

# Poetic license

After two decades of composing and performing her specific brand of multiversal music, Lahore-origin, Brooklyn-based, Grammy-nominated artist Arooj Aftab is at last in heavy rotation  
By NIDHI GUPTA

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY: AMANDA HATFIELD; ALBUM COVERS: BIRD UNDER WATER; ART BY ANUM AWAN AND YIKUN LIANG; SIREN ISLANDS; ARTWORK: MISS ROCKAWAY; COURTESY OF SWOON STUDIO

**A**rooj Aftab is not a fashion person, but she definitely has a stage look: Dark colours, sherwani jacket, statement shoes. “It’s been working well for me so far, but I guess it’s in need of an upgrade,” she says. “It can be difficult, you know. When you ask designers to make something androgynous for you to wear on stage, they run away screaming. Like, what did I say?”

“I can’t go on stage in a lehenga or a saree,” she continues, one eye on her cat, which I can’t see because Aftab’s Zoom window has a virtual filter blacking out her background. This December evening, she sits in a dimly lit room in Brooklyn, wearing a black sweatshirt, accessorised minimally with thick black framed glasses and a silver link chain necklace. This combination of aesthetic choices has the unintended effect of making it seem like her face is floating in a void, a voice speaking from some other dimension. “Roopa Mahadevan can wear a saree because she’s a badass Carnatic vocalist. I’m not a desi artist. I’m a New York diaspora artist.”

“But then, working with designers and stylists is the inevitable path for someone who’s blowing up, right?” Aftab says wryly. It’s been a few weeks since the 35-year-old artist learned that she’d scored two Grammy nominations, in the Best Global Performance (for the utterly visceral, evocative track “Mohabbat” from her third album *Vulture Prince*) and the Best New Artist categories.

Aftab was in Karachi to record her first ever Coke Studio session on the day she got the ‘tune in’ email from The Recording Academy. She felt sick. “I told my manager on the ground that we need to clear our calendars for that evening. Something might happen, nothing might happen — either way, I was going to need a stiff whisky.”

The Best New Artist nom took everyone by surprise. It’s a significantly more mainstream category usually dominated by the world’s biggest rising pop stars. And yet, here Aftab was — a Berklee-grad vocalist and composer with roots in Lahore whose post-genre music is inspired by centuries of poets before her, channeling a wide variety of influences, including jazz, ambient, Sufi music — now in the same league



Art work for Arooj Aftab’s first two albums

as “multi-million dollar artists” like Olivia Rodrigo and FINNEAS. This had never happened before at the Grammys for a musician of South Asian descent.

“The Academy has listened to some very hard feedback over the past five years, especially from musicians in the jazz, folk, indie, American music scenes: That there are people making good music and who are actually quite popular, but they can’t really compete with these multi-million dollar artists in the top four positions.”

Aftab is no stranger to accolades, but the Grammy nominations have had a huge impact. Her social media following has spiked. She’s done her first NPR Tiny Desk Concert. She’s signed to the legendary label Verve, which once repped Nina Simone and now features bright young jazz-oriented artists like Jacob Collier.

And while she’s still on edge, now Aftab is on to thinking about the shows, the campaign, the all-consuming stress of what she’ll wear — but also about composing new music, “investigating” new instruments to bring into her crazy world. Getting on with it.

“Actually, it’s not even a competition,” Aftab adds as an afterthought. “It’s just about different kinds of tracks that deserve recognition equally.”

**There exist over 300** covers of Leonard Cohen’s 1984 track “Hallelujah”. Chances are, you probably first heard the Rufus Wainwright version in *Shrek*, back in 2001. Arooj Aftab discovered this mystical canticle some years earlier, by way of Canadian pop star Jeff Buckley’s 1994 rendition.

Aftab’s own cover — on which her voice shimmers over some simple but accomplished acoustic guitar

work — was recorded in 1999, as she transitioned from being an avid listener to starting to play. This was before YouTube, “a time when we didn’t really know how to use the Internet,” she says. “And in not knowing even just the power of the internet, really, I sent [the “Hallelujah” cover] to friends, and they sent it to friends and it became like a viral chain.”

Aftab grew up in ‘90s Lahore, in an environment steeped in music, art and poetry. “Pre-9/11 Lahore was such a romantic old city, studded with red brick *imarat*, where people just loved music and culture and there were evenings of *shayari*,” Aftab trails off wistfully. “It really evoked so much potential for dreaming and ideas and for getting lost in them.”

Her parents and their inner circle, “the true ‘70s Progressive kind”, held regular listening parties, where they seriously debated, critiqued and unearthed rare recordings and shared bootleg cassettes of everyone from Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to Abida Parveen to Madam Noor Jahan.

At the same time, a teenage Aftab was hungrily consuming all the music she could access: The Spice Girls, Hariharan, Usha Uthup, Mariah Carey. Her high-school band, The Drumsticks, once opened for Strings, Pakistan’s biggest rock duo of their time. “All the other guys in my band are doctors today,” she says, “but I knew then, standing on that stage, that this was going to be it for me.”

In 2005 (and a post-9/11 universe) Aftab had arrived in Boston — the first brown person at Berklee, by her own estimation. “It was like all the chief music nerds from every high school in the world had been assembled,” she laughs. Music, specifically jazz, became life uninterrupted, ▶



consuming her from class to the seedy dive clubs she hung out at in the evenings.

By the end of the decade, Aftab moved to New York, which she calls a utopia of sorts. She quickly built her own ensemble, and began to perform. Today, she cringes at the thought of those early songs, like “Bolo Na”, but does admit her work got the city’s art circles to sit up and take notice almost instantly.

Rapper Himanshu Suri aka Heems tells me that he first saw Arooj Aftab perform in Bed-Stuy with mutual friends in New York about six years ago. Soon enough he’d roped her in to perform alongside jazz superstar Vijay Iyer.

“There’s a way Urdu and Punjabi poetry can tug at my heartstrings,” says Heems, “activating some dormant sense of pain or longing in my DNA. Arooj’s voice channels that for me. I remember playing her music for my father years ago, a fan of poetry himself. It bridged our worlds of musical interests, falling somewhere in the middle.”

“Arooj and I make music together often,” Vijay Iyer says. “Whenever we do, very little needs to be said in advance. She has this incredible musical intuition that makes everything feel right. It’s like the music is being channeled from somewhere else.”

Together, they have an album ready for release this year. Aftab’s Grammy noms remind Iyer of Esperanza Spalding’s shock win (over Justin Bieber) in the same category in 2011. “Her win was well deserved, an incursion into the mainstream from what might have been viewed as the musical margins. I think Arooj’s nomination is a tribute to her vision and determination, her refusal to be pigeonholed as an “ethnic” artist, and also the shifting identities and aesthetics of America’s younger generations in particular.”

“New Yorkers know stuff,” Aftab says, when I ask if her American audience quite understood what she was doing. “It’s rarely ever that they’re seeing something for the first time and are baffled by it. They have a sense of intrigue, they know how to absorb new things, and recognise what’s good.”

Still, Aftab is a little bemused by the near-universal and endless euphoria around *Vulture Prince* since it was released in April last year. “It’s hard to say what exactly did it for so many people at such a scale, for this self-funded indie-label album to be on all these best-of lists, and for “Mohabbat” to be among six top songs for *Time* magazine in the summer, where the other artists are, like, Lil Nas X and Cardi B!”

Aftab and band toured with *Vulture Prince*, playing in a few American and European cities when the pandemic eased up a bit last year. They were surprised to see cheers go up from the crowd the moment Maeve Gilchrist would pluck the first notes on her harp for any song. “They knew our music intimately before they came to our shows!” Aftab laughs. “We felt like rock stars – and that was not normal for a jazz band.”

The harp, accompanied by other nylon string instruments, is the warm, glowing nucleus of these ghazal-inspired songs. “It’s like a guitar but also something of a deconstructed piano and I love that about it,” says Aftab. “But there’s people who play the harp and they’re so annoying, like, it’s so “beautiful” and “angelic”,” she rolls her eyes. “In my crazy mind, it has so much potential.”

*Vulture Prince* is made up of seven songs bleeding with pain, loss and the unbearable poignancy of these things in equal measure. “It’s about the disappointment that you feel from how the world is, you know?”

Like in “Inayaat”, that line “*kuch toh duniya ki Inayaat ne dil tod diya*”: that was kind of my anchor. There’s beauty and there’s breakage and the world is relentless.”

“It explores these dark but sweet themes,” of romance, the night, the moon, the lover, who they are to you. It is, without a doubt, coloured by the grief of losing her brother and a close friend back home. “It’s also about the grind,” she says, refusing to dwell on that difficult time. “Us as a young generation not being able to do our day jobs and save and buy property: Like, what the fuck do we do?”

When she began working on *Vulture Prince*, Aftab wanted to “escape” the neo-Sufi tag that stuck with her first two albums, *Bird Under Water* (2014) and *Siren Islands* (2018); to be recognised as a more mainstream artist with a more competitive record. “I wanted to lean a little bit towards pop, which is horrifying to say now,” she laughs. “I wanted people to hear that it’s also American folk and minimal and jazz and semi-classical. Like, do not play this in your yoga studio!”

The word ‘cover’ bothers her. “These songs are not re-interpretations of old ghazals, but new compositions of old poetry.”

“When there’s a jazz standard that Ella [Fitzgerald] sang, that Billie [Holiday] sang, that Alicia Keys sings: no one is calling these covers of each other. When Mehdi Hassan sings a Farida Khanum number, he’s not ‘covering’ it. It’s his own. I feel like we need to start giving artistic credit where it is due.”

Aftab’s “Suroor” is doused with a heady cocktail of string arrangements that a less avant garde producer may not think to put together; and the few lines she extracts from the original qawwali by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan are more a jumping off point to dive into something wholly new.

“I’ve spent a lot of time trying to create music that is about my personal experience as an artist over the last two decades,” Aftab says. “Coming from a South Asian background, having a love for semi-classical vocal styles and melodies that we grew up with as if they were furniture. Having studied jazz so hardcore. Having been around musicians of the world. Having lived in New York. Having a very experimental, explorative nature. Loving American minimalist composers like John Cage. Listening to so much stuff, and drawing from so many different places and having it translate...”

“When *Vulture Prince* was done, even before it was out, I was really proud of it,” she says, a shadow of a quiver in her voice. “This thing that I’ve wanted to do has just started to happen here.” ❖