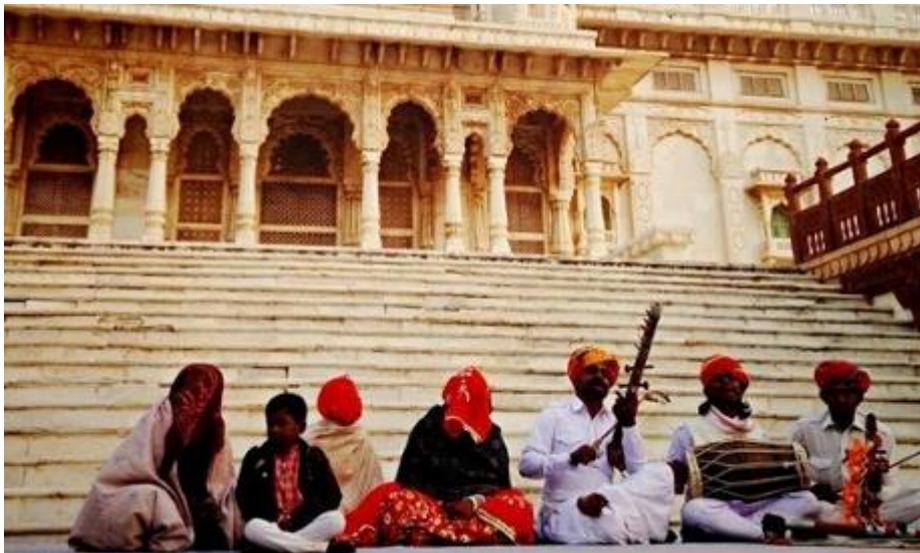




'Even Bob Dylan was a Sufi singer'

Killing Joke bassist Youth and performer Karen Ruimy were the only UK artists at this year's celebration of Sufi music in India. We caught up with them ...



Musicians in Jodhpur, India, during the 2014 World Sufi Spirit festival.
Photograph: Lewis Kyle White

Against the backdrop of the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, India, musicians from around the world came together at the World Sufi Spirit Festival late in February to celebrate the Sufi tradition – the mystical branch of Islam whose most famous musical exponent was the late [Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan](#) – that now faces persecution in Egypt, Iran, Libya, Somalia and Mali. Among those performing was one UK-based act, the pairing of [Killing Joke](#) bassist Youth and the Moroccan-born singer and flamenco dancer [Karen Ruimy](#).

Tell us about the gig in Jodhpur. How were you, the only band from the UK, received?

Youth: Being in India performing at the heart of the World Sufi Spirit festival was an incredible honour. Karen and I have put together a show called El Camino, or “the journey”, that combines the traditional art of flamenco with [gawwali](#), Indian and Arabic influences – it’s the musical journey of flamenco’s cultural roots and was an experimental sound clash mission.

Karen Ruimy: Performing outdoors in the ancient [Mehrangarh Fort](#) under the full moon was a moment of pure magic. To dance surrounded by those ancient stones in an atmosphere of joy and mysticism, where music takes the form of sacred art, took my performance to a new level. To be a flamenco performer and to appear here in India places my art within the heart of its Sufi context.

Youth: We experimented with sounds for this performance: I was playing harmonium and drones (from an [electronic tamboura](#) drone box) but also just travelling all the way to India, overcoming so many obstacles to be there, makes a gig very special. Part of the magic of performance and gigs – especially this one – is that it's like building a huge sandcastle that exists for the moment only, then the tide comes in and washes it all away.

Karen Ruimy: The energy in that place, surrounded by so many musicians from the Sufi world, produces an incredible vibrational level in the atmosphere. In each corner of the fort you would find an ecstatic singer or a group of young children from deep in the middle of the [Thar desert](#) making incredible music. I would urge anyone to go next year – and it is not hard to get to.

Youth: I was bricking it before the gig! The calibre of the music at the festival was so incredibly high. I had no idea if the show would be well received, if we would be accepted by the local crowd or even laughed at. In the end, under the blazing full moon with the wind whipping up the dust and the wafts of incense around us, we performed one of my most out-of-body gigs ever – the sounds and the performance carried me off to some familiar but ancient memory and then everything went all [Herman Hesse](#). Through the mist, the crowd were cheering and I can still hear the distant echo of Karen's flamenco shoes crashing down to the [tabla](#) and dubbed-out drones bringing the [duende spirit](#) crashing home with a thunderous bang! When we got off stage we were surrounded by people congratulating us. Karen was mobbed for autographs. It's gigs and experiences like these that I live for.

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How does the Sufi spirit influence us in the West?

Karen Ruimy: I have been nourished all my life by Sufi mystics like [Idris Shah](#) and [Hazrat Inayat Khan](#) whose book [The Music of Life](#) is one of the pillars of my own spiritual quest. The beauty of the words of a poet like [Rumi](#) is like an arrow in my heart, it's like a beam of light in the darkness on the path. Music is a sacred art in Sufism and wherever I am in the world, it is that which attracts us all. As a spiritual being and an artist, music and spirit come together as one in Sufism.

Youth: Sufi music for me is soul music. What I love about Sufi music most is the ambition to achieve ecstatic transcendence through music and dance. As well as how the philosophy allows this huge dynamic range of personal expression from qawwali masters like the [Saafi Brothers](#) and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan from Pakistan via Turkish whirling dervishes through Egypt and North Africa all the way to Andalusian flamenco.

Even Bob Dylan considered himself a Sufi singer. He said in an interview with Rolling Stone: "Yeah, [Sufi singing] that's where my singing really comes from." Dylan also states his favourite singer is the Egyptian Sufi singer [Om Kalsoum](#), "the voice of Arabs."

What were your highlights of the event?

Karen Ruimy: We were all mesmerised by the songs from the [Fakirs](#) and the [Bauls of Bengal](#) who charted the ancient history of Sufism. Of course, the whirling dervishes transfixed us and we listened in awe to [Kavita Seth](#) and [Javed Bashir](#) who provided the stepping stones between modern Indian cinema playback and the ancient roots of Sufi and [Ghazals](#). My countryman [Mohamed Bajeddoub](#) provided yet another link between Andalusian and Moroccan music.

Youth: There were so many highlights, not least the location. Pretty much everything I heard was outstanding. As well as music there was dance. Like Karen, for me [Kavita Seth](#) was the highlight, performing in the courtyard of the Zennana Deodi – the old harem. She was up there is my top 10 of mind-altering voodoo magical performances – up there with seeing [Fela Kuti](#) perform at Reading festival in the 1970s.

• *Youth and Karen Ruimy will be performing at the Lilian Baylis Studio at Sadler's Wells on 18 June. Details: [karenruimy.com](#). The [World Sufi Spirit festival](#) takes place every February*