



## Unfiltered Universe and Agrima

### New Jazz releases reviewed

By [David Adler](#)



Title: Agrima.  
Featuring:  
Rudresh Mahanthappa - alto saxophone, electronics;  
Rez Abbasi - guitar, electronics; and  
Dan Weiss - tabla, drums  
2017. Self Produced.

Listen: *Snap*



Title: Unfiltered Universe.  
Featuring:  
Rez Abbasi - guitar;  
Vijay Iyer - piano;  
Rudresh Mhanthappa - alto saxophone;  
Johannes Weidenmueller - double bass;  
Dan Weiss - drums; and  
Elizabeth Mihael - cello  
2017. Whirlwind Recordings Ltd.

Listen: *Disagree to Agree*



Rudresh Mahanthappa. Photo: Ethan Levitas

As a developing jazz musician in Boulder, Colorado, alto saxophonist [Rudresh Mahanthappa](#) had little in the way of South Asian role models. In time he encountered pianist and kindred spirit [Vijay Iyer](#) of Rochester, New York, and the two began to engage with their identity and cultural inheritance in a deeper way through their art.

Later, in New York, Mahanthappa struck up an alliance with [Rez Abbasi](#), a Karachi-born guitarist raised in southern California. They worked with Carnatic saxophone master Kadri Gopalnath in Mahanthappa's acclaimed *Kinsmen* project. And together with drummer [Dan Weiss](#) (a diligent tabla student under Pandit Samir Chatterjee), Mahanthappa and Abbasi formed a trio, the Indo-Pak Coalition, merging Indian rhythmic elements and performance practices with the improvisational fire of jazz at its most modern. They released the vivid and technically brilliant *Apti* in 2008.

With *Agrima* (Sanskrit for “next”), the Indo-Pak Coalition makes its long-awaited return. The album finds Mahanthappa, Abbasi and Weiss expanding their sonic vision with computer effects and a new tabla/drum kit hybrid of Weiss's devising that heightens the music's dynamic range and rhythmic drive.

On *Apti*, with the pervasive ring of the tabla (and sometimes acoustic guitar), the music was more explicitly Indian in approach. *Agrima* uses tabla as well, and the opening “Alap,” a slow, out-of-tempo drone improvisation, summons the sound of Indian music right away. But Weiss often switches to a more conventional drumset approach as the pieces evolve. Abbasi's guitar takes on a heavier, more rock-like sound, particularly on “Snap.” Odd and otherworldly software-generated sounds emerge on “Kaw,” “Revati,” “Eeeeeee” and elsewhere. Genre boundaries fall away as the trio takes a bolder step toward its own musical language. The performances are virtuosic, at times breathtakingly so, full of precision yet sometimes slightly wild.



Rez Abbasi. Photo: John Rogers

An ambitious bandleader who has traveled to India to study with the great Ustad Alla Rakha, Abbasi formed his Invocation quintet around the same time as the Indo-Pak Coalition. He enlisted Mahanthappa, Iyer and Weiss as core members and released *Things to Come* in 2009, focusing on the influence of Hindustani music. He followed up in 2011 with the Qawwali-inspired *Suno Suno* (“listen listen” in Urdu). On *Unfiltered Universe*, the new album, Abbasi grapples with the Carnatic musical tradition of south India, where Mahanthappa and Iyer have family roots.

Not unlike *Agrima*, *Unfiltered Universe* takes the interactivity of jazz as a starting point but looks to Carnatic music as a wellspring of ideas. There is less explicit reference to Indian instrumentation or formal structure than one hears from Indo-Pak. But it's there, whether in the formidably complex cyclical rhythms or in subtle details of phrasing and ornamentation.



Invocation is also a larger group than Indo-Pak. Bassist [Johannes Weidenmueller](#) covers a deeper register while newly recruited cellist [Elizabeth Mikhael](#) brings a wealth of possibility in terms of rich counterpoint and a singing legato tone, distinguishing *Unfiltered Universe* from its predecessors. The beats can verge on funky: the closing “Dance Number” gets its name for good reason, and the fractured asymmetric meters of “Propensity” and “Thin-King” have a kind of physical intensity. But the more restrained title track, with glowing harmony that prompts the most lyrical soloing of the session, adds a measure of warmth and introspection.

There's something visceral and gripping about the speed and urgency of Mahanthappa's horn, the endlessly fluid articulation of Abbasi's guitar: these are among the most identifiable and consequential voices in jazz of the last two decades. Interestingly, in their respective quests they land at one particular place that is arguably similar: the odd backwards-sounding effect that Mahanthappa conjures at the start of “E” on *Agrima* finds its analogue in Abbasi's solo-guitar interlude “Thoughts” on *Unfiltered Universe*. Though this quivering, unsettled sound leads them toward different musical conclusions, it suggests a likeminded spirit, a shared commitment to addressing the musical past, present and future on their own terms.



**David R. Adler** has written about jazz and assorted topics for *JazzTimes*, *The Village Voice*, *Stereophile*, *The New York City Jazz Record*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, *Time Out New York* and many other publications. [View bio](#).



Hailed by Pitchfork as “jaw-dropping, one of the finest saxophonists going,” alto saxophonist, composer and educator **Rudresh Mahanthappa** is widely known as one of the premier voices in jazz of the 21st century. [View bio](#).



Voted #1 “Rising-Star Guitarist” in 2013's DownBeat Critics Poll and successively in the “Top-Ten Guitarists” in 2015, 2016 & 2017 alongside Bill Frisell and Pat Metheny, guitarist and composer **Rez Abbasi** has become one of the most significant voices on the current jazz scene. [View bio](#).

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