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WHEN THE HEART SINGS

Singing bhajans may not be everyone's cup of tea. But London born and bred Shivali Bhammer, sings to modern beats with world influences, giving a whole new twist to devotional music. **Jasmine Chokshi** gets a tête-à-tête with this young singer

Spiritual pop diva, voice of the contemporary devotional music scene, singer, writer and dancer Shivali Bhammer wears many hats and epithets with great aplomb. Born to Indian parents in London and brought up in a liberal atmosphere, Shivali transforms traditional *bhajans* and mantras into contemporary versions of mixed genres with R&B, soul, rock and pop. After the raging success of her first

album *The Bhajan Project*, Shivali is back with yet another phenomenon aptly titled *Urban Temple* via Eros Now Music. And not surprisingly, this album has reached number one on iTunes.

Quiz her about how someone with a degree in economics and philosophy from the University Of Nottingham is into fusing rock and R&B music into Indian *bhajans* and she says: "I knew I wanted to be star. That was my goal."

That Shivali found her true calling in devotional music should hardly be surprising given her deep interest in all things cultural and traditional. But her real achievement lies in giving *bhajans* and classic devotional sounds a more contemporary and global voice. From the centuries old *Vaishnava Jana* to the more complex Sanskrit *Chandra Bala* and the hugely popular *Art of Living bhajans*, Shivali's smooth rendition makes the

tracks at once hummable. "My Indian musical influence is my mum who plays the sitar, my great grandmother who had the words of all *bhajans* and mantras on the tip of her tongue, and of course the magic of growing up with Bollywood in the early '90s," she says.

Acceptance to her kind of music was proved when Shivali's first album *The Bhajan Project* made it to the top ten.

"My process of selecting

is quite ad hoc and bizarre. Some devotional tracks like *Mara Ghat Main Birajta*, or *Hari Sundar*, I have picked because they are my personal favourites and also liked by many. Others like *Chandra Bala* or *Shivoham* are hardly known but are songs I have fallen in love with and want the whole world to hear despite their relative obscurity," says Shivali.

And if there is an unmistakable sense of serenity and sincerity in Shivali's singing, she attributes this to her faith and closeness to God. "For me spirituality means being deeply religious. It means intensely searching for knowledge and the truth within you."

Profound words for

someone barely in her 20s. But then she had the idea of her debut album at the age of 15, which was eventually released as *The Bhajan Project* by Sony Music when Shivali was all of 22. At the time, there was a gap in the market; no one was singing devotional music unless they were a certain age with a certain classic style."

The singer who is based out of Knightsbridge has a close connection with Gujarat and Gujarati culture. "Both my parents are Gujarati Lohanas. My mother is from Uganda and my father is from Rajkot. As a matter of fact, we have family owned restaurants in Rajkot. I love being Gujarati, be it the sweetness of our language,

the sugar in the curries, the thinness of our rotis and of course the beauty of *raas garba*. I love Navratri and *raas garba*," says Shivali.

"We should never impose boundaries on how our music should/can sound. I was a Latin dancer in New York; that means I am used to the sounds of Latin America, I grew up on hip hop and R&B so I like heavy bass lines, and very smooth production, and I have spent all my life dancing to Bollywood which means I am attracted to strings, tablas, and the sound of *ghungrus* from *kathak*. You take all these different influences and you merge your ideas with someone like my composer Arjun

who is exceptional with the acoustic guitar." No wonder then, Shivali is being hailed as the precursor of the new 'Basement Bhajan' genre cutting across barriers and inspiring people of all age groups to sit up and take notice of the versatility and depth of Indian devotional music.

Talking of musical influences, Shivali says, "I am an ardent admirer of Vikram Hazra, another devotional singer. I love both Anoushka Shankar and Norah Jones; both carry extreme soul and originality in their music. Nitin Sawhney is the most unique music producer I know, you can't imagine a certain sound and then he will go and create it. But above all is Lauryn Hill, the American hip hop singer with her album *The Miseducation*. She literally re-educated me with her music, and continues to do so."

Other than singing, Shivali is finally finishing her *kathak* diploma, "Which I had to leave behind due to all my travelling and promotional events of my album." And she is already working on her third album. "I have made the first track for our third album which is based on the Hare Krishna *maha* mantra. It is a very Buddha bar style track and I am stoked because it has set an interesting and challenging tone for my next album which will sound completely different from all our previous work," says Shivali signing off. ●

Unlike her contemporaries, Shivali is inspired by devotional music

