



AROJOJ AFTAB

A DEEPER LEVEL OF CASUAL COOL
BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

Vocalist Arooj Aftab has been declared (in an oft-repeated quote from *Uncut* magazine) “the coolest rock star in the world right now.” Her last album, 2024’s *Night Reign*, was released by Verve—home to Billie Holiday and the Velvet Underground—and earned her a GRAMMY nomination for Best Alternative Jazz Album. A song from that record, “Raat Ki Rani”, was nominated for Best Global Music Performance. And now, a remix of that song by Texan global rock trio Khruangbin has been submitted to this year’s GRAMMY Awards. Eclectic? Maybe so, but labels aside, the results all sound like Aftab.

Her *Night Reign* included appearances by a diverse set of guests: multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaili and pianist Vijay Iyer, with whom she recorded the critically-lauded *Love in Exile*; R&B singer and producer Cautious Clay; singer-songwriter Elvis Costello; poet-vocalist Moor Mother; and vibraphonist Joel Ross. Asked about the seeming cross-breeding genre in anticipation of this month’s four-night run, not at Drom or Mercury Lounge, but at the Blue Note, she responds with a perhaps not uncharacteristic ease. “Miles Davis is the epitome of cool,” she offered on the subject of cool, before explaining that “I didn’t study. No one really taught me how to sing. I’ve never had a real, actual teacher. It’s all by listening to records of those incredible singers and those incredible musicians. I ran those records to the ground.” She continues, “And not just the vocalists, I learned all the solos. I really listened for a long time. And so it’s inherently part of my style. Even though I don’t sing like a jazz vocalist and I don’t sing standards.”

The Pakistani-American Aftab, now 40, taught herself well enough to be an early Pakistani internet star. At 19, she moved to Boston and studied music production and engineering and found her first professional work as a composer scoring films. Soon she was releasing albums that were getting noticed by classical critics and dance music outlets. But it was with 2023’s *Vulture Prince* that she found her voice. Old songs and surprise guests is all she’ll say about the upcoming Blue Note shows, which will arrive on the heels of another stylistic pursuit: she played the Royal Albert Hall with the BBC Orchestra in June, presenting her songs in symphonic arrangements, and will be joining the Dutch Metropole Orkest for a string of concerts in Belgium and the Netherlands the first half of this month, all under the direction of conductor Jules Buckley. “He was the one who approached me and convinced me in the first place that it could be cool,” she says. “And the music is already so cinematic and dramatic and just has all this room for it to be grander, so why not? It’s nice to now embark on yet another world (and) see how it is.” She adds, “The classical world is very alien to me, and so I’m just seeing how that goes, and it’s awesome. It’s like, yes, we love music. We just love it. So whatever is happening is good. The drama is

off the charts.”

Aftab speaks as if things just happen, as if her career blew in with the wind. But she’s a musician who gets things done. Violinist Darian Donovan Thomas has been witness to the singer’s trusting her instincts and shaping bands for a half dozen years. The two connected at a party, which led to a surprise invitation to a recording session a couple of months later. “She called me and said, ‘hey, do you want to come by and record?’, which I thought was pretty insane because she hadn’t heard me play yet,” he recalls with a laugh. Although Donovan didn’t think of himself as an improviser at the time, she set the scene for him to explore. “It was very easy to let things out. She makes these worlds that are easy to sing with for me. She’s just asking for all the music you’ve ever made.” Thomas was in the ensemble for a 2021 show at Brooklyn’s Pioneer Works after only two rehearsals. He remembers her saying “I don’t believe in wasting music. Obviously you know how to play your instrument, the key is D minor, it’s going to be fine.” It’s a very good mirror to polish,” he says. “I feel like I can see myself better through the work I’ve done with Arooj.”

Aftab is at work on the follow-up to *Night Reign*, due in late 2026. She’s hesitant to go into details, but from a distance it seems like it could be a deeper level of casual cool. “I’m being a little more open, even more open with myself,” she says. “I have all these songs, all this writing that I’ve kept on a shelf, figuratively, because I’ve been focused on creating a sound.” This time around, she says, she’s “loosening the grip” on being sole producer and arranger. “Usually you’re in the studio and people are, ‘How about this? How about this?’ And you’re like, ‘No more new ideas from anybody else,’ you know what I mean?” she explains. “This time I’m open to things. I don’t know where it’s going to land. It’s giving me room for focusing a little more on maybe taking up more space as a singer, which I seldom do. And then, yeah, writing my own thoughts, being my poetic self, which I usually am, and just articulating some things in words, not being so minimalist with the lyrics. It’s opening up some really interesting spaces.”

For more info visit aroojaftab.com. Aftab is at Blue Note Nov. 20-23. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Arooj Aftab — *Bird Under Water* (s/r, 2015)
- Arooj Aftab — *Siren Islands* (New Amsterdam, 2018)
- Arooj Aftab — *Vulture Prince* (New Amsterdam, 2021)
- Arooj Aftab, Vijay Iyer, Shahzad Ismaili — *Love in Exile* (Verve, 2023)
- Arooj Aftab — *Live in London* (Verve, 2023)
- Arooj Aftab — *Night Reign* (Verve, 2024)



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