

TOP OF THE WORLD

On this issue's compilation – our curated selection of new music and bonus tracks from across the globe



TOP OF THE WORLD TRACKS

10



10 Naïssam Jalal 'In the Rice Fields at Dawn'

From *Landscapes of Eternity* on Les Couleurs du Son

French-Syrian flautist and vocalist Jalal, steeped in Hindustani classical tradition, evokes an Indian dawn with serene delicacy, backed by *sarod*, *tabla*, *tanpura* and Samrat Pandit's voice. **See p65**

Q&A

Naïssam Jalal

What about your time in India resonated so strongly with you?

When I travelled in India, I was going through very tough times in my personal life. It was not like, 'I feel bad, so I'll go to India,' but a few days before I travelled, something happened that was very hard for me. Then I found in the landscapes and in the Hindustani music a space to heal. It was very strange, because I'd never been there before 2021. When I was there, I did not feel that I was home, of course, because it's not my home. But the landscapes resonated as if I had known them forever.

You mentioned the struggles you went through at the time. How has that impacted your music?

Everything I live, everything I go through, my music is the place where I can express and heal myself. I think people can hear that. No-one knows what I've gone through, because I haven't told anybody, but they can feel it. Because any one of us can go through hard times. We all have hard times in our destiny; unfortunately, no one is safe from this.

How do you approach the meeting of Hindustani music with jazz in your music?

Actually, I'm not pretending to play Hindustani music and I'm not pretending to play jazz. I'm just playing my own music using the vocabulary that fits what I'm trying to describe, the landscapes that I've seen and experienced. There are other vocabularies I could use, but I felt that they didn't fit what I'm trying to describe. That's why I decided not to play the *nay* [Arabic end-blown flute] on this album, because it wouldn't fit with the landscape.

Your improvisations are always exciting. What does improvisation mean to you?

My relationship to improvisation is very deep. When I was a kid, I used to study Western classical music at the conservatoire, but it never felt like playing music. The first time I felt that I was playing music was the first time I improvised, because I felt that I could say things with the music that I could never say with words. From the very beginning when I improvised for the first time, I knew that was my path, and I would do nothing else but play music all my life. When I improvise, there are two states of improvisation. There is one state where I know exactly what I'm doing, and when I'm doing it, I know what direction I'm going in. And when I finish the improvisation, I know exactly what I did. There is another state where sometimes I go so deeply into myself that when I finish the improvisation, I have no idea of what I played. It's a kind of trance. I'm playing, but I'm not an actor; I'm more like a listener. I listen to what is going through me, to the musicians that surround me, and to the emotions I feel. Everything is connected.

INTERVIEW BY JIM HICKSON



TOP
OF THE
WORLD
TRACK 10

Naïssam Jalal

Landscapes of Eternity

Les Couleurs du Son
9/10



Every time Naïssam Jalal releases a new album, I get to have the same thought: 'bloody hell, she's a fantastic musician.' The French-Syrian flautist and vocalist is a masterful

composer and improviser rooted in jazz, but her music and techniques encompass classical traditions from across the world as she ruminates on themes of spirituality and healing. *Landscapes of Eternity* is Jalal's 11th album, inspired by her solo travels across North India and the nature and humanity she encountered there. An album tracing a musician's personal journey through India is admittedly verging on cliché, but there is real depth, care and subtlety in Jalal's work. With skills honed through studies with the great *bansuri* maestro Hariprasad Chaurasia and singer Indrani Mukherjee, her playing shows a profound reverence for Hindustani classical music without harbouring a purist's tendencies. She is joined by Hindustani vocals, a *sarod* and *tabla* alongside piano and drums, and a *tambura* drone that vibrates through each track, grounding the whole album in the tonic and providing the base for imaginative meanderings through significant ragas. More than just a conceptual exploration of Indian music and its inherent spirituality, the album is also inextricably entwined with the heavy, years-long depression that coincided with her travels. The album's reflective and candid liner notes illuminate the music as it relates to her experiences during this time and the way her surroundings influenced her health and personal philosophy. The story of 'Soft Rain on a

Silent River', which represents the beginning of Jalal's re-emergence from that depression, is particularly touching. Above all, the music here is superb. Jalal's playing is as revelatory as ever, always taking her improvisations in startling and sparkling directions, whether through her voice-like flute or her flute-like voice. The musicians with whom she surrounds herself are also top-notch: sarod player Sougata Roy Chowdhury and pianist Leonardo Montana deserve special mentions for the colours they add to this canvas. As with all of Jalal's releases, this is a meditation that really rewards focused listening – and the tracks are long enough to allow for that, each clocking in around the 10-minute mark. That doesn't mean that everything's calm and relaxing, though. The opening track, 'Tears in Delhi's Fog', is the perfect example: it begins contemplative and haunting, Jalal's beautiful voice swooping wordlessly over intricate jazz chords and the ever-present *tambura*, but five minutes later she is blasting out exhilarating flute rants and runs to a driving *tabla* rhythm before settling back into an uneasy serenity to finish the piece. And none of it feels abrupt; it all flows onwards naturally, a breathtaking journey that mirrors the album itself. With *Landscapes of Eternity*, Naïssam Jalal gives a prayer of thanks to music and to the landscapes of India, both of which helped heal her depression. It's a thoughtful record of spiritual jazz and yet another opportunity to marvel at the creativity of this wonderful musician.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *Tears in Delhi's Fog*