

Review: Charu Siri

"The Book of Ragas," Second Volume

By: A Band Called Paul

Brecon Indie Reviewer Team

I'd like to think that I'm no stranger to mashing up genres within music. But I bow waist-deep with complete respect for the ingenious and exquisitely stylish mixed form of Indian Raga-meets-Jazz crossover being pioneered by Charu Suri - a lady whose remarkable talent and style underscores a very impressive musical pedigree.

In keeping with tradition, on this second volume of "The Book of Ragas" each raga provides the structured melodic framework within which the musical improvisation is free to colour the overall mood. And improv is at the forefront here as Charu Suri's deft fingers provide a jazz-like foundation for these percussion and piano duet pieces under the beautifully toned Sufi vocals by Falsa.

From the staccato, syncopated piano opening of "Raga Jaunpuri", where echoes of Leonard Bernstein in the brushed (at first) drum kit and increasingly jaunty piano slowly begin to migrate eastward to become reminiscent, to my ears, of Pakistan's Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan once the vocals enter, to the surprising evolution of the E.P.'s closing "Aaj Rang Hai", this combination of sounds and styles is like nothing I've encountered before.

Words fail me in trying to describe how the almost Celtic modal mood of this final track, with soft-mallet cymbals and tom-toms breathing space under the intricate flowing piano, suddenly takes off with a gorgeously confident hip-swaying groove at around the 4'40" mark with brushed drum kit propelling the swinging piano before offering us a soft landing to the former, more ambient mood as the track completes.

Two and four-mallet vibraphone, played nice and hard by Jesse Gerbasi, come to the fore on both the second track "Asavari" and the third "Sankarabaranam" forming a hypnotic but unforgiving counterpoint to the swift moving scale-like sweeps complete with trills. On "Asavari", they combine to form a churning, percussive, rain-like atmosphere of Debussy-like impressionism mixed with Stravinsky-like staccato hits, all wrapped in a free-flowing, tumbling swirl of sound under the somewhat mournful and slow-moving vocals. On the instrumental "Sankarabaranam", the metered, melodic and syncopated opening passage, reminiscent of Prokofiev in its deceptively simple-sounding melodic and rhythmic complexity, gives way to open-pedal vibes and piano sustain creating a lovely air around the more improv-like playing prior to joining forces once again, reverting to the opening melodic section and back again.

Uniquely beautiful and beautifully unique, the Book of Ragas - this new Vol. 2 along with its predecessor - creates an equally soothing and compelling landscape of mood and colour. It is, quite simply, delicious from start to finish.

Savour every morsel.