

Jazz saxman Mittal finds a satisfying Indian fusion

Coloradan's new CD, "Videsh," blends bright harmonies, beats

By Bret Saunders The Denver Post

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Colorado saxophonist and composer Aakash Mittal has his own "vocabulary" of Indian and jazz traditions.

More often than not, attempts to fuse jazz with other global styles fall flat. Even when the participants are sincere, the results can be kitschy and unsatisfying, arriving at a compromise where nothing new or truly beautiful is created.

That's not the case with young Colorado saxophonist and composer Aakash Mittal, whose ambitious new self-produced CD, "Videsh," is a winning fusion project. Because of the balance between tough improvisation and bright harmonies coupled with thorough investigations into the rhythms of the music of India, he's already arrived at his own place in the jazz community, where it's difficult to establish an identity.

"I'm trying to create a vocabulary that draws on both (jazz and Indian music)," he says. "That was totally my goal."

Mittal finds fertile common ground between the two traditions. At points, he delves into balladry with a tone reminiscent of saxophonist Charles Lloyd. Sometimes the performances on "Videsh" — which, according to his liner notes, is a Hindi word that can be translated as "foreign, abroad" — rock and swing confidently, with the dedicated support of his quartet of locals: guitarist Matt Fuller, bassist Jean-Luc Davis and drummer Josh Moore. A

lot of the disc's success comes from the interplay of the group of unknown (for now) performers.

"They're really excited about learning the Eastern stuff," Mittal says of his group. "It's very collaborative, even though I'm credited with writing the tunes."

Mittal is enthusiastic about continuing along the path that began when he "checked out a few Indian records that my dad had" when he was in high school. "I was raised with certain (Indian) traditions but also in a very American way."

The music on "Videsh" could be seen as the result of that upbringing. It also points toward new possibilities in improvised music. Keep an ear on this guy.

The Aakash Mittal Quartet, 7 and 9 p.m. Friday, Nov. 13, Dazzle Restaurant and Lounge, 930 Lincoln St. \$10. Call 303-839-5100.

The Aakash Mittal Quartet:

A musical journey to India

Thursday, Oct 22nd, 2009

By Dani White Berthoud Recorder

There is a bold new kind of music emerging in Colorado. The Aakash Mittal Quartet, influenced by the muse of modern day India where customary meets contemporary, has fashioned a unique and worldly blend of sound. The band is an independent outfit and will soon be self-releasing their second album, "Videsh." Mittal, the band's innovator, was born in Dallas, Texas, was raised in Loveland and is of Indian descent. The diversity of the artist's background has inspired his creative approach to music. A lifelong fascination with instruments and his father's native land of East India is reflected in Mittal's most recent composition. He suggests his ensemble is "trying to create music that goes along with the diverse culture of America and the heritage of immigration." The word "Videsh" roughly translates to "foreign abroad." The music of the latest album illustrates Mittal's initial journey to India with a progressive fusion ranging from modern jazz to traditional Indian styles. The quartet has created a musical voyage representative of an experience in an exotic country where new world and old world unite for the first time. "Videsh" is free flowing and continuous expression that begins with the pure timbre of a few resonating notes. The album tells a musical story interwoven with improvised instrumentals and authentic background noise – voices at the market place, traffic and a swirl of ambient sounds of daily life. Mittal relays the sounds of flute, saxophone, clarinet and the electronically recaptured drone of a tambura gourd, as well as recordings of the natural Indian world. Matt Fuller adds guitar, Jean-Luc Davis the bass and Josh Moore completes the quartet with his drum work. A mellow and moody prelude morphs into a frenzy of sound as "Videsh" pulls listeners straight into the streets of India.

Jazz: Aakash Mittal Quartet – *Videsh*

Colorado Music Buzz

Sunday, November 01, 2009
by [Doug Anderson](#)

The title of **Aakash Mittal's** latest release, ***Videsh***, is a Hindi word translated as “foreign abroad.” As stated in the liner notes, Aakash has taken to heart the idea that “music must be an expression of human experience.” More an “auditory journal” than a typical Modern Jazz CD, *Videsh* captures the essence of Aakash's first visit to India to explore his heritage, seamlessly intertwining audio samples recorded from various scenes in New Delhi and Kolkata with his own genius brand of modern Indian-flavored Jazz. You'll go on a fascinating journey, from a scuffle at a bazaar over sandals to an inspired visit to the Taj Mahal.

Aakash Mittal meshes the music of his father's homeland with classic jazz

By [Jon Solomon](#)

Westword

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The first thing that struck me, being an American, is that I got off the plane and it was like this different level of chaos that I've never experienced before," says Aakash Mittal of a trip he took to India a couple years ago. "That first day you're in the street, and people don't follow any traffic rules at all. So, like, you'll have a whole bunch of traffic going one way and then one car going against traffic, and somehow it works out, like cows in the middle of the road and families that live on the median between traffic."

Mittal made the trip to his father's homeland to meet a side of his family that he'd never met before. He stayed for nine days, which was just long enough to get over the initial jet lag from such a long flight. Fortunately, the trip proved inspirational. On his second album, *Videsh*, the 24-year-old saxophonist continues to explore jazz as well his Indian heritage, offering a snapshot of a day in the life in India.

Starting in the morning with the slow, meditative introduction song "Subah," based on a Hindu morning raga, the album immediately takes on a frenetic pace with "The Street," a track that reflects the initial shock Mittal experienced. The other

members of the quartet (guitarist Matt Fuller, bassist Jean-Luc Davis and drummer Josh Moore) weren't initially fond of placing "The Street" on the album so early on; they thought it made a jolting first impression. But Mittal stuck to his guns.

"I really stuck to it, because the whole point of it is sort of like this: shock in the beginning, and then, as you get accustomed to it, it chills out," Mittal explains. "It's the same with going through a day there. Early in the day things are crazy, but as it becomes nighttime, it's definitely a lot more chilled out. It's about having really big, relaxed meals and hanging out with people."

The track immediately following "The Street," the peaceful "Om Shanti," was inspired by Mittal's uncle taking him to a less densely populated part of town to an ashram type of spot, where there were huge white marble buildings and everyone was wearing white. Hearing the two songs back to back, Mittal says, shows the duality of having this sheer intensity and this super-meditative yoga-type side. "It's really crazy," he enthuses, "and then you're in this peaceful place, and then you're back into the craziness."

Along with other cuts on the album, both songs also include field recordings — such as the sounds of traffic on "The Street," or his uncle speaking on "Om Shanti" — that Mittal made during another trip to India in February to learn how to play Indian music correctly, and authentically. Since he had already recorded *Videsh* a month before he left for India, he wasn't able to apply any of what he learned to the album. Nonetheless, he's happy with the way the album turned out.

"In a way, I'm glad it is what it is, because it's more like a jazz musician playing it rather than someone trying to follow all the rules of Indian music," Mittal offers. "What I wanted to do was be able to compose and improvise from a more authentic perspective. So it doesn't necessarily mean that I'm going to try to create some kind of fusion album, or that from now on I'm going to follow the strict rules of a raga. But it's more like each new thing I might learn is like a new tool I can use or a new color to paint with. Now when we play, I do think of that more. I don't want to force it into any kind of box."

Applying techniques of Indian classical music to the saxophone has been challenging for Mittal, particularly since the music is more suitable to a sitar, which can essentially only be played in one key and where notes can be bent an octave or more. "If you try to put a sitar into a jazz setting, it wouldn't work as well, because you can't really change keys very easily," Mittal notes. "Part of what was fun was doing saxophone research and, like, how can I fake my way through this and be convincing as far as doing the different pitch bends and ornamentations and things like that."

Rudresh Mahanthappa, a highly touted New York-based saxophonist who also blends jazz and Indian music, has been something of a mentor and a major influence on Mittal since the two met four years ago at a show at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where Mittal was working toward a degree in saxophone performance. Mahanthappa offered advice on saxophone technique and how to change the embouchure to create a certain sound or use different palm key notes on the

instrument.

"I did a lot of that on the first record," Mittal confesses. "When he listened to it, he said, 'You copped a lot of my shit.' But that's the tradition. You have to copy somebody for a while. A big part of the jazz tradition is the bigger successful guys taking younger guys under their wing and helping them out."

While it's easy to hear Mahanthappa's influence on both of Mittal's albums, Mittal is also a big fan of Dave Pietro, who was his sax hero his freshman year in high school, and of Jackie McLean's 1960s Blue Note albums. Although there's some bop on *Videsh*, Mittal says he was really trying to use all different types of musical palettes to express the experience. Although he dips into bop, avant-garde, groove rock and Indian music, the album still has a certain cohesiveness, which makes sense, because part of the plan was to create a twelve-song suite of sorts. "I was trying to think about it in those terms," he says, "as well as that each part can work individually."

Aakash Mittal

While a majority of jazz tunes are based on a playing the melody in the beginning and at the end and then improvising in the middle, most of the cuts on *Videsh* are very composed out, which doesn't leave a lot of room for soloing. But he did write tunes that highlight each of his sidemen: Davis shows off some fine arco bass work on "Om Shanti," "Chapal ki Dukaan" features Moore's propulsive timekeeping, and Fuller delivers some extremely fluid legato phrasing à la Kurt Rosenwinkel on "Mughal Impressions," a tune inspired by Mittal's visit to the Taj Mahal.

In *Videsh's* liner notes, Mittal writes about what inspired each song, as a lot of them are about stories or real-life experiences, but he didn't relay that information to the other guys in the band.

"Part of that is like when we're playing, it's just the music," Mittal points out, "and they all put their own ideas into that, especially on the features. I really wanted them to personalize it and not try to be like, "Well, this is about this experience I had," because they didn't have it.

"That's one thing I like about jazz, is giving them the freedom," he concludes. I just give them the chart, and I step back and see what they do with it. And they always make it sound like ten times better."

Jazz musician Aakash Mittal blends east Indian music into jazz

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Videsh, the Aakash Mittal Quartet

Every so often a jazz project comes out that is new, refreshing, and full of possibilities that cause it to stand apart from most of the jazz music coming out today. Boulder, Colorado-based composer, saxophonist, flautist and clarinet player, Aakash Mittal has created such a project, with his latest self-produced cd Videsh, a jazz suite combining jazz idioms, from free jazz and multi-harmonic melodies with traditional East Indian music. Mittal, at 24, has brought forth a project that shows infinite possibilities. While folks in Colorado are hailing Mittal as something akin to the second coming of Ron Miles, they may be getting ahead of themselves with that wishful thinking. Anyone who has seen Miles play, well knows that a second coming is highly unlikely. But the Mile High City has not seen such originality, and talent, in a jazz musician since Miles broke onto the scene. It is easy to feel the buzz and excitement Mittal has newly generated. Denver's jazz community would be well-advised to remember that history shows that there was a time when their most favored jazz musician, Miles, could hardly get a booking in his hometown. So where do these facts place Mittal? Only time, his future projects, and the fickle nature of jazz audiences, will tell. While many will argue that blending jazz with other styles of music can prove to be a musician's downfall, this is an absurd argument. From the nucleus of jazz, other styles of music have been the base upon which the style was created. It has been a dismaying amazement that jazz fans do not always feel that the influences of other musical styles, and forms should, as a part of natural evolution, become solidly incorporated into jazz. It seems ridiculous that jazz fans should consider Mittal's Videsh to be such a bold venture, slinking along the edges of jazz. It clearly is not. The essence of jazz is new creation. As a half Indian, half white musician, it seems completely natural that Mittal would come to present both sides of his ethnicity in his art form. The word, Videsh, means something akin to outlander, foreigner, and stranger. Mittal was inspired to write the music for Videsh from his first trip to his father's homeland, India. Mittal explains: "My goal, so to say, was to write music for my jazz quartet that

expressed the story of my first trip to India. Jazz is my foremost passion and I always come back to it. I have also been into avante-guard music and "free" jazz sense I first started playing saxophone. A few years after first discovering jazz, I discovered classical Indian music and became passionate about that. More recently I have been exploring rock and hip hop. While many people start their love of music with these genre's I have only discovered them in the past few years. So when writing the music I was inspired by all of these genres. As I mentioned above, I was also trying to write specifically for the members of my band. Not just for guitar but for Matt Fuller. This type of composition in jazz definitely goes back to Duke Ellington if not earlier. Instead of trying to "fuse" instruments from different cultures together I am trying to absorb Indian techniques, musical vocabulary, and themes into the jazz tradition. I am really into the idea of "acculturation" which is the new culture that is created when two cultures are combined. As a first generation Indian-American I experience both cultures in my identity. As Rudresh Mahanthappa said, there is no precedent for an Indian jazz musician the way there is one for a Latin jazz musician, or third stream jazz musician. We are creating our own. I believe American culture, and therefore jazz as the unique American art music, is a culture of acculturation. I think the mix of cultures and styles that blended to create early jazz in New Orleans is a good example of this. Jazz still continues to absorb other cultures and their traditions just as America does. In the last thirty years there have been increasingly more interactions with south Asian culture as well as south Asian immigrants to America. I think this music is a product of that." The quartet that Mittal writes for includes bassist Jon-Luc Davis, drummer Josh Moore, and guitarist Matt Fuller. Mittal's horn and woodwinds tie the crew together. More important than Mittal's compositions and tight nature of his quartet, is the fact that even at his youthful age, Mittal shows extreme virtuosity and talent as a player. He already has his own sound. He plays confidently and naturally. Upon an initial listen, it appeared that Mittal may be too ambitious: his combinations of free jazz and ethnic styles sometimes almost appear to clash. One would say that in his case, it might not be possible to serve two masters. Further listening, and reason, soothe these concerns. After all, it is all just music, why should one have to choose? Mittal comments on reactions to his work: "It seems, from my interactions with people who listen to my music, that my music is perceived as being original. Beyond that everyone seems to bring their own experience to the music and perceives it in vary different ways. People who are into Indian music latch on to that. Some people latch on to the free jazz aspect or just the group sound. Many people have told me that I am combining these eastern and western elements in a unique way that is not really like the "fusions" that have come before. That makes me the happiest. I am simply

trying to write and play the music I love, which happens to be kind of eclectic, and express life experiences. I am learning more and more that this will be a continuous journey with no end to it. I hope to continue on it and see where it takes me. In more practical terms I hope to continue to study and learn both about jazz and Indian music. I have several more projects in mind that will be further developments of this. I hope to continue to record, to perform both locally, nationally, and internationally. I hope to develop my ability to compose, teach, and perform. I hope to continue to be inspired by life experiences and try to express them in music. I would like my quartet project to develop into an internationally recognized ensemble someday. I would like to continue to meet other musicians, collaborate, and create new projects. Personally, I hope to continue studying Hindi and one day be fluent. I want to continue to learn how to cook better, dance more, and read and watch more science fiction.” As a young American, Mittal’s hopes and musings seem perfectly in order. With no knowledge of Mittal’s cooking, dancing, or grasp of science fiction, as one whom has heard only Mittal’s music, I say, watch this flower blossom.