

The music of Grammy-winning singer and composer Arooj Aftab – on the eve of her first Australian tour – has always broken convention.

Outside the rules

Musician and composer Arooj Aftab. Ebru Yildiz



“Recently I’ve started heckling my audiences a bit. I’m like, ‘If you guys have your eyes closed and are meditating to this music, then you’re being racist.’”
— Arooj Aftab

Arts editor: Alison Croggon

Jane Cornwell is a London-based arts, music and culture journalist.

Arooj Aftab builds worlds with her music. “It doesn’t matter whether you understand the language or not,” says the Grammy-winning singer, composer and producer. “People listen to these feelings and melodies swirling together and remember what is sad in their lives. I give them a corridor to channel that sadness, or to put down their emotions and take a breather.”

She squares her shoulders. “Which is a beautiful thing to even be able to do. But lately I’m also like, man, I don’t want you to stop at the surface. Let’s dig a little deeper.”

Aftab, 38, is speaking via Zoom, her Brooklyn, New York apartment blurred behind her.

“There was no blueprint for the thing I wanted to do.” Her gaze is direct. “I mean, my energy is pretty chill. I love the minimalist music of Terry Riley, and reading old poetry, and listening to old recordings. I’ve studied jazz. I’ve probably absorbed [Pakistani] semi-classical forms subconsciously. In many ways my sound is about the communities I’ve learned from. It is a statement to having roots and heritages in multiple places.”

Her third album, 2021’s *Vulture Prince*, is a mainly Urdu-language recording informed by grief and strafed by contrast – light, shadow, heart, sadness. Elements born out of musical styles she has earnt, inherited, borrowed and/or recycled, that connect within a diorama of intense, enveloping stillness.

Vulture Prince was reissued in an expanded edition in 2022, after which Aftab toured North America and Europe, playing the Metropolitan Museum of Art and festivals from Roskilde to Glastonbury. A show at London’s Barbican saw her bathed in indigo light and accompanied by harp, violin, bass and, on the track “Udhero Na” (“Undo, Please”), the psychedelic sitar of guest star Anoushka Shankar. Between songs, Aftab threw roses to audience members, refilled her glass of wine and peppered her chat with swear words.

Aftab was born in Saudi Arabia, raised in Pakistan and has been a United States resident since 2005 when, aged 19, she moved to Boston to study jazz composition and audio engineering at Berklee College of Music. She presents her live shows in ways intended to quash reductive stereotypes of the exotic South Asian singer.

“People often aren’t comfortable with the idea of brown people making contemporary music,” says Aftab.

She’s a self-described rule breaker who frequently uses X/Twitter to push back against stereotype. In August 2022, she posted: “Open call for white European journalists to observe my music further than a means to meditate.”

“They want it to be derivative of what they think is our cultural thing, which is either Bollywood or ambient, soothe-the-soul stuff. Not anything that puts you in a competitive space with jazz, pop or whatever other genre. Recently I’ve started heckling my audiences a bit.” She smiles. “I’m like, ‘If you guys have your eyes closed and are meditating to this music, then you’re being racist.’”

Next month Aftab will make her first

tour of Australia, bringing her intimate sound to the Melbourne Recital Centre, City Recital Hall in Sydney and Tainmuntilla (Botanic Park) for WOMADelaide. Whether playing indoors or outside – last September she headlined End of the Road Festival in Wiltshire, England, with “17,000 people really focused and listening” – Aftab’s regal, evocative voice compels engagement.

“Seeing how you have ample lovers around you, I will not be one of those lovers to you,” she intones in Urdu on “Mohabbat” (“Love”), her signature tune. It’s a popular ghazal – a form of lyric poetry – written in the 1920s by prominent Urdu poet Hafeez Hoshiarpuri that has been covered by a host of South Asian artists, including the Pakistani idol Mehdi Hassan.

Aftab wrapped Hoshiarpuri’s words in her singular brand of neo-Sufi melancholy, creating a universe as transporting as This Mortal Coil’s 1983 version of Tim Buckley’s “Song to the Siren”, with which it has been compared. The repeating patterns and microtonal embellishments of “Mohabbat” reward repeated listening, divulging secrets that seem to unfurl gradually, like the scent of night-blooming jasmine in Lahore, where Aftab grew up.

Her previous albums established her penchant for bringing the ancient into the now. *Bird Under Water* (2015) fused dark post-pop with the sort of devotional qawwali singing made famous by the legends Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (“Nusrat impacted the world from east to west”) and Abida “Queen of Sufi Music” Parveen, with whom Aftab once jammed in a hotel room. *Siren Islands*, from 2018, mixed lo-fi electronics with shards of Urdu lyricism in ways that dovetailed with the tenets of New York’s experimental music scene.

Although they were critically praised, neither recording attracted the commercial attention Aftab needed to free her from her day job as an audio engineer at digital media company Genius – “Too long spent working for someone else’s dream”. She scored films, games and installations and made her “beautiful, delicate” music on the side.

Then, almost overnight, *Vulture Prince* started getting noticed.

Music platform *Pitchfork* gave the album a rave review. “They weren’t reviewing stuff like mine then,” says Aftab of *Pitchfork* (which on January 17 was controversially folded into the GQ organisation by Condé Nast). “I felt like I’d broken the mould. It symbolised a shift outside North American music culture, got the cool indie kids opening their ears. It got everybody talking.”

Publications from *Time* to *The New York Times* included “Mohabbat” on their lists of hottest new tracks or 2021 best-ofs. Former US president Barack Obama positioned it between Joni Mitchell’s “Coyote” and Erykah Badu’s “Didn’t Cha Know” on his annual summer playlist. Then “Mohabbat” won Best Global Music Performance at the 2022 Grammy Awards, making Aftab – who was also nominated for Best New Artist – the first Pakistani artist to win a Grammy.

“When everyone started losing their minds over ‘Mohabbat’, I had another listen,” she says. “I was like, ‘Fuck! This is good.’ But I never thought it would be the star of the

album.” She thought people might prefer “Last Night”, with its loping reggae-skank and English-language couplets translated from the Sufi poet Rumi. Or “Saans Lo” (“Just Breathe”), a heartfelt track whose music is set to words written by her friend, journalist Annie Ali Khan, who died in 2018 – a year that also marked the untimely death of Aftab’s younger brother Maher, to whom *Vulture Prince* is dedicated.

The effect of both tragedies reshaped Aftab’s vision for the album. She’d intended a tougher, more danceable direction. Instead she delivered a work of elegiac grace, a recording that, like the ghazal form itself, finds beauty in loss and longing. In early 2023 Aftab was nominated again for a Grammy, this time for “Udhero Na” with Shankar, for whom Aftab produced the recent EP *Chapter I: Forever, For Now*.

Last May Aftab co-released *Love in Exile*, an album by a jazz trio of import: Indian-American composer/pianist Vijay Iyer, Pakistani-New York multi-instrumentalist/electric bassist Shahzad Ismaili (who played synthesiser on “Mohabbat”) and Aftab on vocals. Created on the fly in a single session in New York City, tracks such as “To Remain/To Return” pointed to each musician’s journey as an immigrant, foregrounding a discourse about notions of selfhood amid multiple heritages. “Embracing fluidity helps build community,” Aftab has said. “To be an immigrant is to find identity in movement and change.”

Love in Exile was widely lauded for its emotional depth and shadowy, freeform invention. But a seasoned critic, John McDonough of American music magazine *DownBeat*, disagreed. “In the celebratory spirit of diversity, maybe I’m obliged to embrace the ‘timeless beauty’ of these Urdu chants,” wrote McDonough. “But in the rigor of critical candor I must admit that music is not a universal language and warn of their tedious monotony.”

Aftab clapped back. “What’s monotonous is fossilised white men having platforms and safety to publish their racist views,” she responded online, in a series of posts that prompted conversations about racism and Islamophobia within the music industry.

“Those two lines felt really violent and unnecessary,” she tells me. “If that person can participate in the narrative, then I can say something back. I will not entertain this cap on my career because of prejudice excused as ‘they’re just old’. They’re just racist. These reviews become part of history, affecting our careers in the same way they have affected many other marginalised people’s stake in their music. I want my work to be perceived at a level it deserves, and not as somebody else’s dumbed down version of meditation hour. It is meditative, on the surface. But it is so much more than that.”

Aftab only ever wanted a career in music. She remembers being mesmerised by the instrumentalists her progressive parents – diplomats and amateur singers – invited over to play, and by the ghazals and other Urdu poetry forms that were recited and sung at the family’s all-night *mushaira* social gatherings. She sang made-up melodies between delving into a vinyl collection that favoured jazz greats: Miles Davis, Stan Getz, Billie Holiday, Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone. “I ran those records into the ground,” she says.

She was 18 when a video clip of her singing Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” from her Lahore bedroom went viral, helping to kickstart Pakistan’s indie music scene – and get her into Berklee. There she smoked weed, sang Sufi songs in a band that played “edgy crossover stuff” on guitar, drums, Turkish percussion and the Arabic zither, the *qanun*.

“I love and respect the people I work with,” she says of her long-term collaborators, guitarist Gyan Riley, bassist Petros Klampanis, violinist Darian Donovan Thomas and “heavy metal” harpist Maeve Gilchrist, a new mother who is sitting out the Australian tour. “Petros, for example, doesn’t have dickish masculine energy. He’s secure enough to hang with badass women, and even do a whistle solo if we ask.”

She met most of them in New York, where she moved in 2010. She fell in with the city’s fecund jazz and experimental music scenes, searched for vinyl in secondhand record shops and stayed up late because, well, everyone did. “New York is so alive at night. It definitely takes you on a ride. I really like being here. Sometimes it does come up: should we move? But it’s like, where should we go?”

Who’s “we”? I’ve read she has a cat. She waves a hand airily. “Oh, me and my neuroses,” she says.

New York City has returned the love: in March 2022, Aftab’s image featured on a giant digital billboard in Times Square as part of Spotify’s EQUAL Pakistan campaign, which celebrates Pakistani women creators through playlists. In March 2023, the NYC-based Vilcek Foundation, which raises awareness of immigrant contributions to arts and sciences in America, awarded her the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Music.

She put the US\$50,000 prize money towards composing and recording her hotly anticipated fourth solo album, out later this year. She won’t be drawn on its content, other than it is “inspired by the beauty and power of the night”, and that two tracks are inspired by Chand Bibi – a 16th-century Muslim warrior queen who united the Deccan sultanates and defeated the Mughal armies under Akbar – and 18th-century Urdu poet and courtesan Mah Laqa Bai, variously a skilled archer and horse rider, a women’s rights activist and a high-level adviser to the Deccan courts. “[Mah Laqa’s poems are] in Old Urdu, which I don’t really understand,” says Aftab. “But I ended up composing [music for] two of her poems, and they’re really great.”

With *Vulture Prince* going gangbusters, and after a heavyweight prize tailored to potential, she’s aware expectations for her next release are high and self-confidence is crucial.

“It could all fuck with your head, so it is important to compartmentalise what you want to do. A lot of trust has to happen with myself,” she says. “I’m already pushing the envelope by writing music without the rules, which makes it special and freer, according to me. So I stay plugged into how I’m perceiving everything around me through music, and I wait for the melodies, the thoughts, to form. Then I can hurry up and record a voice note in a bar, or a bathroom, and get that melody that might help me build a world.

“It is almost like magic, right?” She flashes a grin. “But I’ve come to learn that none of it is random. Music is constantly manifesting.” ●