

# Asian Fusion

*The nine rasas of Indian aesthetics in world fusion music*

By TEED ROCKWELL

**ASIAN FUSION. Ancient Future. Narada Equinox. Available at Tower Records and other music stores.**

When Ancient Future founder Matthew Montfort coined the term "world fusion," he surely never dreamed that the musical style he was creating would eventually be eclipsed by something that critics now derisively label "Fusak."

What's the difference between world fusion and Fusak? World fusion musicians study diverse traditions with care and sensitivity. (Montfort played gamelan music in Bali, and is one of the few Westerners to have studied both North and South Indian classical music.) Fusak is played by studio musicians who boot some exotic instrument samples into their synthesizers and then play jazz-pop solos with them.

The best world fusion music ranges over the whole spectrum of what Indian aesthetic philosophers call the nine *rasas*, expressing emotions as diverse as joy, pathos, and triumph. Fusak expresses only a single *rasa* that no Indian philosopher would have considered worth naming: a kind of bored complacency that begs to be ignored, and resembles real artistic experience about as much as a wall paper pattern resembles a Picasso painting.

While Fusak gluts the airwaves of the so-called adult contemporary radio stations today, Ancient Future has maintained its commitment to its original vision. The group's numerous albums have won international awards, and are frequently played by radio programmers who run their stations on their own tastes and intuitions rather than at the command of market research analysts. And for those who have come to look forward to each Ancient Future release, the good news is: the group's newest album, *Asian Fusion*, is perhaps its best yet.

The phrase "East meets West" is appli-

cable to this album in several rather dizzying ways. This is the first Ancient Future album to combine Chinese classical music with the group's Indian influences, and the Chinese have traditionally considered west to be the source of spiritual power — because India is west of China! On the other hand, Ancient Future is based in California, which is considered to be the Wild West, even though you can

get there from China only by traveling due east. Confused yet? Then unwind by listening to a native Vietnamese musician playing to a reggae beat, or a duet between a Chinese flute and an African talking drum,

or a performance by one of China's greatest gu zheng players accompanied by a scalloped fretboard guitar and a Persian tabla player.

The real key to Ancient Future's greatness, however, is that its music is hard to describe but easy to listen to. It blends these diverse elements with such sensitivity

that every innovation seems natural and inevitable. This is particularly impressive on an album that features so many guest performers from different cultures — they all seem to have become members of the same culture for the duration of this album.

The group also uses synthesizers on almost every song, and yet the entire album sounds completely acoustic, because the choice of synthesizer settings blends perfectly with the various (unfamiliar) acoustic instruments. A truly remarkable album, designed to be listened to again and again. □

## Expressive Filigree

By BASUDHA SENGUPTA

**SAAWAN AYO. Rita Sahai. With Pranesh Khan (tabla, pakhawaj), Kanwaljit Kalsi (violin, harmonium), Jai Uttal (keyboards). OSMJ Music, P.O. Box 9598, Berkeley, CA 94709, (510) 526-3449.**

Rita Sahai is a fast rising star on the horizon of North Indian classical music. Her latest compact disc, *Saawan Ayo (The Coming of the Rains)*, a carefully chosen collection of classical and devotional songs, shows why.

Sahai's newest effort captures the subtle nuances of the Indian monsoon, with its clouds darkening the sky and cool winds blowing across the hot plains after the long, scorching summer. It also expresses intricate romantic longings which culminate in spiritual ecstasy.

This hour-long CD contains Raga Jog with an evocative *alap*, generating

stormy, ecstatic, and joyous emotions associated with the coming of the rains. The progression from *vilambit ektal* to *m a d h y a laya teental* to *tarana* helps develop the mood of the piece. Sahai modulates her voice with sparkling clarity and resolution.

This CD also features a thumri, "Saawan Jhari," in Raga Mishra Manjh Khamaj, and three Meera bhajans, "Patiya Main Kaise Likhun," "Barase Badariya," and "Badara Re Tu," in Ragas Mishra Desh Malhar, Nat Mand, and Ragamala respectively. Her youthful craftsmanship in two renowned schools of music — the Banaras gharana and the Seni Allaudin gharana — are evident here.

This section of the CD is an expressive filigree of melodic variations. A lover's helplessness, quivering hands and pounding heart, all shine through Sahai's notes, tone, and tempo. Her rhythmic vitality is notable. This CD offers a refreshing exploration of a lover's experience and emotions. □

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