

Najma Akhtar Gary Lucas – *Rishte* (World Village/ Select Audio Visual)

Published by Bob Baker Fish at June 15, 2009 in Reviews Issue 23. 0 Comments



Rishte is this utterly beguiling creation that just flows beautifully, like it was always meant to, like it's something that has always existed together, despite the really unique ingredients. It's not that they're particularly groundbreaking, predominantly guitar and vocals, with the odd thud of tabla percussion and touch of violin, but really it's about how they're played, and about the two personalities behind them. First there's Gary Lucas, the axe wielding Beefheart Magic Band alumni who co wrote the title track of Jeff Buckley's *Grace* and who has critics lathering to pronounce him one of the greatest guitarist of his generation. Then there's Najma Akhtar, a truly unique English born singer from Indian ancestry who is renowned for updating the Indian Ghazal tradition (a centuries old tradition of Urdu poetry set to music) during the 80's with a fusion of contemporary and traditional instrumentation alongside her utterly unique vocal harmonies. She has collaborated with everyone from the Basement Jaxx to Page and Plant and her vocals here are absolutely remarkable. Lucas mostly plays acoustic guitar in a rhythmic and quite blues influenced style, only using electric guitar sparingly to accent certain moments, creating a shimmering cloud of sound that echoes the pitch of and interplays with Akhtar's remarkable vocals. Akhtar sings mostly in Urdu, in her unique style, however strays into English on the duos gorgeous cover of delta bluesman Skip James' *Special Rider Blues*. This song is probably the most overt example of what's going on here, an Indian voiced fusion with the American blues. It's incredibly successful, the duo constructing this fascinating beguiling world, Akhtar's vocal harmonies quite complex and unexpected over Lucas' more Western influenced playing. In keeping with this idea of a new world the duo have pretty much created a new genre and the the album retains a relative uniformity across the tracks. Yet this is not a problem, *Rishte* is the kind of album you just put on and let the whole album wash over you again and again.

If you're interested there's a fascinating podcast of the duo playing live and being interviewed on WNYC radio in New York about a week ago, which gives some great contextual information about their respective pasts, though also about how they approached the collaboration.

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/newsounds/episodes/2009/06/08>

Bob Baker Fish