

A Girl and Her Piano

Manisha Shahane is a singer-songwriter from Boston, USA and holds a master's degree from a prestigious business school too. Her debut CD, *'Peace in Progress'* highlights the jazz and folk-rock styles she has grown up with entwined with her Maharashtrian heritage. The sound is something unique.

Now as a full-time pianist of note, we delve into her vivid world and find out who Manisha Shahane really is.

So just who is Manisha Shahane?

Figuring that out as I go along – sister, daughter, friend, girlfriend, ex-girlfriend, and so on! So many things interest me. In particular, I long to see more equitable provision of public goods in this world (as in water, education, electricity, that kind of thing) – I was so influenced by the varying standards of living I witnessed in India and the U.S. as I was growing up. I thought I'd be doing some kind of work in development economics, research or even fieldwork, constantly moving from one place to another. I wouldn't have believed it if you'd said it would be so years ago, but now it seems that music will increasingly serve as the platform for those kinds of activities and I actually am currently blessed to be able to work part-time in the student data research and assessment office of an urban school in the Boston area, where I've been living in different neighborhoods for roughly five to seven years (so hard to believe!) depending on your counting skills.



I love to perform for people. Practice and studio work enable me to do that, so I definitely exhibit a strong element of entertainer, plus my stories indicate my desire to somehow connect with others. The artist side of me is not into gimmicks and I try to let my writing be guided by as pure an inspiration as possible.

What notable musicians have you worked with on this album.

Recorded in three Boston-area studios, one studio in Virginia, and mastered by Jonathan Wyner at M-Works, *'Peace In Progress'* includes appearances by notable musicians such as Blake Newman on acoustic bass (Jeff Robinson Trio), and Jerry Leake on tabla/percussion (Club D'elf, Ali Akbar Khan), guitarists Kevin Barry (Mary Chapin Carpenter) and Prasanna (Joe Lovano, Hari Prasad Chaurasia), plus

percussionist Ricardo Monzon (Myanna, Boston Pops). Producer Dan Cantor (Jim's Big Ego) of Notable Productions hops on the drums for a couple of tunes, adding texture to the alternating moods and time signatures inherent in the songs, as the album ranges from the simplicity of a vocal/tabla duet to the rich, deep sounds of the sordo (Brazilian drum), accompanied by an exospheric electric guitar. Matthew Taylor (drums), Raj Banerjee (guitar), Dominique Gagne (flute), my parents (voice/tabla), and even Mother Nature have also contributed to the project.

Describe your music style. What influences, if any, have come from India or your parents?

My live show is predominantly acoustic, during which I try to provide the audience some comic relief from



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the 'heavier' or emotional themes my work sometimes explores. As a singer-songwriter, I primarily accompany myself on piano, but don't be surprised if I bring out the guitar or frame drum, or sing a Blas Galindo arrangement of a Pablo Neruda poem a cappella. Rooted in folk and jazz, my original songs are predominantly Western in style, often colored by Indian influences. If I want to sing Indian songs, I'll usually perform them 'straight up,' just as I did when I was growing up. I feel the album's release frees me to return to the roots of my singing, heavily influenced by my parents' vinyl collection of Indian film songs from the 60s and 70s, North Indian classical music, and American musicals.

Do you regard yourself as a vocalist/pianist who is 'experimental' or are you more of a 'traditionalist'?

I am a singer at heart. My mother always sang around the house (and still does) and at local community events as I was growing up. She coached me for my first public appearance in the talent show at the primary school I attended. I sang 'My Favorite Things' from the Sound of Music in a saree. I was six. All I remember from being on stage was the big light shining in my eyes. The third grade girls won the prize for disco dancing. Oh well.

I am willing to experiment more with vocals and effects when doing sessions for other musicians whenever I am blessed with such an opportunity; however, I wanted my album – especially this first one – to be very acoustic. If I had it my way, it would have been even more acoustic perhaps than it is, relying primarily on the trio which is how I generally perform live; maybe my affinity for this type of 'sound' comes from growing up in an era in which I heard very little pure acoustic music.

In terms of playing piano, it came about because my father thought it

would be a good idea for me as a singer to be trained in at least one instrument. I initially practiced on a keyboard until my parents could see I was really interested and then at the age of 15, I was surprised with the gift of a piano for my birthday. I studied Western classical piano and sung in a chorus through high school, so in that way, you could say I am more 'traditionally' oriented, but I'd say that I'm more open to experimentation in terms of the shapes of the songs I write.

Is it easy to play any piano anywhere? Or is there an ideal environment that suits you best?

As my current preference is piano over keyboard (unless it is a digital 88-key one with weighted keys), often the ideal environment is difficult to come across in the performing world in which you can't count on the piano being in tune or otherwise in good condition. Also, many rooms with a piano are looking for someone to play or sing standards or provide background music.

I suppose the ideal environment for me is a relatively small and intimate venue where the focus is on the music, i.e., where there is a 'listening room' for the audience to hear shows and maybe sip on a beverage of some sort. A grand piano in good condition, some lights, but dim enough for me to interact with the audience.

How did the 'Peace In Progress' album come about?

Unplanned, just like the rain that introduces the album. It is not sampled. Not only did it rain in Virginia on the day that my father and I recorded Nachre Mora (which is a song about a peacock dancing in the mango grove in the rain), but it was raining on the afternoon we were mixing that very song up. Everything on the album is based on some type of 'real instrument,' so to speak, except for the synth we added to enhance the harmoni-

um's low drone on Nachre Mora.

I wanted high-quality production, but minimal editing of recorded tracks. I wanted the music to come across as live as possible, for example, most jazz discs are recorded live, with little editing and minimal effects. You can really hear the musicians playing.

Rooted in folk, jazz, classical, and Indian traditions, the just-released debut album is 45-minutes long and comes with an eight-page color insert with images, sketches, lyrics, credits, and stories about how some of the pieces were developed. I sing and play



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piano on the tracks, most of which are my original music and lyrics (primarily in English). There are also lyrics in Marathi, some of which I have written and some of which I have borrowed, including a poem from a children's book authored by one of my father's friends, former Doordarshan news anchor Anant Bhave, as well as a childhood song about a peacock dancing in the mango grove in the rain.

The album is dedicated to my late grandmother who often asked me when my 'cassette' would be ready and who originally taught me the 'Saptha Swarams' (seven notes which are the Indian classical equivalent of the Western solfege).

What strictly Indian elements can we hear on the album?

As for Indian instrumentation and language, let's start with tabla: my father plays tabla. The sound of the tabla feels like home to me. 'Dha dhin' is the closest thing I know to a heartbeat outside our bodies. My liner notes explain how my mom spontaneously contributed (unknownst to her) to the Love Sheets mix. In terms of incorporating 'roots,' it is very special to me that both my parents have been featured on the album—and in a completely unplanned way, really.

How has the Indian community received your work?

You'll have to ask them. Marathi is not a very well known language outside India and so I think Maharashtrians seem to get a kick out of hearing their language featured in this context. And I'm still working on distribu-



tion and getting the word out to all communities.

What live dates have you got planned for the remainder of the year?

Please visit my website itinerary to keep abreast of upcoming events (www.manishamusic.com). The site currently lists everything that's publicly on the burner as of now. Tanuja Desai Hidier and I hope to do another across-the-pond collaboration soon, this time in London, but no date has been set for it. Also, I might try to

head out to the West Coast (SF, LA) in the fall, but again this is tentative – and to Austin, TX, too, but the date has not been set. Folks should sign up on my mailing list via my website to stay in the know!

And, finally?

The disc was circulated to about 300 stations at the end of January. Currently the disc has been added to the playlists of about 30 radio stations, several of which broadcast via the net, too, I believe.

Pics courtesy Chris Yeager



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