



The Connection Of It All

RARE ELEMENTS

STORY: R. SEAN OGDEN

Indie label 5 Points records' newest release *Rare Elements* is the first in a series of inventive recordings that bring together the music of master musicians/composers with today's top studio remixers to explore the connections between all genres of music. Using the Periodic Table of Elements as cover art is an example of the perfect symmetry between the inside and outside of this disc (to quote Mr. A. Einstein, "It's all connected"), and a good indication of the kind of creativity and inventiveness that went into this ambitious project.

The recording features one of India's great master musicians and composers, Ustad Sultan Khan, and up-and-coming American-born Desi vocalist Falu (aka Falguni Shah). Here Falu joins Khan and brings just the right ethereal touch to these string-based compositions, seamlessly blending her signature pop/rock style with Khan's formidable, classically-honed talent. She also boasts a *curriculum vita* not to be dismissed, having performed with leader Karsh Kale and David Nichtern and, most recently, with her new band at CBGB as part of the 2003 CMJ Music Marathon.

Khan's résumé is, of course, even more impressive. While he first gained international recognition on George Harrison's 1974 *Dark Horse World Tour* with Ravi Shankar, his talent was generations in the making. The grandson of Ustad Azim Khan and the son of Ustad Gulab Khan, both celebrated singers and *sarangi* players (a bowed, multi-stringed Indian instrument used to accompany vocalists), he's carrying on the tradition of a family of master musicians working within India's venerable *Indora Gharana* tradition.

But Khan has never limited himself strictly to the classical Indian repertoire (or even to one project at a time: Khan also recently teamed up with Krishna Das for the *A Drop of the Ocean* project, on Karuna records). He's also scored music for numerous Bollywood films and stage productions that have garnered him much acclaim in the South Asian community. With such past collaborators as Madonna, Duran Duran, Peter Gabriel and Shankar, as well as George Harrison, Khan is no stranger to fusion in the deep end of the pool and on a global scale. In 2000 he participated in Bill Laswell's groundbreaking *Tabla Beat Science* project. That same year, Khan's own album, *Piya*

Basanti, balanced his mastery of the Indian classical traditions with contemporary electronica, thrusting him into the vanguard of classical fusion once again. All of which makes Khan the perfect starting point for this ambitious series.

For the *Rare Elements* project Khan composed and performed 10 original tracks, then let some well known, and some not-so-well-known, remixers cut lose on his tracks. The result is an interesting array of musical interpretations that range from the pedestrian to the pinnacle of creative endeavor. This list of remixers includes Thievery Corporation, Joe Claussell, Ralphie Rosario, Nickodemus and Osiris, Brainpolluter and Radar One.

Each track truly reflects the individual remixer's particular style, and not all come away with stellar results. Reworking what was originally a meditative and spiritual composition into a hip remix can cause some problems, as on "Tarana" by Thievery Corporation, which seems to be less than dope, as they say. It features a groove that tends to be more redundant than meditative. It meanders and leaves one wondering how many times you can say "Om" before

you have to stretch your legs.

But the mixture of breakbeats and tribal drums on "Aja Maji" and "Sayaji" by Joe Claussell work well, showcasing why breakbeats and house vibes are Claussell's forte. Yet the attempted high-energy pulse on Chicago homeboy Ralphie Rosario's club anthem wannabe, "Maula," falls on its back beat. Everything about this track says "I wanna be big" but it never pays off.

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Nickodemus and Osiris (of *Turntables On The Hudson* fame) drop a downbeat gem with "Jaadu," a hypnotic and celestial track, which works around a circular baseline that pulls you into this jazz/ funk/dub of spiritual "Oms" and secret dark alleys. It's easily the best track of the bunch.

Brainpolluter's contributions are varied in both originality and creativity. "Majhi Re" tends to be aimless and uninspired, though "Caravan" has an interesting and original percussive structure that works perfectly with the vocal samples and whipping bass effect. Radar One slips some ethereal big beat vibes and grooves into "Jaadu" and "Meher Ali," both of which have a deeply cinematic tip with jazzy scratches and vocal snips that set an otherworldly tone against the backdrop of Khan's classical compositions.

One thing is very clear: each artist in this project brings his or her own musical muse into the creative collage, making for a very personal and resonant collection of work. Falu finds inspiration from a wide collection of artists "in the Western tradition," as she put it, listing Yo-Yo Ma, Ella Fitzgerald, Sting and REM. "I prefer traditional American music," she explains, "things like rootsy blues and jazz, because of their soulfulness and improvisatory nature. My favorite single song is 'Imagine' because its message is universal and larger than the music that created it.

"From the Indian tradition," she adds, "I take inspiration from my teacher Ustad Sultan Khan and his teacher Ustad Amir Khan, and Kishori Amonkar."

Of the tricky nature of the South Asian music business, she says, "Bollywood films are the best way to target the bulk of the more than one billion people in India. However, the singing and songwriting there is often (but not always) highly stylized and it is difficult to advance a new idea in that field.

"There is also a large audience that listens to alternative music," she adds, "mostly concentrated in large cities like Bombay and Delhi." This is the audience she hopes will be most receptive to the *Rare Elements* project.

Of the album she says, "Personally I like tracks two ('Tarana') and nine ('Caravan') because I feel both of them really bring out the warmest elements of Indian classical music, and also Sultan Khan's capabilities." She adds, "[The producers] did not really change the nature of the original work. Our vocals were performed knowing that grooves would be added under it. It is an idea we've shared with the producer David Nichtern for some time. So we were comfortable with it."

As for the producers' perspective on the record, Thievery Corporation's Rob Garza weighs in on his inspiration, too: "We are very inspired by Eastern music; songs like 'Facing East,' 'Illumination,' 'Indra,' 'Vivid,' 'Transience,' 'Interlude' and 'Un Simple Histoire' have all explored our fascination with the Eastern sound."

In the end *Rare Elements* is a project that's both spiritual and percussive, uniting the mind, body and spirit on the dancefloor. If the music overreaches occasionally, that's only because of the adventurousness and ambition of the project. Mostly the risks pay off.