

MONTREAL - The toy room in the Mile End home of Azam Ali and Loga Ramin Torkian is more than the headquarters of their 4-year-old son, Iman. It also works quite nicely as a symbolic entry point into the boundary-crossing music of their group, Niyaz.

Iman's lack of concern over what language or style he is listening to – typical for a child – allows him to simply enjoy music without prejudice, singer Ali said. To her, that openness has become a mission statement for the mystical Middle Eastern roots music of Niyaz, which is modernized and textured by electronica.

“Experiencing music from Iman's perspective is what drives and motivates us: being able to tap into that part of each of us where we are one, where those boundaries that are created through culture and religion just dissolve,” Ali said during a recent interview at the couple's home.

Both Ali and Torkian were born in Iran and lived in Los Angeles until they moved to Montreal three years ago. They know something about boundaries that exist between people.

The new Niyaz disc, *Sumud*, pays tribute to the spirit of minority groups around the world, and their struggle for respect and dignity. Ali said she has been in a minority since she was 4, when her mother sent her from Iran to a boarding school in India. Her mother was able to join her only when she escaped from Iran in 1983, years after the country's 1979 revolution. Mother and daughter emigrated to Los Angeles in 1985, when Ali was 15.

Torkian was sent by his father to Eugene, Ore., in 1979, in the wake of the revolution. He was 14. Two years later, he, too, moved to Los Angeles to pursue his education. The multi-instrumentalist was leading the band *Axiom of Choice* when he met Ali, who was in the alt-world group *Vas*. In 2005, they both decided it was time to move on from their respective projects and do something a bit more electronic, Torkian said.

Keyboard player and programmer Carmen Rizzo, the third member of the group, provides the electro shading that brings the traditional poetry and folk music of the couple's native country into an ear-catching, up-to-the-minute musical setting.

“Our idea was to really create a hybrid,” Ali said. “A lot of times, you hear electronic music and it's just a beat and then they slap on the vocal or the instrument as an afterthought. For us, it was important to have this emphasis on the song structure and to have the performances of the acoustic instruments really come through.”

But it was a delicate balancing act. “Often modernization and westernization get confused,” Ali said. “People want to be part of the modern world and they think, in order to do that, they have to become westernized. The idea for us is that it is possible to do something very modern but still have deep roots and culture.”

Torkian said the purist mentality in world music sometimes creates a stigma around electronic textures, but he questioned the logic. “As soon as you put a mic in front of an instrument or vocalist, you are already going electronic. The most purist musicians on stage immediately ask for reverb, so you're already manipulating the sonic spectrum,” he said.

“When you decide to consciously manipulate sounds and put them in a different context, it's just accepting that this is part of our modern life and our technology and saying, ‘Let's just explore it and discover and see where we can go with this process,’ ” he said.

The group, both agreed, has a mission beyond its sonic agenda. “Niyaz became an

autobiographical project for us,” Ali said. “We wanted to tell the story of our generation of Iranian immigrants.”

For them, Montreal became a part of that story in 2005 when the newly formed Niyaz was invited to perform at Lafontaine Park’s Théâtre de Verdure. A free outdoor show at the 2006 Montreal International Jazz Festival clinched their love for the city, as visits stretched into two-week stays. Papers were soon filed and they moved here in 2009.

The title of Sumud, available next week, refers to a Palestinian ideology and translates as steadfastness. Although sumud’s philosophy of non-violent resistance originated in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the theme of Niyaz’s disc is the application of sumud to any part of the world where there are ethnic or religious minorities trying to live freely in the land of their birth and maintain their identity.

As a teenager living in America, Ali said, she was ashamed to answer when she was asked where she was from, because of what she saw as a negative perception of Iranians. “That can really wear you down and break your spirit,” she said. “In my 20s, I came to terms with it. You learn to make it work.”

The climate in the United States after 9/11 is what helped make up their minds to leave, Torkian said. “The negative media campaign constantly eats away at you and your sense of confidence and the way you are willing to embrace your own culture,” he said. “Eventually, you have to say, with a certain level of conviction, ‘I embrace it. I know who I am and where I came from and I’m going to hold on to it.’ ”

Nonetheless, both are learning French and say things have changed greatly in what they call, in Ali’s words, “the best home we’ve had.” They have found the occasional person coming up to them when they are conversing in Farsi in a park and asking what language they are speaking, Ali said. “And they say, ‘It’s so beautiful.’ And I’ll look at Loga and say, ‘Did they really just say that?’ Never once in my 25 years in America did anybody tell me my language was beautiful.”

Niyaz performs Saturday at 8:30 p.m. at L’Astral, 305 Ste. Catherine St. W. Tickets: \$24.50, \$28.70 at the door. 514-790-1245; [www.admission.com](http://www.admission.com). Sumud is released on May 22.

With the launch of the One Wo/Man Band Festival – more eloquently titled in French as Festival de musique solitaire – it now looks as if every concept for a music festival has officially been taken.

The event, which starts Friday and runs through Sunday, showcases the talents of one-man and one-woman acts – singer-songwriters, loop artists, DJs and the like. Among the 18 acts on the schedule are Bloodshot Bill, Jenn Mierau, Armen at the Bazaar, Wax Mannequin, Lederhosen Lucil, Molly Sweeney, Jon Cohen Experimental and Jesse Dangerously.

The action takes place at Casa del Popolo, Divan Orange and L’Envers. Tickets cost \$12 per night, \$22 for two nights or \$32 for three nights. To buy them and find out more about the event, go to [www.onemanbandfest.com](http://www.onemanbandfest.com).

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