

Shaya Ramanan: How an up-and-coming artist rocks Boston's music scene

By Erin Renzi

As R&B singer-songwriter Shaya Ramanan prepared for her performance at The Jungle in Somerville, she didn't expect anyone to show up. The concert took place on Dec. 2, 2021: a freezing night during a COVID-19 positive case surge.

To her surprise, Ramanan and the concert's other headliners, Gaetano Wixon, Sergio Music, and Skip2Dip — the four refer to themselves as the Inner Circle — sold out the show and it went over capacity. With approximately 200 audience members, the performance marked the biggest show held recently at The Jungle and the venue's owners allowed the performers to invite extra people inside.

For Wixon, Ramanan's manager and musical engineer, the engagement of the crowd made the concert surreal. The scene was reminiscent of the concert thrill experienced during pre-COVID times. "The crowd was amazing," Wixon said. "They were literally singing along to songs... we would say something, and the crowd would react back."

The pandemic presents challenges for up-and-coming music artists, but Ramanan, a Boston native, refuses to let the pandemic interfere with her drive to create. She produced her first song, "ToxXic" in April of 2020 with GarageBand to create a beat, and then sang over it. She loved the process of recording her music and released her EP *Universe* on Jan. 21, 2022.

“*Universe* came from a place of spirituality and my spiritual journey this past year in 2021,” Ramanan said. “There’s a lot of references to that on the album.”

Ramanan wrote the first song for *Universe* in January of 2021 and she and Wixon produced the final song in August. The creative process differed from “ToxXxic”.

Ramanan recorded most of her vocals at home and she and Wixon handled the sound production and mixing at One Entertainment Recording Studio, in Everett, Massachusetts.

“The first song [ToxXxic] was very experimental, I was still figuring out how to produce and what I was kind of doing with my music,” Ramanan explained. “I feel like with this album, I had already figured out my sound and the type of music that I make as an artist.”

In conjunction with *Universe*, Ramanan released a visualizer on Feb. 8, 2022. Listeners can watch an abstract visual representation of the album on YouTube while listening to each track.

Ramanan’s parents didn’t allow her to listen to the radio until fifth grade, but pop artists like Brittany Spears, Mariah Carey, and Ariana Grande inspired her. Today, R&B and Indie artists influence her music, including Alina Baraz, Tame Impala, and Jhené Aiko, who people often mistake Ramanan’s sound for.

“Everybody that listens to her thinks she sounds just like Jene Aiko,” Wixon said. “But at the same time, her message is different.”

Even though Ramanan started recording her songs less than two years ago, music influenced her identity from a young age. At three years old, Ramanan’s mom taught her to play the piano. In grade school, she picked up the clarinet and flute, and then in high school, Ramanan said she wanted to try everything: she learned to play the guitar, drums, and saxophone.

Ramanan also uses instruments to connect with her culture. “I’m Sri Lankan, so I also play a few Eastern instruments,” she said. “I started out with a veena – it’s kind of like a sitar. I played that for about 13 years.”

When Ramanan enrolled at Boston University in 2015, she found it difficult to pursue playing instruments, due to her small dorm room. She still played guitar for stress relief and kept up with piano but fueled her passion for music by delving into BU’s acapella scene her freshman year. In her four years with the Bostones, an acapella group at BU, she served as the group's music director and arranger of music. Ramanan attributes the group to giving her the building blocks for becoming an independent artist years later.

Mohamed Ibrahim, a member of the Bostones since the spring of 2018, performed alongside Ramanan during her last year in the acapella group. During the spring 2019

concert, the group performed “Breathin” by Ariana Grande. During Ramanan’s solo, Ibrahim recalls the entire audience on their feet and clapping.

“I feel like that was the first time she was able to just get that spotlight by herself to sing something that she enjoys,” he said.

Not only did Ramanan prove to be a talented musical asset for the Bostones, but she brought the group together and helped foster a sense of community. Each year, members of the Bostones go on a retreat to bond and get to know one another better.

“She [Ramanan] made it her mission to get everyone there to have a good time,” Ibrahim explains. “She wants to make sure everyone feels included and loved, and I guess just feel good about themselves. She hyped everyone up — she’s very good at doing that.

In addition to her musical career, Ramanan participates in a nurse practitioner program at Massachusetts General Hospital and interns at a clinic twice a week. With all the hours Ramanan dedicates to her studies and her music career, she said it feels like working two full-time jobs.

“I’ll do my schoolwork and then I’ll go do something music-related, either filming content or writing or producing or searching for beats online,” Ramanan said. “I kind of try to split the time 50-50.”

In her limited downtime, Ramanan focuses on self-care and her physical health. She loves working out at the gym, hiking and meal prepping healthy dinners. “It's really important to take care of yourself in those little moments throughout your day,” she said.

With graduation from the nurse practitioner program in May, Ramanan spends time searching for nursing jobs and entertains the possibility of relocation for work. However, her musical endeavors remain a priority. She wants to host an album release party for *Universe* and the Inner Circle plans to perform a show with over 200 people in attendance. Wixon expects the concert to take place in either Malden or Revere, Massachusetts.

Ramanan and Wixon recorded a song called “Poison” together and Wixon plans to drop it on March 22 to promote his upcoming album. She helped create the melody at the end of the track. “I love the song –the song’s fire,” Wixon said. “Me and Shaya killed it.”

Ramanan said that in the music industry, an artist becomes their own cheerleader, but Wixon seems like her biggest fan. He envisions Ramanan receiving a nomination at the New England Music Awards and the Boston Music Awards this year, where she received a nomination for R&B Artist of the Year in 2021.

Wixon believes Ramanan’s success thus far only marks the beginning of a legendary career in the music industry. “I see her in the next couple of years just living the dream, to be honest, maybe even getting a Grammy.”

