

Najma Akhtar

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With the help of a European promoter, Akhtar performed in numerous concerts and festivals throughout Europe such as the Lille and Bourges Festivals and in the Middle East, at the International Palestinian Jazz Festival in Jerusalem. Some of her highlights include performing at the WOMAD (The World of Music, Arts and Dance) concerts, the jazz stages at the Reading and Glastonbury festivals, headlining at London venues such as the Ronnie Scott's, the Jazz Cafe and Waterman's Arts Centre, and opening for Nina Simone at the Dominion Theatre.

She has performed throughout England in areas such as Croydon, Birmingham, Somerset, Scotland and Cornwall and often participates in Asian community festivals and fairs or melas. The digitised items in this section include a selection of flyers, programmes and photographs of Najma Akhtar's national and international performances. The Najma Akhtar collection consists of material relating to her performances such as flyers, concert programmes, photographs and paraphernalia such as CD, tape and record sleeves, press releases and other promotional items.

Najma Akhtar launched her musical career as a vocalist after winning the 1984 Asian Song contest with the song 'Jane Kis Tara Say' in Birmingham. Born and raised in England, Najma was educated in Chelmsford, Essex, and Aston University in Birmingham, where she studied Chemical Engineering. Akhtar made her debut as a vocalist with a form of lyrical poetry known as a ghazal. She became interested in the poetic quality of ghazals, which are Persian in origin and deal with themes of unrequited love and longing, during her secondary education. Although she didn't receive formal training in Indian classical music, Akhtar learnt the harmonium and vocal techniques with Ustad Naeem Solaria and received guidance from other prominent South Asian classical musicians.

Akhtar emerged as a musician when international music was gaining popularity and Peter Gabriel's WOMAD (The World of Music, Art and Dance) tour began showcasing music from various parts of the world. She began touring widely in Europe, England, USA and Asia and performed at the jazz stages at the Reading and Glastonbury festivals, WOMAD concerts, the Lille festival in France and numerous others. She also collaborated on projects with a range of musicians including Robert Plant and Jimmy Page for their MTV unplugged performance, Jah Wobble, Andy Summers, Apache Indian, Ken Morioka, Phillip Glass, Ian Anderson and the renowned Pakistani musicians, the Sabri Brothers. Akhtar was also the first Asian woman to perform at Ronnie Scott's, one of London's premier jazz venues and the Jazz Café another prominent jazz club.

Akhtar's first album, 'Ghazals by Najma', was produced by the Indian music director, Ravi in 1988. It was her second album, 'Qareeb' (Closeness), which was released in 1989 on the Triple Earth label that received critical acclaim. She created a light, modern version of the ghazal by abandoning the strict musical conventions followed by established ghazal singers from the Indian subcontinent. Subtle jazz accompaniments such as the saxophone and electric bass were added to the traditional line-up of instruments such as table, sarangi and dolak. 'Qareeb' also explored other styles of music including Qawwalis, a form of Sufi music, Kafi music from the Sindh province in Pakistan and Punjabi music. Songs from the album were included in the soundtrack of Hanif Kureishi's film 'Sammie and Rosie Get Laid'.

'Atish' (Fire), her third album, also released on Triple Earth Label (1990) with Ian Scott, was a mixture of ghazals and Indian popular music. In 1996, Akhtar produced a 'concept' album with American musician Chris Rael, 'Forbidden Kiss: the Music of S.D. Burman'. This was a tribute to the Indian composer S.D. Burman, who popularised Hindi film songs. Akhtar's fifth album, 'Pukar' (Calling you) was produced by her own company Last Minute productions, in 1998. In 2002 she released 'Vivid', a musical collaboration with film composer Richard Grassby-Lewis.

Najma Akhtar has also performed and acted in several plays. She appeared in Tara Arts' production 'Journey to the West' in March 2002 and performed in 'Haroon and the Sea of Stories', an adaptation of Salman Rushdie's children's book, at the National Theatre in London in 1998. Akhtar's projects include playing the lead role in the West End musical, 'The Far Pavilions', which was scheduled for release in 2003.