



SANJOY Narayan

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VIVA MUSIC  
Azam Ali, vocalist  
and songwriter of  
Iranian band Niyaz

# Beyond The Language Barrier

You may not understand their lyrics, but the music of Niyaz, Curumin and Kinky speaks for itself

IT MAY have something to do with being in an aircraft. At an altitude of 30,000 feet, you do tend to do stuff that you may not otherwise consider. So, although I normally scrupulously avoid listening to songs sung in languages that I don't understand, on a recent flight, while listening to a podcast I stumbled across a band called Niyaz. Now, so-called 'world music' is not usually my genre of choice but the track that I heard by the band was so compelling that I was intrigued enough to follow up on them. What I found was a very pleasant surprise.

Niyaz are an Iranian trio and their music is a fusion of Persian, Turkish and Indian folk songs and poetry with electronic instrumentation and programming. Their lyrics are in Persian, Turkish or Urdu and, except for a few stray snatches (when they sing in Urdu), I can't understand a thing they say. Yet, maybe because of one member of the band, DJ Carmen Rizzo's musical arrangement, Niyaz's music is instantly likeable. The three members share Iranian roots, although each of them took a different route to their current base in Los Angeles. Niyaz has a strong Indian connection too. Azam Ali, vocalist and songwriter who also plays instruments including riqq (a small tambourine), tanpura and the hammered dulcimer, went to school in Panchgani, Maharashtra, and has formal training in Indian classical music, besides also learning Western, Persian and East European traditional music. And Niyaz's music reflects such eclectic influences. Their second album, *Nine Heavens*, has two CDs – one purely acoustic and the other marrying traditional Turkish, Persian and Indian music with modern electronic dance genres.

A few days after discovering Niyaz, I came across another musician most of whose songs are in another language that I do not understand, Spanish. Curumin (a.k.a. Luciano Nakata Albuquerque) is of Brazilian and Japanese descent and plays a brand of music that locals call "samba-funk". He's also part of San Francisco's hip-hop collective, Quannum Project, which was co-founded by American DJ and producer, DJ Shadow. Curumin's music is of the kind that is so catchy that it hooks you instantly. Besides, if you don't know Spanish, you don't have to bother much about the lyrics and concentrate on the music that is very danceable too. Curumin has also done a couple of offbeat soundtracks for a couple of Nike TV ads that are worth checking out (links in the web version of *Download*



ROCKSTARS

Mexican five-member ensemble Kinky are known for their flamboyant live shows



**CURUMIN'S  
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INSTANTLY**

*Central*) and his most recent album, *Japan Pop Show*, is well worth picking up. A highlight of Curumin's music is the cavaquinho that he plays. The instrument is like a mini guitar with four strings and, I learnt, originated in Portugal.

After discovering Niyaz and Curumin, I was on a roll trying to discover more bands that sing in other languages. The next band to turn up on my iPod was called Kinky. A Mexican five-member ensemble, Kinky play alternative rock and are based in Monterrey, Mexico. Kinky are known for their flamboyant live shows and their music has an appealing punk feel to it – gritty and bare. They're also known to occasionally destroy their instruments on stage, keeping alive an authentic rockstar tradition.

But being a rock band in Mexico is evidently not easy, as I found out while listening to an interview with Kinky's members on an Internet radio station. Playing gigs at nightclubs can become an ordeal because of the local mafia, which seems to control many of these clubs. Kinky though have managed to break out of all that by

touring across the world and playing at US music festivals alongside bands like Cake, The Flaming Lips and Modest Mouse. Kinky have released six albums, the latest being *Baracuda*, which came out in February. It's a sweaty, party-ready and full-bodied album with 13 tracks. If you like electronic rock, this album's for you.

After immersing myself in music by three bands whose languages I don't quite follow, I realised that you don't necessarily need to pay more attention to what is being said in a song than how it is being sung. Still, if I liked Niyaz, Curumin and Kinky so much without understanding a word of what they were saying in their songs, imagine how it would have been if I had even a working knowledge of Spanish, Turkish or even Urdu.

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