

Music

Speaking her language

Rupa Marya composes songs with meaning that go beyond words

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s a doctor, teacher, and musician, Rupa Marya understands the power of language.

The leader of the surging San Francisco-based world-music act Rupa and the April Fishes was compelled to compose the songs for the band's acclaimed debut album, "Extraordinary Rendition" (Cumbancha), in the months following the Sept. 11 attacks.

The music on "Extraordinary Rendition," which combines the group dynamics of jazz with the passionate intensity of tango with the swirling rhythms of the Middle East, emerged after what she calls "a year of total silence."

"Watching this country become more fearful and journalists becoming the mouthpiece of the administration, I became so angry," says Marya, on the phone from Sweden. She performs with the April Fishes Tuesday at Johnny D's as part of a North American tour that includes the Montreal Jazz Festival and Quebec City's Festival d'Été.

"I couldn't pick up my guitar," Marya says. "It was too painful. But then I started to think about what would it be like to create music that reflected what I wanted to see in the world, to give a voice to the things that weren't getting any airtime. I started with an assignment to write 10 songs about love, compassion, and uncertainty in a time of love across borders."

Born in San Francisco to Punjabi Indian parents and raised for several years in the south of France, Marya decided to write most of her new songs in French, with some Spanish, English, and Hindi thrown in for good measure. She already had the border-crossing sound in mind when she started assembling a band from the Bay Area's polyglot music scene.

Featuring jazz trumpeter Marcus Cohen, Isabel Douglass on accordion and vocals, Aaron Kierbel on

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Rupa Marya combines jazz, tango, and Middle Eastern music on "Extraordinary Rendition."



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percussion and contraptions, upright bassist Safa Shokrai, and Pawel Walerowski on cello and vocals, the April Fishes have honed a gloriously expressive sound that perfectly complements Marya's poetic tales of love, longing, and loss.

"In San Francisco there's an amazing community of musicians reinvigorating these old acoustic instruments," says Marya, whose deft guitar work is a central element of her sound. "I knew I wanted an accordionist versed in tango, French chanson, and musette, and a cellist who could play classical and also use the instrument in innovative ways."

She credits bassist Marcus Shelby as an essential influence in the evolution of her band's sound. A pillar of the Bay Area jazz scene, Shelby is an ambitious composer who has released a series of thematic albums featuring his jazz orchestra, most recently a thrilling oratorio inspired by the life of Harriet Tubman. He started hearing Marya perform around the Mission District, a historically Latino neighborhood with a plethora of clubs, and ended up contributing to two "Extraordinary Rendition" tracks, the yearning "La Pecheuse" and the seductive Hindustani chant "Yaad."

"She's remarkably musical," Shelby says. "She'll say she doesn't have all the technique, but she's got great instincts and is a wonderful storyteller. You're immediately drawn into her narrative no matter what language she's singing. I just like the way she thinks about the characters in her band and utilizes their sounds to tell a story."

Despite or maybe because of the mostly French lyrics, Marya's music has found an eager American audience. YouTube's home page has featured the band's video for "Une Americaine à Paris," and Marya has been covered widely on public radio, including PRI's "The World," WNYC's "Soundcheck," and NPR's "All Songs Considered." The album broke into the top 10 on Soundscan's world chart last month and has hit No. 1 on iTunes' Top 10 world songs chart several times.

"That's what's been so remarkable to me about this whole experience, how many people feel they understand what I'm saying without knowing the lyrics," Marya says. "People are remarkably open right now. Part of it is learning as a performer how to reach out to the audience so you can take them along with you and not just alienate them by standing behind the wall of a foreign language."

Marya's acute sensitivity to language affects her life off the bandstand as well. A medical doctor on the faculty of the University of California-San Francisco, she teaches interns about ICU communication for UCSF's department of medical ethics, analyzing how families understand their loved one's prognosis in the ICU.

"How we're conveying information to one another is something that's very interesting to me," Marya says. "As a doctor, there are so many ways you can miscommunicate, and it's always a challenge. How do you tell somebody they're dying? How do you tell an audience that people in their neighborhood are living with so much fear of being deported that they don't seek proper medical help? It's like the riddle of my life, and I explore it several different ways, through music, and through these kinds of investigations."