



Susheela Raman works with gamelan musicians from Java on her latest album, *Ghost Gamelan*

Andrew Catlin

trance, devotional or whatever," Mills says. "Music that has the potential to break through barriers."

"We always want to try and imagine what's in the beyond," Raman says.

Raman played to packed houses in Britain, France and Australia, and became a drawcard in India, particularly after her version of the Hindi film song *Ye Mera Divanapan Hai*, originally used in Mira Nair's 2006 film *The Namesake*, found a mainstream audience after it was aired (during a pole dance) on India's *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2012. But for all the college kids who liked to stage-dive during Raman's sets at festivals and gigs in India's cities, there were religious minority groups who took umbrage at her abandoned hair-whipping and (respectful) secular use of sacred texts. "We have a lot of trolls," Mills says with a sigh.

Raman and Mills have kept travelling and studying, working with friends from other cultures, following their passions. Their project with Pakistan's Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali, a group of Sufi Muslim devotional singers headed by Khan's nephews, wowed the Royal Festival Hall in 2013. An ensuing album, *The Queen Between*, delved into mysticism and folklore and unearthed the gold to be found in the liminal and tabooed. Their next project, *Sacred Imaginations*, segued into Eastern Orthodox ("We'd been going to Ethiopia and Greece, then were given resources to stage this show with 20 musicians"), and was a hit in London, Paris and Berlin.

Along the way the couple continued to tour with their band or as a duo. After 20 gigs in a row they needed a break. A friend invited them to Bali, so they went, only to be drawn by the siren call of the gamelan to Surakarta (also known as Solo), the capital of Java.

There they attended village trance ceremonies variously involving hobby horses, people dressed as cows and shaman cum showmen cracking whips. "Javanese gamelan is different from Balinese

cians arranged in a square; another clip, *Tanpa Nama*, all fire, energy and flying sparks, has them seated in a circle. In another, they're assembled in a line.

Then there is the video Raman made for *Tomorrow Never Knows*, the trippy Lennon-McCartney song they recorded on a return visit to Solo in 2016, by way of celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' inventive, psychedelically minded seventh studio album, *Revolver*. The Gondrong Gunarto players set up a metallic circle of careering loops, as gentle as it was discordant, adding another dimension to the Beatles' experimentalism.

"We turned up at Gondrong's expecting something really experimental, but he'd thought the song was like a traditional Javanese tune and made a beautiful arrangement, so we built on that," Mills says. "The tricky part was recording the album. We'd

already written songs for a future album [English-language songs called *Beautiful Moon*, *Sphinx* and *Ghost Child*] but the challenge was how to play them with gamelan, which has tunings all over the place, this sort of magical meshing dissonance."

Their own band struggled at first, they say. "At first you think, 'This is impossible'," Raman says. "But after a while your ear tunes in and you realise that you're hearing something different each time. It was a continuous process of adaptation for all of us until it became normal." She flashes a grin. "OK, strangely normal. It will always feel spooky."

**Susheela Raman** will perform *Ghost Gamelan* as part of the *Melbourne International Arts Festival* on October 19 and as part of the *OzAsia Festival* in Adelaide on October 23-24.

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***'Music is a physical thing and when your energy is summoned you have to give it ... It has to be spontaneous'***

**Susheela Raman**

gamelan," Mills says. "It's a bit less frenetic. It evokes ancestral presences and court intrigues, ritual and procession and trance and possession."

"It's a Muslim culture with a strong animistic leaning, so offerings are made to the volcanos and the ocean, and there's a real sense of the invisible," says Raman, many of whose songs on *Ghost Gamelan* reflect on transformation and mortality. "There's also a connection to south India, to the Chola Empire, which sent ships through Southeast Asia. At times gamelan had traces of Indian scales, which helped me find a way into the music."

She fires up a laptop they've brought with them, complete with portable speaker, and shows me some of the videos that accompany each of the album's eight tracks: *Ghost Child* features a traditional dancer moving under a white veil and Raman standing atop a volcano, singing about voices echoing on the wind as she is buffeted by air currents, surrounded by smoke and digitally altered to dissolve and reappear. A performance sequence sees the musi-