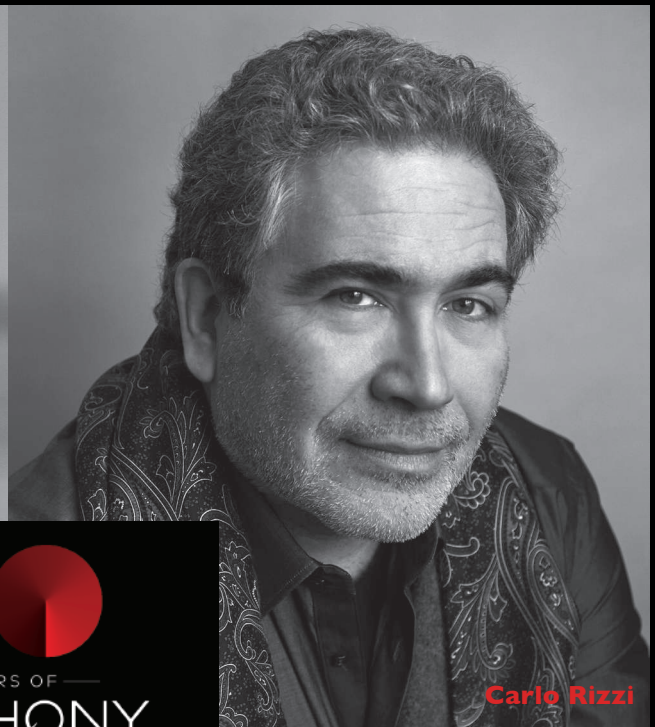


ON Stage[®]

VOLUME 15 • ISSUE 7



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Davide Giusti



The KM Sufi Ensemble will present time-honoured *qawwalis* and popular Sufi songs

Experiments in Devotion

From vocalist Salman Ali's familial oneness with Sufi compositions to the universality of the music of KM Sufi Ensemble at A. R. Rahman's conservatory, and filmmakers Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar's ode to the living-breathing musical traditions of Kachchh, *Sama'a: The Mystic Ecstasy*, celebrates the liberating openness of Sufi music and philosophy.

By Akshaya Pillai

There's a kind of love you learn early. The one that hinges on desire and being desired. It is impatient. It wants proof. It keeps checking itself in the mirror of another person's face. *Ishq-e-Majazi*, the Sufis call it. And then there's *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* which happens when that same feeling soars higher and points elsewhere, towards God, or peace, or whatever name you can live with. Jyoti Nair Belliappa, Head of Preparatory Programmes at A. R. Rahman's KM Music Conservatory, tries explaining the difference over a phone call serenaded by musicians rehearsing in the

backdrop for the upcoming edition of *Sama'a*, the NCPA's annual festival of Sufi music. "At some point even the love song reminds you of and connects you to your guru or your God. The love of man transforms into the love of God. It comes with maturity, when you start throwing away the extra shackles you have around you," she says.

"Love and God are synonymous," Belliappa adds, reminding one of Rumi, who is often lifted out of his own poems and carried around like a billboard for being in love. We clip lines, print them on mugs and call it wisdom, forgetting that he was writing to move the

body as much as the heart. His verses turn towards the world and towards God at the same time.

Sama'a has, across its editions, brought together *qawwalis*, ghazals and regional folk traditions shaped by Sufi thought, placing them in dialogue within the NCPA's concert halls. The programming resists the tendency to distil Sufi music into a single religion or mood. It is precisely this openness that makes space for a group like The KM Sufi Ensemble, whose work moves across lineages, classical and contemporary, devotional and pedagogical.

Belliappa explains how the ensemble at KM Conservatory was formed. "When we moved to the new building [in Chennai] in 2014, our director, Fathima Rafiq, Mr. Rahman's sister, suggested that we start a Sufi *qawwali* programme, open to anyone studying with us who could sing well or play an instrument. It began as something of an offering." The *qawwali* room, located opposite the entrance, lends a sacredness to the space. It elevates study into a form of devotion. In this room, music moves easily between Kabir, Sai Baba and Sufi saints across regions. "We don't subscribe to Sufism as only Islamic," she says. "It's about peace within and without."

The ensemble's repertoire is vast; 35 songs, sometimes more. Some are devotional, some secular. They sing Rahman's Bollywood Sufi tracks and have their own originals written by Munna Shaokath Ali, who brings his expertise in Hindustani classical music and *qawwali* to the conservatory. The songs are customised depending on the audience. The music circulates beyond the conservatory, too. One day, Belliappa recalls, someone turned on the television and a *dargah* in Mumbai was playing their Sufi music. The compositions travel and still retain their reverence. The ensemble is pan-Indian. Students come from every corner, every belief. Music is first dedicated to God (*hamd*), then to Prophet Muhammad (*naat*), and next to the *khwajas*, sages and saints (*manqabat*), Belliappa explains.

When the *qawwal* sings a poem from the 13th century, does time dwell in the past, present or somewhere in between? Does the 13th century suddenly become

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now or has the distinction always been less stable than we pretended? Sufi music is a kind of time travel. And isn't repetition of a song or its echo across centuries, in the end, a way of asking time to slow down or step aside?

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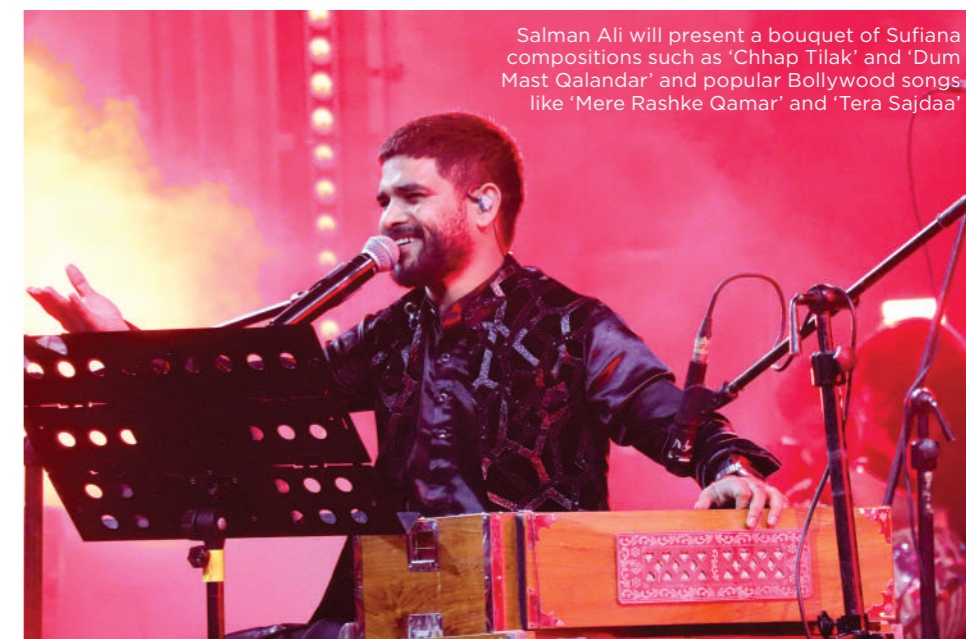
Being a singer is a form of devotion in itself. Years of rehearsal, travel and listening shape the body into an instrument of memory and attention. Salman Ali brings with him the precision

of someone who has spent years understanding how sound can inhabit one's being. He was born in Haryana into a family where music is both livelihood and inheritance, passed down through generations. He began performing publicly on reality television, winning *Indian Idol* and moved into film, into the studio, carrying Sufiana songs along with him.

The pain of separation from the Creator, the longing embedded in Sufi lyrics, is something that Ali translates into contemporary idioms. 'Chhap Tilak', 'Dum Mast Qalandar', even the Bollywood numbers he chooses are all acts of bridging the seen and unseen. "Even a ghazal can be sung as a Sufi song, any song can be transformed into a Sufi song. It all depends on the presentation, really," he says. "These days, old things are making a comeback. Perhaps because people are searching for something that lasts. I'm happy that this is the trend, I'm just allowing my music to flow with it."

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The first time Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar arrived in Kachchh in 2008, it was the sound of music



Salman Ali will present a bouquet of Sufiana compositions such as 'Chhap Tilak' and 'Dum Mast Qalandar' and popular Bollywood songs like 'Mere Rashke Qamar' and 'Tera Sajdaa'



The third of a trilogy of documentaries, *Jhini Bini Chadariya* (A Delicate Weave) traces musical traditions across Kachchh in Gujarat

on a community radio project that drew them in. They had no idea it would become a nine-year engagement, or that a single film would grow into a trilogy documenting the music of pastoral communities across the region. "Our initial encounters with the people and the space inspired us to explore the sociocultural fabric that makes Kachchh an island of peace in a state marked by fault lines," Monteiro recalls. The musicians in this trilogy are not professional artistes in the modern sense, which is to say they did not select this as a vocation. Their families have practised music for generations, the way some families cook or pray together.

The final film, *Jhini Bini Chadariya*, takes its name from a metaphor offered by Naranbhai, a Dalit carpet weaver and community archivist in Bhujodi. He explained that the *bhajans* of Kabir, sung every night by a group of young men, were like a finely woven cloth. Jayasankar says, "It seemed apt to describe both the delicate weave and the fragile yet robust traditions, committed to the project of what I call 'breaking down the walls'."

The walls he speaks of are physical and social, the divisions of caste, religion and history. The musicians in this quaint town have other professions. They are weavers, pastoralists, members of communities whose work is rooted in the everyday. Yet their devotion to learning, performing and passing on these songs is exacting. "Many of them saw the film as a way of taking their work to a wider audience and felt that this would perhaps help them to get better recognition," Monteiro explains. Recording and filming goes beyond documentation and becomes a sort of

The first time Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar arrived in Kachchh in 2008, it was the sound of music on a community radio project that drew them in. They had no idea it would become a nine-year engagement, or that a single film would grow into a trilogy documenting the music of pastoral communities across the region.

ensuring that oral traditions survive. Some traditions are robust, others endangered, but the intervention provides both a framework and incentive. "There are some music forms that require years of practice, and if there are few spaces for musicians to play and earn a livelihood, there is little incentive for younger people to devote time and energy to learning," Monteiro explains. The films do not shy away from this precariousness; they are attentive to the politics, economics and social dynamics that shape what survives and what fades.

At its core, *Jhini Bini Chadariya* is about continuity and care. The music of Kabir and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is a vessel for values that might otherwise be overlooked: compassion, coexistence and interdependence. Monteiro and Jayasankar are clear-eyed about their role: "We regard the role of documentation as crucial, a documentation that moves away from 'museumising' these traditions and focuses on understanding them in the context of the everyday lives of their practitioners." What is beautiful is how the camera does not aestheticise. It observes hands lifted in song, the way a foot taps a rhythm against dusty earth, the small smiles exchanged between teacher and pupil and the

validation, a recognition that their tradition matters, that their labour is meaningful. The women of Lakhpat (another town in Kachchh), whose music subverts local gender norms, took charge of the filming process, suggesting where to be documented, how to move and when to sing. "They really enjoyed the filming, and so did we," Monteiro says. "Their guidance on what we should document made the process very smooth and participatory."

Along with the songs, the trilogy captures context. Camel bells in the distance, the churning of buttermilk, the quiet expanse of the Rann, birdsong at dawn; all of these are part of the soundscape. "All our music has been recorded on location, not in a studio space; hence these everyday sounds often meld with the music, giving it a grounded feel," Jayasankar notes. Music, in Kachchh, is inseparable from the landscape and the labour of daily life.

Through the Sur Shala initiative of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (a grassroots organisation pioneered by social activist Sushma Iyengar in 1989), younger musicians are paired with elders,

unspoken acknowledgment of a shared world.

For centuries, Sufi music belonged to people on the move; migrants, craftspeople, singers who carried their repertoire the way you would your mother tongue. It lived in courtyards, on roadsides, in rooms where the walls learned the songs by heart. Now it fills concert halls with velvet seats and programmes printed on heavy paper. But the song doesn't care where it's sung. A 15th-century poem about longing sounds the same whether you're sitting on the floor during a village *mehfil* or in row M of a concert hall. If a song has survived this long by travelling across borders, languages, centuries, why would it stop

now? The music keeps circling back. Look at it all; the tanpura, the microphone, the hands clapping in one universal rhythm under stage lights. It is all endless. ■

Sama'a: *The Mystic Ecstasy, Festival of Sufi Music*, will be presented from 6th to 8th February at the NCPA. *A Delicate Weave* (Jhini Bini Chadariya), a film by Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar, will be screened on 6th February at the Experimental Theatre. *Sufiana* compositions by KM Sufi Ensemble will be presented on 7th February at the Tata Theatre. *Sufiana* songs by Salman Ali will be presented on 8th February at the Tata Theatre.

The Birth of the Qawwali

Writer, scholar and translator Rana Safvi, in her book *In Search of the Divine: Living Histories of Sufism in India*, examines the roots of the mystical practice in the country. In the excerpt below, she discusses the histories and mythologies that surround the inception of the *qawwali*, a form of devotional singing that originated in Sufi shrines but today, enjoys mainstream popularity all over the world.

It was in the *dargah* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya that the *qawwali* as we know it today was developed by Hazrat Amir Khusrau, who is credited with composing the first-ever *qawwali*. It is said that the credit goes to him for creating a soulful fusion of Turkish, Arabic and Persian influences with north Indian Hindustani music traditions. The traditional *qawwali* is based on Indian ragas.

There are two versions of the story of how the first *qawwali* was composed. Here I discuss both, with the disclaimer that this is all hearsay passed down through generations and no documentary evidence regarding the validity of either could be found.

According to the first version, which I heard at the *dargah* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, once Hazrat Amir Khusrau was at the *khanqah* [Sufi monastery] of the famous Chishti saint Hazrat

Bu Ali Shah Qalandar in Panipat. The latter asked him to sing something in praise of the Amir-ul-Momineen (leader of men), Hazrat Ali. Hazrat Amir Khusrau

obeyed Hazrat Bu Qalandar and set Rasul-e-Khuda's *qaul* to music. '*Qaul*' literally means 'a saying' and it refers to the sayings of the Prophet.

The most popular *qaul* of the Prophet is:

*Man kunto maula,
Fa haza Ali-un maula.*
[Whoever accepts me as a *maula* (master),
Ali is his master too.]

It was set to music by the genius Amir Khusrau, who did it on the spot. To give body and soul to the music and help induce a trance, he added the meaningless mystic chants of the famous *tarana* (a form explained later on in the chapter):

*Dara dil-e-dara dil-e-dar-e-daani
Hum tum tanana nana, nana nana ray
Yalali yalali yala, yala ray.*

