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Songs of Sufi love from a Hindustani voice anchored in Minnesota



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· St. Paul, Minn. · Jun 20, 2014

Arts & Culture

Minneapolis-based, north Indian classical singer Pooja Goswami Pavan, at right, and her husband, Allalaghatta Pavan, a renowned tabla player. *Courtesy of the artist*



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4min 30sec

Twin Citians have the chance to hear a truly amazing voice this weekend. Minneapolis-based, north Indian classical singer Pooja Goswami Pavan will perform at Pangea World Theater on Lake Street. The event comes on the heels of the release of her latest CD, a collection of ancient Sufi love songs re-imagined for a modern audience.

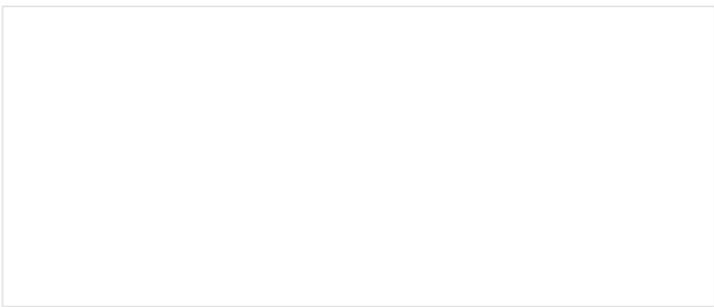
Encountering her voice for the first time is startling. It's a soaring sound, slipping between notes with ease, bending with exquisite control, the product of years of Hindustani vocal training that began when she was a child growing up in India.

"I would say 25 years or so," Pooja says while sitting in the living room of her south Minneapolis home. "It's a part of my life. If I don't practice every day something is missing."

Now she has leant that technique in the service of another of her deep interests: Sufi poetry. For her new album, "In What Land's My Beloved" she takes poems, some of them 800 years old, and puts them to music.

"Whatever poetry I liked, I picked it up," she said.

Sufism is an ancient practice, deeply entwined with Islam, although some say its roots lie before the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Pooja's husband Allalaghatta Pavan, a renowned tabla player himself whose day job is at Honeywell, describes Sufism as a devotional practice which has produced a wealth of love poetry.



Pooja Goswami Pavan *Courtesy the artist*

"And this love is expressed through the metaphor of a lover beckoning her beloved, who is either away from her, or through the concept of unrequited love," he said.

Pavan says the beloved is usually not a person, but a supreme entity.

"And that supreme could be a god, could be an abstract concept, could be a universal force that moves the world," he said.

As she composed the music, Pooja deliberately chose a range styles for the songs.

"I'm exposed to every kind of music and I love that," she said. "So that was my idea: why not use jazz? Why not to use traditional Indian classical music or why not to use Middle Eastern instruments?"

Pooja recorded the voice tracks in Minnesota, then sent them to producer Rajan Sharma in New Dehli in India where he arranged the music. They sent the material back and forth till they were happy.

"It took a year, I would say," recalled Pooja. "It took a year."

Pooja and Pavan then traveled to India for the final recording. The final mix took place in Minneapolis, where she has lived for the past six years, and the work was released by Minneapolis world music label Blind Eye records. Label president Ken Onstad remembers how it felt when he first heard the recording.

"Extremely embarrassing" he said. "I've been in the music business for a very very very long time, and I was stunned with how wonderful it was and how little I knew about what it was they were doing right in our backyard."

Minnesota music lovers owe it to themselves to get to know more about this music, he says.

Pooja and Pavan will help with a lecture and performance on North Indian music on Sunday

morning at Pangea World Theater in Minneapolis. The event begins at 10.30, and is free.

They are also planning a sales campaign both here, and in India where a popular TV show is fanning interest among young people for contemporary adaptations of classical songs.

Broadcast dates

Morning Edition

7:25 AM · Jun 20, 2014

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11:44 AM · Jun 20, 2014

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Euan Kerr is an arts reporter for MPR News.

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