

# Arooj Aftab, Vijay Iyer, Shahzad Ismaily

## Love in Exile

**Start time:** 8pm

**Approximate running time:** 70 mins, no interval.

**Oumar Saleh talks to the three world-class musicians behind a one-of-a-kind performance, blending shimmering keyboard melodies, stirring vocals, earthy basslines and hypnotic drones.**

With its sweeping soundscapes consisting of just bass, keys, and breath, *Love in Exile* is nothing like you've ever heard before. Borne from a live studio session in New York between GRAMMY-winning vocalist Arooj Aftab, pianist & jazz composer Vijay Iyer, and bass & synths virtuoso Shahzad Ismaily, the genre-defying record is equal parts expansive and intimate. Hailed by critics as one of the year's best releases, *Love in Exile* is an alluring six-track journey that hypnotises listeners into deep ruminations whilst embracing a vast, cosmic space where time stands still.

'I read somewhere that someone played *Love in Exile* while cleaning their kitchen, but actually couldn't get anything done because they just sat there and listened to it front to back,' Aftab recalls, somewhat echoing Iyer's thoughts on his own interpretation of the album. 'Each piece has that kind of immersive feeling which you can't help being enveloped by,' he explains. 'I think it really does ask you to experience time in a different way, where there's no beginning or end.'

To Ismaily, the album title conjures up a more holistic definition when asked about *Love in Exile's* underlying themes. 'One thing that still continues to resonate with me is this idea that when a community is in exile, they then make a new community with one another,' the veteran multi-instrumentalist explains. 'Take the UK during the 70s and 80s, where people from various Caribbean nations felt a kinship with one another irrespective of whether they shared the same country or not. I love this idea that, in a way, this record can be that 'exiled space', where listeners can have this kind of shared experience in which their various differences dissolve and there's a point of connection.'

Ismaily, Aftab, and Iyer have performed with each other in various capacities, but first linked up as a trio in 2018 when the latter was curating a series of events at the Kitchen — a non-profit, avant-garde performance venue — in Manhattan. 'Though I felt that I could trust their ears and the choices they made as fellow musicians, I wasn't sure what to expect at first,' Iyer remembers. 'When it happened, we all had this gut feeling that we should continue playing together, which occurred over the next few years where we would be 'composing live' at each event. That's what we did in the studio where we recorded *Love in Exile*, where each piece was created as it was heard.'

barbican

Having already developed their sound through improvisatory live shows, the seasoned trio were able to showcase their near-telepathic chemistry throughout *Love in Exile*. There's no better example of their synergy than on eerie opener 'To Remain/To Return', which begins with Ismaily's gossamer synths and Iyer's stuttering keys, before Aftab's powerful voice fills the expanse created by her collaborators three minutes in.

The rest of the album unravels in similar fashion. 'Haseen Thi' has Aftab soaring over Ismaily's bubbling basslines, Iyer's ominous piano creates a pensive backdrop for Aftab's laments on 'Shadow Forces', Ismaily's heavy bass reverbs from the jump on 'Sajni' before Iyer's shimmering Rhodes chords take over, and Aftab's husky melancholy glides over Iyer's delicate keys on the spectral 'Eyes of the Endless', which closes with Ismaily blending droning synths with a low bass that steadily rises until claiming centre stage to breath-taking effect.

For Aftab, performing with Iyer and Ismaily gave her the chance to deftly use her voice as an instrument, instead of lyrics being the focal point of a composition. 'It's ingrained into our brains that vocals must take the lead and instruments are only allowed to shine when they are in solo sections, and I wanted to deconstruct this idea,' she explains. 'I wanted the three of us to be telling the story, not just myself as the singer. I'm really happy to have that kind of positive space in this trio, where I can attempt and develop this desire to use my voice as an instrument in a way that I'm not solely responsible for weaving a narrative through lyrics.'

Given that Aftab often dwells on love, loss, and longing in her songs, Iyer and Ismaily's mesmerising interplay is the perfect accompaniment to what she's attempting to convey through her vocal range. According to Iyer, there's plenty of material to follow up *Love in Exile* with. 'It feels like we've already made more albums just off of playing live,' he says. 'Every concert is like a new record.'

Today's show marks their first time sharing the Barbican stage together. 'I've been lucky to play at the Barbican a couple of times with various people over the years,' Ismaily says. 'I feel like that room will allow us to have a wide dynamic range from extremely subtle to dense and louder.' Aftab, who made her Barbican debut last year performing her 2021 breakthrough album *Vulture Prince*, also has fond memories of playing in London. 'I expect absolute chaos here!' she laughs. 'London crowds are super live, and we have such a diverse fan base here. It's always a good time, so I'm ready to have a blast.'

## Performers

**Vijay Iyer** piano and electronics

**Shahzad Ismaily** bass and Moog synth

**Arooj Aftab** Vocals