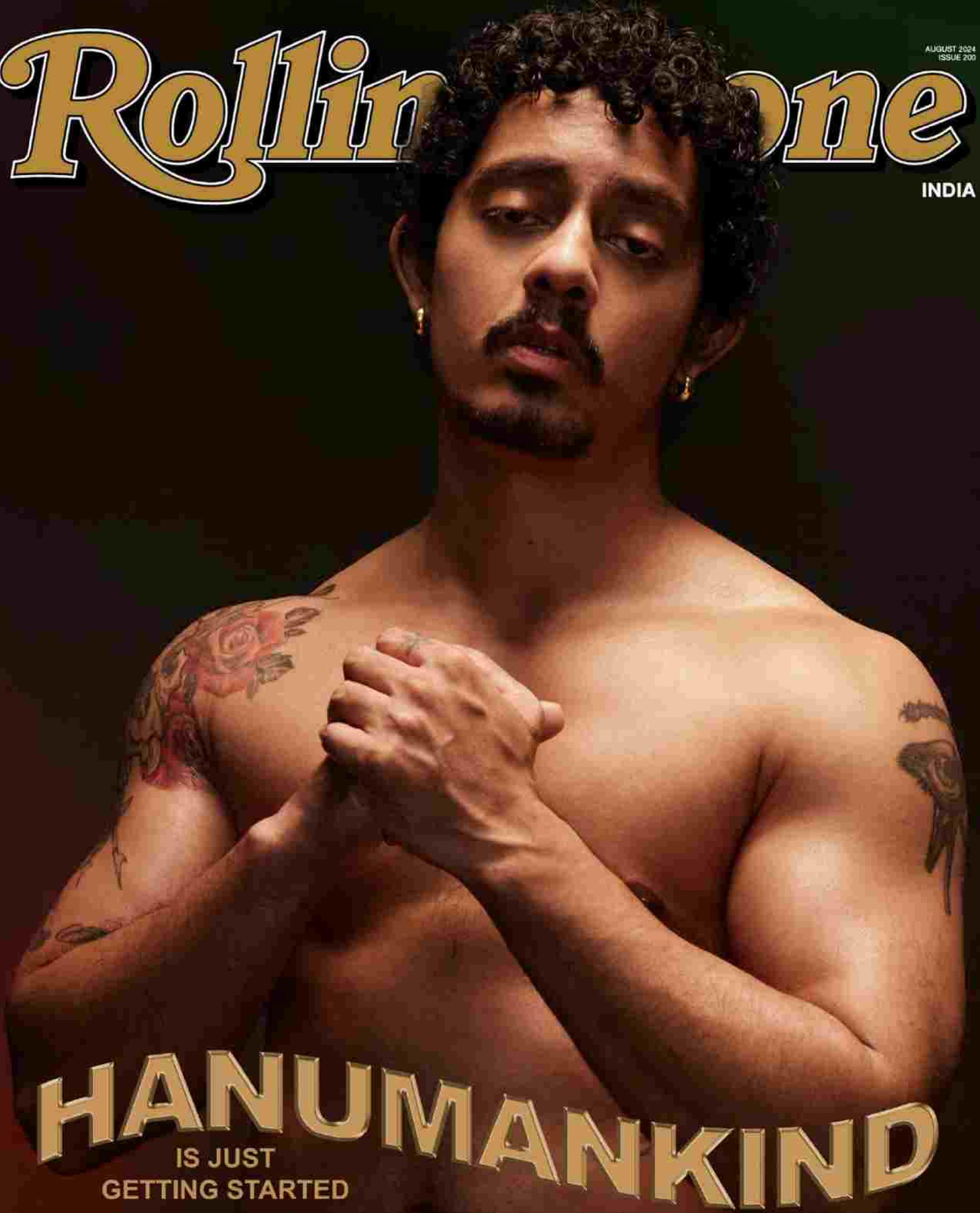


Rollin' One

AUGUST 2024
ISSUE 200

INDIA



HANUMANANKIND
IS JUST
GETTING STARTED

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ISSUE 200
'ALL THE NEWS
THAT FITS'



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“Shakira can stand tall and even more empowered than ever before.”

— Arjesh Shah



Hwasa Hits a Home Run

Hwasa's honesty and the depth of character shone through, especially in reflections on balance—artistic integrity versus the demands placed by one's career. Her candid discussion of struggles with self-confidence and making a life worthy of fans' respect had been both very motivating and quite relatable. It feels so refreshing to see an artist, so set on really being herself, yet always evolving.

- Yashasvi Chillar

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Shakira Is The Artist for All Times

It feels like no matter how much can happen in Shakira's life, she can stand tall and even more empowered than ever before in the face of it all. Seeing her navigate art, life, parenthood and everything else made me a bigger fan of

her than ever before. Of course, I'm here for her music, but now I'm understanding so much that drives this globally beloved star. Lucky are those who get to see her scale up and come back like never before on her upcoming tour.



Omega X Are Proof of Second Chances

I really loved your interview with Omega X. Candid thoughts on conquering adversities and finding their place in the idol world are inspiring. Their unique journey, full of trials, has only strengthened their bond with each other and their fans. The depth of this piece brings us closer to their story.

- Michelle Fernandes



SPOTLIGHT

Purva Mantri Is Taking Over

Being an Indian in the U.S., I'm hyped to read about Purva Mantri's tour of the United States. It is really inspirational how devoted she is to transmitting real Indian culture to the outside world. I can't wait to see her perform with the Nashik dhol; really it puts such a strong cultural edge on her performances.

- Dhavan Patil

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Shreya Jain Brings Classical Vocal Training to New EP 'Bawari'

Mumbai pop singer-composer, who dropped the first single 'Kaahe' with a video, teams up producers like Bluk, lyricist Juno, singer Sanah Moidutty, R&B/pop artist The Rish rapper Gravity and more across four tracks

MUMBAI-BASED pop artist Shreya Jain offers the first glimpse of her debut EP *Bawari* with the song "Kaahe," where producer Bluk's house music approach goes over Jain's classical vocal melodies about a magnetic kind of attraction, with lyrics by songwriter Juno.

Jain explains that her four-track EP *Bawari* goes in all directions, from bringing in rapper Gravity to Tamil vocals by artist Sanah Moidutty, all the while retaining her classical vocal roots. Jain says, "I think I just wanted to do crazy things in the EP, that's why I've called it *Bawari*."

Like we hear in "Kaahe," Jain has specifically picked melodies inspired by Hindustani classical music for *Bawari* EP. She grew up hearing traditional music and received training from her father, vocalist Surmani Shyam Jain. "My father's riyaz [practice] used to be the alarm for me to wake up," she says with a laugh.

Although it came naturally to her, she was "very scared" to finally share the EP with her father, although he liked it. Jain says, "I'm always very scared to present a song to him. I was surprised [at his reaction]. He usually will find at least 10 mistakes in each song of mine. I was surprised that he was really impressed. He was happy, and he was very proud. He was asking me, 'Kisne compose kiya hai? (Who composed this?) I was like, 'Papa, I did.'"

In a way, the songs off *Bawari* are Jain's way of taking ahead her father's

45-year classical music legacy ahead into a world where Indian music is slowly finding it easier to gain global acceptance. "I want to represent the culture of India and this is a great opportunity," she says.

In addition to Bluk, Juno, Gravity, The Rish and Moidutty, *Bawari* brings in producer Nakul Chugh on two tracks, beatsmith Dropped Out, artist Saahel and songwriter Shayra Apoorva. Jain says it took "lots of effort, lots of patience" to make sure the project's collaborations all took off. "I think

"I want to talk about love in a very old-school way"

collaboration is what makes a song 10 times better." Jain says she picked up on potential collaborators based on recommendations (like Gravity) and other times, just following the work of other artists she felt would be a good fit for the eventual time she would make an EP.

After working with Kerala producer Pina Colada Blues and producer Vaibhav Pani on "Ratiya" last year, Jain says she received a lot of tracks from producers in her DMs and email. Among them was Bluk's demo for what eventually became "Kaahe." She adds,

"I think Bluk initiated this EP. He sent me this track almost a year back, and then boom, then I decided I want to make an entire EP out of this [kind of approach]." She professes being a longtime fan of artists like Moidutty and The Rish, who appear on different songs.

The predominant vibe of the four-track *Bawari* EP is classical vocals over futuristic production. "I want to talk about love in a very old-school way. There's a particular language that I have kept in in few of the songs, that is the braj bhasha," Jain says about the lyrical concerns on the EP.

While she counters that the songs on the EP are not intentionally under the three-minute mark just to cater to social media formats, she's more detached from the expectation of betting on these new songs to necessarily be a hit. "As independent artists, I think we're not at a point where we can predict or bet on a song. You can obviously bet on a message, but you cannot bet on a sound or a kind of melody or particular production approach. Everybody is just trying and seeing what works," Jain says.

The goal to release an EP was jotted down in her calendar back in December 2023, part of a larger planned schedule for 2024. To that end, there's another single coming in October that Jain says she's been "holding for two years" and working with Chugh on her father's full-length album, which is more raag based.

ANURAG TAGAT

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Ereimang Return with Manipuri Folk-Meets-Rock on 'Heirangkhoi'

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Project founder Kamal Singh talks about filming the video late last year and the success of their debut single 'Kwakta Lamjel'

MANIPURI FOLK/noise-rock project Ereimang's second song "Heirangkhoi" brings heavy riffs and powerful Manipuri vocals from singer Nganthoibi Ningthouja to a song about the cycle of life and relationships.

Their first release of the year, "Heirangkhoi" follows Ereimang's debut single "Kwakta Lamjel" from 2023 which introduced the band founded by Bengaluru-based artist Kamal Singh. The new song comes with a music video directed by Heisnam Shantanu and shot by Khaba Maimom carrying forward their inclination for storytelling through ancient tribal tales, dance forms (with performers Ningthouja and Purnima Yengkokpam) and of course, heavy rock riffs.

Looking back at the success of "Kwakta Lamjel," which has over 400,000 views on YouTube, Singh – who also makes music under the

moniker Hoirong and was part of alternative act Lounge Piranha – says he had a feeling the project's first song would do well, but it went well beyond that. "I didn't think it would be like nothing I've done in my life and received at the level it has," he says with a laugh.

Does it set a new bar for all subsequent Ereimang songs? "I guess it does, but I don't want it, I don't want it to be like that. That's a slippery slope," Singh says, laughing again. He adds, "I thought this was something people might resonate with. I also do see it happening on stage." Like with their first song, Ereimang brings in drummer Reagan Yumnam and guitarist Gajendra. Singh says, "Now, the focus is on getting it ready for performances and Gajendra and Nitin [Shamurailatpam, vocalist-guitarist in Lo! Peninsula] will be a lot more involved."



With visuals taking us straight to the forests and landscapes of Manipur, "Heirangkhoi" was filmed in late 2023 amid the ongoing violence in the North East Indian state. Singh says, "There was one day we had to cancel shooting because there was a lot of trouble happening. There was no internet at that time also."

Singh had gone over for relief work and it coincided with the video shoot for the song. In one particular scene, Singh and the band are performing in an open paddy field. "It was kind of risky because we were out in the open and just in front of us, there was another settlement on the hill. Anything could've happened, but we thought we had to do this." ANURAG TAGAT

YOUTUBE

How Indian Ocean's Nikhil Rao Created Videogame Music for 'Detective Dotson'

Guitarist-composer worked with the mystery-adventure game (and animated series) creator Shalin Shodhan, who also plays flute

A NEW VIDEOGAME from Ahmedabad-based Masala Games called *Detective Dotson* takes inspiration from the likes of Bollywood as well as cult shows like C.I.D. with music by guitarist-composer Nikhil Rao and the game's creator (and flutist) Shalin Shodhan.

Rao, who is part of fusion legends Indian Ocean, says it's his first time "attempting to score a game." He adds, "I was looking for this kind of challenge but didn't want to bite more than I could chew. Shalin of course was overseeing the entire thing so I was reassured I'd have a soft landing. I asked the talented producer Sharad Joshi to help me out and it was great to jam with friends."

Detective Dotson - coming soon to PC via Steam and Xbox - has an episodic-style story that unfolds over a richly stylized 2D-meets-3D rendition of modern-day India, developed using

the game engine Unity. True to its influence from Bollywood, it remains lighthearted, with the protagonist being described as an aspiring actor who reluctantly takes on detective work.

Rao recounts that in terms of cues and creative direction from Shodhan to make music for the game, he didn't load up his head with too many ideas during the pre-production stage. Rao adds, "Shalin and I are the same age and grew up in the same time and place - we have similar cultural references in India and globally. He had a very strong vision of what he wished to achieve with the game and the series so I just tried to listen to him carefully and pick on things he left unsaid."

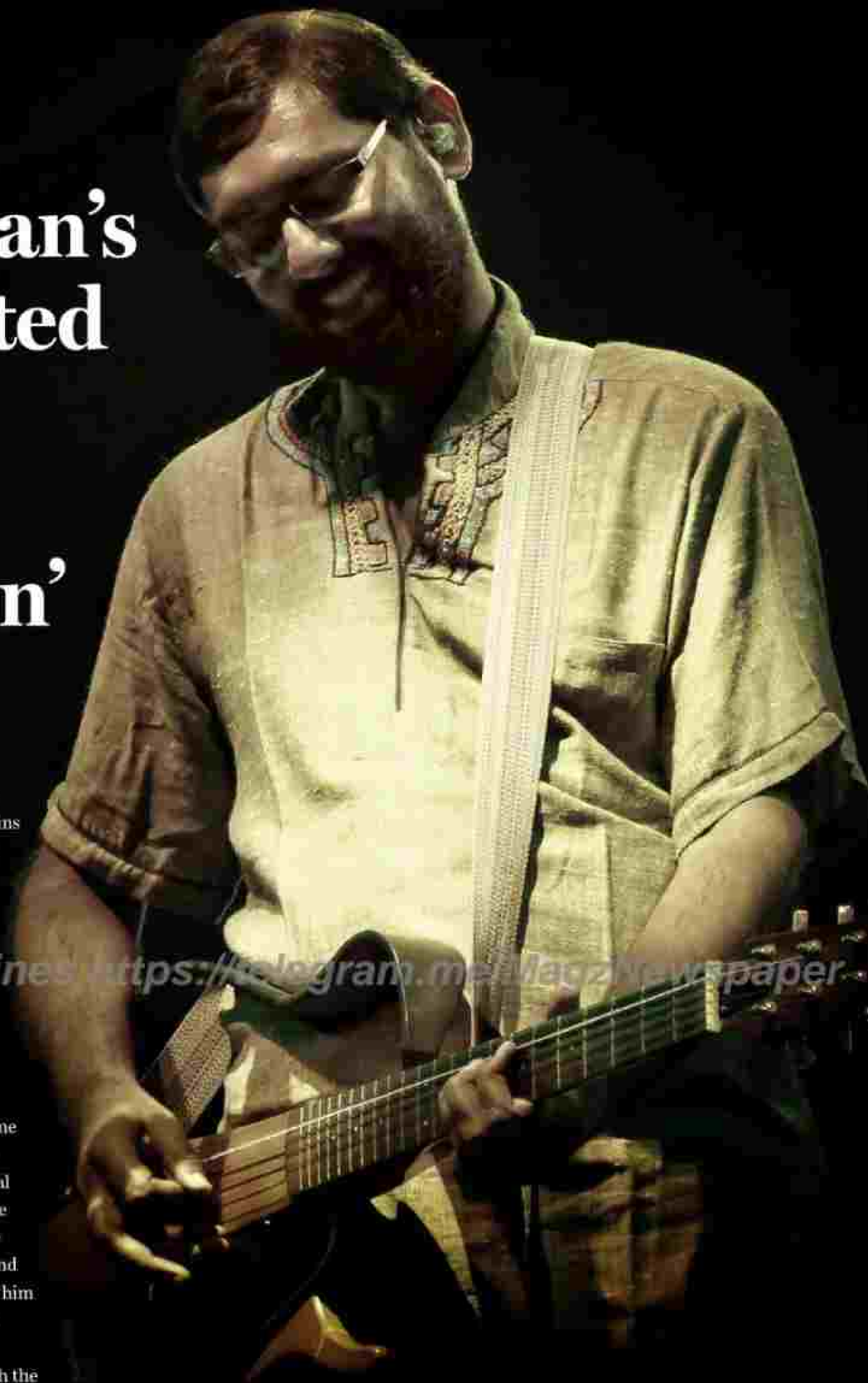
To have one's music pieces match the rhythm of the game can be challenging at times and Rao describes it as "the

biggest challenge" to think about the "tradeoff between music and visuals." He adds, "We count music in beats and bars and visuals in frames and seconds. Oftentimes you have to compromise on one of the two. If you are lucky, serendipity happens and things fit nicely. Sometimes you have to let go of a few musical ideas for the overall health of the product."

Rao has created a few versions of the main theme of *Detective Dotson* and says it was fun to keep arranging the same sonic motif in different styles to cater to each situation in the game.

Encouraged into composing music for the visual medium by his bandmates in Indian Ocean, Rao says he wants this to be the first of many more videogame scoring gigs and hopes more artists join the pool. "Indie musicians are falling over themselves to bag OTT projects, which is fine. But gaming is a growing industry in India and if musicians can be alert to the huge opportunity coming our way with more and more quality Indian games being made, I think *sab ke ghar mein roti hoga aur struggle kam hoga* (everyone will earn and struggle less)." ANURAG TAGAT

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K-Drama Flashback: 'Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha'

'Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha,' starring Kim Seon-ho and Shin Min-a, is a quaint, tranquil haven where the burdens of the world seem to melt away and love thrives

HOMETOWN CHA-CHA-CHA (2021) is a beautifully healing K-drama that helped me see that peace isn't a thing you experience when you steer clear of an adverse situation, but rather when you're at peace within it. It's likewise a poignant lesson that while you have your best intentions in doing things and everything you can, it's of little use until the peace of mind prevails; minus that, you can't do well.

Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha is a beautiful love story between two opposites who're fighting their fair share of experiences. The only commonality is the place where they're staying—Gongjin—a gorgeous seaside hamlet full of nature's grandeur, cool breeze, gentle serenade of seabirds, gurgling turquoise waters, slow and simple life, delicious seafood, and sweet locals. It's "a beautiful and shining day" there every day and surely conjures up that idyllic "romantic Sunday" that dreams are made of, the one we all hope to experience once in a lifetime.

Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha rolls the moment Yoon Hye-jin (Shin Min-a) meets Hong Du-sik (Kim Seon-ho). Hye-jin, a highly decorated dentist, moves from her affluent world in Gangnam, Seoul, to Gongjin for a change when her career is suddenly derailed. At Gongjin, where the rhythm of life ebbs and flows in sync with the rhythmic kiss of the waves upon the shore, she chances upon its very beloved town handyman, Du-sik, or Chief Hong. Thus begins this tale of romance, which unfolds like a soft ballet between the beauty of nature and the depths of the human heart.

Hye-jin is a high-achieving perfectionist, modern posh,



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*HOMETOWN
CHA-CHA-CHA IS
THE HOME OF THE
SWEETEST
PEOPLE—PEOPLE
WITH LIVES OF
THEIR OWN
AND CHALLENGES
BUT WITH THE
WARMEST HEARTS.*



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and expensive in her tastes and preferences. Almost immediately, she becomes the talk of the town—her ways, her looks—in sharp contrast to Du-sik's carefree style and country manners; he's a free spirit and just indifferent to her high standards. Even so, he's in no position to escape an obvious attraction that keeps creeping in between them as time goes by, and resisting each other's company becomes nearly impossible. The salty breeze whispers secrets of a dark past as it sweeps across their lives on the beach, but it also carries with it the

promise of endless possibilities that could change life for the better.

Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha is the home of the sweetest people—people with lives of their own and challenges but with the warmest hearts. You see them, and you feel that if you could run into people like them, you'd wish you had such company, such heartfelt encounters, and such exchanges. The simple things in life are just so important in life at times—simple conversations, simple routines, and simpleness overall—that are so profound in and of themselves in

making life meaningful and worth living. It's within such a society that the story of two souls, drawn together by the invisible threads of fate, unfolds with beauty and tenderness.

Along the way, we see Du-sik's crisis suppressed underneath that composed, smiling façade. The shadows of the past haunt him even today. He was so upset that he once considered harming himself. It's clear he did need someone to break through that stone in his heart, release his pain, and soothe his wound, which Hye-Jin does for him, and she heals herself in the process. As the sun sets, painting the sky in a breathtaking canvas of yellow, orange, and red, the two lovers, bask along

the sand, their laughter echoing in the breath of wind swirling around them.

Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha, a dazzling artsy opus with the best actors breathing life into the story, becomes a quaint tranquil refuge where the burdens of the outside world seem to melt away, and our gorgeous couple, Du-sik and Hye-jin, find solace in the everyday treasures that abound in Gongjin: the care of neighbors, the strength of friendship and the warmth of the sun upon their skin, the calming caress of the ocean, the intoxicating scent of the blossoms, and the serene beauty of the mountains that stand as silent sentinels guarding their love.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

COURTESY OF TVN

Ameya Saraf: 'I Wanted to Do Music for Life the First Time I Picked Up a Guitar'

Los Angeles-based Indian composer and producer worked his way from the rock scene to assisting pop artist Arjun Kanungo at the latter's Promethean Studio in Mumbai

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THERE ARE A LOT of commonalities shared between Mumbai and Los Angeles, as composer-producer Ameya Saraf can attest.

Both cities are widely regarded as entertainment capitals, reflecting multicultural, dream-chasing inhabitants. There's of course, the great cuisine and the quality of people too. "The major thing that I've found in common is both cities have horrible traffic," Saraf adds with a laugh.

Raised in Mumbai and currently making music for films and TV shows in Los Angeles, Saraf moved from being a studio engineer assisting the likes of pop artist Arjun Kanungo (including the song "Aaya Na Tu" from

2018 with Pakistani artist Momina Mustehsan) to study film scoring at UCLA between 2018 and 2020.

Saraf says life in L.A. was initially feeling “like an uphill battle” but things began falling into place after he gained momentum. He says, “It’s very competitive, and there are a lot of talented people here that will inspire you to improve your craft and do better. The access you have to some of the most talented artists here is definitely unparalleled, and it feels surreal working with people who have worked on some of your favorite things when you were growing up.”

Influenced by progressive rock acts like Pink Floyd and Porcupine Tree, Saraf says the sub-genre’s sprawling, often dexterous and intricate songwriting was “a great education in the technical aspects of music.” He adds, “I have spent hours figuring out songs on my own and learning a lot from it.”

He knew he wanted to “do music for life” right from the moment he picked up a guitar and began playing. Along the way, he showcased his prog influences in Mumbai band *Alis* in the, which was founded around 2012. Writing music for films too happened serendipitously, although it’s fair to say Saraf was already on his way and more than ready for it. “A friend barged into my studio one night asking me to record some music for his short film that needed to be submitted for a film festival in seven hours, in exchange for a few beers. I truly just fell in love with the process of telling a story through scores because I could say a thousand things with probably three notes, and that was something I didn’t know I wanted to do,” he says. By 2015, Saraf had worked on the music score for season two of *24: India*.

Saraf counts working with Arjun Kanungo as a formative experience taking place four years apart. His first-ever internship was at Kanungo’s Promethean Studios. “I think four years later, I got a call from Arjun saying that he was looking to expand his production team to work on his upcoming singles and if I would like to be a part of it,” Saraf says. Before setting off to study at UCLA, Saraf got to work on songs like “Aaya Na Tu.” The producer adds about Kanungo, “It’s incredible to see how deeply he’s



“I fell in love with the process of telling a story through scores. I could say a thousand things with probably three notes”

involved in all aspects of making a song, right from writing to marketing plans itself. It was poetic in a way to finish my journey in India where it started.”

After finishing his program at UCLA, the first project that came his way was to make music for the documentary *Bend Or Break*, which is considered his first score release. Directed by Karan Sharma and Sidhant Sharma, Saraf’s somber yet hopeful score highlighted Mitch Martow’s struggles with the genetic disorder called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.

Saraf says he was “incredibly nervous” to see how his score would be received, but looks back on it as something that went well. He adds,

“Having something like that on my reel allowed me to approach bigger projects, and the music itself would often help me get meetings with directors and producers.”

Once that was done and out, Saraf was able to try more new and experimental approaches to sound for screen. “The funny thing is I am working on a docu-series right now where half of the episode is temped with the score from *Bend Or Break*. It’s definitely a new and weird feeling for me to hear my own score on a temp for something I am working on,” he adds with a laugh.

On what is perhaps the other end of the film spectrum, Saraf got to score music for comedy flick *Not Another*

Church Movie, which released in May and stars the likes of Jamie Foxx and Mickey Rourke. It was a seven-week window that Saraf had to mix jazz, funk and hip-hop, plus orchestral and gospel music elements all in one for the score. He says about his process, “Comedies are actually such a different beast because your score has to be very understated; otherwise, it can change how a scene is perceived. There are many significant characters in the film, and all of them needed their own sort of theme, if not at least a particular vibe.”

Tight deadlines are par for the course in the world of composing music scores and Saraf has had a good number of those kinds of projects to figure out how to work on the fly and not panic. From assisting to now leading the music himself, the composer is well aware that artists are “always known for what we did last.” He adds, “[It’s] definitely more responsibility and more pressure, but I honestly thrive on it.” ANURAG TAGAT

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Zubin Mehta Talks Symphony Orchestra of India Concerts

The Mumbai-born conductor leads a slightly offbeat selection for the SOI Autumn 2024 Season, taking place on Aug. 17 and 18, followed by Aug. 24 and 25

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A YEAR AFTER he conducted the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) at Mumbai's luxurious Jamshed Bhabha Theatre, maestro Zubin Mehta returns to the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) with a sense of satisfaction. "In the last concert, our program included Gustav Mahler's difficult Symphony No. 1, Titan. The musicians did a wonderful job, and I wouldn't have been here again if I wasn't convinced of their abilities," he says.

The 88-year-old Mumbai-born conductor, who had to postpone his original 2022 concert when doctors advised him rest, looks very exuberant before his first rehearsal. What's challenging is that instead of popular composers like Beethoven and Mozart, or forms like the symphony and concerto, Mehta will lead a slightly offbeat selection this time. "After discussing with Khushroo N. Suntook [NCPA chairman] we decided to go ahead and okay the two Strausses," says Mehta.

On August 17 and 18, the program will thus comprise the music of Johann Strauss II (1825-1899), which will include his famous waltzes and sections from his operettas. The show will feature soprano Chen Reiss. On August 24 and 25, Mehta will conduct the repertoire of Richard Strauss (1864-1949). Besides his tone poems Don Juan and Ein Heldenleben, the section will consist of Four Last Songs, rendered by soprano Krassimira Stoyanova.

The shows are being presented by the NCPA and Mehli Mehta Music Foundation, named after the maestro's father. Says Mehta, "I have conducted numerous renowned orchestras, and have come to India often with the Israel and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras, besides the Munich Philharmonic. The

SOI is relatively new, but has some talented musicians. When Khushroo said we must do something to widen their repertoire, I thought of the two Strausses."

The focus was on the music of Vienna. While Johann Strauss II belonged to the musically rich city, Richard Strauss was born in Munich, Germany, but played the role of principal conductor of the Vienna State Opera from 1919 to 1924. Suntook joked, "The choice was easy as Zubin is almost Viennese and has been attracted to the music of Vienna."

Having grown up in Mumbai, Mehta moved to Vienna at the age of 18. He initially studied music under Hans Swarowsky at the Vienna Academy Of Music. He also studied the double bass, but Swarowsky spotted a unique

penchant for conducting in the youngster. After graduating from the Academy, he made his conducting debut with the Tonkünstler Orchestra in Vienna's Musikverein. Later, he won a conductors' competition sponsored by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, and there has been no looking back since.

Mehta recalls, "I got enchanted by the Viennese School. It is something that has remained with me. In fact, this year marks the 150th birth anniversary of Vienna-born composer Arnold Schoenberg, who has been one of my heroes. A whole bunch of activities is being planned in Vienna."

While looking forward to conducting the SOI, Mehta feels it will establish itself better over time. He says, "Each orchestra has its own personality and flexibility. Conducting them is a process that builds up over a period of time. I usually do four or five rehearsals before the final show. During those rehearsals, I choose the kind of approach I will have to deliver the best results," he says, as he leaves for the first rehearsal on this tour. **NARENDRA KUSHNIR**

"When Khushroo said we must do something to widen their repertoire, I thought of the two Strausses"

Sudan on How 'Happy Accidents' Led To His Genre-Defying Debut Album



Mumbai-based producer and multi-instrumentalist launched 'Sudan?' in August with a collab-heavy list of guests including Tejas, Frizzell D'Souza and more

MUMBAI-BASED producer, singer and multi-instrumentalist Sudan aka Pritpal Sudan seemingly becomes a different artist on every song off his 13-track debut album *Sudan?*

Released in June, the artist who first made a mark as part of alt-pop duo Khoya Firdaus hosted a big, collab-heavy launch gig on Aug. 8 at Antisocial in Mumbai, bringing in the likes of Tejas, Frizzell D'Souza, Anoushka Maskey, Bendi and more.

While making a statement as definitive as one does with an album, there's a fine line between being all over the place and presenting a spectrum of sound and Sudan builds upon his love for synth experiments to be the latter across 13 songs.

He's an openhearted singer-songwriter ("Can You?" which goes from acoustic to tabla-infused to electronica), electronic artist who can turn clubs upside down ("Omg"), but also an accidental Midwest emo artist ("Fool" and "Weakness," the latter shapeshifts into electronic music so seamlessly) and finally, a warbling mess that seems to rise above it with a horn section on "Iiiii." Sudan says in an email interview, "The goal of the album for me was to showcase the range of my sound as a producer, so I was more than happy to let my creativity flow in whatever direction it naturally went into."

Inspired by the likes of artists like Tom Misch, Tennyson and more, *Sudan?* was two years in the making, even as Sudan was managing sessions and production work with the likes of Maskey. As it turns out, he was working on most of these new songs simultaneously and the unnamed song that actually started him off on the album didn't eventually make the cut. "Ironically, the last track that I wrote and produced was 'Intro,'" he adds.

To finesse his ideas and arrive at the myriad synth textures and loops heard on the album, Sudan credits "sound designs and happy accidents" as part of the process. He says, "I spend a lot of time exploring new sounds, textures and sound design techniques and that usually results in either me creating a sound exactly like how it is in my head or accidentally coming across something that's even better than I could come up with."

Where the likes of Mumbai singer-producer Nicholson aka Landslands introduced electronic music with singer-songwriter hues – itself a reflection of being inspired by the likes of U.K. artist James Blake – Sudan pushes the sound even further. He's also gotten a little bit of help from other Indian indie artists on his album.

Featuring the likes Lavi on the banger "Trouble," Sudan seems to take every artist's strength and leans into their signature sound. Bendi signature vocals lead "Dreaming," while Bengaluru-based singer-songwriter L'nee Golay is Taylor Swift-like in her poignant questioning on "Aftermath."

A pre-requisite of sorts for Sudan to collaborate was that he would be "so in love with their work," which is perhaps why he says the songs with featured vocalists sound like they belong in those artist's catalog as well. "The point of a collaboration to me is to showcase the collaborator's sound and personality as much as mine even if that means I have to sacrifice a bit of cohesion as a result of that," Sudan says.

At the end of the day, Sudan feels he's an "electronic producer who's obsessed with playing in a band." That said, he's not going to take any time away from production work even as he sets out to take *Sudan?* live on stage this week.

He adds, "In fact, I'm currently producing records for some of the most exciting acts out the country and I will continue working on them while I'm taking the album on the road. A lot of music under different hats coming your way in 2024."

ANURAG TAGAT

KEENAN PEREIRA

Sukha Talks New EP '2003' and the Success of '8 Asle'

The Toronto-based Punjabi artist also looks back at hits like 'Sangdi' and the EP 'Undisputed'

WHEN YOU'RE a Punjabi artist like Sukha who has delivered songs like "8 Asle" and "Attraction" within a year, there's understandable pressure to top your work with each next release. The Indo-Canadian artist counts it as "positive pressure," though.

He tells Rolling Stone India over an email interview, "[It's the pressure] to outdo ourselves and ensure our audience receives the best music possible from us."

Working with the likes of his previous go-to collaborators like producer Prodig, lyricist-singer Chani Nattan and singer Gurlez Akhtar on 2003 EP, Sukha, 20, had released "Sangdi" in May with producer Manni Sandhu that had a laidback loverboy R&B vibe. Sukha says, "I definitely want to explore more romantic songs this year, and 'Sangdi' was the perfect start to that."

It was in November that Sukha released *Undisputed* EP with songs like the 50 Cent and Jazzy B-inspired "8 Asle," "Armed" and "Godfather" and counts it as a "blessing" for it to get Canadian Gold certification. Understandably, it's a "great honor" for this to happen as Sukha had completed his "first full year in the industry." He adds, "It feels extra special when you see mainstream artists like Drake and Nav receive those same honors. Being right there is meaningful, and it's great to see Punjabi and South Asian music growing so quickly in North America and the rest of the world."

He hopes to repeat the success of songs like "8 Asle," representing a new wave of Punjabi music that resonates globally alongside the likes of Nattan, who had his own hit "Daku" in 2021 with Punjabi artist Inderpal Moga.

Sukha says, "Chani possesses a unique talent for understanding precisely what resonates with listeners. He has remarkable versatility."

Staying on "8 Asle," he also calls it the song which has his favorite lyrics "Munde kalian pughan alay ah." He says, "This lyric especially when you perform it and the whole crowd screams with immense energy, just makes it significant. To have a lyric that represents young people who look like me and are proud to wear their turbans is a great feeling."

With songs like "In My Feels" and "Hey Lav" from 2003 EP, Sukha is perhaps digging into the challenge of finding fresher ways to write about themes like love. He says they draw from their "day-to-day experiences or things we've seen or felt." Sukha adds, "Sometimes it's as simple as telling a story or making music that you can enjoy in your car or at the gym or even while reminiscing. Certain songs like '21 Questions' [from *Undisputed* EP] draw from personal experiences which give them deep meaning."

Fresh off a tour that promoted *Undisputed* to packed houses in North America, Sukha says he put in the work to transition from playback to live performances. He's looking forward to integrating a live band into shows and "prioritizing more live singing" instead of relying on backing tracks, giving a shoutout to veteran artists like Mannohan Waris' stage presence and crowd engagement for inspiring his live performances.

Aware of the global spotlight that Punjabi music is enjoying, including international collaborations and wide representation in India as well, Sukha says all this "only means more growth." With 2003 EP out last week, Sukha says they're planning "surprise shows in cities that have shown us a lot of love." He adds, "It's only up from here. Most importantly I want to focus on making new music for all of our fans who have shown us nothing but love." **ANURAG TAGAR**

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The Derelicts Take a 'Highway Drive' on Euphoric New Song

The Kochi disco-pop/electronica band introduce a science fiction-informed storyline for their first release since 2018

ALONG THE WAY of writing new, dancefloor-ready music, Kochi band The Derelicts began feeling like they were sci-fi writers. Now, they present their first song in six years, the shiny, synth-driven "Highway Drive" focuses on rebels escaping the clutches of a tyrant named Nura on the planet Ichok.

Vocalist, synth artist and guitarist Ashwin Nath says they worked with artist Chirag Swamy to create a comic book that will accompany their new material. Nath adds, "The lore helped us a lot in visualizing the sound we want to go for. The setting, the colors, the characters, the environment... help a lot with planning the sounds of the song."

They've taken inspiration from their band name and written a story that brings together four characters forming an unlikely union to challenge the tyrant Nura. Bassist and guitarist Sreekanth Bhasi says they've had the idea of The Derelicts being four aliens from another planet who make it to Earth and the conversation progressed from there. "In a way, we have sort of felt like aliens trying to figure out how to live in a society engineered by our ancestors, since our childhood-around the time we all found music. And I'm sure most people have had escapist thoughts of wanting to be a part of something big. This comic for us is one such escapist vision of being part of something bigger and crazier than our mundane lives where nothing otherwise seems to happen," he adds.

Compared to their 2018 self-titled debut, there's a more vibrant electronic sound that's added over and above their disco, funk and rock blend. It gives "Highway Drive" a polished, arena-ready sound that is ripe to take over stages all over the country. Guitarist Sabarish Menon says they had a lot of fun touring the country after the release of their self-titled EP, but the pandemic did

hit them hard. He says, "Some of us made major life decisions, some of us faced really tough life situations. Our previous drummer, Biju [Karthik] had to step down and we brought in Paul [Varghese] which drastically altered the sound of the band."

He likens this "crazy ride" to the fictional journey that's soundtracked on "Highway Drive." Menon adds, "There

will be crazier rides but each ride gives you something to live for." Nath goes on to credit producer Leslie Charles, their manager Siddharth Nair and audio engineer Mrinal Anand from Stained Class Productions as key in helping The Derelicts find their way.

Menon says their next songs are only going to be bigger and more ambitious as they unveil the lore,

especially with "visual media plans." Nath adds, "Through our upcoming album we want to establish the sounds of Ichok. For both us, and the listeners."

Varghese offers a few more insights into the characters seen and heard so far - Brucci, wields the mythical Axe of Chazz, BassiUni is a notorious bounty hunter, Ash13 is a musical AI and Poly is their pilot. One speaks only in references to songs by rap-rock/alternative band Linkin Park, while Poly is only interested in late Bollywood actor Amrish Puri. "A lot of our life experiences have become plot points and people we know have become characters," the drummer says.

ANURAG TAGAT





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Peekay Embraces Djent on 'Merciless' and Plots an L.A. Move

The Hyderabad artist worked with guitarist Jonathan Edward and prog band Skyharbor's Keshav Dhar on the track

HYDERABAD ARTIST Peekay aka Pranati Khanna has been steadily working her way into a modern, polished and heavy sound and there's a culmination with the band's new song "Merciless."

Co-written and produced by Khanna's go-to collaborator Jonathan Edward and mixed and mastered by Mumbai-based guitarist-producer Keshav Dhar, "Merciless" has all the makings of a prog rock and djent song. It might just remind some of the style that was put forward by the likes of Dhar's band, prog rock act Skyharbor.

Khanna says she wrote the song initially using digital audio workstations like Logic and Garageband. "I loved the hook and sent whatever I had made to Eddy [Jonathan Edward]. He took it and as he always does, turned

it into a beast," she adds. Before this studio release with a music video that's murky and unsettling in a way that rock and metal songs have been known to champion, Peekay performed "Merciless" live at Music Matters in Singapore as well as the regional leg of Wacken Metal Battle India. "It turned into a crowd favorite," Khanna adds.

There are a few biblical references that the singer-composer says are par for the course with her songwriting, but also points to being influenced by Michaelangelo's "powerful" depictions of heaven and hell in his paintings. "The way he portrays the devil or demons in all his work have particularly stuck with me and I feel like I have personally come face to face with many people who have a darkness in them that have brought me chills in this lifetime," she says.

For the lyrics to "Merciless," Khanna also points to another specific work of art – Francisco Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son." Khanna, a visual artist as well as a musician, says, "The painting has a lot of different theories but the most common one is that it is a depiction of the Greek myth of the Titan Cronus, whom the Romans called Saturn, eating one of his children out of fear of a prophecy by Gaea that one of his children would overthrow him."

The song arrives just as Khanna heads out to set up base in Los Angeles, marking a U.S. move on an artist visa. She says about the shift, "There is so much left for me to learn and bigger pools to learn to swim in. I love my country and it has given me a leg up but I am acutely aware that my genre of music holds very little space here. I do

want to give it a shot in LA. I am lucky to have received the opportunity to go there and be an artist for a while."

There are at least three singles that Peekay have roadtested live which will be released through 2024. For the most part, the year holds what Khanna calls a "welcome challenge" to make music in a different country for the first time. To her credit, she's already got strong bonds with film producer Apoorva Charan [part of the acclaimed desi film *Joyland*] and rap-rock band Flipsyde's vocalist-guitarist Steve Knight, with whom she released the song "Running" earlier this year. "There is also a group of fellow Indian musicians who have recently settled in the Bay Area so I might actually get by with a little help from my friends to begin with," Khanna says. ANURAG TAGAT

Aksh Baghla and 10CM Swap Languages in 'Spring Snow' Hindi Version

The Indian pop artist got the South Korean indie-pop artist to sing in Hindi on his hit song from the 'Lovely Runner, Part 8' soundtrack

SINGER-SONGWRITER and YouTuber Aksh Baghla clearly has a penchant for introducing Hindi to international artists. After getting American pop artist Lauv to sing in Hindi early this year, Baghla brings South Korean indie-pop artist 10CM's Kwon Jung-yeol for a Hindi version of the latter's song "Spring Snow" from K-Drama series



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Lovely Runner. While "Spring Snow" has taken on a life of its own after it released in May this year for *Lovely Runner, Part 8* (the series recently began streaming via Netflix in India), it was in June that Baghla dropped his version of the 10CM song on Instagram, adding Hindi lyrics in his inimitable pop croon.

Baghla tells Rolling Stone India that while watching *Lovely Runner*, he came across "Spring Snow" and was drawn to 10CM's music, particularly taken by the South Korean artist's vocal texture. Thanks in part to capitalizing on a trending song as well as Baghla's own fan-following, the Hindi version song's Reel garnered over a million views in the span of a day, with a comment by 10CM himself. Baghla says, "I was so happy, when I saw that comment and I instantly sent him a DM asking if he wants to collaborate."

10CM in his email interview with Rolling Stone India says he was "really happy and surprised" and calls it a "pleasant experience" to have come across the Hindi version of "Spring

"I felt very cautious so I practiced a lot, since I wasn't sure if I could do it well," 10CM says

Snow" and then collaborate with Baghla. 10CM says, "At first, I was both very excited and curious about singing together, but I was very satisfied with the result when we finished the collaboration."

At the core of the idea presented by Baghla for "Spring Snow" was that 10CM would sing in Hindi and the Indian artist would sing in Korean. "I felt very cautious so I practiced a lot, since I wasn't sure if I could do it well, but fortunately, many people complimented it and thankfully really liked that video," 10CM says about the reception it's got so far.

With over 69,000 views on YouTube and 4.7 million views of the Reel, "Spring Snow" is a crossover smash that helps both artists tap into different audiences. Baghla says timeliness was key. "I was planning to do this in person in South Korea but because the song was trending and we wanted to post asap, we decided to then do this remotely," he adds.

10CM adds that he'd like to collaborate with a lot more Indian pop artists. "There are a lot of artists with great voices, but I think [singer] Jubin Nautiyal's voice would work really well with mine, so it would be fun to work with him. I hope we have some chance to maybe work together in the future," the artist says.

The Korean artist - who also scored another hit this year with "Tell Me It's Not A Dream" from the K-Drama *Queen of Tears* soundtrack and created "Drawer" for the show *Our Beloved Summer* - is next heading out on a multi-city Asia tour.

Meanwhile, Baghla is working on his "dream project" - an I-Pop boy group. "The members are training at the moment. We are taking our fair bit of time because this is being done after almost a decade in India and there are a lot of challenges. You can expect a glimpse very soon," he says.

ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF BAGHLA, 10CM

How Daira's 'Jaadoo Bastar' Tapped Into Chhattisgarh Tribal Stories

Mumbai rock band teamed up with artists including Lakheshwar Khudaram and Hindi lyricist Alok Ranjan Srivastava for five songs and a documentary that goes behind the scenes of the project

IN JULY 2022, when Mumbai rock band Daira got the call to be a part of a workshop and perform with tribal musicians in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, there were understandably some presumptions.

Vocalist Piyush Kapoor says, "We thought should we go or not? Would they accept us, or would they say you've come to wreck our traditions? People think it's a very violent place and that there are only Naxals there and you'd

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“It was a fun, magical experience. It was pressurizing, so by the end of it, we were all crying”



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get kidnapped or something. People were very hospitable and very sweet. I think more people should go and explore that place. It's very untouched and unexplored in that sense.”

After the workshop at Bastar Monsoon Festival organized by Bastar's then-collector Rajat Bansal and the government of Chhattisgarh in July 2022, Daira decided they should go back and make five songs. The result is their new five-track collection of songs *Jaadoo Bastar*, featuring Bastar artists Lakheshwar Khudaram, Ablesh Kumar, Vineeta Pandey, flautist Rahul Raikwar and more.

Guitarist Shivam Pant says, “We had ideas for two songs after the jam during the workshop. The rest of the three songs came after going back there and rehearsing.”

The first song from the project, “Bailadila | Jaadoo Bastar,” was also

released via the Chief Minister's Office of Chhattisgarh's YouTube channel. A song that extols the beauty of Bastar led by Khudaram, the Hindi lyrics of this one – and all the others on *Jaadoo Bastar* – were written by Alok Ranjan Srivastava.

Khudaram says in a written response that working with Daira was a new experience and hails them as “a pathfinder in taking our art culture forward.” He adds, “Innovation is needed to advance the art culture of Bastar. Folk Songs can be re-recorded with new sounds to make it appealing to new generations.”

Across other tracks, romance blooms on “Laal Pungaad | Meri Jaan” with Kumar and Pandey on vocals. “Gaye Chari Gala | Baawara Insaan” brings forward the shehnai-like mohri and introduces the song about life and nature's cycles, the instrumentation and lyrics bearing

a pastoral hue with flute. “Iya Kaye Hajaari | Mere Jaisa Hi” which opens the EP leads with reggae vibes, apt for a song about unity.

Khudaram notes that Bastar's songs are for “every aspect of life,” from history to values, nature, emotions like joy and sorrow and farmer woes. “There is everything in the art, music and language literature of Bastar that provides an opportunity to humans to define the ideal of humanity,” the folk artist adds.

Daira have often carried a categorization of being an art-rock band, spawning mind-bending albums like the jam-driven *Vipreet Buddhi* in 2017. Kapoor says they've evolved far beyond that but did retain the lessons they gained from making an album like *Vipreet Buddhi* in terms of working on *Jaadoo Bastar* in the span of five days. To their

credit, there's also “Kahan Kahan” on this new album, which goes into a psychedelic aesthetic, prog riffs and all as they speak from the perspective of a god in the song about devotion.

Pant adds, “Over there in Bastar, it was a natural process. Since we didn't have much time, we couldn't risk getting stuck either. If things weren't working, we wouldn't spend more time on it. We've done that for quite a few songs.” They also worked through heavy rain and an open-air environment for recording, as opposed to a sound-proofed, studio setting. Pant adds, “It was still a fun, magical experience. It was pressurizing, so by the end of it, we were all crying.”

With *Jaadoo Bastar* songs all out now, Daira will also put out a nearly hour-long documentary film soon, one that goes i **ANURAG TAGAT**

Fotty Seven and Bali Bring Laughs and Dilli Launda Energy on 'Jai Veeru' EP

New Delhi BFF rappers flex their brotherhood with a high-energy, in-your-face and explicit set of six songs together

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NEW DELHI hip-hop artists Fotty Seven and Bali forge a new rap partnership on their collaborative EP *Jai Veeru*, with six songs between them that ooze with attitude.

Teaming with their longtime producers including Enzo, Quan and An1kst, there's a bombastic, incorrigible intent with *Jai Veeru*, which takes its name from Bollywood's iconic 1975 movie *Sholay*'s lead characters, Jai (played by Amitabh Bachchan) and Veeru (played by Dharmendra). Taking names and kicking ass in the way that you'd expect two typically Delhi blokes to do, the duo took questions from *Rolling Stone India* about the making of the EP and the things they wanted to get off their chest, including a cautionary tale about royalties and the music industry maze in "Haramzada." Excerpts:

Rolling Stone India: How long was a full project of songs like *Jai Veeru* with both of you together in the works? What was the first song off this project that was made?

Fotty Seven: It was stretched out for barely a month but if we remove the empty spaces, it won't have taken more than a couple of days. Both of us started working on our own three tracks and showed it to each other

but "Bhai Hai" was the first one to be locked.

Bali: For about a year I wanted this crossover and wanted us to build our own cinematic universe. It took only a month or two for us to figure out what tracks we wanted on the EP and then we focused on the fine tuning part of each track. "Bhai Hai" was the first track that was locked for this project and gave shape to the EP.

What draws you to each other as collaborators and cowriters for a project like this?

Fotty Seven: We never saw each other as artists. We were always friends first and that was everything that was required for us to work on this project. Sometimes we cancel each other out, the other times we're fuel to the other person's fire but we're always in sync (mostly)

Bali: Before music, we were BFFs and after knowing each other for so long we rarely talked about doing music together (nerd culture took the front seat), I knew that if I ever do a project with another artist, it has to be him. (In tears as I speak)

It also feels like a project that has a very high energy throughout, nothing too serious in some senses. Would you agree that was the overall vibe you were going for?

Fotty Seven: Yes, This project is exactly how we envisioned it and we won't change anything about it. The vibe, lyrics, music, everything came out exactly the way we wanted it to.

Bali: Yes absolutely, we wanted to give people something that they can just play and have fun with, we wanted to create a project that would live on forever and could be played from front to back without any filler tracks, something different from the whole music scene.

I think the essence of all these songs is that it's also sometimes light-hearted, humorous and dripping with a Delhi launda attitude, pretty explicit and violent at times. How do you guys match each other's level when it comes to things like that?

Fotty Seven: I think both of us are skilled in a very specific area of lyricism and at times, if a Venn diagram were to be made, these zones overlap each other by a considerable amount. It would never be too difficult for me to match Bali's lyricism

"I wanted this crossover and wanted us to build our own cinematic universe"



or the other way around. Also, we do not condone violence in any shape or form. We're playing characters. Anything with violence in it is not to be taken literally. It's art. Most of the EP is just metaphors, figure of speeches or senseless jokes because, why not?

Bali: We wanted to justify every track that we were on, even if certain (almost all) tracks are explicit, I wanted it to make sense. The humorous tone had to be just perfect so as to not cross into the "forced comedy" part.

"Haramzada" feels like it stems from some real experiences of people you perhaps you don't want to name but still want to take down, with talks of royalties. How did that song come together?

Fotty Seven: Oh, no! I did the royalty bit because I wanted it to be meta when it came to the themes of haram-zadagi.

I just wanted to break the fourth wall as I had never done it before so I broke character and put on another mask without announcing it. I think it was pretty cool and funny but then again, I really enjoy my own jokes a bit too much.

Bali: I want to name that person, that person is me. the incident described in "Haramzada" is something that I have recently been through (a balls-crushing experience). I think "Haramzada" was made in an hour and while recording the track everyone in the studio kept on laughing. As far as the "royalties" part goes, my legal team is looking into it. I'm looking at you, Fotty.

What else is coming up through 2024 for both of you individually as well as perhaps more projects together?

Fotty Seven: I am working on a couple more projects individually and might just be releasing EPs instead of singles. I'm starting to get a hang of it and it does open my mind more creatively.

Speaking of projects together, I think *Jai Veeru* might transcend into an Amar Prem or it might not. You never know.

Bali: I'll be making my Bollywood debut (tears in my eyes again as I speak) with "Meri Baggi Mera Ghoda," a track that I believe is some of the best work I've ever done, other than that I'm working on my debut album and an EP along with it.

Jai Veeru is just the beginning of this cinematic universe that we have created, more sequels to follow. ANURAG TAGAT

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COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Akshath Plots India Tour on the Back of Hit Song 'Nadaaniyan'

Mumbai artist's breezy love song took over streaming charts and short-video platforms

JUST ABOUT two months since the release of his song "Nadaaniyan," Mumbai artist Akshath Acharya (who goes by his first name as an artist) still finds it difficult to process that the song has been streamed over 25 million times across Spotify and YouTube. It's also been used extensively over Reels and became the most Shazamed song in the country for a while.

Akshath anticipated some success once an early teaser for the song in May itself garnered 3.5 million views and calls to release the full version. He says in an email interview, "I along with my team just put our heads down and kept working day in and out to make sure we built on the momentum and gave our best, in just a month we were the Number One viral song in India, Pakistan, U.A.E. and globally on Spotify. This validation is truly inspiring for me to work even harder and become the best version of myself for my community and everyone who has shown so much support all around."

While some have pointed out a noted vocal phrasing that reminds listeners of Suzanne Vega and DNA's 1984 hit "Tom's Diner," there was just a high relatability in Akshath's lyrics, coupled with a charming, uncomplicated approach to production. He says, "Both in terms of the mood and the tone, I wanted to keep it simple and relatable, while the instrumentation and production added to the edge. The expression was crafted from a very day-to-day perspective having my loved ones around."

Although Akshath has enjoyed success with songs like "Jadoo" in 2023, it helps that "Nadaaniyan" was backed by Universal Music India to catapult it into viral territory. The artist, however, says there was a "remarkable organic rise" when it came out.

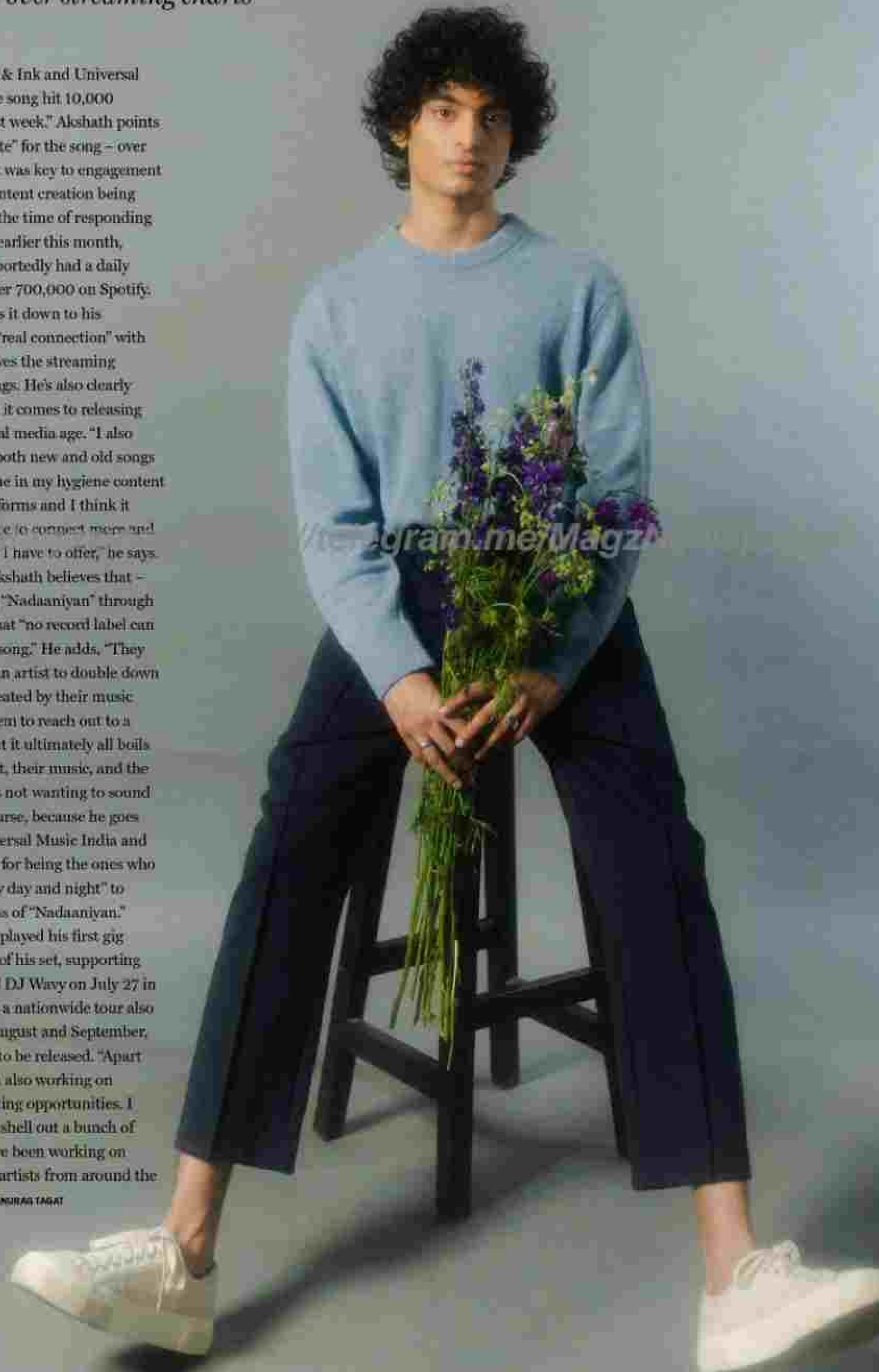
The first Instagram Reel for the song garnered 14,000 shares in three days. He adds, "With a quick turnaround from creation to release within 36 hours, facilitated by [artist management

company] Shark & Ink and Universal Music Group, the song hit 10,000 streams in its first week." Akshath points to a "high save rate" for the song – over 50 percent – that was key to engagement and of course, content creation being "continuous." At the time of responding to our interview earlier this month, "Nadaaniyan" reportedly had a daily stream rate of over 700,000 on Spotify.

Akshath chalks it down to his community and "real connection" with listeners that drives the streaming success of his songs. He's also clearly a strategist when it comes to releasing music in the social media age. "I also like to integrate both new and old songs from my catalogue in my hygiene content plans across platforms and I think it helps the audience to connect more and get more of what I have to offer," he says.

To that end, Akshath believes that – despite releasing "Nadaaniyan" through a major label – that "no record label can make or break a song." He adds, "They can only enable an artist to double down on the impact created by their music and empower them to reach out to a larger fanbase but it ultimately all boils down to the artist, their music, and the community." He's not wanting to sound ungrateful, of course, because he goes on to thank Universal Music India and his management for being the ones who "worked tirelessly day and night" to ensure the success of "Nadaaniyan."

The artist just played his first gig since the release of his set, supporting artists Rahill and DJ Wavy on July 27 in Mumbai. There's a nationwide tour also slated between August and September, and more music to be released. "Apart from music, I am also working on some exciting acting opportunities. I also can't wait to shell out a bunch of collaborations I've been working on with my favorite artists from around the world," he says. **ANURAG TAGAT**



Masrat Un Nisa on Channeling Raj Begum in Upcoming Film 'Songs of Paradise'

Inspired by the legendary Kashmiri voice Raj Begum, the singer talks about working with filmmaker Danish Renzu, who has also called on her for songs with his label Renzu Music

THE UPCOMING FILM *Songs of Paradise* has seen a good amount of anticipation behind it, starring actor-singer Saba Azad in the lead role inspired by Kashmiri singer Raj Begum - the first female vocalist at the local station Radio Kashmir who rose to fame in the Seventies.

A larger point that the film's director, Los Angeles-based Kashmiri filmmaker Danish Renzu, wants to make is about the struggles and successes of artists in Kashmir. That's where singer Masrat Un Nisa comes in. Making her debut in a film soundtrack, Masrat is the singing voice of Azad in *Songs of Paradise*. Featuring music composed by Abhay Rustum Sopori, Masrat says she was "thrilled" to be a part of the film. She says, "The opportunity to contribute to a project that empowers female singers in a predominantly male-dominated industry was inspiring. It's been an honor to be involved with *Songs of Paradise*, and I am eagerly anticipating the final outcome."

It also heightens expectations for Masrat since none of her songs have been officially released so far, which means the world might just get to hear her first on *Songs of Paradise*, which is produced by L.A.-based Kashmiri entrepreneur Shafat Qazi. A singer since childhood, the artist says she's been participating in music competitions throughout her school and college



years. Among her biggest gigs, she recounts, is performing at the SaMaPa Aalap Festival of Sopori Academy of Music And Performing Arts in Jammu & Kashmir. "Although I am not a trained singer, I developed my skills by listening to greats like Raj Begum, Shameem Azad, and Kailash Mehra. I have always been inspired by the compositions of the great music legend and music composer, the late Pandit Bhajan Sopori ji," she adds.

As a singer inspired by Raj Begum herself, Masrat says it was "daunting" to imitate the voice that was widely regarded as the Melody Queen of Kashmir for *Songs of Paradise*. On the soundtrack, Masrat leads versions of Begum's famous songs recomposed by Sopori. "Despite the difficulties, I put my utmost effort into doing justice to these assignments," the singer says.

She credits Sopori and Renzu for "clear and precise directions" when it came to singing for the narrative. Although she wasn't watching any early scenes from *Songs of Paradise* to prepare her songs, Masrat says she watched some footage later and says it made her "feel proud to be part of this film."

In addition to being part of *Songs of Paradise*, Masrat is also singing on music coming out via the Kashmiri label Renzu Music and has "a couple of projects lined up that should be completed by the end of this year."

ANURAG TAGAT

RENZU FILMS

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King, Chaar Diwaari and More are Cooking Hits at This Delhi NCR Studio

Synergy Audio Productions is founded by singer-songwriter and producer Rohan Solomon, who believes the DIY days are in the past for professional musicians in the capital

IN THE HEAT of Sector 114, Gurugram, you can't tell which wall of Synergy Audio Productions studio you want to stare at – there's one that's got more than 20 quirky signatures of artists like King, Seedhe Maut, Chaar Diwaari, Raga and more. They've all been here to record and rave about it.

A few steps to the left, there's a colorful mural commissioned by the studio's founder, singer-songwriter and producer Rohan Solomon. It runs from floor to ceiling and takes you to Times Square in New York City, where Solomon first started Synergy Audio Productions after working at recording studio Engine Room

Audio. But in this version of the mural, Times Square doesn't have ads and billboards for musicals – there are artworks and visual references to Solomon's past releases as well as his work with erstwhile New Delhi rock band Cyanide, Star Wars and DC Comics heroes Superman and more, plus his influences ranging

from Michael Jackson to Hanson to Blink-182.

It's all about flavor for Solomon, whether in the choice of gear rigged up in the recording rooms and stacked up in different cabinets or in the visual look and feel of Synergy Audio Productions. Under construction for two years, Solomon says he took his time to make sure everything was just right before it was time to test it out, becoming accustomed to the rooms and its gear.

Solomon says, "I wanted to create a space for musicians that will create a sense of community. Other than probably the best equipment and engineers in NCR, it is a safe space for musicians to come and make



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"I wanted to create a space for musicians that will create a sense of community"

music and feel creative. I believe that creating this vibe will significantly affect the quality of the music being created here and the outcome will reflect that. It is a one-stop-shop for all your recording and post-production needs."

While there are quite a few recording studios in the Delhi NCR area, the allure of Synergy Audio Productions might be that it's located a bit far away from the buzz of a sizable population, the smoking balcony overlooking a bit of greenery and an unobstructed horizon.

Then, there's a relaxing space with gaming consoles, a pool table and yet, classes as part of the Synergy Institute of Music also take place amid these worthy distractions.

Within the studio rooms and around the space, there's a Kawai upright piano, a Pearl reference drum kit (including snares from DW, Sakae &

Pearl), several guitars including Les Pauls, Telecasters, an Orange Tube amplifier, several effect pedals and more than 30 microphones. "We even built our own SubKick Mic specifically for the Kick Drum! We call him Ranjeet. He likes bass," Solomon says. The microphones, on their own, are the studio's pride no doubt. There are vintage tube mics like the Neumann MI49 and Manley Reference Cardioid. To make sure every recording goes smoothly, they have a full-time electrician on-site who makes sure every cable, every piece of equipment is ready to go when creativity perhaps strikes.

A studio this size and caliber not only draws the artists but also the aspiring sound engineers. Synergy Audio Productions has had a rolling internship program that brings in curious engineers to try their hands in a big studio setting.



Solomon sits in his studio engineer chair, which pulls up to a taped 'X' mark for the best sound from 12 monitors and two more in front. He may not reach the headrest of that comfy chair but he does run the place like a seasoned pro. Hearing songs in the now-hot Dolby Atmos mix and more, you can't help but feel this is the best seat in the house, not that there's anything wrong with kicking back anywhere else.

But Solomon has no time for that because Synergy Audio Productions is just one of three verticals for the artist and entrepreneur. There's also

the Synergy Institute of Music which teaches music in schools and also hosts in-person sessions at the studio space, plus Synergy Audio Institute where the internships come into play. "We would like to share our knowledge of everything we have learned and experiment with multiple ways of going about production, recording, mixing etc. in order to give our students a holistic experience. Think of this program like an 'externship' where you will be spending a lot of time in the studio," the Institute's website says. ANURAG TAGAI

‘Suicide Squad Isekai’: The Time Blackgate’s Inmates Were Isekai’d

Task Force X’s latest mission takes them into another world, literally

THE SUICIDE SQUAD (or Task Force X) has been sent on many a mission on many a medium. Be it in the comics, the live-action adaptations, the animated films or even video games; they’ve been everywhere. These treacherous assignments with perilous foes can be anywhere, against any kind of enemy where the team may not necessarily make it out in one piece, let alone alive. Hence the name Suicide Squad.

This time round, Task Force X is headed out to a world that’s unlike any other they’ve encountered so far — an Isekai. And in a medium they haven’t really been featured in — anime.

Isekai (異世界) literally translates to ‘another world.’ A popular genre of light novels and anime that take place when the protagonist awakens in a realm different from ours. Mostly, these isekai feature a protagonist

that is for all essences and purposes a ‘loser’ in every sense of the term. This loser is swiftly dispatched to the other world at the entity affectionally called ‘Truck-kun.’ After meeting an unfortunate end in their original world, they are reincarnated as heroes in the isekai, which is more often than not, a high fantasy world.

Technically speaking, this isn’t the first time that the DC universe has been isekai’d, for lack of a better term. The first time was in *Batman Ninja* (2018) where the Dark Knight and a large number of his compatriots and rogues’ gallery were transported to feudal-era Japan. Interestingly enough a sequel — *Batman Ninja vs. Yakuza League* — has been announced, so it looks like Gotham’s residents are fated to be traversing between worlds.

There are differences between the two, of course. While *Batman Ninja*

was an entirely 3DCG film, *Suicide Squad Isekai* is a 10-episode anime series. There is a distinct lack of the Caped Crusader because the focus is on the Suicide Squad.

The show is definitely in the same vein as the two live-action *Suicide Squad* films with the more popular cast of characters taken from both movies. It definitely isn’t a sequel because the members of Task Force X are meeting each other for the first time. Therefore, there’s no prerequisite for watching the other films first (or the other DC animated films).

Since the Earth’s resources are dwindling, Amanda Waller has hit upon the idea of terraforming — to send an expendable team to explore other worlds and figure out how to harness the resources there.

That expendable team? It’s the Suicide Squad.

The team headed by Rick Flag, is populated with familiar faces. We have the regulars Harley Quinn,

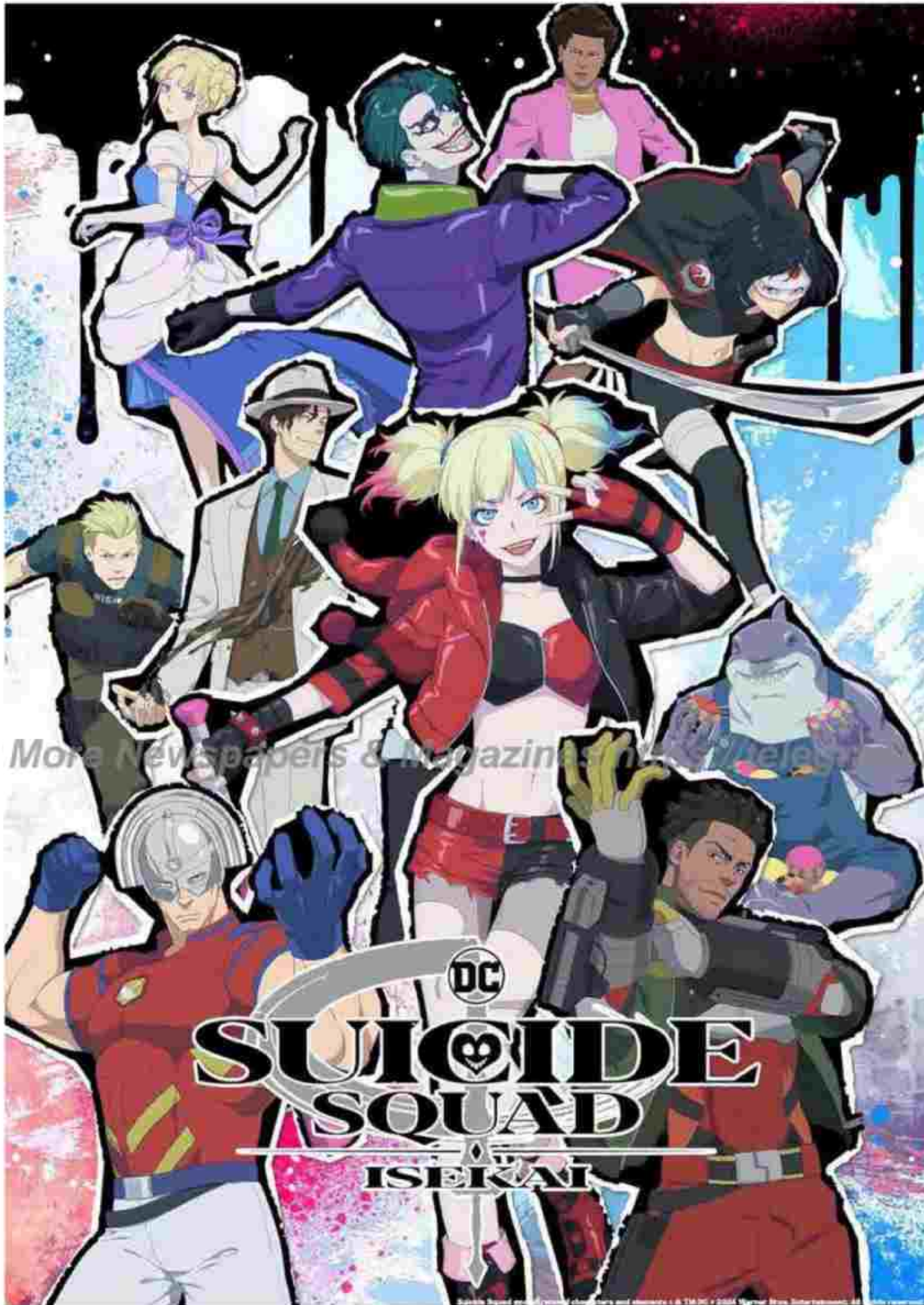
Deadshot, Peacemaker and King Shark. Clayface is the only entrant who doesn’t have a live-action counterpart.

While Waller’s plan looks good on paper (if you support terraforming, that is) the one thing she did not account for was the state of the world she was planning on exploiting. The Kingdom of the isekai world is in a state of chaos. Beastmen and the elves have joined forces and are busy waging war with the monarchy. Waller’s previous expendable team has seemingly vanished into thin air shortly after setting foot in the other world.

Now wiser, Waller decides to implant her favorite tactic to get her team of expendable felonious minions to comply — nano bombs in the neck. These bombs are set to go off if any of the members try to run, if they aren’t successful in their mission and most importantly, if Waller does not get a status update in 72 hours. In other words, failure isn’t an option.



WARNER BROTHERS



The group however is immediately captured by the Kingdom's forces on arrival and thrown into prison. Strangers in a strange land, this ragtag group of villains have to figure out how to not only complete their mission but also get to Waller before their heads go BOOM!

When the anime was initially announced, the public expectation of the show was abysmal. *Batman Ninja* didn't deliver, so why would this? Coupled with the fact that the trailer heavily featured the Joker, it made the show seem like an animated version of *Suicide Squad* (2016) with

an isekai twist, which wasn't exactly something people thought they needed to look forward to.

Surprisingly, DC's characters and the isekai setting get on together like a house on fire.

The 72-hour time limit and the pressure from the Kingdom to gain

their freedom tighten the plot so it doesn't meander too much. The isekai genre typically features a lot of worldbuilding, what with the protagonist landing up in very unfamiliar territory. In the case of *Suicide Squad*, it's not only the DC characters that need screen time but also the newly introduced characters exclusive to the anime. There's basic isekai worldbuilding done in the show, but it's mostly kept to the minimum. You are left as in the dark, much like the characters themselves.

Generally, the good and bad in an isekai anime is cut and dry (only exceptions being perverse protagonists). But the minute you have Blackgate's deadliest criminals footloose and fancy-free, there's absolute chaos. Which, let's face it, is what we expect of them. They may be forced to do the right thing but their methods aren't exactly hero-like.

Since Task Force X comprises only five members (plus Flag), there aren't too many characters to keep track of, so things are kept simple. They work surprisingly well together and get things done fast. Their group dynamics is a lot of fun.

WIT Studio (which was responsible for the first three seasons of *Attack on Titan*) is animating the series, so visually the series was guaranteed to be good. The loud colorful palette of the *Suicide Squad* blends in beautifully with the bright, vivid isekai world. The fight scenes are fluid and you have Task Force X cutting through their enemies like butter.

The character designs are also unique. A combination of the live-action films with the comics is neatly wrapped up in an anime aesthetic and presented to the viewer. Of course, it isn't for everyone, especially those unused to a cutesier colorful take being brought to the table as opposed to the more mature, gritty visuals we see in the Western animation scene.

Suicide Squad Isekai is a refreshing change to see in DC's animation releases and the isekai anime as well. It's a series where one can just cut loose and have fun, just like Blackgate Penitentiary's inmates.

RUDRAA ABIRAMI SUDARSHAN

10 MUST-READ FANTASY WEBTOONS

A selection of popular titles from the genre, featuring 'Lore Olympus,' 'Tower of God,' 'The Remarried Empress,' and more

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By Debashree Dutta

Fantasy webtoons are undeniably brilliant snackable reads thanks to their imaginative themes spanning genres, fully immersive storytelling, fascinating artwork, and in-depth visual expressions. Surrealist or comparable elements and a well-crafted narrative lend authenticity to the setting. But expecting what may never happen brings the deepest rush of all.

Fantasy webtoons excel at worldbuilding. Their portrayal of fictive spaces, periods, and theories is unique and far removed from what is normal. At their most basic, fantasy webtoons are an escape into wonderful worlds of exciting adventures. And I'm a fan, of these stories. So, here I've listed the top 10 fantasy webtoons that, in my opinion, are essential reads for anyone interested in the genre.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEBTOON



Lore Olympus

In her *Lore Olympus* series of the Gods, Rachel Smythe provides a modern spin on *The Abduction of Persephone*, a classical Greek story. The first season chronicles a plot by Minthe, Thanatos, and Thetis to disgrace Persephone and her struggles

with Apollo's inappropriate advances while also pursuing a college scholarship that requires her to remain chaste. The second season follows Persephone's abduction and her growing romance with Hades, while the third has their reunion and the beginning of their official relationship.



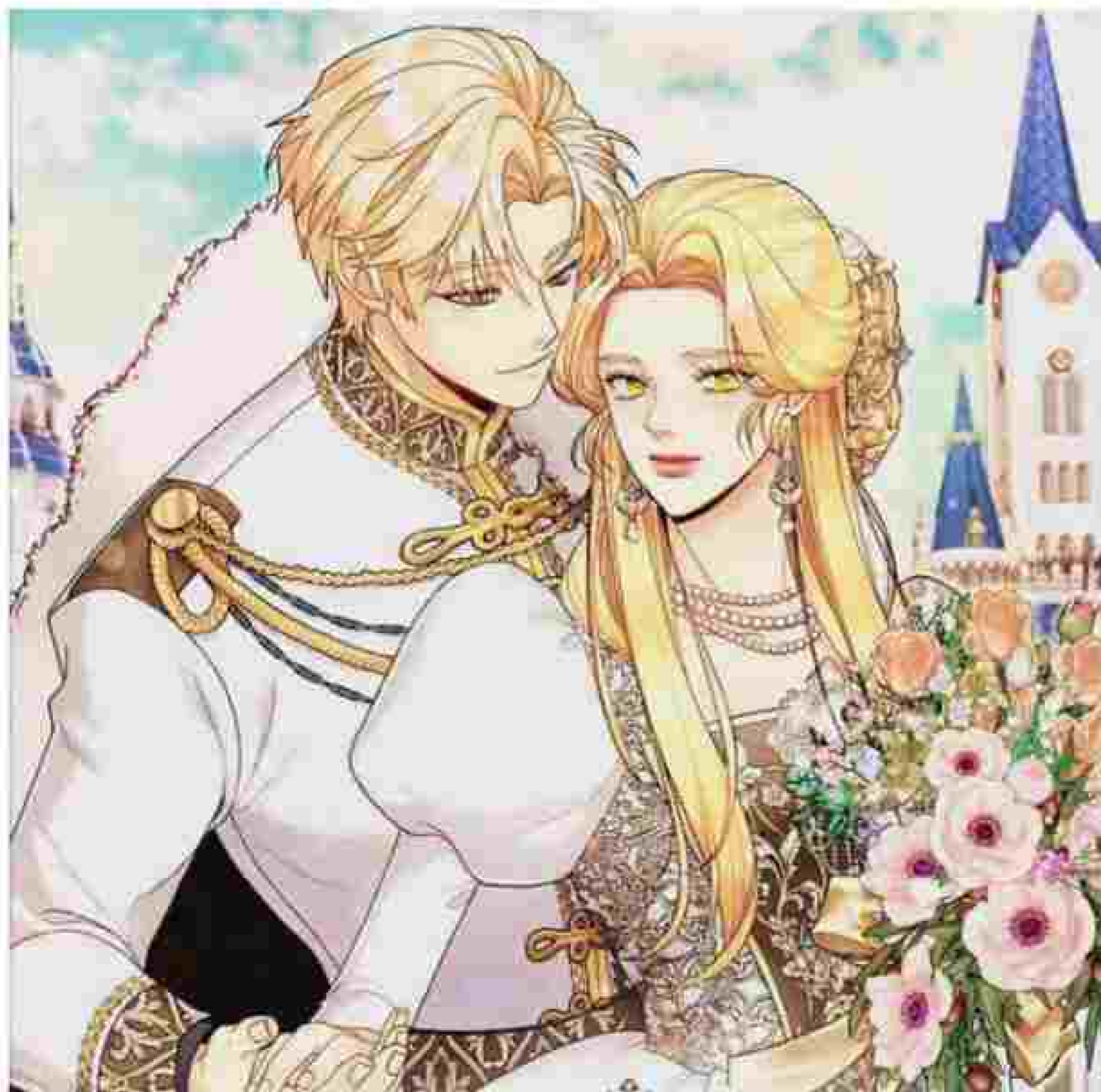
Tower of God

A massive wish fulfillment tower that bestows all blessings on those living inside is at the core of creator Siu's *Tower of God*. When a young Bam ventures inside the tower in search of his love, Rachel, he discovers its inner workings and the diverse individuals within its ordered society, where challenges differ from floor to floor.

The Remarried Empress

Alphatart's engaging webtoon, with gorgeous artwork by Sumpul, blends romance, fantasy, political drama, power struggles, and unexpected plot twists. The essence of what transpires is the nuanced relationship between Navier, Heinrey, Rashta, and Sovieshu.

Navier Ellie Trovi, a highly accomplished woman, is Emperor Sovieshu's loyal wife and model empress; yet, when he abruptly brings Lady Rashta home as his mistress, things radically change with Navier receiving a divorce request. Interestingly, she agrees, and, while still retaining her empress title, she marries King Heinry.



Omniscient Reader

Of post-apocalyptic horror, suspense, mystery, and action developed by Sing Shong (singNsong), *Omniscient Reader*, aka *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint*, is an air of imminent catastrophe transcending fact and fiction.

We encounter Kim Dak-ja, an office employee who becomes engrossed in reading *Three Ways to Survive in a Ruined World*. He's the only one aware of the web novel's ending, and as its fictional world suddenly becomes real, Dak-ja strives to change its fate.

Currently in production under the direction of Kim Byung-woo, *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint* is a highly anticipated film adaptation of the popular webtoon, featuring A-list stars including Lee Min-ho, Blackpink's Jisoo, and Ahn Hyo-seop in leading roles.

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Eleceed

Thanks to Jeho Son, Zhen, *Eleceed* is a fantastic read via stunning illustrations. It's lit with excitement, tender moments, humor, and everything you want from a solid fantasy story.

Eleceed stars Kayden—the most formidable of a covert gang of superpowered individuals—who transforms into a cuddly cat for a cause, only to get caught in that state. Kayden finds a home with Jiwoo, a cat-lover, and discovers that he understands him. It means Jiwoo's also gifted but untrained and unaware of the secret society those of his kind belong to. Consequently, Kayden mentors him, and they embark on a mission to wipe out the vile powers threatening humanity.

Castle Swimmer

In an enthralling marine world of *Castle Swimmer* by Wendy Lian Martin, Kappa and Siren, are bound by ancient prophecies that require them to undertake significant responsibilities. Kappa, the beacon, is a hope for his people, while Siren, the shark prince, can liberate his subjects from a malevolent curse.

Kappa is taken into custody once he gets lured into the enigmatic Shark Kingdom. The sharks' prophecy has it that the way to break the curse afflicting them is for Siren to kill Kappa, something Siren chooses not to do. He shatters expectations helping Kappa escape, setting the stage for an exhilarating journey.

SubZero

Junepurrr's fantasy romance, *SubZero*'s timeless conflict between two formidable dragon clans that is on the brink of resolution through the impending union of Princess Clove and Prince Kyro. As scandalous politics, deceit, and duty intertwine with the backdrop of ferocious dragons, the protagonists find themselves entangled in a gripping tale of intense hate-to-love drama.





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Your Throne

The Vasilios Empire breathes tension into Sam's fantasy tale when Lady Medea Solon, an adept and cunning figure who, despite losing her spot to Crown Prince Eros, remains unyielding and resolute to fight back. A tough cookie that she is, in her pursuit to regain her claim to the throne, she is unwavering and super determined to go to any lengths.



Like Wind on a Dry Branch

Two bereaved souls find redemption as they get close in Dalsacowl and Hwaem's heartwarming and poignant masterwork.

Amidst the chaos and plague that beset the empire, Rieta Tristi, an alluring widow, finds herself vulnerable to the nasty intentions of Lord Casarius. After her husband fell victim to the plague, her child was stolen by slave traders, and now her safety is on the line, she is saved by the outcast prince of the empire, Archduke Killian Axis of the North, who brings optimism to her otherwise hopeless life.



Men of the Harem

Latil's father is murdered, and she is forced into marriage to secure her rule over Tarium. But despised by her lover, she picks five men to be in her harem.

Latil finds herself torn between them as they vie for her affections, and she is appalled by the paranormal aspects that start to appear nearby. Things get more eerie and bizarre for her when she starts uncovering her unusual powers. Another great work by Alphantart, HereLee, and Yeongbin, *Men of the Harem* delves into a sinister world of monsters, mystery, and more where Latil must use every resource at her disposal to save her empire.



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WHEEL IN: 'I'M WAITING FOR A CHANCE TO MEET AND HAVE FUN WITH MY INDIAN FANS'

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THE MAMAMOO MEMBER AND SOLO ARTIST DISCUSSES HER NEW SONG, MUSIC, WHAT SHE LOOKS FOR IN MUSIC, AND HER DESIRE TO VISIT AND PERFORM IN INDIA

By Debashree Dutta

“C

OCO WATER” beautifully cuts the mustard as a “Whee In song,” basking in the calming embrace of an idyllic, inviting summer night, like a sonic oasis of sultry rhythms, shimmering instrumentals, and soulful vocals. I delight in having a word with her—the Mamamoo member and solo artist—on the song, her new digital single, in a sense of gratifying contentment. I’ve been her fan for the K-pop star and adept singer that she is, and for how she maintains a cohesive and distinctive artistic identity in each of her appearances.

“Coco Water,” Whee In says, “is an R&B track with a chill mood and lyrics that fully convey the summer season from a child’s point of view, away from tiring daily life. It’s just perfect for this summer!” The tune is distinct in that its sonic objective is bright and warm. Whee In’s honey voice evokes languid comfort as if cruising down the open road, windows down, and the warm summer breeze stroking the face. Is it a narrative in your mind or an expression of emotions from a memory? “When you watch the music video, you’ll feel like reminiscing about fun memories from the past,” she replies, adding that instead of a hot summer, it recalls romantic summer days.

The slow and steady flow of “Coco Water” hits like sweet bursts, each one sweeter than the last. It’s a perfect beach song, in its boho feels, nature’s colors, the vibe of the waves, and the vibrant summer world, like music in itself, melding with Whee In’s notes like a compliment. The video does have this awesome euphoric element in tandem; the mise-en-scene works perfectly. I’m told that the dancers who participated in her concert tour appeared in the video. “We all had a great time playing games, chilling in the water, and talking. We did hang out on the beach when we were touring in the United States, so it was a lot of fun to be all back in the ocean after a while! It might have been more fun because it was our last scene to film (*Laughs*). There was a lot of sunlight and heat because we filmed in the ocean in the middle of summer, but it was a very fun shoot.”

“Coco Water” was a surprise prelude to Whee In’s recent encore gig in Seoul, capping up her 17-city solo tour. “I felt so much love once again from fans around the world in each of the 17 cities I visited. I’ll work harder to repay everyone’s love with better performances and albums. I’m very grateful for my fans, and I’ll showcase more genres and activities.” Have you considered doing a show in India at some point? India, I promise you, loves you and Mamamoo, and we’re eager for you to bring your music here. “Absolutely!” she notes, “I would love to visit India whenever the opportunity arises. I’m ready



and waiting for a chance to meet and have fun with my Indian fans.”

2014 saw Whee In make her debut with Mamamoo. In 2018, she started putting out solo music, launching *Magnolia*, her single album. Both her maiden solo mini-album, *Redd* (2021), and sophomore mini-album, *Whee* (2022), were major successes, followed by her first solo extended album, *In the Mood* (2023). We’ve additionally seen her as a featured artist and heard her on multiple popular K-dramas. So, hers has been an eclectic discography to date; I imagine it’s challenging for her to continuously reinvent her sound with every new work. “I listen to a lot of songs to explore many genres, and I also discuss a lot with the A&R team about the song’s direction. By doing so, I can be reminded of things that I didn’t know before and receive valuable feedback and ideas. Such steps motivate me to look back on what I’m good at and to improve myself continuously, resulting in my natural and consistent growth.”

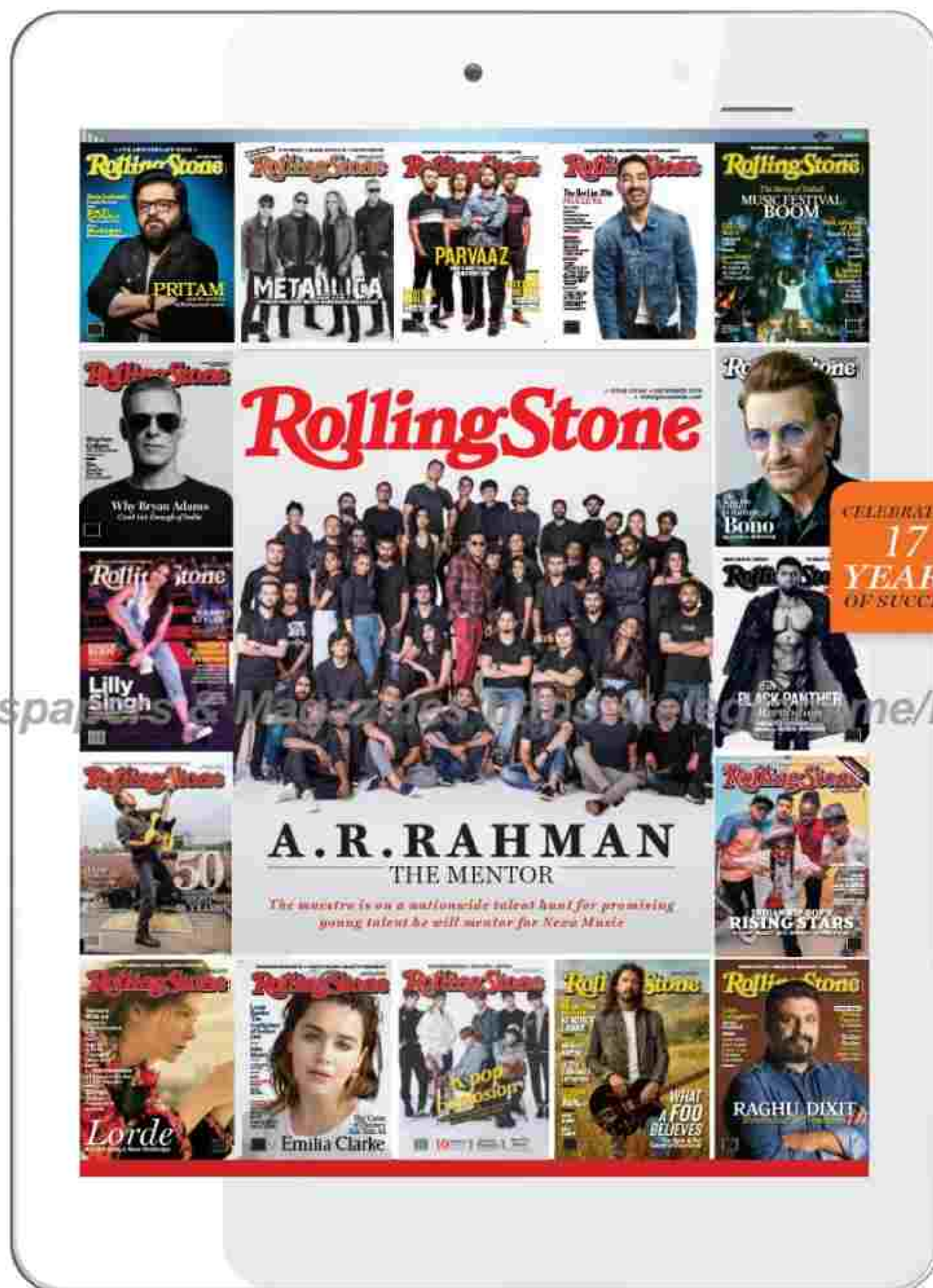
Mulling over Whee In’s music, it’s palpable she’s a sucker for fluidity in music, wanting to explore its uncharted territories, multiple genres per se, and be perfect in performing them. I sense she’s one of those rare artists who defy the

trappings of success in dedication to the quest for excellence and a commitment to singing, a passion that seemingly burns brighter than the spotlights, a desire to explore feelings and lived experiences through songs—a ballad, pop or dance number, a piece of rock music, or whatever. “I hope to showcase various genres in the future; I want to be a versatile artist; I plan to continue practicing and preparing.”

“Coco Water” is convivial and perhaps sums up the way she is. “There’s the line, ‘Mouth hurts from a smile; all day it’s funny’ in the song. Like this line, I find joy in speaking to and spending time with my family, MooMoos, friends, and colleagues!” “Coco Water” indeed emanates intimacy, inviting one to connect with her experiences and indulge in the pleasures of its warm fuzzy feeling. In a final message, Whee In says, “I hope I have a good opportunity to visit my Indian fans. Just like fans are my motivation, I aim to be their motivation by staying active in many ways. Thank you always, and with MooMoos, I can improve and move forward. Even though we’re far from each other, we’re always connected. I’ll make sure to work hard to meet all MooMoos, no matter where they are. Thank you!” 🌟

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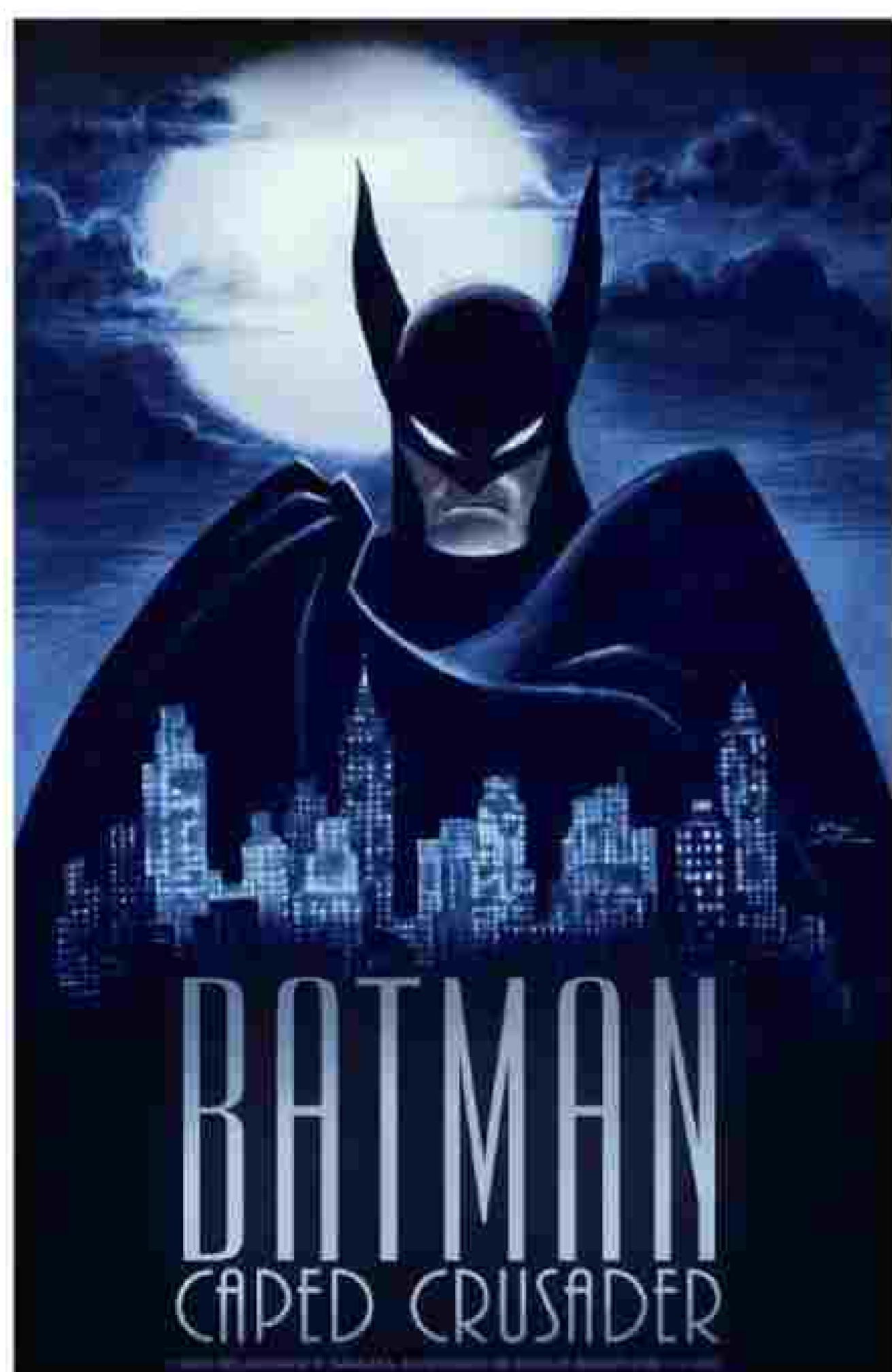
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'BATMAN: CAPED CRUSADER' SEES THE DARK KNIGHT IN A NIGHT WITHOUT END

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Down Gotham's mean streets, Batman must go in his latest animated series iteration as a detective

By Rudraa Abirami Sudarshan

I

T'S BEEN 85 YEARS since Batman first appeared on the scene, lurking around the dark alleys of Gotham city. Naturally, being around for more than eight decades, the Dark Knight has evolved along with the audience. There are so many versions of Batman and his universe. It is as hard to keep track of them as it is to keep Arkham's inmates behind closed doors.

The broad term for most iterations of Batman including Steampunk Batman, Vampire Batman or even medieval knight Batman fall under the category of 'elseworlds'. These are worlds where the characters are reimagined and put in worlds so far removed from their original. It simultaneously preserves continuity and makes way for a fun what-if? scenario. *Batman: Caped Crusader* is similarly an elseworlds story.



In 2021 it was announced that Bruce Timm, J. J. Abrams and Matt Reeves were going to develop a new Batman animated series titled *Batman: Caped Crusader*. This would be a more gritty, darker, noir take on the World's Greatest Detective in his early years with inspiration drawn from the Batman comics in the 1940s to 1960s period.

This seemed promising and hopeful; there's nothing more revitalizing than a return to the roots. Modern Age Batman has been to nearly every kind of universe but there's so much from the Golden, Silver and Bronze ages that deserve to be brought to the spotlight. The show was to bring something entirely different to the table. It was supposed to peel back the layers of the characters, and take a deeper look into the dark psyche that Gotham's citizens possess.

Which it did not.

The animation and atmosphere nail the Gotham Noir aesthetic. It is the perfect blend of the simplistic style of *Batman: The Animated Series*-meets-1940s-crime-drama. There are the shadowy corners of downtown Gotham, the Iceberg Lounge, Wayne Estate and Batman perched upon a gargoyle in the dead of the night, waiting to strike on an unsuspecting criminal, to a flash of lighting illuminating him watching from the distance.

The audio also plays a huge role in setting the tone for the series, transporting you back in time. The cast does a good job in bringing the characters to life. Hamish Linklater's portrayal of Batman may seem a lot more stoic than the norm, but it is a Batman still finding his feet in Gotham. It is the

transitioning between the distinct personas of Bruce Wayne and Batman that stands out, especially in the scene where he's conversing with Harvey Dent as Bruce, but momentarily slips on the mask of Batman.

It has been a long time since we've seen the long pointy-eared Batman so it's nice to see that aspect make a comeback. This is no longer a Batman who relies on his gadgetry to get the job done. This is a Batman in a time when technology is limited. A Batman who busts the criminals the good old-fashioned way. This is a Batman who is less of the Dark Knight and more of the World's Greatest Detective. It's impossible for one to not to try and piece together the cases, playing detective along with him.

That said, the show doesn't exactly shy away from the supernatural as is with the case of Gentleman Ghost and Natalia Knight. It takes away from the more realistic and grounded approach that the series started off with. But this of course pales in comparison with the liberties taken with the world itself.

For a show that has a period setting, *Caped Crusader* might have worked better in a more modern timeframe. This is probably because it caters to an audience of the present day rather than the ones who have grown up reading the comics the show is based on.

A show airing in 2024 cannot be without the stipulated diversity changes. Not that there is anything wrong with changing the races or genders of characters, but at least it should be done in a plausible way befitting the era it's set in. Or better yet, create entirely new characters to fill in the blanks or bring characters from the source material who check the boxes of what exactly they were going for. The token representative changes neither brings anything new to the table nor does it have any consequence whatsoever to the plot. So, what exactly was the point?

One could suppose that the story does not take place in our world and instead, a fictionalized utopia where discrimination and prejudice do not occur. That sort of begs the question that in such a world, what need is there for criminals?

Neither Gotham nor its police department seem to care about whatever crime is being committed in the city. Commissioner Gordon is sidelined to make way for his DA daughter Barbara. Barbara seems to be sole champion of justice (other than Batman) functioning as a one-woman army. Batman himself is sidelined in his own story. There's a very 'Forget it, Jack It's Chinatown.' feel to it all.

Take Penguin in the show, for example. We now have a matronly lady known as Oswalda Cobblepot who runs the Iceberg Lounge. Part-time mob boss, part-time lounge singer, this iteration has her playing the role of mama Penguin to her two sons. Supposedly smart, it took a third party to point out that one of her



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THIS IS A
BATMAN WHO
IS LESS OF THE
DARK KNIGHT
AND MORE OF
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GREATEST
DETECTIVE





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sons was a rat in her organization. And despite this, she manages to kill the wrong son. In the end, she is apprehended by Batman. What was her backstory, her motivation? Versions of Penguin in the comics have pasts that shape the characters in the present. Why waste a character that could have been a major player in a one-off episode demonstrating how insignificant she is? If there was a mob boss plot needed, why use a big name like the Penguin?

Harley Quinn takes a more subtle approach this time and her arc felt the weakest of all the villains seen so far in the show. The fact that Harley's girlfriend Detective Montoya

didn't even realize that the former was a villain does not bode well for Gotham's police department. Here Harleen Quinzel is the whimsical therapist and Harley Quinn is the cold-hearted, sinister jester. More in line with her current anti-hero persona, Harley Quinn tortures her clients to reform. It's always refreshing to see Harley hold her own without the Joker. In *Caped Crusader*, it definitely feels less like Harley and more like Hugo Strange. Strange was introduced as Batman's adversary all the way back in 1940, so why not use him? Why use a character who has been done to death in the current era?

Nocturna's arc also was a bit of a letdown. She was just an energy-drinking vampire Wednesday Addams instead of a crime boss astronomer, her original iteration. Her character arc wasn't explored at all, which was disappointing as Nocturna hasn't really appeared as Batman's direct adversary in a long while.

In fact, there was no deep psychological exploration of the characters. Their arcs were resolved in a single episode and their depth was shallower than a dried-up kiddie pool. It was nice to see minor callbacks to obscure foes like King Tut. It might have been nicer to completely switch out the rogue's gallery of overdone villains, though. With a clear hint of the Joker making an appearance in season two, it feels like the series is falling back into familiar waters.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking part about the show would be Bruce's treatment of Alfred. It's a first that Bruce refers to Alfred solely by his surname, Pennyworth. He's constantly belittling Alfred, having no faith in his abilities to treat wounds or his deduction skills. Even Lucius Fox comments on Bruce's mistreatment of Alfred. It took Alfred nearly dying to get a modicum of respect from Bruce. And it was only in the final episode that Batman hesitantly refers to him as Alfred. That's character growth, one could say.

Even if Batman is still green, finding his way as a vigilante it's surprising how he treats his surrogate father, especially when this Batman treats his adversaries kinder. Strange are these times.

At the end of the day, it all depends on perspective. *Batman: Caped Crusader's* contribution to the Batman mythos isn't anything special. *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992) still reigns supreme on that front. It isn't like the show is completely unwatchable. There's just nothing that stands out here, there isn't much to captivate you. Reading the comics from the 1940s still feels like a better option for a fresh look at the Dark Knight's original universe. Especially with how much of it has been changed today.

Of course, staying true to the characters defeats the purpose of exploring them in a different light, which is what the *Caped Crusader* wants to do.

On the other hand, a new animated Batman show is welcome if one doesn't have too many expectations. There are moments when it does shine, cutting through Gotham's impenetrable darkness.

DC fans are going to be divided no matter what. It's a difficult job making comic book enthusiasts happy. Going into it as a casual watcher who just wants to enjoy a piece of Batman-related media, chances are that the show just might be what you're looking for. ☺



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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



GLAY'S LEGACY: 30 YEARS OF ROCK EXCELLENCE

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AS GLAY KEEPS TURNING A CORNER AND DIVERSIFYING ITS PALETTE OF SONGS, IT OFFERS A SHINING INSTANCE—A NARRATIVE OF SINGLE-MINDEDNESS AND SHARED PASSION FOR MUSIC

By Debashree Dutta

G

LAY COMES FROM Hakodate, in northern Japan. It all started with Takuro and Teru in 1988, joined by Hisashi and Jiro later, and debuted in 1994 with the single "Rain." Ever since, the band has weathered the ever-changing tides of the music scene, adapting and evolving while preserving what "it" is—one of the most enduring and influential rock acts to emerge from the Land of the Rising Sun.

Through its music and unshakable bond with fans and listeners, Glay has etched its name in the upper crust of Japanese rock music. And it's my absolute honor today to have the members share words on this incredible sustained ride as Glay observed its 30th anniversary a while ago. While heavily influencing the Japanese music space and inducting



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itself into its cult status, Jiro, however, is still unsure “if there’s been any remarkable evolution,” because he asserts that they’ve carried on without any breaks for three decades, “but the fact that we still enjoy making music today shows that we’re growing every day. Keeping up the motivation and continuing as a band for so long is very tough, so I think we’ve influenced the rock scene in that way,” he says.

Earlier this year, Glay featured as a special guest for the esteemed British rock band Queen at the Queen and Adam Lambert concert in Sapporo, and thereupon released a 30th anniversary commemorative single entitled “whodunit,” collaborating with K-pop sensation Jay (Enhypen). “When we were looking for a singer to partner with Teru for our 30th anniversary celebration, we discovered Jay from Enhypen, who is making huge waves globally and loves rock ‘n’ roll. Naturally, we made the offer knowing about its presence,” Jiro explains. The music video is jazzed up by visuals drawn from the world of Eiichiro Oda, as Takuro points out. “I think this collaboration with Jay is a miracle of sorts that wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t persevered for 30 years,” Hisashi adds. “I feel that the meaning of continuing with music is to keep generating new energy through interaction with different eras.”

In my mind, this collaboration is about the power of music to bring people together, regardless of genre or cultural barriers. It elevates Glay as a part of this global music community. Indeed, its success rests in its ability to balance a distinctive sound and embrace a continuous



process of musical growth and experimentation. From the raw, energetic booming numbers of infectious music to the even richer introspective rock and pop anthems, Glay consistently exhibits remarkable versatility, incorporating diverse elements from different rock genres alongside punk, electronic, R&B, and more into their arrangements—an impressive range and a commitment to creativity within Glay’s sound.

Glay, known for being a trailblazer in the Japanese visual kei scene, ranks among the top ten artists on Japan’s all-time best-seller list, with an estimated 51 million records sold as of 2008, including 23 million albums and 28 million singles. The band members have made it through time only to return stronger and more unified than ever, indicative of Glay’s very identity—a tale of grit and camaraderie that has kept them going for years—and how they’ve managed to



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get through the music industry's maze of rules and volatility while still being open and true to the fans.

As Glay keeps turning a corner and diversifying its palette of songs, it offers a shining instance—a narrative of single-mindedness and shared passion for music—that has withstood whatsoever, confirming Glay's legacy as one of Japan's most beloved and significant rock bands. Excerpts.

Is there an inspiration behind Glay's unique blend of rock music?

Hisashi: The approach changes by incorporating each member's ideas into Glay's standard style, and a new standard is born. For example, in the case of EDM, just using a TR-909 for the drums changes the approach to the bass, the guitar recording style shifts to editing waveforms while recording, and the ideas for vocals and choruses are transformed. When the foundation changes, it reflects in the sounds you dub as well.

What is the beating heart of your sound, and what do you believe sets Glay apart from other rock bands?

Hisashi: Takuro's message to the times and the members' interpretative approach to that message is simple, straightforward, and with firm conviction, without being eccentric.

How has the band's approach to songwriting and performance evolved since its inception? Which of your favorite songs best captures the spirit of your music and who you are?

Jiro: I've always been dedicated to rock 'n' roll, but in recent years I've been listening to a lot of R&B, which has significantly changed my approach to bass playing and songwriting. However, I find myself going right back to rock 'n' roll again, so I guess the rock 'n' roll blood is still flowing in my body. The song that describes me is the theme of "Shutter Speeds."

Please share your story of being a leading act in the visual kei scene and your pioneering role in it.

Hisashi: I've been greatly influenced by Japanese culture, anime, games, and music. Visual kei is a very unique Japanese subculture based on gothic themes, and I truly enjoyed the variety of performances.

Even today, visual kei continues to evolve and change. Glay, which has continued for 30 years by facing the tides of time head-on, still takes pride in Japanese culture and believes in the entertainment we can offer today.

It's truly an honor if we've been able to contribute even a little to the greatness of Japanese culture, not to mention visual kei.

Glay is recognized for its avant-garde performances. What impact has its visual aesthetic, in your experience, had on other artists in the industry?

Jiro: I'm not quite sure how we have influenced other artists. However, I think collaborating with Enhypen's Jay was such an unexpected combination, like, "Glay, you've got your eye on an interesting point!" If you say it's the influence on others, it might be.

How have you navigated cultural differences in your music and maintained the band's relevance and connection with your listeners over the years?

Jiro: Since our debut, the four members have had completely different ways of thinking and fashion styles, but we still want to "make Glay better" and "dream with Glay," so I believe that's why our fans see us and think, "Glay always looks like they are having fun!" and can relate to that. It's the band's role to lead and entertain those people.

With so much time spent making music and thriving in the industry, what has been your biggest takeaway?

Hisashi: I believe that being healthy trumps everything; that's all it takes.

How does Glay envision the future of its music and legacy as you continue your journey?

Hisashi: I think the quote "learning from the past" is universal, and it is exactly right. I feel the same strength in the splendor of classical traditions and the youth culture that is ahead of its time. Of course, the achievements of the past and the future are here to stay, so the expectations for the future are boundless.

Any messages for your Indian fans and readers of *Rolling Stone India*?

Hisashi: I'm Hisashi, and I play guitars along with other instruments in the band Glay. I have been to various countries, and I have always felt and said that there are no language barriers for those who love music and alcohol. But I know that's not always the case. Well, let's have a toast when we get a chance to meet anyway.

Jiro: Glay might be a band that doesn't go abroad as often as other Japanese artists, but we want to visit your city! To all our fans in India, we hope to see you soon! 🍷



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MIN: 'YOU NEVER HAVE TO EARN THE RIGHT TO LIVE LIFE ON YOUR TERMS'

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A strong sense of freedom has become what it is—Min's creative voice—evolving past limitations and taking a freewheeling attitude

By Debashree Dutta

MIN'S NEW EP, *Prime Time*—her exploration of empowerment and awakening since moving to New York—is the centerpiece of this interview, alongside anecdotes that helped me get to know the former member of Miss A, an influential K-pop act of its time. Since releasing the EP, she says, "I've been ecstatic about its reception," actively engaging with fans, speaking about the music, and spreading the word.

PRIME TIME IS AN INTILATION and a reflection of the whole process, where she is, in a sense that's not only a sign of something big coming her way in this chapter of her life but also her belief that while "you never have to earn the right to live life on your terms, I certainly have earned that right throughout my career and life." It conveys her passion for pulling out all the stops to create the music she always had in mind—the music that truly resonates with her. "When I moved to New York, I had no plans of moving here for good. I came to do a show on Broadway called KPOP, and after the show closed, I decided to stay here. I guess you can say that the spirit of New York—the right to completely be yourself and be uninhibited—was one of the inspirations for this EP." *Prime Time* is Min saying just that: "What you have come to know me by, judge me by, and dictate my life by, none of that matters because where I am right now in my life is going to be defined by me and no one else."

As is the complex dynamics of creative production in the context of music-making, *Prime Time* kicked off with Monstar Entertainment approaching Min, who she reveals genuinely seemed excited and saw her as "the woman" and "the artist" that she is, and of course, her very drive to express and drive into the depths of experiences. "From there, it was writing sessions accompanied by food, endless meetings to discuss creative concepts, dance rehearsals, performance video shoots, photoshoots—all of the stuff that people glamorize, but really, it's a lot of work. Everything felt super-organic, and it makes me feel proud of not just the final product but the entire process of getting to that destination."

THE FOUR-TRACK ALBUM DRIVES HOME the innately personal and expressive aspects of Min's life through intellectual and emotional lenses, serving as a musical portrayal of her findings from this introspection. She tells me, for example, that "Happy Plant" is a recorded phone conversation she had with her grandmother, the pillar of her life and her biggest driving force. "Even though it's in a language that a lot of people may not be able to understand, I hope that the takeaway is that there is always someone in your corner who is rooting for you and believing in you even when you can't do that for yourself at times."

So, what definitive, necessary point about *Prime Time* would you like to make? Min replies pronto, "That, baby, it's your *prime time*, and go shine. In all seriousness, I genuinely hope that people feel empowered to live their best lives, to shun all of the voices and critics that impose their opinions on their lives, and to be the most authentic and genuine versions of themselves because that shines. It's a message I needed to remind myself of, and it's a message all of us need to hear."



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A STRONG SENSE OF FREEDOM has become what it is—Min's creative voice—evolving past limitations and taking a freewheeling attitude. It all began in 2007. Min made a few solo songs that year and in 2008, joined Miss A in 2010, left the group in 2017, and carried on with her solo projects. "Well, those solo songs were never released and were meant to be for my solo debut, which was the plan originally before I joined Miss A,

but when people heard them, there was a huge buzz and excitement surrounding not only those songs but my debut as a solo artist in the States." That said, she admits, "Everything happens for a reason, one way or another." Her Miss A debut was unplanned but surely a decisive moment in Min's life. The band, in her words, "has some experiences that only the four of us are privy to," performed on some of the biggest stages, and won some of the



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“WHAT YOU HAVE COME TO KNOW ME BY, JUDGE ME BY, AND DICTATE MY LIFE BY, NONE OF THAT MATTERS BECAUSE WHERE I AM RIGHT NOW IN MY LIFE IS GOING TO BE DEFINED BY ME AND NO ONE ELSE.”

most prestigious awards and honors. All of that [both the good and bad], she adds, “provided a sturdy foundation for what my career is defined by now, which is a strong sense of freedom, independence, and truly going for what I want.”

Looking back, Miss A’s music was “sensational,” especially for that K-pop era, Min recalls. It was unlike anything heard before, and she felt that’s why they were so

well received. “The production was top-notch because you don’t get anything that’s not from JYP, a brilliant producer and musical mind.” However, as a solo artist, she’s got a distinct voice when singing and making her kind of music. “That’s very different from being in a group, and my musical expression now is completely free and deeply personal to me.” I can imagine it calls for a high level of will and persistence to release music as an independent

artist. As she says, “There’s the creative aspect; that doesn’t feel like work, but there’s song registrations, administrative work, scheduling, etc. It’s a lot, but I’m up to the challenge.”

“I don’t strive to differentiate myself.” As the pop star’s career keeps expanding, her music as an advocate of artistic freedom and independence is cemented, hinting at the eloquence of creative expression in popular music. Min, as I’ve been gathering through this exchange, simply wants to be herself and make beautiful music. “I think that act in and of itself is empowering, and I hope that everyone can live that way. I understand that, in many cases, it’s not that simple. It took me a long time to get here too.” As a solo artist, she’s eager to see her work reach not only her long-time fans but also new ones. “I just want to affect people positively, even if that’s something as simple as making them feel like dancing.”

In a space dominated by the urge for commercial success and steady growth, artists like Min stand out for their commitment to making authentic, passionate music. Her emphasis doesn’t lie on the complexities of musical evolution but rather on the positive influence that what she creates may have on people. Min is currently just soaking up and savoring the moment, saying, “I’m living my life, and I’m paying attention to the sights and sounds that are around me, and it’s quite a view.”

At this point, in the closing part, I ask Min how she feels about the dramatic rise of K-pop and K-content and the way it’s become such a global phenomenon. “It makes me proud of my culture and heritage,” she asserts, while also expressing, “I do hope, however, that people truly appreciate the emotional and mental cost that it takes to produce all of those things that they ingest. It’s a tough business, and our culture is hard-wrought, and it makes me very proud.”

MIN HAS SPENT YEARS putting her heart into every performance, and she believes her efforts have paid off. Her words serve as an appropriate message that real success is about the real connections that artists can build with listeners and fans—relationships that get stronger with time—it’s not just about big hits and packed tours. In gratitude and being optimistic, Min concludes, “I hope you listen to this album and love it. I hope that it affects you in some way and shapes your day to be a little lighter. I hope that you know that regardless of what’s going on, you have the power to make this chapter your PRIME TIME. Thank you for listening. Thank you for reading. And thank you for being you. Keep on.” 🎧

LAUREN NAKAO WINN

CIGARETTES AFTER SEX TALK NEW ALBUM 'X'S' AND INDIA TOUR IN 2025

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**FOUNDER GREG GONZALEZ
RELIVES MEMORIES FROM
A PAST RELATIONSHIP IN
HIS DISTINCTLY INTIMATE
POP MANNER ON THE
AMERICAN BAND'S THIRD
FULL-LENGTH**

By Anurag Tagat

T

HE SEDUCTIVE, melancholy and dreamy sound of Cigarettes After Sex returns on their third album *X's*, released Jul. 12, via Partisan Records.

More than a decade after the American band led by frontman Greg Gonzalez rose to fame for taking dream-pop to new places – and sometimes being derided for it – Cigarettes After Sex's imprint on music is evident in just how many more artists have drawn from their easy-paced yet sometimes explicit storytelling around romance and all the feelings associated with it.

Speaking with Rolling Stone India, Gonzalez says it's "the highest compliment" when there are other artists trying something similar. "Because music, to me, is a big circle."

Is there something different about *X's* compared to their breakout 2012 EP, the self-titled 2017 album and their 2019 follow-up full-length album *Cry?* To the hardcore fan, it doesn't matter. To Gonzalez, there are of course things he's done



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differently with bassist Randall Miller and drummer Jacob Tomsky.

X's thematically centers around memories from Gonzalez's relationship that lasted four years. He says about the songwriting, "There's some stuff that's a little more surreal at times, but then some of it's very straightforward, too. My favorite stuff is if I can write super matter-of-fact, or where it's like a memoir, kind of like a journal entry."

On "Hideaway," for example, with its lumbering bass to welcome you in, Gonzalez sings about finding his partner "blue in bed." He says, "I would wonder what's wrong and ask, 'Hey, what's wrong? Let me help you. You want to talk about it?' She was like, 'No, if I ever get this way, I don't ever want to talk about it. If I feel this way, I want you to snap me out of it.'" Within the reverb-heavy, atmospheric minimalism of Gonzalez's composing, he sings about taking his partner away to the beach, near Marina del Rey. "It's like a super dead beach, it's deserted," he says with a laugh. Gonzalez adds, "So it's about 'Let's go to our little place that we know makes us feel better and have a sweet day together.'"

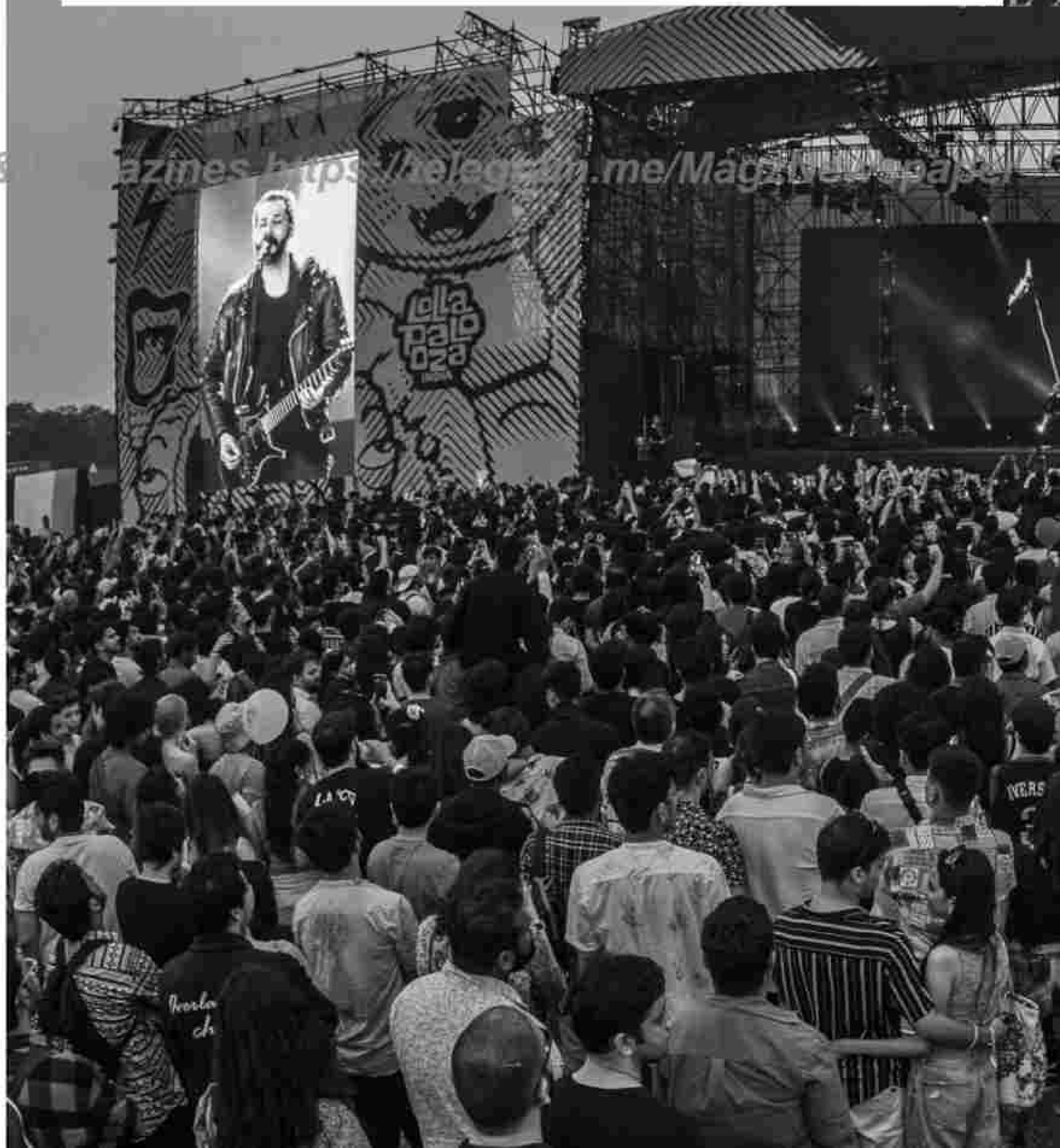
There's a slow hypnotism of "Dark Vacay" that's already made it one of the most popular songs on the album along with "Tejano Blue" (that's the more explicit one) but "Baby Blue Movie" is Cigarettes After Sex's most upbeat song to date. Gonzalez calls it "the weirdest song on the record!" It's inspired by dark-pop songs like Depeche Mode's "Enjoy The Silence" and "Missing" by Everything But The Girl, which Gonzalez calls "gentle club bangers."

He makes it a point to mention here that he's fully aware of how people say all their songs sound the same. It comes from the artist wanting to go back to "certain moves I like to do as a songwriter." He adds, "And it's meant to sound the same, but it's cool to stretch it a bit, like on 'Tejano Blue' and 'Baby Blue Movie.'"

Lyrically, there's a memoir chapter narrated in "Baby Blue Movie," but Gonzalez intended to keep things cryptic this time rather than straightforward. "I'll have songs that are like a memoir, like I said, where it's really based on exactly certain memories of somebody. Some are based on somebody, but it's a little slanted, it's a little blurrier. And then there are songs that are totally invented where a song like 'Kiss It Off Me,' I was more of a screenwriter," he adds.

Compared to previous material, Gonzalez says they took more production elements into account, digging into more grooves. "We played a static drum beat, like a drum loop, off a drum machine in a certain way, and played live on top of that. And then I moved things around a bit to make it groove the way I wanted to. Then the final step was having the drummer, Jacob Tomsky, come in and redo the drums. So that was a little more produced than we usually do," he says.

With the album out now, a world tour beckons Cigarettes After Sex to promote *X's* all through



“I’VE ALWAYS KIND OF HATED WHEN BANDS PLAYED A LOT OF THEIR NEW RECORD”



2024 up to early 2025. Gonzalez is upfront about how the setlist will change. “I’ve always kind of hated when bands played a lot of their new record,” he says with a laugh. “You should barely any new stuff. I think we’ll have maybe four new songs at the very most and that feels like a lot, even to me,” Gonzalez adds.

Of course, if fans are clamoring for more new songs off *X’s*, Gonzalez is more than happy to play them. He adds about the setlist they’re preparing for the upcoming *X’s* tour, “I’m more like, let’s focus on the songs that people know. We’ll play a bit longer, for sure and we’re trying to make the show just feel even more cinematic, more dynamic, feel more like it’s this world that you walk into that has a really specific feeling to it, as if you walked into a movie or something, but it should also feel like a rock show.”

India has always been a part of Cigarettes After Sex’s history so far, right from when they made their debut at Bacardi NH7 Weekender festival in Pune in 2017 and indoor shows in Mumbai in 2019. Most recently, they were back to perform at the inaugural edition of Lollapalooza India in Mumbai in 2023. Gonzalez recalls their Lollapalooza India show, “It was just so beautiful, looking out over that crowd. I think it was sunset when we were playing and everything.”

There are plans for a return to India as well to promote *X’s*. In July, the American band announced they will return to India for a fourth time for their debut three-city tour in January 2025.

Cigarettes After Sex perform in Gurugram on Jan. 24, in Mumbai on Jan. 25 and in Bengaluru on Jan. 28 as part of their *X’s* World Tour which kicks off in August in Canada and goes through Europe in October before reaching Asia in January 2025.

While they’ve had festival sets and two shows, Gonzalez says they’ve “been trying to do a tour forever, since 2017.” He adds, “We’re finally going to be able to go to some cities. We’ve only been to Mumbai, and now we can actually go to a few more cities. We’re going to New Delhi, which will be awesome because we’ve never been, and then Bangalore, which is great too. It was always like, ‘Let’s do a tour of not just Mumbai, let’s go to India and do more cities.’ So finally, [...] That’s really, really exciting.”

Among the things that Gonzalez says stood out for him when touring countries like India was how he’d often be spotted by fans in public. “I don’t really get recognized that much in the States or anything. Once in a blue moon, it’ll happen, but over there, it felt like there was a chance to have a mob around us or something,” he says with a laugh.

The universality of Cigarettes After Sex’s music is one that Gonzalez has seen reaching far, to places like India and it amazes him. He adds, “It just shows that we’re all united together. That’s what’s cool about this, that everyone can share those experiences together, you know?”

Hanumankind

IS JUST GETTING STARTED

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THE BURGEONING SUCCESS OF 'BIG DAWGS' IN RECENT WEEKS HAS PROVIDED THE KERALA RAPPER WITH A PLATFORM TO BECOME A TRULY GLOBAL MUSIC SUPERSTAR

By **PEONY HIRWANI**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAMRAT NAGAR

“T

HE PAST FEW WEEKS have been a lot to process, but me and the boys are taking it one day at a time. It's cool to see how the world has embraced us,” Hanumankind says in a tone that is calm, composed and disarming. He is in between a photo shoot at the studio in south Mumbai as we speak. All the accolades and adulation that have come his way in the last few weeks do not seem to have fazed him. A burger and fries that he

asked for has just arrived, and he makes sure that he shares it with the people around. Even if the new celebrity status sits lightly on him, it has been very concerning for his family. “They were even more overwhelmed than I was,” HMK, as he is widely known, says, “I must keep my composure, and they're the ones going, ‘What the fuck is going on?’ I just want to make sure they're okay because they're not really prepared for



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this kind of stuff. For them to be dealing with people calling and showing up at the house can be a little scary, so it's my job to protect them."

Considering the speed at which the popularity of his breakout track "Big Dawgs" has skyrocketed around the world in the last few weeks, and the overnight global fame that followed, what his family has been going through is understandable. The song was released in late July 2024, and by early August it had become the first English track by an Indian artist to reach No.1 on the India Spotify chart. In the following weeks, it climbed to No. 9 on Billboard Global 200 charts, and No. 8 on the US chart, the highest position again for an English track by an Indian. It has been on the charts in countries ranging from Latvia, Austria, Ukraine, and Germany to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, New Zealand, and Switzerland. With 132 million streams on Spotify, the song is still holding tight at No. 8 on Spotify India chart, and No. 9 on Spotify Global Top 50 Chart.

HMK's stardom is in many ways unique for an Indian music artist. There is no doubt that Punjabi singers like Diljit Dosanjh, A P Dhillon, and others have seen a steady rise in their international audience in recent years, enabling them to play in packed stadiums around the world, and big-name festivals like Coachella. The significant difference however is that their popularity comes largely from the global Indian diaspora. "Big Dawgs" on the other hand has done something different for HMK. It has broken through into a more mainstream global hip-hop audience.

"I like pushing myself creatively," HMK says, "It's been nice to see how people are reacting to ["Big Dawgs"] and the fact that they like it is super fucking cool, but also, it's only because the music came from a place of me just enjoying what I do and embracing my creativity." The smash hit represents both an opportunity as well as a challenge for him. Opportunity, because it would make it easier for his music label (he is signed on Def Jam India, the Indian arm of one of the biggest hip-hop labels) to market and amplify his new music in the future now that there is an international audience that is familiar with his name. The challenge for him though will be for a repeat performance with new music that would have an equally enormous impact, locally as well as in the international arena.

Despite its international acclaim, what truly sets "Big Dawgs" apart is its remarkable success on the charts in India. Historically, it has been exceedingly rare for an English-language artist like HMK to achieve nationwide success in India. Consider Indian hip-hop, which has arguably become the most successful new genre of popular music in the country over the past decade, aside from enduring categories like film music, spiritual songs, and folk-based tracks in regional languages such as Haryanvi and Bhojpuri. The last time a genre achieved this level of widespread popularity was during the short-lived "Indiepop" era of the 1990s, influenced by Biddu Appaiah, which produced stars like Alisha Chinai and Shaan & Sagarika.

The reason for this is not far to seek. Indian hip-hop's rise to popularity began in Punjab and surrounding regions in the late 2000s, eventually spreading to other parts of the country over the last decade. This success has largely been fueled by artists who perform in their native languages, whether Punjabi, Mumbai Street Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, or even Kannada, Marathi, and Gujarati. Given that fluency in English remains the domain of a relatively small elite in India, the deep roots of Indian hip-hop in local languages and dialects have helped it reach a broader audience and tap into a larger talent pool. In contrast, this also sheds light on the still limited appeal of English-language Indian rock and pop music, which, despite being around since the 1960s, has yet to achieve the same widespread success.

HMK's success in this context has much to do with his unique back story of having grown up for a part of his formative years in the U.S., specifically in the southern hip-hop region. The 32-year-old singer was born Sooraj Cherukat in central Kerala's Malappuram district. His father was an oil company executive based in Houston, Texas. The time he spent with his family there in his teens exposed him to the likes of Three 6 Mafia, Project Pat, and Bun B, an influence evident in his musical style and singing. HMK attended Houston Community College but returned to India to do a degree in Business Administration in Coimbatore. He spent a part of his 20s working in a corporate job at the investment bank Goldman Sachs, followed by a stint as a gym trainer.

Music though was his first love. But it seems to have taken him much longer than most other musicians to embrace it as a career. Holding onto a full-time job meant that he was already in his late 20s by the time he launched his EP

Kalari in 2019. At his debut appearance at NH7 Weekender in 2019, he was hardly noticed in a lineup of artists like artists such as Niek Murphy, Opeth, Dreamville, Kodakline, Earthgang, Cozz etc. But the show did bring him to the attention of standup comedian Abish Mathew who promoted him on his social media channels. Like Mathew, Tej Brar, head of festivals at Nodwin Gaming is someone who saw immense potential in the rapper when he first met him a little over five years ago. "I've known Sooraj for a long time now. What I have admired the most is his consistency and dedication to getting better at his craft."

But it would be another two years before HMK had his first big hit, the fan favorite "Damson" that got him a slot to open before the headliner J.L.D at the first post-Covid NH7 Weekender in 2022. Still, he continued to be mostly featured as a guest artist at various music festivals, including this year's Lollapalooza India 2024 where he played with Karan Kanchan and the first edition of Spotify's Rap91 where he was part of Karan Kanchan and Parimal Shais' sets. Again, at the most recent Bengaluru edition of Boiler Room, he was a guest on Parimal's set. Not surprisingly, his oeuvre on Spotify is peppered with guest appearances, including the most recent "The Last Dance," a Sushin Shyam track that features on the soundtrack of the hit Fahadh Faasil's Malayalam film Aavesham.

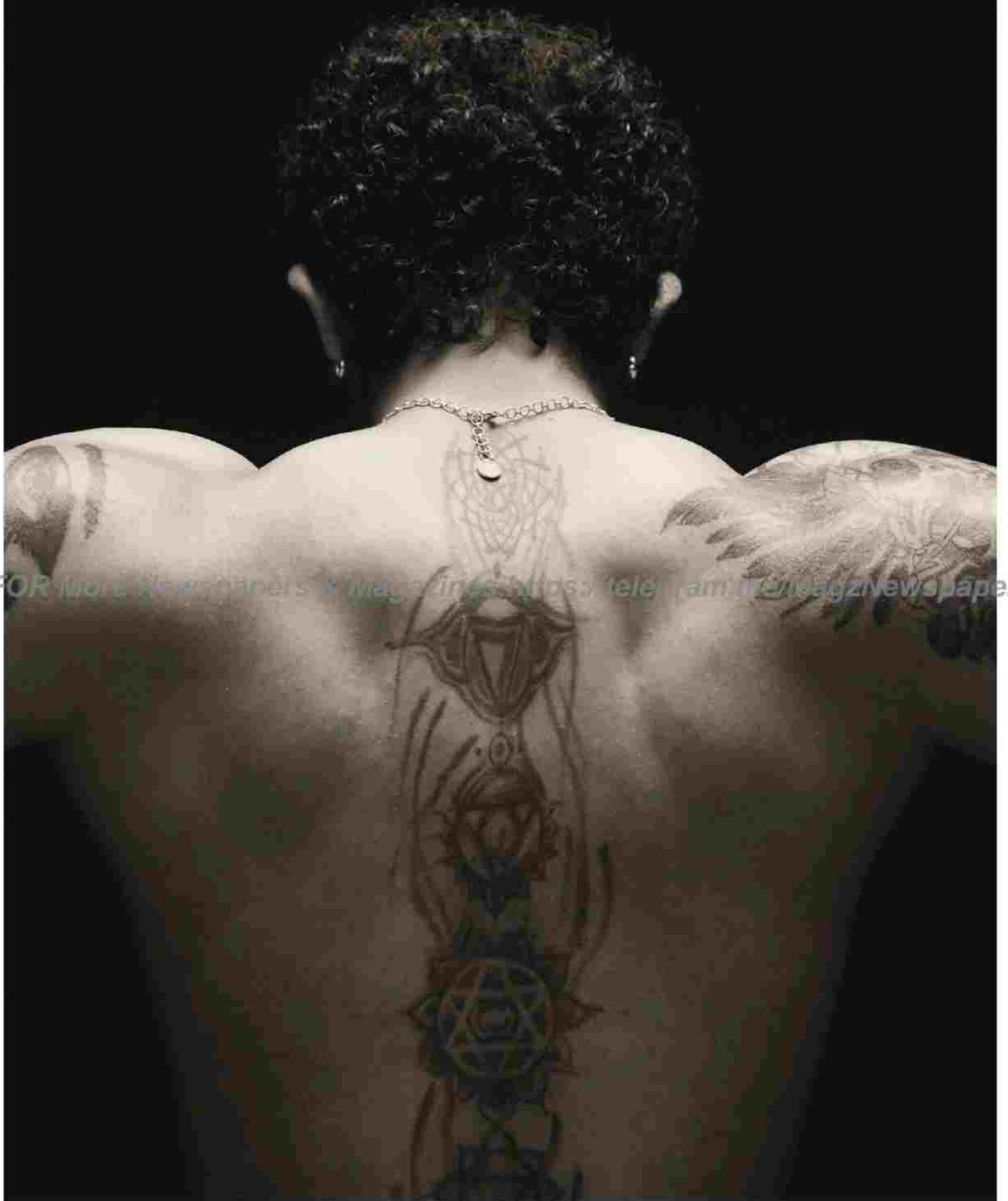
HMK though relishes his collaborations, especially with his long-time friend and "Big Dawgs" producer Kalmi, and Bijoy Shetty who directed the song's popular music video which was filmed in the Maut Ka Kuan (Well of Death) of the traveling circuses during its staging in Ponnani in Kerala, and which in the last few weeks has garnered more than 100 million streams on both on YouTube and Tik Tok. "For me, working with my boys is the only way I would do it. I don't know how to feel any other way," he says. "This is what I intended when I got into music. In fact, my relationship with the boys is more than just music; the closeness we have outside of our creative work is the foundation for everything we do. I'm glad the boys decided to stick with me throughout these years because I know I can be a lot to handle."

Kalmi, whose full name is Nikhil Kalimreddy is a Hyderabad-based producer and electronic music DJ who has known HMK since the time he launched himself professionally five years ago. Reflecting on their recent success with "Big Dawgs," he says, "It's important to recognize this win. For both me and Sooraj (HMK), we acknowledge this achievement and are focused on creating more music and exploring new directions for our sound." Kalmi refers to their partnership as one of "yin and yang," a meeting of mind of two distinct kinds of characters. "We have completely different personalities—I'm calm and prefer to avoid too much exposure, while HMK is the opposite."

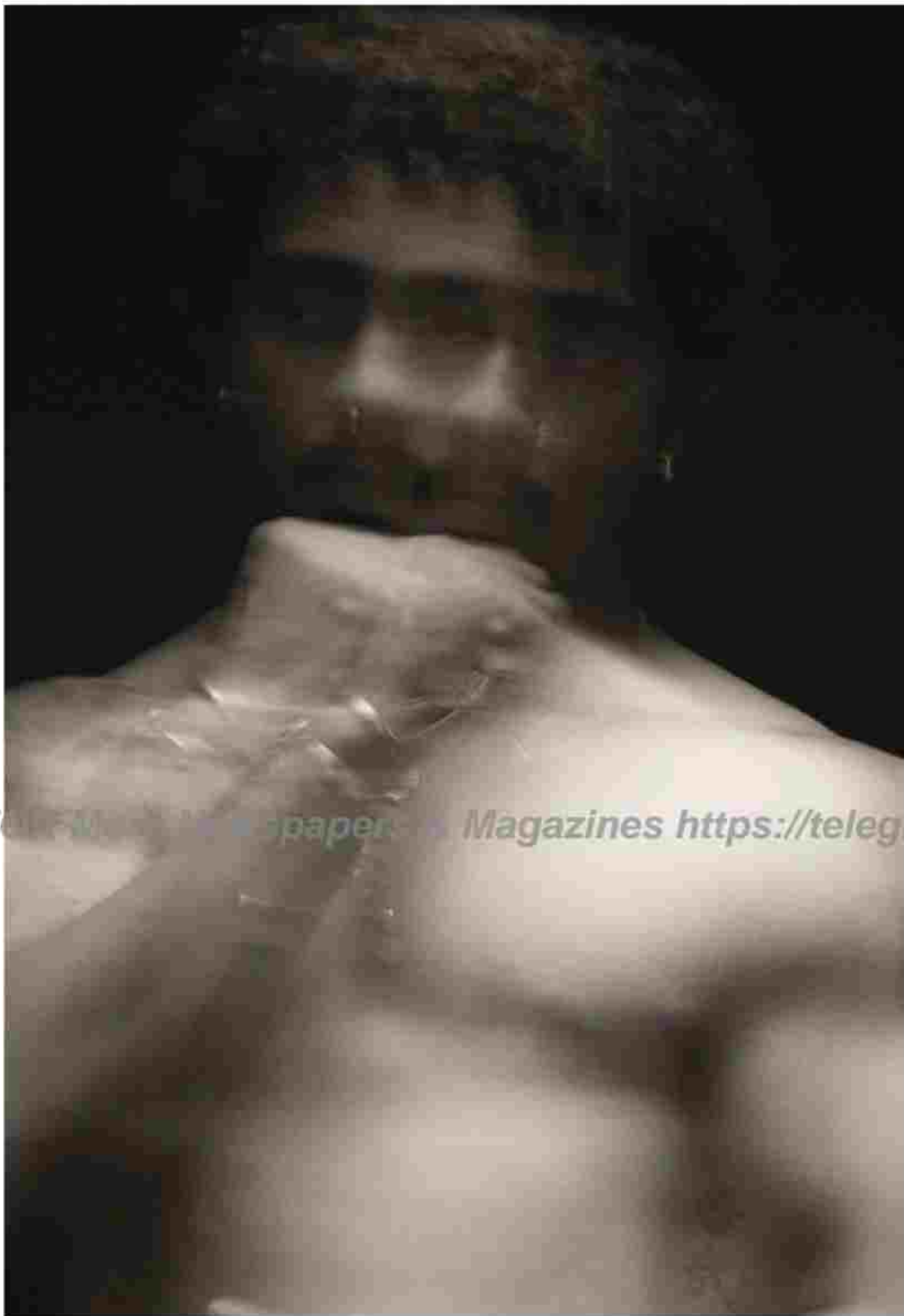
This sense of community and cultural pride was evident in an Instagram live chat last week between HMK and one of his heroes, Texas rapper Bun B. During the conversation, HMK discussed the Indian music scene and his mission with "Big Dawgs" to authentically showcase his culture and the South Indian community to the world. "At the end of the day, what we did here is

"It's nice to see how people are reacting to 'Big Dawgs' and the fact that they like it is super fucking cool."

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“Keep your eyes open for the people I incorporate in my new music.”

but even within America, there are divisions and social classes, just as there are in India.” He believes the key to overcoming these divides is by “being authentic and making music” that unites everyone.

Bun B, drawing from his own experiences, shared how he and his community have fought to present a united front. “Different people came from different places, and everyone wanted to be seen and heard equally,” he explained. However, he noted that not everyone had a platform, and it took time for people to understand how to bring everything together. “But once we realized that while we were fighting to establish a hierarchy, from the outside looking in, no one saw the differences between us. So, we had to fight for individuality without isolating others in our group.” This, Bun B emphasized, is the message he wants to convey to HMK as he is starting off, and to the Indian hip-hop community at large.

For the immediate future though HMK is very excited about his acting debut in noted Malayalam director Aashiq Abu’s new film *Rifle Club*. He will be portraying a character named Bheera alongside Hindi filmmaker and actor Anurag Kashyap. “Aashiq Abu reached out to me in February or March,” HMK says, “He saw something in me that made him take a chance, and I’m incredibly grateful for that.” He feels his music videos played an important role in him getting the role. “I think those videos were

my audition,” he says. And now that “Big Dawgs” has made him a big star, he does not rule out being part of the film’s music lineup as well. “We didn’t start out planning to write music for the movie. It was more about me playing a character, but if we do end up creating a song for it, that would be amazing. If not, I’m just grateful for the opportunity to try.”

When asked about his plans for new music, the rapper enthusiastically reiterates his viral catchphrase “hmk otw”—short for Hanumankind on the way—which includes a potential album, and live performances at music festivals worldwide. “Rest assured, there is a lot of music,” he says, “I would say keep your eyes open for people that I incorporate in this music.” 🎧

meaningful because I’m Indian, but I’m just a part of a much larger country. So, I cannot fully represent it because there are so many languages, styles, traditions, and layers to our culture. Within the country, we have a unique opportunity to bring everyone together. Different regions—north, east, south, west—each have their own styles, cultures, and heritage, but what’s exciting right now is the potential for unity.”

The conversation then turned to the future, with Bun B and HMK agreeing that “Big Dawgs” is “just the foundation of something bigger, with much more to be done.” HMK emphasized the importance of building a cultural bridge, pointing out that “Indians know Americans, and Americans know Indians—



LIVE INSIDE SEEDHE MAUT NATION: DESI HIP-HOP'S PUNK MOMENT

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SCENES FROM THE NEW DELHI
DUO CALM AND ENCORE ABJ'S 12-
CITY LUNCH BREAK TOUR STOPS IN
THE CAPITAL AND DEHRADUN

By Palash Krishna Mehrotra



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TAKE NO MISTAKE — this is a moment, an exploding generational moment that India's parched pop culture landscape has been waiting for years to arrive. Cinema dictates everything in India, from fashion and hairstyles, to music and choreography. The only redeeming thing is that we have many cinemas, in different languages, each with its own lexicon.

But the Seedhe Maut (SM) moment comes from outside the system. This is pure angst, pure rebellion, pure badmashi and pure badtameezi. SM is a headless chicken squawking its head off. It's a sight to behold. There is blood everywhere but there is also grace in the chicken's mad dancing.

Every once in a while there comes a band that marks a line in the sand. There's a before and

there's an after. Like with all cultural phenomena that seek to stomp on the past and present and create their own future in the now, SM elicits strong either/or reactions. You either love them or you hate them. Unlike Indian indie bands in English — with the exception of Peter Cat Recording Co. — who mostly end up singing for friends and family (metal is a different universe), SM has the numbers to show.

With 489,000 followers on Instagram, 589,000 subscribers on YouTube, and 14.6 lakh monthly listeners on Spotify (that's only one music streaming platform), one thing is clear: the lovers far exceed the haters. Local has no need to go global. As the line from "First Place" goes: "Seedhe Maut cult hai/ Need no ally." This is our scene, our lives, our cities, our insouciance, our Hindi, our Hinglish, our lingo, our in-jokes, our profanities (more specifically: dyed-in-the-wool Dilli gaalis), our pot — Cannabis Indica, not London skunk: "Aanh! Check!/ Geeta pe haath your honour, aan/ Spit game sick and proper, aan/ Chahey poora scene karoon call out, haan/ Chahey poora din karoon ball out, yeah." When the lyrics appear in Spotify, it's in a potpourri of Roman and Devnagari.

My generation — different from the one SM is addressing — waited long for this moment. We thought that like in the U.K. the revolutionary vehicle would be punk. Well, punk never really took off here. It was too foreign, too British. Also, if anything as incendiary as the Sex Pistols ever happened here, the band would most likely be behind bars for life. But punk is a broad term. I would term the SM moment a punk moment in India's constant churning. Except that this moment arrived via hip-hop — bars of a different kind.

I first heard of SM in 2019 when the animated video for the single "101" came out. It features the duo, Calm (Siddhant Sharma) and Encore ABJ (Abhijay Negi), driving around Delhi at night, past a flyover, with ripped pieces of paper raining down on the car, which manages to move and remain stationary at the same time. For some reason, the line "Noida se leke Nizamuddin" got stuck in my head. It still is. Then, for some reason, I stopped listening to them.

Seedhe Maut kept on releasing new albums and singles, their audience kept growing. Last year, they dropped the mixtape *Lunch Break*, pretty much SM having fun in the time and



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space between their previous album, *Nayaab* and the next one, *Kavi Kehna Chahte Hain*. They followed this up with a sold-out 12-city pan India tour, taking the music to places big and small, from Jaipur and Hyderabad to Mumbai and New Delhi. New Seedhe Maut tour dates have been announced for October.

2024 marks a tipping point of sorts for the band. The band has become a bandwagon. Like many others, I hopped on to it. This is the year that SM began making hordes of new fans. I started with *Lunch Break* and traced the journey backward through the four previous albums, ending/beginning with the first E.P. *2 ka Pahada* (2017). (Originally a product of the indie label, Azadi Records, launched by Uday Kapur and Mo Joshi, SM are doing their own thing now, even though Mo is still on board.)

The word is on the street. SM knows that they are now an unshackled force, spreading their tentacles beyond core loyalists. The new fans are acknowledged in every gig. Between songs, Encore, who loves peppering his conversations and lyrics with 'yessir', stops and asks the audience in Hindi: "How many of you are watching us live for the first time?" There's a

show of hands. A warm welcome ensues from the stage. The follow-up is addressed to the older fans. Encore tells the crowd to keep coming back: "Jab tak tum log vapas aatey rahogey, tab tak, bhai, hum bhi stage par aatey rahenge. Tumharey bina hum kuch nahin hai."

SEEDHE MAUT KNOW THAT THEY ARE NOW AN UNSHACKLED FORCE

Yessir!

But where's the gig? Which crowd is this? Let me take you there, live, from the concert in Dehradun to the tour finale in Delhi.

SM followers are a devoted lot. YouTube is full of self-made videos of kids getting ready for the gig in their bedsits, hostel rooms and shared apartments. Nothing is left out – the ride to the concert, waiting patiently in the snaking queue, and once you are in, rapping with the duo, word for word, in tandem.

I have done my homework. SM songs are scorched with red hot iron in my head. I've been listening to them on repeat while drunk, while sober, while driving, while drunk driving, until I get a 'Top Fan badge'. I'm on my way to a Seedhe Maut gig, my first, in Dehradun.

I'm still ten minutes from the venue, when the texture of the traffic changes. Just kids on scooters and motorcycles, some 'tripling', all wearing hip-hop tees: Tupac, Eminem, Seedhe Maut.

There's an interminable queue waiting to get in. The queue is a mela, exuding bonhomie. There is pregnant anticipation. I joke with



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someone that it's easier to vote. The generation SM is speaking to is 15 to 25/30, but it's easy to break the ice if one knows how to deploy SM lyrics. I don't waste any time, and begin by addressing fellow fans with the opening lines from "Hola Amigo" (with KR\$NA & Umair): "Hola Amigo, Kaiso ho theek ho?/ Kya challa hai bruv/ Tell me what's up/ Ghar pe kaise hain sab/ Aunty ko bolna I'm sending my love." I ask if Sez On The Beat (SM's beatmaker on previous albums) is here; this insider question melts the ice further. I'm finally one of them.

The thing about a Seedhe Maut gig is that there are no curious fans, only old and new ones. If you know you know, once you're in you're in. Age no bar, gender no bar, class no bar. We're all citizens of SM Nation. They've come crawling out of the woodwork: gay couples holding hands, girls perched on their boyfriends' shoulders, loners, students, food delivery agents, callcentre workers, gangs of girls, gangs of boys, and the hardcore fans who arrived three hours ago, all packed tight upfront in a unified block. The lucky ones are pulled up on stage and get to rap with SM live. One can't really see the band from the back; it would help if in future gigs they had screens blowing up the duo on stage. Not everyone has

the courage to handle the crush of the front-row converts. Periodically, Encore asks the audience to make space for those around them.

The bar is thriving. Complete strangers buying each other drinks and sharing cigarettes. Each time I'm dancing and singing along by myself, a circle forms, and we rap together, throwing water, exchanging fist bumps. There's an incredible sense of community: no aggro, only camaraderie – we belong to a secret club, a parallel universe the outside world has no idea of. This is the close-knit Indian underground, on the ground.

The energy hits you like a gale force punch. Aside from 'energy', the word 'elation' comes to mind. There's more energy here than in the sun. Each time it sags a little, there comes the classic SM clarion call from the stage; Calm shouts: "Tera bhai!" We scream back: "Seedhe Maut!" Everyone throws more expensive bottled water on each other. Confetti rains down from the sky.

Having seen SM in my backyard, Dehradun, it's time to catch the tour finale in their backyard, Delhi. It's a much bigger venue, bigger crowd, bigger cars parked outside. Inside, it's the same vibe, except Delhi being Delhi, people are more wary of each

other. Everyone sticks to their circle. For some reason, a lot of kids are wearing heavy metal tees. Seriously? Dehradun scored better on this one. Given the number of school kids, some of them chaperoned by bewildered parents, perhaps it's no surprise the organizers have decided to do away with the alcohol.

It's May, it's Mother's Day, and a voice comes from the stage informing the audience that one of the duo's moms is here to watch the show. Again, I'm at the back, so can't tell if it's Encore or Calm. The voice asks us to say, "Happy Mother's Day, Aunty" to her, and ten thousand (possibly more) kids oblige in one voice. One of the duo (again, I can't tell who) says: "Look at those windows in IG Stadium. My father installed those. Tonight let's make so much noise that the windowpanes shatter." A loud roar from the crowd ensues. A big fat yellow moon looks down benignly from above.

What's happening on terra firma is anything but benign. Rebellion is in the air. SM goes after rich kids living off their father's money: "Pal rahe bapu ke FD pe", and tyrannical teachers and parents: "Main aata vaha se, jaha pe bachche baithe mu fulake/ Kyuki ye teacher bina baat ke maar raha hai chaante/ Toh bunk hai classein/ Ghar pe gaiee khabar to toote gaand hai/ Par dum hai gaand me, inke dollo se bade yaha aand hai/ Andar se nazuk, chamdi moti, dil se malamaal hai." My hair stands on end, and a shiver runs down my spine, when thousands of kids rap in unison to "101": "Gharwaalo ko pata tha chathi [Standard 6] se, ladka ye mandir me maatha nahi tekega."

There are moments in SM tracks, when I haven't a clue what they're talking about – like in "Tour Shit" – but it doesn't deter the kids from running with it and rapping along: "Jaata tha Gindi ke mele mein/ Pannalal bola, main Mukaddar ka Sikandar/ Pannalal ek gadha tha, vo ghoomta tha circus mein jaise koi madari aur bandar/ Teen saal baad suna, 'Pannalal gaya mar'/ Navbharat Times pe chhapi khabar (Aanh)."

And therein lies the difference between SM and the rappers who came before them. They are not overly political like Asian Dub Foundation, even though there is socio-political commentary in songs like "Rajdhani," where Delhi is personified and addressed: "Tu ban chuki hai dharam aur raajneeti ki jageer/ Vaha pe chalti ni mohabbat jaha pe chalti hai laathi/ Marte Hindu, mart Musalman, marti teri santaan hi/ Par terko pade ni fark tu khaati namak hai sarkari." Unlike Honey Singh, their videos don't feature luxury cars and models. Unlike Faadu, of "Kaash Koi Mil Jaye" fame), they are prolific to the extreme, and have a wider lyrical ambit. It's certainly not the safe affable nonsense rhymes of Baba Sehgal. As Calm said in a podcast: "Hip-hop cannot be sanitized."

When the gig ends at ten sharp, those in the front do an army about-turn, the message travels to us at the back and we head towards the exit. There is no pushing, just a giant groundswell. We are pilgrims headed back to our Kumbh Mela tents after the dip in the Ganges. This is an exodus of the purged. 🕊

ØYA FESTIVAL 2024: IN PHOTOS

By Peony Hirwani

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HE 2024 ØYA FESTIVAL was truly spectacular. Held from August 6-10 at Toyenparken in Oslo, Norway, the event featured incredible performances by world-renowned artists like RAYE, Delara, Astrid S, Jack White, Jesse Ware, Overmono, Idles, Sampha, and The Pulp.

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