

## Interview: Priya Ragu

**Priya Ragu's unique fusion of Western R&B influences tinged with South Asian flair has seen her craft feel-good anthems such as *Good Love 2.0* and *Chicken Lemon Rice* alongside her brother, producer Japhna Gold. Gemma Cockrell caught up with Ragu in the build-up to her debut mixtape *damnshestamil*.**

As I speak to Ragu, she's residing in London, but has plans to return to her home country of Switzerland soon. "There's a music scene in Switzerland, it's not big but there are lots of amazing up-and-coming artists. If you sing in Swiss-German, you have more of a fanbase in Switzerland than if you sing in English. In Switzerland, there's only a small market for me," she explains. "Especially when it comes to soul and R&B music, you never see someone make it happen as a woman of colour internationally out of Switzerland."

Despite this, Ragu remains connected with and inspired by her Tamil heritage. "It's mostly Tamil folk music that influenced my sound," she explains. She acknowledges that there's not enough Tamil representation in the mainstream, but predicts positive change in the future. "It was M.I.A. who paved the path. There aren't many of us doing this; there should be more. People are ready to listen to other languages in music – you can hear it with Rosalía when she sings in Spanish. I feel like nowadays, we connect with music differently."

At the start of Ragu's career, it was actually her brother's idea to incorporate Tamil sounds into her music. "That was his idea," she admits. "When we created our first song *Leaf High*, we had different ideas musically, and there was a big clash. But then, we did our second song *Lighthouse*, and I said to him 'I'm just going to trust you'. I let go of everything I was holding onto so tightly, and he gained confidence. Then, he flipped the beat and now we have our own sound of music."

Japhna has produced every track in Ragu's discography thus far. "It's the best," she enthuses. "It's nice to see that not only am I taking this path, but also my brother is too. I wouldn't be doing this without him. I might be the face of everything, but musically it's 50/50. We speak the same language when it comes to music, and being able to create music together is spiritual in a way. It comes so easily, and it's exciting when we're in the studio together – it's like we're little kids! I think it's the best thing ever. If you asked me what the highlight of my career is, this would be the highlight."

Inevitably, their creative partnership often leads to comparison with pop's biggest sibling duo, Billie Eilish and FINNEAS. Ragu explains that these comparisons are simply because "they're also a bro-sis duo, and there aren't many bro-sis duos making music together nowadays. There should be way more! But it's not like they're comparing us musically, it's just the bond between siblings creating art together. It's very inspiring to see Billie doing that with her brother."

Ragu's father is also musical, but at first, he struggled to support her musical endeavours. "When it came to Western music, he was not supportive. There was lots of fear because he's very conservative. So, at first, he wasn't supportive, and neither was my mother. But they are very supportive now!" she laughs. "My dad heard *Lighthouse*, and said 'This song is going places!' – and this was before I even got signed."

Ragu took further inspiration from Western music in order to draw an eclectic range of influences into her sound. In particular, she states "The Fugees, Lauryn Hill, Alicia Keys, India Arie, The Beatles, Stevie Wonder, and Donny Hathaway" as key influences. Rather than conforming to a pre-existing genre, she labels her sound "Ragu Wavy," explaining that "it's difficult to put your music into one genre, because you never know what you're going to create. I'm still exploring."

Even though she's mastered her craft, she has only been releasing music since 2020. So, what was she doing before then? "In 2019, I released four songs on my own, but we took them down [when I signed to my label] because we wanted to release them to a bigger audience," she recalls. "But it's not like I've been creating music for a long time. It took a long time for me to decide that I wanted to do it. And once I decided, it just happened! It flowed very naturally and easily."

At the time I'm speaking to her, Ragu has recently announced her debut mixtape *damnshestamil*, set for release on 3<sup>rd</sup> September. "There's ten songs on the mixtape, all produced by Japhna. It's a pure, honest project, and I'm really proud of that. Expect the Ragu Wavy frequency when you listen to it! Hopefully it will uplift people, and heal people. That's the main goal of music, you want to transform something within people's hearts."

I was curious to know whether the positive themes within her music thus far will be continued on her mixtape. "That will be my thing as a musician," she confirms. "Music is so powerful. People listen to music all the time to escape from wherever they are in the moment. If the music has a positive, uplifting message, it can give them hope and light at the end of the tunnel."

Ragu looks forward to performing the mixtape to a live audience, and she will have the opportunity to do so at her sold-out headline show at The Jazz Café in London on 23<sup>rd</sup> November. "I'm really looking forward to it, I have a special connection with The Jazz Café, because ten years ago I saw Odyssey there and, in that moment, I was thinking 'This place is magical, so many legends played here, is it possible that one day I could play here?' I had that thought for a second, and now it's happening."

**Gemma Cockrell**