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## BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Jameela Siddiqi on the late **Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan**, the Pakistani Pavarotti, populariser of the *qawwali* tradition

# NUSRAT FATEH ALI KHAN

Everything about Pakistan's Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948-1997) was larger than life, not least, his imposing physical stature and his stunning musicality. He was, almost single-handedly, responsible for popularising *qawwali* – the music of Indian and Pakistani Sufis, (Islamic mystics) – which had been going strong since the late 1300s but was virtually unknown outside the Indian sub-continent. The act of performing and listening to *qawwali* is a specific religious ritual of the Sufis and as such was traditionally only performed at the shrines of Sufi saints and past masters. It was Nusrat, descended from a long line of distinguished *qawwals* (performers of *qawwali*) who had been in the business for over 600 years, who brought it to the concert halls of Europe and the USA with many Western musicians realising its potential for modern collaborations. Nusrat embarked on several of these, from his work with producer Michael Brook (*Mustt Mustt*), to contributions for film soundtracks, including *Dead Man Walking* and *Bandit Queen*, as well as music for a Coca Cola commercial. Nusrat himself remained adamant that the message of *qawwali* was the same, whether it was performed in the traditional context or adapted to suit more modern tastes. "If even just one out of a thousand listeners feels spiritually uplifted, then my job, as one who tries to reduce the distance between the Creator and the created, is done," he said in an interview shortly before his untimely death in 1997. His death coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Partition of India and was mourned both in India and Pakistan.

*Qawwali*, although categorised as 'semi-classical North Indian music,' has a distinct sound of its own based on a chorus of male voices and entrancing rhythms marked by hand-clapping. But percussion is only part of the story. *Qawwali's* main spiritual content lies in its classical melodies enhanced by mystical Persian, Hindi and Urdu/Punjabi



verses of the great Sufi poets of the past. It is interesting to note that the majority of Nusrat's fans, although not from within these linguistic traditions, nevertheless admit to being spiritually moved by his songs. *Qawwals* are not so much musicians as part of an ancient institution which is strictly a

family business, with musical and poetic knowledge handed down from father to son. But Nusrat was probably the first *qawwal* in the world to stand aside as a musician in his own right, doing everything from classical *qawwali* to Bollywood soundtracks and works of fusion with Western musicians.

OPPOSITE: **Nusrat in full flow** (Jak Kilby)  
 BELOW: **Michael Brook working with Nusrat on Mustt Mustt** (Stephen Lovell-Davis)

## BEST ALBUM

**Devotional Songs** (Real World, RWMCD2, 1992)

By far the best single disc of Nusrat, featuring most of his classical/traditional qawwali repertoire as well as a more modern *ghazal* in the Urdu language. Nusrat performs with a kind of carefree abandonment that was seldom heard after the late 80s. Not only is he at his energetic best, but this was also, technically speaking, one of Nusrat's finest studio recordings of the time, and includes what later became Nusrat's anthem – 'Allah Hoo Allah Hoo' as well as 'Haq Ali, Ali, Haq'. There is also a song in Punjabi – a Nusrat speciality – featuring an important qawwali tradition in its own right based on the poetry of Punjabi Sufi saints like Baba Bullhe Shah (1680-1753).



## BEST FUSION ALBUM

**Mustt Mustt** (Real World, 7862212, 1990)

One of the most exciting collaborations of all time, with Michael Brook's musical vision enhancing Nusrat's musical prowess in a way that was never to be repeated, using instruments from different continents like the Brazilian *surdu* drum and the Senegalese *djembe*, alongside the North



Indian tabla and keyboards. The overall sound works very well with the *tarana*-style of singing – a style that is part of classical qawwali and one in which the words are deliberately uttered in staccato fashion, to obscure their meaning. The ancient Sufis did this to avoid persecution at the hands of the religious establishment.

## BEST COMPILATIONS

**Ecstasy – An Essential Selection from the Genius of Qawwali**

(Nascente, NSCD 073, 2000)

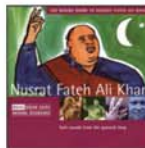
**The Rough Guide to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (Sufi sounds from the Qawwali King)**

(Rough Guide, RGNET 1078 CD2002)

**Ecstasy** is the best compilation of traditional qawwali numbers from live recordings at Washington University (including 'Allah Hoo Allah Hoo'). There are also a couple of early recordings made in his hometown Lahore, featuring the upbeat 'Mera Piya Ghar aya' (My Beloved Has Returned to Me). This is by far the best compilation featuring Nusrat at the height of his powers, before his health started to fail.



The *Rough Guide to Nusrat* has a wider range of song styles, from qawwali as it is heard at the shrines to more modern settings, like the dance floor. Alongside the traditional harmonium and drums in the classical recitations, there's also qawwali with its Bollywood-style orchestra complete with crooning females –

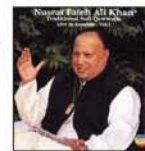


something that would be unthinkable in traditional qawwali.

## WHAT ELSE?

**Traditional Sufi Qawwalis, Live in London (two double-CD sets)** (Navras, NRCD 0016/17 & NRCD 0028/29, 1993)

While it was albums on the Real World label that made Nusrat's voice available worldwide, one of the finest collections of Nusrat songs was made during a traditional-style Sufi gathering in 1989, by Navras Records in London. In terms of spiritual content, this is the closest to a genuine Sufi shrine recital. A small audience of discerning listeners feed into Nusrat's musical energy and the result is electrifying. Nusrat himself considered it his best recording. It includes all of his popular favourites plus one or two ancient numbers like 'Kheliye Dhamar' – in celebration of the arrival of spring – usually only sung at the Sufi shrines.



## WHAT TO AVOID

Local Pakistani recordings with titles such as Greatest Hits Vol. 53. There are numerous albums of this kind (from EMI Pakistan and others) and they present the novice with a bewildering array of discs which usually amount to nothing more than a hotch-potch, cashing in on Nusrat's fame as the main selling point. Most of them kick off with a good first track and then deteriorate into the banal. Also avoid posthumous recordings claiming to be retrievals from the family archive. Most of these are out-takes of previous studio recordings subsequently dropped from Greatest Hits compilations.

## LIKE NUSRAT? TRY...

**Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali**  
*A Better Destiny*

(Real World, CDRW 98, 2001)

An outstanding performance by two of Nusrat's nephews who trained with him and have gone on to become qawwals in their own right. What they lack in the spiritual subtlety that was so characteristic of Nusrat's performances, they more than make up in sheer exuberance and youthful energy. A truly earth-moving listening experience.

