

# The whole world's got rhythm

Musicians Susheela Raman and Sam Mills travel widely studying musical traditions which, as they tell **Jane Cornwell**, they interpret for their growing audiences



Andrew Catlin

**S**usheela Raman was holidaying in remotest Bali in 2015 when a mysterious off-kilter sound — maybe nearby, possibly far away — woke her in the night. After lying there listening to the complex harmonics, absorbing the looping vibrations, she got up, grabbed a torch and with her husband, guitarist-producer Sam Mills, went in search of the source. What they found was, well, nothing at all. “Just sea and mist,” the British-Indian singer says with a smile. “But then we started hearing this same music everywhere we went. It was haunting us.”

Mills nods. “We’d gone there to relax after some really intensive touring,” he says, sitting next to Raman in a pub near their home in north London. “But if you’re a musician wanting to chill then you should probably visit a place that doesn’t have any music.”

What they heard was gamelan, a word that describes both the ensemble of xylophones, drums and metal gongs and the music itself, a mainstay of the traditions of Bali and Java and a genre that has fascinated progressive Western composers from Olivier Messiaen to John Cage and Sonic Youth.

A Mercury Music Prize nominee with a particular fascination for the spiritual music of Asia, Raman had grown up in Sydney and was loosely familiar with the trademark sound of Indonesia.

But it was only after she and Mills hopped from Bali to the vol-

cano-dotted island of Java that she decided to explore it. The result was Raman’s seventh and current album, 2017’s *Ghost Gamelan* — and concerts in Paris, Brussels and London — that drew rave reviews for its creative reimagining of gamelan, both in its use of songs and focus on instrumental textures.

Next month Raman brings her *Ghost Gamelan* show to the Melbourne International Festival and OzAsia in Adelaide, buoyed by her band of art rockers and a team of gamelan players led by Javanese maestro Gondrong “Longhair” Gunarto, the son of a shadow puppet master (gamelan is integral to Javanese wayang performance) and an experimentalist with a grounding in tradition.

“Gondrong and his ensemble belong to Indonesia’s kontemporer, or contemporary, branch of gamelan,” says Raman, 46, who is long acclaimed for her intense, authentic performances. “They bring a real sense of the avant-garde to traditional instruments and often mix in poetry and theatre and Western pop sounds. There was no problem doing something adventurous with him.”

Musical adventure is Raman’s lifeblood. The only child of parents from Tamil Nadu, south India, who arrived in London in the 1960s and moved to Sydney when she was four, she fronted her own funk band as a teenager before happening upon a CD by the late great Pakistani Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (“It was like being hit by lightning”) and heading to the subcontinent to receive a classical vocal education.

In 1997 she relocated to London, working with techno-raga bands at the vanguard of the Asian Underground scene before meeting Mills — a fellow risk-taker and doctor of anthropology who had recorded with musicians from West Africa and rural Ben-

gal — at Peter Gabriel’s Real World Studios in Wiltshire. The couple have been inseparable ever since.

Today they finish each other’s sentences, pick up on each other’s trains of thought: “Where does one of us begin and the other one finish?” jokes Raman, briefly resting her head on Mills’s shoulder.

Mills went on to produce and play on Raman’s now classic 2001 debut *Salt Rain*, an album that fused ancient devotional songs in Sanskrit, Hindi and Tamil with jazz, blues and soul (and included a cover of Tim Buckley’s *Song to the Siren*), duly impressing the Mercury Prize judges and thrusting the 28-year-old Raman, with her wild curls and leather trousers, her glorious wide-ranging voice and ecstatic, foot-stomping gyrations, into the spotlight.

“That’s not me so much any more,” says Raman, her warm, low voice still with an Aussie twang. “But music is a physical thing and when your energy is summoned you have to give it. Sometimes my approach is quite contemplative and ethereal. It depends on the feeling. It has to be spontaneous.”

The success of *Salt Rain* saw Raman held up as a poster girl for “world music”, a genre she rejected then and still rejects now (“A racist marketing category”). Her response was to go off-grid, living for six months in a small village in southern India and studying ancient Tevaram hymns with the masters.

Then came albums including *Love Trap*, which featured a Mongolian throat singer and Afrobeat rhythms; *33*, a covers record of songs by the likes of Can and Throbbing Gristle; and *Vel*, Carnatic South Indian songs in dialogue with other forms of Indian music. No one was going to put Raman in a genre.

“We’re drawn to music with psychic intensity, whether it’s