

Rupa & The April Fishes

On their third record *Build*, Rupa Marya and her band continue their “electric gumbo radio,” though this time it comes through in English BY HAYLEY ELISABETH KAUFMAN

“**T**HE LYRICS tend to come as the melody arrives,”

explains Rupa Marya, the multi-lingual frontwoman of Rupa & The April Fishes, as she takes slow sips of herbal tea backstage at Brooklyn, N.Y.’s venue-cum-art space Littlefield. Marya shakes her wavy mane out of her eyes and continues. “Mostly, it’s a groove that informs me, or a feeling or an idea,” she says about her songwriting process as a trumpet blasts from around the corner.

It would be an understatement to merely label this San Francisco-based fivesome’s music as eclectic. With a global-centric sound that runs the gamut from gypsy-esque stomps, a fervent iteration of ‘40s-era, big-band swing, slithering raga, hip-swiveling cumbia, saccharine sweet French pop, and a politically-fueled punk rock spirit, Marya and her band of merry men defy convention and easy genre classification.

The singer/songwriter, who evocatively describes the April Fishes sound as “electric gumbo radio,” explores new terrain on the stellar third album *Build* and describes the recording process as equally daunting as it was rewarding.

“What was different on this album was that I didn’t go in [the studio] knowing what the album was going to be,” she says, her voice rising over the cacophony of her band—composed of musicians Aaron Kierbel, Safa Shokrai, Misha Khalikulov and Mario Alberto Silva—soundchecking conspicuously onstage. “I had a vague idea of the songs. Even when we recorded the song skeletons, there was a lot for me that was unmapped. Just allowing myself to be in this unknown space—it was absolutely terrifying and so great.”

While *Build* is a slight sonic



departure for Rupa & The April Fishes, the most dramatic change comes in the form of the album’s lyrics, written primarily in English—a first for the group. Whereas previous efforts have incorporated an international amalgam of tracks in French, Spanish and Hindi, Marya’s decision was both personal and political. “We did a huge U.S. tour last summer and also the language of the hegemony and the business culture around the world is in English,” she explains, making not-so-subtle mention of the Occupy movement and other injustice-fueled international protests. “To speak to these ideas of change and awakening, it felt relevant for me to sing in English.”

Writing in English also allowed Marya to channel the right words to convey emotions

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that stem from a very intimate place—something that she felt might get lost in translation if she didn’t let the words flow organically. “Some of the songs on the album are vulnerable and tender like ‘Inheritance’ and ‘Metamorphosis’ and that, for me, was writing from a space of total vulnerability. English was the easiest way to tackle those subjects.”

Soulful and sensuous, *Build* ebbs and flows seamlessly starting with the opening title track, which acts as a sonic call to action and introduces the thematic concerns of the album. From the overtly politically-laced “¡Cochabamba!” to the reggae-infused “Weeds,” inspired by the children Marya met during her artist residency in Southern Mexico, or the slinky cover of The Clash’s legendary anti-violence dirge “The Guns of Brixton,” this Bay Area outfit weaves social commentary into the album without ever coming across preachy or self-righteous.

It’s this culturally conscious mindset that informs everything from the sound, the lyrics and the way the band structures their tour—with the latter recently becoming part-show,

part-heirloom seed exchange. Now, the live show is not only a place to let loose on the dancefloor but it also provides a fertile ground for like-minded people to share seeds, political discourse and ideas freely.

“Every show, we’ve been conducting a seed exchange, so farmers are coming with their seeds and the first ten farmers get in free,” she says excitedly. “It allows a way for people who may not be able to afford the admission into the show to see the music and share seeds.” In addition to keeping the genetic diversity of local produce alive, once the tour reaches India for a six-week stint, the group will also be offering workshops on localized farming practices spearheaded by activist (and Marya’s partner) Benjamin Fahrer.

Contrary to what it may seem like, *Build* isn’t a protest album—according to Marya, its meaning is as simple as its name suggests. “For me, *Build* was the command to myself, to harness the positive creative capacity that comes with this kind of social change. We have to get our hands in the dirt and do it ourselves.”