

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION



Niyaz

The Fourth Light

Electro-acoustic outfit **Niyaz** breaks new ground on ***The Fourth Light***, a far-reaching album that defies the conventions of “world music” and makes a bold statement to a global audience. After three successful albums which have topped the world music sales and radio charts and placed them in front of audiences around the world, Niyaz has created what is arguably their most mature work yet. Mixed by Grammy nominated producer/electronic musician **Damian Taylor (Bjork, The Killers, Arcade Fire)**, the album offers exotic rhythms, outstanding acoustic performances and of course the bewitching melancholy of front-woman Azam Ali's voice, all seamlessly blended into a production of richly textured arrangements, sweeping choruses and electronic beats. The band's musical, and personal heritage lies in the mysticism and allure of the East; but Niyaz was formed in California and is based in Montreal, and one of their aims has long been to build a bridge between East and West - a sanctuary from a modern world of polarized ideologies.

On *The Fourth Light*, lead singer, co-composer and co-producer Azam Ali takes on the role of electronic musician for the first time, programming all the beats for the album. This is a major achievement for a woman who until now has been principally recognized for her spellbinding voice, which has been featured in some of the biggest Hollywood film and television scores. "It was a tremendous challenge to take on what is generally a very masculine role," Azam says. "People know me as a singer, not an electronic musician, and there was an initial fear that I would not be taken seriously. Once I freed myself up mentally from that self-imposed limitation, I discovered a whole new world inside myself, a world that led me to my greatest personal triumph on this album, which was transcending the role that had come to define me simply as a singer."

In many ways, *The Fourth Light* is a feminist album. The production and programming duties that Azam has taken on – duties usually associated with men – is just one part of it. At the center of the album is Rabia Al Basri, the first female Sufi mystic and poet. Born in the 8th century in what is now Iraq, she served as the main source of inspiration for the music on this album. Rabia was born into extreme poverty during a time when women's rights were severely constrained. Sold into slavery at a young age, Rabia defied the odds and managed to find the inner strength and resolve that would eventually lead to her liberation both as a woman and a spiritual figure. As Azam explains, "Rabia's struggles even in the 8th century remain quite relevant to our time, when women continue to strive to rise above the status of inferiority placed upon them by many patriarchal societies around the world."

Rabia is credited with the creation of the concept of "Divine Love," which today lies at the heart of Sufi Mysticism. Though only fragments of her poems have survived, the words that do remain carry a powerful message. Her writing served as the building blocks upon which Azam and co-writer/multi-instrumentalist Loga R.Torkian constructed three of the album's most potent songs: "Tam e Eshq (The Taste of Love)," "Man Haramam (I am a Sin)," and "Marg e Man (My Elegy)."

The song "Aurat (Woman)," further drives home the cry for gender equality. The track's lyrics are based on a visionary poem by Kaifi Azmi, one of the greatest, most progressive Urdu poets of the 20th century. Azmi's original text was written for his wife in the 1940's and called for women to stand shoulder to shoulder with men, during an era when women lived in very traditional societies in an India that was still not independent.

There has always been a deep social conscience woven into the music of Niyaz. Though many of their songs are original compositions based on or inspired by ancient poetry of the great Eastern mystics, a large part of their repertoire is derived from traditional folk songs of ethnic and religious minority groups in the Middle East who have suffered great oppression. The new album features five of these folk songs: "Shir Ali Mardan (Song of a Warrior)," from the Bakhtiari region of Iran; "Yek Naza (A Single Glance)," from Khorassan, Iran; "Eyvallah Shahim 'new rendition' (Truth)," from the Alevi-Bektashi tradition in Turkey; and two from Afghanistan, "Sabza Ba Naz (The Triumph of Love)," and "Khuda Bowad Yaret (Divine Companion)."

The message of hope in the face of oppression, and the need for unity, remain pivotal to the band. Their sublime, ever-evolving mix of poetry and song is delivered through music that is both uplifting and transformative. Niyaz already bridges East and West, the acoustic and the electronic; now the band aspires to restore a severed bond between the past and the present. "It's a daring task to try and bridge the chasm between peoples," says Azam, "but if we can make that happen, even for the moments when people listen to our music, then who's to say we did not triumph in our goal?"

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