

Humour & Darkness

The success of *Vulture Prince* sent **Arooj Aftab**'s career into orbit, turning her into a Grammy regular overnight.

Jane Cornwell speaks to the Pakistani singer about its collaborative follow-up and the years studying Sufi music, jazz and audio engineering that led her here

“As a younger musician I’d fixate on certain songs, the ones where you can keep going back and hear different things each time,” says Arooj Aftab, a singer and composer of inherited heritage and leftfield smarts. “I always wondered how people went about making those songs with secrets.”

She knows now. Largely because, well, she’s been doing it. Last year Aftab scooped a Grammy award in the new Best Global Performance category for her rendition of ‘Mohabbat’, a South Asian *ghazal* famously sung by Pakistani idol Mehdi Hassan and refreshed with microtonal embellishments, repeating minimalist patterns and a jazz-meets-indie-pop flair. Sensitively interpreted, the result of years spent studying, mulling, waiting until things felt right, ‘Mohabbat’'s slow-flowing gorgeousness won fans including Barack Obama, who put the track on his coveted annual summer playlist. She ended up with a Best New Artist nomination at the Grammys, too.

“When everyone started losing their minds over ‘Mohabbat’ I had another listen.” She flashes a grin. “And I was like, ‘Fuck! This is really good! It’s like a journey, you know?’”

It’s early afternoon in Brooklyn, New York. Aftab, 37, is on the other side of a computer screen wearing sweatpants and a slogan T-shirt reading, ‘I am not here for you,’ her dark hair shoved through a scrunchie, her cheeks glowing from that morning’s pre-Grammy performance facial. This year she’s up for an award in the very same category that she previously won in with ‘Udhero Na’, a song that features her friend Anoushka Shankar on wandering *sitar*, and which she’ll perform live in the pre-televised ceremony, with her long-time band members, double-bass player Petros Klampanis and Maeve Gilchrist on heavy metal-leaning harp.

Translating to ‘Please Undo’ in Urdu, ‘Udhero Na’ is included on the deluxe edition of Aftab’s third solo album, 2021’s *Vulture Prince*, a largely Urdu-

language work that reimagines the centuries-old ghazals she grew up reading and listening to with her Pakistani family. Poem-sonnets, written and sung, ghazal couplets tell of love, stolen glances and the intense longing caused by separation from God, with words studded with metaphor, double entendre and, on ‘Mohabbat’, a sort of knowing defiance.

“There’s a line, ‘You’ll have so many lovers but I won’t be one of them.’” Aftab squares her shoulders. “That struck me as a really bold and quite humorous thing to be singing about. I spent years trying to find a sound that did justice to what was being said, but also where the lyrics wouldn’t really matter either.

“I wanted to write music that would tell a story in four different movements, and I wanted all these things to converge in ways that were light and uplifting but with a synth solo in the middle that was really dark. It just kind of came together. I never thought it would be the star of the album.”

That honour, she thought, would go to ‘Saans Lo’ (Just Breathe), a heartfelt track whose words were written by her friend, author and model Annie Ali Khan, who died during the making of *Vulture Prince*. Sadly, so too did Aftab’s younger brother Maher Aftab – the *Vulture Prince* to whom the album is dedicated. “Well, it could be my brother who passed away,” she says. “Or it could be me or you. It’s pretty open. A mythical figure from another dimension. ▶



Aftab, Shahzad Ismaily (right) and Vijay Iyer (centre) form the trio responsible for her latest album, *Love in Exile*

Edu Yildiz



AROOF AFTAB

“I spent years trying to find a sound that did justice to what was being said, but also where the lyrics wouldn’t really matter either”

Byrne Thomas