

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Sounding Relationality: An Interview with Aakash Mittal

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0jf4k2v1>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 17(1)

Authors

Rangaswamy, Varun

Du, Bowen

Publication Date

2026-09-04

DOI

10.5070/T8.66175

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Sounding Relationality: An Interview with Aakash Mittal

VARUN RANGASWAMY, Cornell University
BOWEN DU, University of California, Davis

Aakash Mittal is a multi-instrumentalist, composer, and improviser based in Brooklyn. While Mittal might be said to roam in the circles of “creative music,”¹ placing him in any one category of music-making is difficult. He grew up learning jazz standards and later developed more experimental music, but he also practices Hindustani vocal music and composes wind band pieces for middle schools. In albums like *Videsh* (2009) and *Ocean* (2013), Mittal decouples South Asian artistic expression from the name “South Asian” by bringing Asian religio-philosophical ideas into relation with Black American music while also acknowledging the formative impact and importance of his South Asian ethnic identity. Born in Texas to a white mother and a South Asian father and growing up later in Colorado, Mittal consciously works within and beyond the definition of “American” by finding intersections between Black American, European, and South Asian musical practices.

In order to find these intersections, Mittal describes how he had to shed the idea that jazz is a genre and instead think of jazz—or any musical category—as a set of relations. This breaking down of the idea of genre into relationality was partially facilitated by Mittal’s turn to composer Anthony Braxton and the idea of transidiomatic music. For Braxton, the transidiomatic entails a “transformational dynamics” that emerges at the level of the global and challenges categorization.² Mittal’s *Videsh* is transformational in both a geographic (as in spatial transformation) and aesthetic (as in transformational) sense. Mittal thinks multiple musical idioms across different locales by bringing together such elements as street sounds from Kolkata with jazz instrumentation and Hindustani rhythm and melody, thereby emphasizing the transnational within the transidiomatic.

In another particularly insightful moment during our conversation, Mittal again foregrounds the transnational, describing his experience working musically with the indigenous Jino people in Jinghong City in Xishuangbanna as part of FutureTradition, a

project led by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Du Yun. In his retelling of this experience, Mittal connects the personal with the collective by stressing the need for the slow, deliberate building of relationships in such endeavors. By bringing our attention to nondominant, noncanonical Asian cultures, Mittal also raises important questions about the scope and limits of the term “Asian religio-philosophy.” The unusual breadth of experience that this conversation covers reminds us that the term cannot take such disparate spiritual traditions like Hinduism and Jino cosmology as equivalent.

Finally, our conversation with Mittal also highlights the ways upbringing and environment can shape modes of reception. For Mittal, however, reception does not name a passive mode of learning or an unresponsive type of listening. Rather, Mittal actively searches for and constructs new relations to people, ideas, and environments. His time in Colorado (where he completed his undergraduate studies) was shaped by an environment that typically held to genre purism. For teachers, jazz was a genre; for audiences, use of ragas had to include sitar and tabla. But in order to produce albums like *Videsh* and *Ocean*, Mittal had to consciously resist that reductivism. He did this by exceeding the limits of reception, working both with and against the environment’s expectations. Though Mittal, in this interview, stresses the importance of local and contextual specificity, he also questions the boundaries that an environment might impose. That is, environments shape, but do not necessarily constrain. For reception to occur in any given place, receiving ideas is only half of the story; the other half is the active construction of relations—in Mittal’s case, with musical collaborators, musical practices, and musical histories. Overall, this interview provides a personal and concrete complement to the other contributions in this special forum by turning to embodied, racialized experience with an emphasis on artistic, sonic experimentation as a form of relationality.

Mittal’s music can be found on Bandcamp and major streaming platforms. We spoke with Mittal on Zoom in February 2026. The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Varun Rangaswamy: I thought of you, Aakash, for this special forum because your practice moves a lot in-between Black American experimental music, jazz, and Hindustani music, and the topics we’re interested in involve the way Asian religions and philosophies circulate and how their reception affects or changes what America or Americanness signifies. So, I wanted to start broadly. How has the reception of South Asian spiritual practices in your environment impacted your musical practice?

Aakash Mittal: The environment that I grew up in absolutely plays a role in my personal practice. And I can’t tell the story without talking about my parents. My father is from New Delhi, India, and my mother has cultural roots in Nebraska with heritage that goes to England, Scotland, and the Czech Republic, which used to be Bohemia. My dad’s side of the family is from Uttar Pradesh. His mother is from Lucknow. They’re Punjabi.

I grew up in Dallas, and the part of this upbringing and environment that affects my artistic work is the aspect of growing up in a culturally mixed family.

My mother wanted me and my sister to be raised with Indian cultural elements. Of course, she was seeing that through her lens as a white person. My father had a really different vision, which was to move to America and assimilate. He seemingly had very little interest in disseminating Indian culture in an intentional way to my sister and me. He disseminated the culture by just being himself, and Indian cultural elements would just emerge from time to time.

Another important part of the story is that my parents divorced when I was six years old, and my mom had most of the custody, so I only saw my dad about every other weekend. Plus the occasional phone call. I was not hanging out with him every day, so that changed the amount of cultural immersion I had. My dad spoke Hindi, but not to my sister and me, so I grew up around Hindi as this magical, strange thing that was part of him that I hungered for and didn't get. Now I'm semifluent, but I've learned it all as an adult. And it's just from that desire as a kid. What is important here is my childhood desire to engage with the culture, and the denial of my desire because of the environment, because of who my parents were.

As a kid, I also had some resistance to Indianness. I remember being ashamed of my father, the way he stood out, his accent, the way he struggled economically, or the way he might try to haggle when buying tickets for a trip to the zoo. As an adult, I look at my dad's circumstances with more sympathy: Here is a person who moved to another country, dropped out of college to take care of his dad, and was supposed to inherit the family business but didn't. All of this made it difficult for him to do well in America. But as a kid, I associated the shame with Indianness. There was a time when I really rejected Indianness. I wanted to change my name. I wanted to be white. I often mostly had white friends, so I was usually the only Brown friend in the group. When we hung out with my mom's family, my sister and I were often the only Brown people in those rooms as well. This was during a time in my childhood when fitting in felt really important.

When I shared this story with Peter Sellars, the theater director, he shared a thought that really stuck with me. He told me that I grew up in exile, that I was exiled from the culture.

Varun Rangaswamy: I can imagine that the structural and racial dynamics of transnational movement certainly had an effect on the way you approached music.

Aakash Mittal: Yes. When I was 16, my mom got remarried; I had a stepdad. I was just getting into jazz, improvised music, and the idea that I can be the creator of the music. It started with Black American music, and I give a lot of credit to Black American culture in my journey. That may be because Black American culture and music offered a path for me to deal with the sort of exile I had from Indianness. Black people have been here from the beginning of European colonization of the Americas, so there is a lot

that they have figured out, and all of that is in their music. When you think of the jazz tradition, one of the famous axioms is that enslaved people weren't allowed to have their [native] instruments in the US, whereas in Central and South America, they were. So, the music evolved differently because, in the US, they had to play snare drums, saxophones, clarinets, and tubas, things like that. I think of this lineage as a group of elders or musical ancestors. You can learn a lot from that history.

So, as a young person, I often looked at Black historical figures and Black musicians as my heroes and role models when figuring out my own path. I quickly got into music from the 1960s. I was regularly playing my CD of [John] Coltrane's *Interstellar Space* (1974). Eric Dolphy's *Out to Lunch!* (1964). The Ornette Coleman live two-volume album *At the "Golden Circle" Stockholm* (1966). I was listening to these albums, but I was also reading about the lives of the artists as well. In many ways, when I think about my journey, it really started with Black history and Black heroes rather than Indian history and Indian heroes.

But then, I found this Ravi Shankar, Ustad Alla Rakha recording of them playing live in my stepdad's CD collection. I still don't remember exactly which live record it was, but I would love to find it. I remember that I was in a period where I was just getting really serious about music, and I put this CD on, and an alap plays on sitar. And I thought it was so boring. [Laughs.] I was not into it, because it was slow, I didn't get it, there was a lot of space between phrases, and there was only one instrument. I was into really hard-hitting jazz at the time, like Kenny Garrett records and things that would come in with a lot of intensity. I was already getting into Ornette Coleman and late John Coltrane, which is noisy and dense, in addition to swing dance, like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. I was listening to music that had a lot of instrumentation and a lot of energy. The alap came on, and I wasn't into it. I gave it a minute or two, I hit the next track, and tabla came in. And it was the tabla, the sound of it, the rhythm of it, that totally grabbed me in that moment. It was like everything froze. Time stopped in a way. There was this rhythmic element that captured my imagination. That was a moment of realizing that being Indian is something that I can have pride in, or not be ashamed of. There was something really healing about it. These rhythms and that sound helped me choose a path toward self-love.

I don't usually talk about music's relationship to healing for me. I don't feel comfortable selling the idea of healing, because it's so deeply personal, but I don't think I can tell the story that you're asking for without talking about healing. There's this aspect of getting into the music that, for me, is one hundred percent tied to this journey about healing my relationship to my body, to my position in American culture and society, and to my name—going from "I wish I didn't have this name" to "having this name is really cool." And the deeper I got into playing Indian music, having this name could actually open doors or make people feel more comfortable.

I've also been working with a really great therapist for the last six years, and he's someone who specifically works with people of color. The therapy process includes talking about culture. To leave that out of the story could potentially give

people the impression that the musical journey alone was the [source of healing], and it's not. There is community and there is seeking out a therapist. Those are important pieces for me.

Bowen Du: How does this discourse about cultural healing tie into your approach to religio-philosophy?

AM: Well, I think the music offered me community, belief, ritual, mythology, role models and an actionable path to center my life on. I couldn't articulate it this way at that time, but I think of music now as its own form of being. That it is a way "to be" in and of itself. It's a way to be together through gathering, through the ritual of it, but it's also a way to just be. When I'm playing my instrument, it becomes more than an activity. It's like a way to exist in the world. And I think established religious traditions, or philosophical ideas, or even culture provides these things for a lot of people.

So, I want to pose a question, which is: What is the function of holding on to religious traditions for the people who do so, especially when they move to another country and become part of the minority? I think of different members of my family, like my uncle, who is the opposite of my dad in a lot of ways. He is a South Indian Brahmin who really holds the tradition in his family. He knows all the *pujas*, he has them memorized, he can recite the chants, and he's the one who makes sure that his family keeps them.³ He raised his kid speaking Hindi and some Tamil, keeping the traditions and going to temples, very different from how I grew up. Again, I think it's interesting to think about what holding on to that means for him, or for his family. Why do we hold on to what we choose to hold on to? What does that fulfill for us?

BD: It's a difficult question to answer, but listening to you, I appreciate your sensitivity to structural forces around caste, economics, and race. Even if we can't get at what those traditions mean for a particular individual or a particular family, maybe we can at least be cognizant of how structural factors shape our access to religio-philosophical thought and practice. You've raised a deeper question for me to reflect on, which is whether those limitations are part of religio-philosophy, or whether they are imposed on our access to religio-philosophy, or both. What I find compelling is how your personal thinking tries to exceed the limitations that have been placed by those forces. What did it take to start moving beyond those limitations in your personal practice?

AM: Finding the music of Ustad Alla Rakha and going on this big journey into Indian music and culture evolved into creating my own music and my own rituals. I often feel I had to seek the culture out and oftentimes construct it for myself from scratch. My relationship to it as spiritual practice is about discovering and building my own relationship to Indianness and Indian culture, and how it is tied to a healing journey. How do I live in this body? How do I live in my positionality? How do I ask the questions

that I want to ask and make art out of it? How do I express my particular experience of hybridity through that? And that really drove me for two decades.

I'll say one more bit before we move on, which is, it's funny how Hinduism gets equated with Indianness. There's Sikhism and Islam and Jainism and Christianity, all kinds of other spiritual practices in India. But I kept trying to create a relationship to Hinduism, partially because I was curious about it. My mother's family came from a Christian Methodist background. I grew up going to Quaker Church, which is different in and of itself, but I also sought out both Buddhist and Hindu texts in my musical journey. I would read about them and try to educate myself. I was curious, I liked going to temples, I was interested in meditation, and I was trying to understand the philosophy and the different perspectives. There's something about it where it always felt forced, and I always felt a little like an impostor. This wasn't embedded in me from an age where it was just given or taught by family, so I'm seeking it really intentionally. But the music itself was also a more genuine spiritual practice for me than these established, named spiritual practices that you're supposed to engage with.

When I finally went to India to study music in 2009, I quickly found out that it's the musicians and the artists who are my people. And that sense of belonging in relation to others transcended culture and place.

VR: One thing that's really interesting to me is how you narrate yourself, your own musical journey, and your musical self. You're working with all these different traditions and ways of musicking that have been handed down to you and that you have discovered. In the liner notes to *Breathe*, you describe yourself for the first time as a songwriter, which is a really interesting shift. What kinds of musical traditions and histories do you have in mind when you describe yourself as a songwriter, and how does that connect with everything else you've been talking about?

AM: That's fun for me to think about, because it's where I'm at right now. Listening to songs and songwriters is relatively new for me in my musical life. I had a long phase of mostly listening to instrumental music, and if I listened to songs, it was mainly jazz standards or Hindustani music.

In terms of artists that I'm checking out, it's a wide range. Recently, I started listening to Johnny Cash. I have only one of his records. I had a phase when I was listening to a lot of Nine Inch Nails, but again, just one record in an obsessive way: *The Downward Spiral* (1994). On this new album that I just recorded a few weeks ago with a new band, we actually covered "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails, which is the first time I've done a cover of a song. We did some free improvisation and then brought it into the chorus, so we recontextualized "Hurt" a bit and made it our own, but it's still the song, essentially.

I'm really into this ambient metal band called King Woman that's based in the Bay Area. I've yet to see them live, but their album *Celestial Blues* (2021) is just amazing.

I also listen to a lot of Brandi Carlile and John Denver. I also had a Rihanna phase and a Carly Rae Jepsen phase.

So, it's a lot of what we might call country and metal as well as some punk stuff. I also like a lot of emo music. I was listening to Goo Goo Dolls and getting into some stuff that was playing on the radio in the mid- to late nineties. That was when I first started listening to the radio, so I have nostalgia for those songs and lyrics.

VR: Your shift is interesting because songwriting is often thought of today in terms of the singer-songwriter of American popular music. And yet you have spoken so much about how your journey of seeking out Indian music and culture has shaped your artistry and subjectivity. We also have this conception of the American songwriter as a solitary creator, even though we know that the most famous "songwriters" have huge production teams. How does all of this merge with your personal journey? And what about it becomes relational for you?

AM: Studying [Hindustani] voice with Samarth Nagarkar for about five years was an important part of my journey in songwriting. We were learning *khayal* in Braj Bhasha, which is a language that I don't know, but he would translate it for me.⁴ I was learning the translations and the poetry and trying to understand and hold on to them. Practicing that vocal music has really fed my own songwriting. There are a lot of songs that I've written that started with me trying to practice for my lessons, which then turned into improvisation, and then turned into writing a song. So, there is something about *khayal* and trying to sing these songs in a different language with a different concept of poetry and different themes that also impacted my songwriting.

The very first song I ever wrote is track one on *Breathe*: "Upon the World Together." It was at the beginning of the pandemic, and I was practicing Raag Yaman, and we were quarantined at my mother-in-law's house. I felt this feeling come up, and I started to improvise just with Yaman, and then the improvisation became less Yaman; I started to let myself be free with whatever would come out intuitively. The rules for raga music can be so controlled and strict that when I tried to really do the raga, there was a lot that couldn't exist with it for me, possibly just because of where I was at as a student with that music—I didn't have the freedom. I think with a lot of musics, the deeper you go, the more freedom you gain. But with where I was at as a student, I didn't have the freedom. So, I let go of Yaman, and then I just started improvising, and the poetry started to come out with the improvisation. I was just improvising with these words and with the music.

It was like an old feeling of going back to having divorced parents and having to say goodbye to my father when he dropped me off at my mother's house. The feeling that would come up from that parting was what launched "Upon the World Together," the feeling of accessing that pain and finding words or metaphors to try to describe it. I wanted the song to be open and metaphorical so that it could mean a lot of different things.

So, that ties together a bunch of things that we've already talked about, from the environment I grew up in, to practicing Indian music, to allowing a freedom of improvisation that evolves into adding lyrics, because I'm listening to singers now.

BD: Having your work contextualized like this is really nice. You're working with so many different strains, threads, traditions, practices. I really enjoyed thinking about the multiple different techniques that you use for the musical expression of relationality. Your piece "Awaz 1:1 + 3:1 + 2:1 + Storms" draws inspiration from Anthony Braxton's collage forms. Back in your 2017 piece "Ghosts" for *BOMB Magazine*, you talked about quantum entanglement to bring together saxophone and the New York subway. And then before that, in your album *Ocean*, you and your fellow musicians evoke a kind of transnationality by juxtaposing different spaces and environments from Kolkata and Colorado. I was wondering if you could say more about how your thoughts on music and relationality have developed over the years.

AM: One part of the story is that I started my musical training and career in Colorado. The scene there was really good for me in the sense that it was very kind and nurturing, and there were a lot of opportunities for me to learn how to be a musician. At that time in Colorado the community I was part of was very genre-focused. The way a lot of people learned and thought about music was in terms of representing a genre. Obviously, that was not across the board, but that was the situation in a lot of places there. You had this culture of playing jazz or Black music in a certain way. That's how it was taught in Colorado, and that's how people talked about it. That was just part of the culture. Many places I've gone still hold on to that genre-focused idea.

I didn't know that genre wasn't real, or that it's a construct, for a long time. High school, college, and the first seven years of my professional career were all coming from a place of: I play jazz, I play Indian music, and I have training in classical saxophone, so I can read notation and teach lessons in Western classical music. Simultaneously, I found that the things that resonated with me the most were people who were drawing from a lot of different ideas, exploring sound, and mixing things up in a way that sparked my curiosity. My favorite music was stuff that I didn't fully understand and had a sound that was compelling and rapturous while also making me want to learn. That challenged the genre idea, because the genre idea has rules to keep things within categories, whereas a lot of what I was falling in love with was what Anthony Braxton might call transidiomatic, moving between idioms.

My first four albums were made while I lived in Colorado: *Possible Beginnings* (2008), *Videsh* (2009), *Thumbs Up* (2012), and *Ocean* (2013). They were all with the same band [The Aakash Mittal Quartet].⁵ That band became my place to write, explore, and ask these questions. There were a few things that were important about this phase. It was my first engagement with the idea of playing our own music, and not necessarily standards. We did play standards sometimes, but that wasn't what the band was about. I pushed everybody in the band to write in some way, if they wanted to, and we

would play each other's tunes. Ninety percent of the time, it was my music, but the guitarist and bass player would also contribute. We started bringing in guests to feature with us, and then we would play their music as well, so it unintentionally became a living composer project. In the context of Colorado, we were one of the only bands in that jazz world who would only play our own stuff pretty much every big show. That was the focus. It was also unique in that it was always the same people in our band, because in the Colorado scene at that time, it was very much about playing standards, and you could mix and match anybody, because everybody knew the same tunes.

Another important element was my inquiry into Indian music and sounds. On *Possible Beginnings*, there's a song called "Hindustani Song," which is a transcription of an Ajoy Chakrabarty song. I transcribed it and turned it into the head in a jazz context.⁶ But it was also in *teentaal*, so we stuck to that.⁷ There was an element of exploring Indian concepts with jazz instrumentation, so I was really intentional about not using Indian instruments.

In Colorado, I would get some feedback from certain audience members about including tabla or needing a sitar player. And that was actually something where I would push back and say, no, that's not what it's about. It's actually about playing *tihais* with bass and drums,⁸ about playing these melodies and raga music in the context of the jazz quartet instrumentation, but—pulling from what I was learning about Hindustani music—trying to find the universal elements, rhythmic structures, melodic things.

BD: What you're saying about musical genre resonates with some critiques in literary studies where boundaries of genre often reinforce racial boundaries.⁹ It also reminds me about a series of thought-provoking essays for *NewMusicBox* in 2016 in which you discuss navigating between different notions of universality and cultural or ethnic specificity.¹⁰ In the first essay, "Street Music, Noise, and the City of Joy," you wrote about comments Hafez Modirzadeh made to you about the concept of "a universal music."¹¹ In the fourth and final essay, "Questions of Identity," you ask, "How do we straddle the line between individuality and the cosmos without becoming homogenized masses or superficial categories?"¹² What does this dialectic of the cosmic and the individual mean in terms of the more local places that you have been talking about so far?

AM: I think a question around the idea of universality is: If it's universal, can this exist in another place? In my case, I was simultaneously in this genre world while also intuitively wanting to push back against it, but I didn't have the language yet, because I hadn't encountered Anthony Braxton's music. I was taught jazz as a genre, but I knew the history of the music was actually full of hybridity; things are formed along continuums, people, relationships, and communities. And not having that language yet, I was just trying to find ways, through the music, to bring those elements into the jazz quartet instrumentation. The second album, *Videsh*, includes field samples, or

tape, of Indian street traffic noise, a recording of an interview with my uncle, and a conversation with my cousin. I was trying to capture the language, or their accents, or something that they were talking about, and then I put that into the album, and then tried to put it into the live shows as well.

That was also an example of being interested in place and how environment impacts community and thus impacts the way we make music. The way I wanted to explore the idea of place was related to my own journey. The place that I came from didn't have access to Indian culture or music; I had to find it on my own and then find the people who would help me get there.

I was also literally in a place where, even if I wanted a tabla player, there weren't that many people who would necessarily be able to do the thing I was interested in doing. So, I had a sense that place mattered. That's why, in *Ocean*, I was trying to describe what I was doing in that moment: I was going to Kolkata every year, and I was experiencing this dense, urban cacophony that I was trying to bring in, but the band I was playing with then was from the Colorado scene, and they had this kind of expansive mountain range sound with lots of space. Because of that, even when I tried to bring in my ideas about density, their sound didn't really have that density the way that I can find it here in New York. There was something that would happen in-between. And then the idea of the ocean came from a trip to the Pacific Northwest, where it was this gray, rocky—I don't want to say gloomy—not sunny ocean. It was a moody, broody ocean. That trip was where the idea of place came from.

So, there is an idea about environment and its relationship to sound that is in that subway saxophone piece, and it's also in "Awaz." That idea is, what is the space? How does the space or the environment that we're in inform or put boundaries on culture or on what's possible?

VR: It's nice to hear about how travel and transnational movement has contributed to the way you break down the idea of genre. You mentioned another travel experience to me in a separate conversation in 2025 about a gig in China that you felt was important. What possibilities did you glean from that experience?

AM: That project is led by Du Yun, the composer who won the Pulitzer Prize [for Music] in 2017 for her opera *Angel's Bone*. I play in her band called Ok Miss.¹³ We were in southern China, in Jinghong City in Xishuangbanna, working with an indigenous [Tibeto-Burman] community there called the Jino.

The project put together a stage show [*The Ocean Etched in the Forest*] in which eight Jino children were taught to sing by an elder recognized by the Chinese government as one of the keepers of this indigenous culture.¹⁴ The kids are very much in the modern world, playing video games on their phone a lot with the rest of us. The project was, I believe, a way to pass on the music, make it relevant, to have another generation learn this music, but also provide a modern context for them and for our audiences as well.

It's part of a movement that Du Yun started called FutureTradition.¹⁵ Ok Miss was playing in this iteration [of the project]. It was Grey McMurray on guitar with FX, Shayna Dunkelman on drums, Nava Dunkelman on percussion, and myself playing woodwinds.¹⁶ The children and the master teacher, or elder, sang. There was an artist and opera set designer named Julian Crouch¹⁷ who made puppets and sets, and the kids used these puppets to tell part of the Jino's own origin story.

We had a day where we went to a museum dedicated to the Jino in their village area, where we learned about their history and how they were formerly a matriarchal culture before they shifted into what we think of as a patriarchal system. They also have their own drumming tradition; there's a very large drum that sits in the middle of the village and is very important both to their origin story and to their culture and practices. The drum features in our project, along with several other Jino instruments.

In working with this indigenous culture, Du Yun made a comment about how, even for people in China, having access to the Jino and their culture is not a given, it's not easy. You have to build trust, you have to form a relationship, you have to form community. It took effort on Du Yun's part to build that trust, and she did a really good job with that. She'd already built all that, and I got to come in as one of her musicians and witness and be part of the collaboration.

BD: That's really wonderful. Throughout this special forum, I notice we have been focusing primarily on canonical Asian thought. And you've just pointed to how working with Asian indigenous cosmologies requires a different set of artistic and scholarly methodologies. This reminds us that we should not uncritically extend the term Asian religio-philosophy to encapsulate both dominant and indigenous traditions at once. And what you said about Du Yun's work conveys that the goals of such artistic and academic endeavors should be to amplify indigenous voices rather than to extract knowledge or musical techniques from groups like the Jino.

VR: Right, and in talking about points of relation, Aakash, you have also highlighted points of difference, like how the music of enslaved Africans developed differently depending on where they were trafficked to, which is an important structural difference between enslavement and what Peter Sellars refers to as exile. I appreciate how you make sure not to make these histories commensurate.

Finally, thinking about relation, I've also noticed an interesting trajectory throughout this conversation that goes something like this: You started with being at odds with your ethnicity, then coming to appreciate it, then learning to go beyond it through relation with others. What does this mean for your current and future work?

AM: I think my practice has already been shifting incrementally through the past twenty or so years of exploring Indian American identity—moving to India, moving to New York, getting into songwriting, going to therapy, having conversations with people like Varun and Du Yun and Rajna Swaminathan.¹⁸ I had a therapy session in the

last few months where I told my therapist that I don't want my music to be about exploring and representing Indianness anymore. I want it to be about what I want to say, and I think that's why the songwriting and the lyrics feel exciting and new and important.

That being said, I also know that everything I've already done is part of my wheelhouse now, so it's still there. I just did this residency series through Arts for Art,¹⁹ and I formed a new band for it [Awaz Quartet]. All of the influences I've talked about were present. But now [incorporating those influences] feels less forced. I don't have the angst around it anymore or the impostor syndrome that I used to have. I think I feel comfortable and satisfied in a way that is healing. Now it's on to the next stage of that process.

What feels exciting now is exploring the idea of transformation within a piece of music. Let's call it sound transformation. How do you transform one sound into the next in the linear experience of the piece? How does one sonic event transition into the next one? I think from that standpoint, it could actually relate to the "quantum entanglement" of city noise with acoustic saxophone in my piece "Ghosts" for *BOMB Magazine*,²⁰ which we brought up earlier, or my "Awaz" series,²¹ which is trying to represent city noise structures through open score instrumentation and improv. I think all of those incorporate the same idea that the experience of the piece is still linear, because that's how we're existing. I've already looked at questions like: How can I explore this raga in this instrumentation? How do I explore this tihai, or this rhythmic concept in this instrumentation? How do I explore an alap, or this improvisation concept, but within a jazz context? And I'm not doing that right now. I don't want to say it's done, because it's still there, I'm just adding to it. I think that's what we all do. We just keep adding to what we've already done. The continuum keeps moving forward.

Notes

- ¹ "Creative music" is a term often associated with Anthony Braxton in particular and Black American experimental music in general (see, e.g., Graham Lock, *Forces In Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton* [Da Capo Press, 1989]).
- ² George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 506.
- ³ A puja is a type of Hindu ritual that can be used as a form of prayer, homage, or celebration.
- ⁴ Braj Bhasha is a language spoken in Northern India, specifically in Uttar Pradesh.

- ⁵ The Aakash Mittal Quartet consists of Aakash Mittal, Jean-Luc Davis on bass, Josh Moore on drums, and Matt Fuller on guitar.
- ⁶ In jazz, the “head” refers to the opening section of a song, often introducing the thematic melody.
- ⁷ Teentaal is a type of rhythmic cycle in Hindustani music.
- ⁸ A tihai is a rhythmic cadence involving a pattern or phrase repeated three times, also common in Hindustani music.
- ⁹ For instance, see Mark C. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (Fordham University Press, 2018); John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Indiana University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁰ As well as the essays noted below, these include Aakash Mittal, “A Universal Music,” *New Music USA*, “NewMusicBox,” October 11, 2016, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/a-universal-music>; and Aakash Mittal, “New York City Heartbeats,” *New Music USA*, “NewMusicBox,” October 24, 2016, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/new-york-city-heartbeats>
- ¹¹ Aakash Mittal, “Street Music, Noise, and the City of Joy,” *New Music USA*, “NewMusicBox,” October 17, 2016, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/street-music-noise-and-the-city-of-joy>
- ¹² Aakash Mittal, “Questions of Identity,” *New Music USA*, “NewMusicBox,” October 31, 2016, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/questions-of-identity>
- ¹³ Du Yun & OK Miss, “Du Yun & OK Miss Performance Film: ‘Day 198’ 杜韵 + 完美错,” YouTube video, posted October 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_-L_ZG4PKY
- ¹⁴ For pictures of this project and more information, see Du Yun’s instagram posts from September–October 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/duyun>. This was first performed at the Beijing Music Festival in 2025 and will be presented in July 2026 at the Lincoln Center, <https://lincolncenter.org/series/summer-for-the-city/the-ocean-etched-in-the-forest-297>
- ¹⁵ For more information on this project, see Du Yun, “FutureTradition 未来傳統,” Channel Du Yun, 2020, <https://channelduyun.com/futuretradition>
- ¹⁶ See Shayna Dunkelman, <https://www.shaynadunkelmanmusic.com>; Nava Dunkelman, <https://navadunkelman.com>; Grey McMurray, <https://greymcmurray.bandcamp.com>
- ¹⁷ See Julian Crouch, <https://juliancrouch.com>

- ¹⁸ Rajna Swaminathan is a mridangam player, composer, improviser, and scholar with whom Mittal has collaborated many times. She played mridangam on Mittal's albums *Nocturne* (2021) and *Breathe* (2025). For more information about her projects, see <https://www.rajnaswaminathan.com>
- ¹⁹ Arts for Art is a nonprofit arts organization based in New York City. For more information, see <https://www.artsforart.org>
- ²⁰ Aakash Mittal, "Ghosts," *BOMB Magazine*, "Field Recording," April 17, 2017, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2017/04/27/field-recording-2>
- ²¹ Aakash Mittal, "Awaz 1:1 + 3:1 + 2:1 + Storms," track 4 on *Breathe*, 2025.

Selected Bibliography

- Jerng, Mark C. *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*. Fordham University Press, 2018.
- Lavender III, Isiah. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Lewis, George E. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. The University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Lock, Graham. *Forces In Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton*. Da Capo Press, 1989.
- Mittal, Aakash. "Ghosts." *BOMB Magazine*. "Field Recording." April 17, 2017. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2017/04/27/field-recording-2>
- . "New York City Heartbeats." *New Music USA*. "NewMusicBox." October 24, 2016. <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/new-york-city-heartbeats>
- . "Questions of Identity." *New Music USA*. "NewMusicBox." October 31, 2016. <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/questions-of-identity>
- . "Street Music, Noise, and the City of Joy." *New Music USA*. "NewMusicBox." October 17, 2016. <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/street-music-noise-and-the-city-of-joy>
- . "A Universal Music." *New Music USA*. "NewMusicBox." October 11, 2016. <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/a-universal-music>
- Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.