

MUSIC

out of the box

Practising doctor and singer-songwriter of one of the hottest new bands on the international music scene, **Rupa Marya** is hard to typecast, says SARIT RAY

Listening to Rupa and the April Fishes' music is a bit like being on a *MasterChef* challenge—trying to identify the ingredients in a really complex gourmet dish. There's a bit of American folk, some Latino influences, some Indian classical. And all of these come together in an interesting, unpredictable way. It's what Rupa Marya calls "a beautiful mess". India-born Marya, 35, has been around the world, and grew up in several countries amid several cultures. The same can be said of the kind of music that her curiously named band makes. Their hit song 'Une Américaine à Paris' is in French; the video is slick, somewhat retro, with some absurd action, featuring two distinctly Indian ladies, who are in fact Marya's mum and aunt. Already, it's got over four lakh views on YouTube.

Doctor and singer—aren't those professions at two ends of the spectrum?

It's become the way I live. I did my residency balancing writing and performing with my training in medicine. At its best moments, the experience is inspiring—I am engaged in so many aspects of my mind and spirit in both pursuits. At its worst moments, it's utterly exhausting. I am still learning how to walk the balance with grace and patience.

Did you grow up always wanting to be both? For as long as I can remember, I was



A DEVIANT ACT

Rupa (second from left) and the April Fishes stand out with their edgy music and multilingual tracks.

singing and I wanted to be a doctor. My uncle was a physician. Music has always been a part of my life. One of my earliest memories of singing was when my *nani-ma* would punish me by making me stand in the corner if I was naughty. I would stand there and sing. The acoustics in the corners of that old house were amazing! **Your music cuts across different genres.**

How does it all come together?

There's an obsession with categorisation—so that people can bottle, package and sell something. Somewhere in between the experience and the labelling of it exists the stuff of magic. I like to sit in that space and make sounds. I leave it to marketing folks to label it.

How much do your Indian roots influence your music?

I am still exploring my Indian roots. I grew up listening to classical Hindustani and Punjabi folk music, as well as The Beatles, Mozart, Chopin and Roger Miller. I am looking forward to formally studying Indian vocal skills and allowing these aspects of my heritage to seep into what I am saying.

Has it been tough finding acceptance for such a different kind of sound?

In the music biz, if you are brown, there is a pressure to be the kind of brown the

industry wants to hear.

It's not easy to be Indian and not be up there with a sitar, singing ghazals or dancing bhangra. It makes people comfortable to sell something that feels congruent. But an Indian woman, who was born and raised here [USA], singing in French, and now in Spanish, about issues of immigration in Latin America? It is hard to transcend race and culture in the entertainment business to just present music.

You're touring some interesting places (at the time of the interview, the band was in Mexico). What's next for Rupa and the April Fishes?

We were in Mexico City and then in Chiapas for a month-long artist residency, working on new music there and helping develop an art space. There are also tentative plans of bringing the band to India later this year; we've been wanting to do this for a few years now. Then there may be an opportunity to do some compositions for a film. And after that, a boat tour around the Mediterranean basin; and a year of going around the southern hemisphere, collecting sounds and making friends, eating from what I can make off music and doing medicine for free. ■