

A regal creature with a pretty shocking wingspan. A prince with no fucking kingly responsibilities. There's humour there, and darkness."

The effect of both tragedies reshaped Aftab's vision for the album. The long incubation period that is part of her creative process, that variously involves "winging it with lots of late-night whisky drinking, thinking about stuff, interacting with people, building musical details into worlds, not listening to things that I like so that I come in super clean and original," took a different path. Danceable elements were jettisoned for a silvery elegiac beauty that owned grief and loss but never slipped into despair.

2022 saw Aftab touring internationally across festivals and venues including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and, last June, at London's Barbican, where her brand of neo-Sufi melancholy came bathed in indigo light and accompanied by an assembly of strings. Touring is the medium that lets her quash stereotypes of the saintly, mystical ghazal singer, even if the music itself inspires feelings of awe. Between songs she drinks, jokes, swears. She hands yellow roses to audience members and at the Barbican, an extra-special red rose to her guest Anoushka Shankar, whose Hindustani stylings add boundary-crossing symbolism (Pakistan and India have a complicated relationship) as well as an aural dimension to Aftab's music.

Saudi-born, Pakistan-raised, a New Yorker since 2010 (having obtained a degree in jazz studies and music production from Boston's Berklee College of Music), who Aftab is influenced by her sound. Her concerns inform her identity: displacement, chaos, loss. Feminism, love, reinvention. Freedom, risk, the right to fail.

Fans of her earlier albums, *Bird Under Water* (2015) and *Siren Islands* (2018), know of her penchant for experimentation. For edging the ancient into the now. The former album, a fusion of jazz and devotional *qawwali* singing, speaks to her love for such Sufi icons as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan ("His music impacted the whole world from the east to the west") and Abida 'Queen of Sufi Music' Parveen, who once told the 25-year-old Aftab to listen, deep, to her (Parveen's) discography. To learn with her ears and fly.

*Siren Islands* was a raw collection of ambient electronica spliced with snippets of Urdu lyricism. "Urdu lives in a different place in your mouth, in your entire body," says Aftab who, despite the jazzy acoustic version of 'Hallelujah' she recorded aged 18 (the first ever song to go viral in Lahore), insists that she takes more risks and feels more vocally agile, when she's singing in her first language.

*Love in Exile*, her latest, is arguably her most avant-garde yet. A trio album recorded live and off-the-cuff in New York City with composer/bandleader/keyboardist/Harvard professor Vijay Iyer and composer/electric-bassist/collaborator extraordinaire Shahzad Ismaily, it's a shadowy sound-world textured by electronics and inhabited by Aftab's husky voice. 'Sunlight dappled through deep water, fluid motions that dissolve individual boundaries and amplify communal energy,' offers the press release.

"Vijay likes to put people together to play his music, and in this [format] we just played whatever," she says of a trio that has wowed venues including The Kitchen in New York, and art galleries such as Washington's. "There was always a lot of synergy and magic. We listened to each other and led each other down paths without ever getting lost, which is a





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rare quality to find in musician friends. At the end of 2018 we decided to record for a few hours in a studio and eventually created this dark, doomy, jazzy, very free kind of album.”

*Love in Exile*'s hypnotic drones, earthy basslines and airy vocals/vocales had this writer lying on the floor, astro-travelling. It is a work that demands careful listening, divulging secret after secret with each repeated play. And while best experienced as one long piece (the eponymous *Love in Exile* trio always performs live without a break), the titles of its seven tracks ('To Remain/To Return', 'Shadow Forces') have a personal-is-political intent (even if another title, 'Haseen Thi' translates as 'she was pretty').

“I guess [the album] points to our three journeys as immigrants, or as people who have had homes in multiple different places and have inherited many heritages. Is it an exile that was forced? Is it self-exile? How do you find love through this journey? How do you find identity?”

“Not that I was thinking about what I was singing,” she continues good naturedly. “I just wanted my voice to be an instrument. But you need vowels, right?”

Aftab grew up in Pakistan, making up melodies and singing them around the house between delving into the wide-ranging record collection of her economist/educator/hipster parents: “They were proper super-cool liberalist progressives from the 70s. My earliest musical memories are of them hosting musical evenings and singing and exchanging rare recordings, tapes and stuff. They were hobby singers with beautiful voices who met through their love of music.”

Music that included jazz greats from Stan Getz and Miles Davis (“I memorised the solos”) to Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, divas whose bold phrasing – extending notes, following riffs, moulding space – she found as remarkable as the

microtonal flourishes of Abida Parveen. The young Aftab read poems by 13th-century Persian scribe-mystic Rumi and great Urdu poets Hafeez Hoshiarpuri and Mirza Ghalib (all of whom she interprets on *Vulture Prince*). Her teenage stint as a Leonard Cohen-loving singer/songwriter, and the ensuing social media buzz around ‘Hallelujah’, fed her courage to apply to Berklee.

There she sang Sufi songs in a band whose members played bass, guitar and *cajón*. A YouTube clip sees her on stage, barefoot in a *salwar kameez*, her hair towel-dried, singing alongside a female Hindustani vocalist. Aftab smiles when reminded. “We were hippies. We smoked a lot of weed. I’d taken a shower and was running super late for this concert. There was something so good about what we were doing then, scratching the surface of what *Vulture Prince* became, this refined edgy thing. It was worth the journey.”

Aftab moved to Brooklyn, New York in 2010, supporting herself and her music by working as an audio engineer for news outlets such as *Vice* and *Huffington Post*, writing music for documentaries and even a noir adventure game. At Berklee she’d studied the analogue aspects of music production, the engineering and microphones and studio circuitry boards. Now her digital skills increased exponentially. As did her confidence: “It gave me the tools to communicate what I wanted in those [recording] rooms, the spaces where the woman walks in and is [seen as just] the singer, so they’re not going to listen to you for jack.”

“Anyway, I had a corporate day job in America and I was getting really fucking depressed. It’s like, I keep making this beautiful, delicate music and I have to go to work every day. I’m not building towards anything. And then, thank God, *Vulture Prince* started getting its flowers.”

Not enough, alas, for Aftab and Shankar to win Best Global Performance at this year’s Grammy Awards. But their sublime slo-mo performance – Aftab standing in a black sculptural cape; the seated Shankar in a glittery evening gown; Gilchrist shredding her gilded harp strings like a boss – packed a wallop. It was a shame that such exemplary musicianship was never televised as part of the main ceremony; that despite the name change (Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was nominated for Best Traditional Folk Album and Best World Music Album in 1997), ‘global’ is still regarded as marginal.

“I was thinking about Nusrat because he’s the only other Pakistani person to have been nominated, right? These giants of music – Angélique Kidjo, Yo-Yo Ma, Nusrat – have a major impact on the world. They are leading the music charge from a global perspective, and yet they sit in this little category...”

Aftab’s eyes flash. She knows she’s got work to do. ♦

**+ LIVE** Arooj Aftab plays at Wide Awake London in Brockwell Park on May 27. For more details, visit [wideawakelondon.co.uk](http://wideawakelondon.co.uk)

**+ ALBUM** Arooj Aftab, Vijay Iyer and Shahzad Ismaili’s album *Love in Exile* is reviewed this issue. See p60



Aftab performing at Leith Theatre during the 2022 Edinburgh International Festival

By the Thomas, Jessy Earl