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*Global Music With a New York Edge*

## A Cross-Pollinated Gem from Katayoun Goudarzi and Shujaat Khan

*by delarue*

Iranian-American singer [Katayoun Goudarzi](#) is known for maximizing the musical qualities in classical Persian poetry. Renowned sitarist [Shujaat Khan](#) plays in a very distinctive, cantabile style. So it makes sense that the two would complement each other well. Their cross-pollinated, epically hypnotic ensemble Saffron, with Rolling Stones saxophonist Tim Ries, seems to be on hiatus, but that hasn't stopped Goudarzi and Khan from putting out a similarly ambitious and magically enveloping new album, *Ruby*, streaming at [Spotify](#). The rest of the group comprises Ajay Prasanna on flute; Abhiman Kaushal on tabla; Ahsan Ali on sarangi; Prabhat Mukherjee on santoor and Anjad Khan on percussion.

It comprises five tracks: four settings of Rumi poetry to resonant, slowly unwinding raga melodies, along with a single, thoughtfully sweeping instrumental. In typical fashion, Goudarzi approaches the lyrics – in Persian – meticulously, almost syllable by syllable. She has such nuance and command that she can channel any emotion she wants. In this case, that runs the gamut, but a vivid sense of longing, one that transcends the limitations of language, persists throughout these songs. Rumi's poetry, like African-American spirituals or classical Jewish *ngunim*, often conflates the mystical with the carnal and Goudarzi makes that resonate strongly here. Yet there's also a sense of restraint – she never reaches for a fullscale wail.

Likewise, Khan chooses his spots, staying close to the ground for the most part, leading the group – which also includes rippling santoor, stark sarangi, rustic bansuri flute and tabla – with a purposeful sway. The opening track, *Adrift*, begins with a long, pensive conversation between flute and sarangi, then gives way to the sitar and tabla. Goudarzi comes in, stately and precise and then rises with an angst that reflects the longing in the lyrics (thanks to Goudarzi for the English translation):

*The curls of your hair have made my life very complicated.  
Spread your hair on my completely disordered affairs*

*Clouded* begins with a balmy sitar intro, then the tabla and flute enter judiciously, Khan introducing an artful echo effect as the raga-like procession goes on. Goudarzi speaks to a lovestruck regret: Rumi seems to be having special fun with the hangover metaphors in this number.

The slowly swaying instrumental *Not Taken* builds to meslimatic sitar crescendo and then a series of graceful exchanges with the sarangi. *Whirling Tree* establishes more of sense of unease amid the tranquility until Khan takes the music skyward, matter-of-factly and optimistically: it's the most dramatic track here and a launching pad for some pretty pyrotechnic flurries from Khan and Goudarzi's dynamic, insistent delivery. The final cut, *Bound* addresses themes of absence, longing and perhaps exile via Goudarzi's anthemic sensibility and minutely jeweled vibrato matched by Khan's spacious, considered lines. It's an

appropriate way to wind up an album in an age of refugees and shortage of refuge. While the album's distinctive, classically Indian sound will strike most western listeners right off the bat, this ought to resonate with devotees of Rumi and fans of lushly poignant music in general.

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