



THE SACHAL ENSEMBLE: SONG OF LAHORE

Biography

The Sachal Ensemble presents *Song of Lahore* – inspired by the acclaimed documentary film of the same name by two-time Academy Award-winner Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Andy Schocken – a cross-cultural re-creation of songs made iconic by the likes of Duke Ellington, The Beatles, Dave Brubeck, Henry Mancini, and Richard Rodgers as well as traditional Pakistani folk songs. In the relatively safe space of the Western world, artists and listeners enjoy the ability to follow their muse wherever it takes them – to create and commune with music freely, to express themselves and exchange with others. But in other, far less fortunate places, this can never be taken for granted; even venerable musical traditions can be repressed or even banned, causing a living culture to wither. No music lover could fail to be moved by the inspiring story of The Sachal Ensemble as depicted in the documentary film *Song of Lahore* by two-time Academy Award-winning director Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Andy Schocken. The musicians of The Sachal Ensemble come from the Pakistani city of Lahore, for hundreds of years a thriving center of the arts on the Indian subcontinent. By the 1960s and '70s, Lahore was the home of “Lollywood,” the Pakistani equivalent of India’s Bollywood film production center, employing many musicians who were virtuosos on their instruments and had developed a distinctive sound and sensibility. But in 1977, with the establishment of a conservative Islamic regime and Sharia law in Pakistan, most non-religious music was discouraged. Esteemed musicians were soon out of work, having to hide their instruments away to take jobs in coffee shops or driving rickshaws.

“We were losing our instruments, losing our musicians, losing our culture – something had to be done about it,” said Sachal Ensemble producer Izzat Majeed. By the early 2000s, Majeed had convened a devoted group of surviving Lahore musicians to rehearse and record privately within his Sachal Studios – to revive their tradition, to keep it alive. They made recordings of classical and folk music at first; but, with local listeners for the music having dwindled away, the group began to make music for a global audience, outside Pakistan. As a child, Majeed had seen the Dave Brubeck Quartet when the group stopped in Lahore on a 1950s State Department “Jazz Ambassadors” tour, leading to his lifelong love of jazz. So, blending their age-old tradition with American jazz, The Sachal Ensemble created a YouTube sensation with an infectious version of “Take Five,” the iconic Brubeck hit. Brubeck himself said of the Sachal interpretation, “It’s the most interesting and different recording of ‘Take Five’ that I’ve ever heard.” A new energy and renown led to The Sachal Ensemble being invited in 2014 to collaborate in a concert with Wynton Marsalis and his Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in New York City – an intense but ultimately jubilant experience captured in Obaid-Chinoy and Schocken’s film.

On May 20, 2016, Universal Music Classics released the album *Song of Lahore* – a fully integrated East-meets-West companion album inspired by the sounds and story of the film. Produced by Grammy Award-winner Eli Wolf (Norah Jones, Robert Glasper), *Song of Lahore* features The Sachal Ensemble in cross-cultural, genre-bending collaborations with artists from across the spectrum of Jazz, Rock, R&B and Americana. “You hear the term ‘world music’ thrown around a lot,” Wolf says, “but this album is truly music of the world, with songs and artists from New Orleans, Kentucky, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, the U.K., Jamaica, Brazil, Greece, Pakistan and more all brought together.” For the album *Song of Lahore*, musicians from across expanses of geography and culture teamed to express a collaborative message of understanding and hope – a message that is all the more worth sending given that it goes against the odds in today’s fractious world. “The album mirrors the meta-message of the documentary –

which is that music is *the* universal language, a bridge across divides and between cultures,” Wolf says. “That’s the message of this album, and it’s both timely – given all that’s happening in the world today – and timeless.”

The Sachal Ensemble’s Nijaat Ali says about the Song of Lahore projects: “*God willing, this will help the entire world see that Pakistanis are artists, not terrorists.*”