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The Drums of India Hip-Hop Toward a Hit



Rahav Segev for The New York Times

Suphala playing the tablas at Joe's Pub last Monday night.

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AMONG musicians New York City is what is known as a tough town. And as a young musician named Suphala learned one Thursday night late this month, that is never more obvious than when you are playing to a boisterous room full of alcohol-fortified partygoers on the small Indian drum called the tabla.

The setting was the Greenwich Village town house of Diane Von Furstenberg, where, at the behest of the author Salman Rushdie, a fan, Suphala had been invited to play the tabla with her band at a party honoring the writers' organization PEN. The crowd of around 200 quieted briefly as Padma Lakshmi, Mr. Rushdie's wife, introduced Suphala as a new talent worthy of their ears. Suphala sat cross-legged, the custom for tabla players, and began to play the intricate, ancient rhythms of her instrument. No sooner had she begun than the party resumed at full blast. The gig lasted all of three pieces.

"That wasn't fun for us at all," Suphala said later. "The whole point of performing is connecting with your listener. I'd rather have stayed in my room and practiced."

In the last few weeks Suphala has had a kind of coming out, playing at Tonic, Joe's Pub and Ms. Von Furstenberg's in an effort to see how well the spiritual tabla - and by extension her career - will play in the hot zone of materialism and egotism that is New York. At 30, with brown irises the size of nickels and seductively flowing black ringlets, Suphala, her record company is convinced, is the person who can once again popularize a musical instrument that last had its moment in this country in the late 1960's and early 70's, when the Indian tabla master Alla Rakha and the sitarist Ravi Shankar played the Monterey Pop Festival and Woodstock.

Creating a career around an instrument as obscure to Americans as the tabla takes savvy as much as talent. In the 60's crossing over into the mainstream required jamming with hippies in dashikis and getting the endorsement of George Harrison. In the postmillennial era it means laying down hip-hop rhythms for happening D.J.'s, wearing haute couture on your album cover and, maybe most important, getting Norah Jones to sing a track on your CD.

"We want to share her with any crowd," said Donna D'Cruz, the founder of Rasa Music, Suphala's record company, and the wife of Tom Silverman, who started Tommy Boy Records. "It should be Tonic as much as Diane Von Furstenberg's. The challenge is to make it palatable and to create a bridge between cultures, and we think having a jazz influence and a connection to hip-hop is the way to do it."

Though Suphala, who trained in India with tabla masters, is not naïve about the realities and perils of pop music - in the mid-90's she toured with Perry Farrell, and she is friendly with Sean Lennon and Vernon Reid - she said she is uneasy promoting herself as a pop musician.

"I've always kept in mind paying respect to where this art came from," she said. "The idea of marketing, those two worlds don't overlap." When her producers suggested she wear a miniskirt on her CD cover, Suphala said she told them, "I wouldn't be caught dead like that on a record cover."

There have been a few compromises. Suphala - the name means fruitfulness in Sanskrit - dropped her last name, Patankar, for simplicity's sake. In the photographs accompanying her CD, "The Now," she's clad in Jean Paul Gauthier and Dolce & Gabbana and displays a J. Lo-style make-over.

One song, "The Lover," contains a mix of the voices of Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith reading a Deepak Chopra translation of a poem by Rabindranath Tagore.

SUPHALA grew up in Minneapolis. Her father, a mechanical engineer who owns a software company, and her mother, a medical technician and computer programmer, emigrated to the United States from near Bombay. Suphala started playing piano at age 4 and in her teens became transfixed by the complex rhythms of the tabla, small drums of goatskin stretched over rosewood or copper frames.

They are played not simply with crude slaps but also with rapid taps of the fingers, producing multisyllabic patterns that mimic human speech. She bought her first tabla at 17.

The writer Suketu Mehta, long a friend of Suphala's, said that for a young Indian woman with musical aspirations the tabla was an odd choice.

"It's the equivalent of finding a female drummer in a rock 'n' roll band," he said. "It's not unheard of, but it's unusual."

Music for the tabla is passed down orally from player to player, so the path to mastery almost always involves studying with a guru. At 18 Suphala managed through an acquaintance to get an invitation to audition in Bombay before the venerated Alla Rakha Qureshi, known in India simply as Allarakha. (Zakir Hussein, his son and student, who lives near San Francisco, is considered one of the best tabla players in the world.) Alla Rakha was known to take poor tabla playing as an offense.

"It was nerve-racking to play in front of him anytime, but the first time especially," Suphala said. "Afterward he said, 'From now on you can study with me and Zakir, but no one else.' "

On that trip Suphala lived in Bombay for three months. Over the next eight years, until Alla Rakha died in 2000, she made annual trips to study with him, each lasting three to six months, staying in the servants' quarters of his family's apartment by the sea. Back home she spent hours practicing each day. Though she enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute, Suphala said, "I was much more into tabla than into college."

It was in San Francisco in 1996 that she got her first big chance to take the tabla into the mainstream. Perry Farrell, the singer for Jane's Addiction and at the time the frontman of the band Porno for Pyros, stopped in to see her perform at a club. After the show Mr. Farrell invited Suphala to join his troupe, which then included a contortionist and two women who did a fire-breathing routine on stilts during concerts. The tour was cut short by financial problems and after one of the women on stilts caught fire during a show.

"It was very much a rock 'n' roll experience," Suphala said. "I was the most sober person on the tour."

She moved to Park Slope, Brooklyn, in 1999 and quickly found that in New York, where guitarists and vocalists are as plentiful as pigeons, tabla players are scarce and in demand by musicians bent on finding new sounds. She met Mr. Reid, the guitarist, at a party and with an electric autoharpist, they formed an avant-garde trio.

After hearing Norah Jones, the daughter of Ravi Shankar, sing at the Knitting Factory in 2002, Suphala introduced herself and asked the singer if she wouldn't mind stopping by her apartment to record some vocal tracks. Ms. Jones obliged, not long before her first album orbited her into international stardom. Ms. Jones's contribution is the first song on Suphala's CD.

Last year at a party at Bungalow 8, Suphala met Mr. Rushdie, Ms. Lakshmi, Mr. Lennon and Harper Simon, the son of Paul Simon. Within days she was jamming in the studio with Mr. Lennon, the younger Mr. Simon and Edie Brickell, the singer, who is married to Paul Simon. Mr. Rushdie offered to help promote her music.

Mr. Mehta said that Suphala has been able to make connections in New York, especially among musicians, in part because she straddles Indian and American culture.

"Because she's American and can talk about the tabla, she can make it accessible to people," he said. "People respond to it."

While Americans may need the tabla explained to them, that was not the case in Kabul, Afghanistan, where Suphala traveled in January to inaugurate a new concert hall. Word that a student of Allarakha and Zakir Hussein was in the country made the national television news, and the concert hall was packed by locals and master musicians. Few of them, if any, had ever seen a woman play tabla.

"They really seemed to be celebrating," Suphala said. "They said no musician had come for 20 years, so it was a big deal to them that someone came and just that they were recognized."

At Joe's Pub on Monday night about 75 people showed up to see Suphala perform with a trumpeter and violinist. The reception was warm but more understated than her Kabul concert, though there were a few yelps for Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" and a far-out version of Ravel's "Bolero."

"It's definitely more enjoyable to have a more enthusiastic audience," Suphala said. "But that's part of the challenge. You don't want it to be too easy."



Suphala's CD