carnatic training would last till I was about 14—which is when I became rebellious and had no wish to conform to any kind of tradition. I was also starting to discover some trailblazing Black American singers like Nina Simone and Aretha Franklin, and I realised other worlds were possible.

**AN:** I felt that with the veena—and stopped playing throughout college. It became a burden to carry an instrument of tradition and going to class every single week. I was deep into scene music and listening to some terrible male-centric bands. I picked it up again when I was just messing around doing covers of rock songs. I met my partner in 2020 and we started writing music. That's when I thought I should really bring



# VOICES

back the veena as it's a part of me—a way for me to be heard without singing.

**SR:** I actually had my own cover bands in Sydney in my early twenties—there was a thriving market for that, and I had five concerts every week. Then I discovered a trilogy of records that Sheela Chandra made, which naturally blended ideas from Indian classical with English folk—even had echoes of The Beatles. It began trying my own experiments combining Sanskrit chanting with drum and bass—and English lyrics. Around this time, I also discovered the music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan which had an energy that was stronger than the kind of rock and soul music I was playing. He'd released records on Real World Records, so when I came back to England at 24, I decided to pay them a visit. They gave me a record; Sam (Mills) had made for them with Paban Das Baul called *Real Sugar* which I fell in love with.

**AN:** Both of us make music with our partners, essentially! Joan and I are very intertwined when it comes to making music. I'll describe a mood that I want to write about and we'll play around. It can be

very intimate as when I'm writing lyrics, I have to explain all the personal stuff that I'm thinking about—it brings down a lot of boundaries.

**SR:** If you're together with someone you aren't always on best behaviour, but we also complement each other—he's great with chord as I am with melody. Collaborating with other musicians I always think about it as making space for each other. It's about exchanging energies and the moments you create together.

**AN:** Your music is very vulnerable that way. But this creative exchange makes sense as I started listening to more punk because of our drummer Ade (Ogunleye) who is big into the punk scene and drums very hard—we never thought we'd do harder songs. That vulnerability is also where I engineer the veena into my music to make it sit naturally. I don't even think about it as particularly Carnatic as I play it a little rough for the rock edge.

**SR:** Neither do I think of my own musical identity as only defined by a connection with South Indian classical or rock—which are there but music moves where it wants. It's about following your energy,



Natesh at Sweet Juice Fest in Philadelphia

PHOTO CREDIT: UV LUCAS



Video still of Raman from a show at St James's Church, Piccadilly, London, 2025

intuition and curiosity and letting music play with you. After the release of our first album *Salt Rain* in 2001, I followed the sound of some records from the '70s Ethiopia to South India, learning Tevaram hymns from an old dreadlocked sadhu in Chennai along with other forms of non-Brahmanical music, like the music of the Vellalar caste which includes more ecstatic and trance music. That kind of psychic intensity in music appeals to me.

**AN:** I think when you were initially performing, people were incensed about you not singing classical the way it "should" be sung and the way you performed?

**SR:** When identity becomes inflexible, it drains all spontaneity and leaves a husk. I can't imagine setting out to conform to a genre. If you have a musical ear, you hear all kinds of sounds which trigger your imagination and you collaborate with them in your mind. Music associated with trance and ritual takes you to a deep place and I found open-minded people happy to explore—it was a bit of madness what I did then. I don't think people who are violent about their beliefs have any right to control other people's spiritual expression. I don't give a damn about how people perceive me—you have to focus on who is actually listening. We're working on William Blake's poems—translating them into Hindustani and Malayalam—now as an extension of our work with sacred and esoteric traditions. He too worked in an era when the government was clamping down on ideas.

**AN:** It's also why I don't envision us touring at the moment because of what's happening in the US (days after we spoke, ICE was supposed to march into Philadelphia). It's not safe at this point. We'll probably be independent for a long time—without the pressure

of always performing or having something to record. My brain doesn't work that way—when we wrote *Divinity*, inspiration arrived because I was unemployed!

**SR:** I don't really work with the mainstream music industry—whatever it is—these days. If you're being told what to play, that can be difficult. If you're an artist, you just make the best work you can at a given moment. When you're aware of having tried to please everyone, that's when criticism can hurt as it reminds you that you're annoyed with yourself.

**AN:** Yeah, like I am very proud of this album as it's a lot easier for me to listen back. I'm proud of it, I think! We're doing an acoustic vinyl in the summer. I don't think my Tamil grammar is absolutely accurate and I'm trying to force myself to think in Tamil now as I'm losing that connection to my language since my parents are the only ones who speak to me in Tamil—and I don't live with them—they don't appreciate me being openly queer in my music. Our first album *Divinity* felt like a second puberty almost and I used Tamil in our song *Bite* where I thought it'd be funny to write something threatening for the Indian aunties judging me from afar (laughs).

**SR:** As I grew up in London, I never really considered Tamil to be my language. Although I spoke Tamil with my parents, I didn't learn to write in Tamil then. As a rebellious teen, singing anything Carnatic or Tamil seemed ridiculous—but it came back to me when Sam and I were developing *Salt Rain* and one day I dreamt of a composition by Tyagaraja called *O Rama* that just opened a door—but I was entering it from a different perspective. It felt right. I went ahead and recorded other Carnatic music for the album without worrying about how it was going to be received. ■

PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREW CATLIN