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Niyaz Honors 8th-Century Mystic on 'Feminist' Album 'The Fourth Light' (Exclusive)

By Eric R. Danton



Niyaz — Courtesy of the artists.

It was with a mix of dismay and delight that **Niyaz** singer **Azam Ali** discovered **Rabia al-Basri**, an 8th-century Muslim saint and poet regarded as the first female Sufi mystic, who introduced the doctrine of Divine Love. Her life and work became the central theme of Niyaz's new album, "**The Fourth Light**," which premieres today on Speakeasy.

"I fell in love with her story, I fell in love with the few poems she left behind," Ali says.

The nine-track album features Ali singing in Farsi, Dari, Turkish and Urdu over hypnotic electronic beats that she programmed, with accompaniment from her co-writer and husband, **Loga Ramin Torkian**, on

keyboards and various Middle Eastern stringed instruments, and a cast of other supporting players. Ali based the lyrics on al-Basri's teachings and, in three cases, her surviving poetry.

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"It was a revelation, discovering her," says Ali, who was born in Iran before attending boarding school in India and moving to Los Angeles as a teen. She and Torkian now live in Montreal. "On the one hand, I was very upset that as an Eastern woman we had never learned about this very important character in our history, and on the other hand, it was so wonderful to find a woman from the 8th century who struggled with the same things we are struggling with now."

By that, she means issues of gender inequality and violence against women, in their most severe forms in the Middle East and India, but also in the form of the gender pay gap that persists in the West. "More and more we are hearing about these stories, and women are standing up," Ali says.

"The Fourth Light" represents a personal milestone for her, too: it's the first Niyaz album on which she did all the programming. Original member **Carmen Rizzo** played that role on the band's first three releases before departing in 2013.

"For me, it tied into the whole philosophy of the album, which is in many ways a very feminist album: a woman coming into her own," Ali says. "By the end of it, I have filled a very male-dominated role."

"The Fourth Light" is due March 23 on Six Degrees Records. What do you think of the album? Leave your thoughts in the comments.

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