

Interviewing The Indian Music Producer Who Was Just Nominated For A Grammy

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The much-awaited list of nominations for the 2019 Grammy Awards went up a few days ago, much to the thrill of music fans around the world. It came with many pleasant surprises, as it often does, and for Prash Mistry it was a particularly special moment.

Prash wears many hats in the music industry – a music producer and sound engineer whose work includes incredible collaborations with Jorja Smith on her Mercury-nominated debut album *Lost & Found* and The Prodigy on *No Tourists*, among many others on his list of accomplishments. He also creates his own diverse sounds and music with his band, Engine-Earz. Their album, *Symbol*, was among the nominations for this year's 'Best Immersive Audio Album' (as was Jorja in the 'Best New Artist' category). A wonderful, down-to-earth guy, Prash talked with Homegrown about his musical journey, his cultural identity, inspiration and experiences in a changing world.

Born to parents who fled from Uganda as refugees, Prash grew up in Reading, UK. “I started playing the drums and piano when I was 6, and started composing at age 11. I started playing in clubs when I was around 14 probably – I had a beard, so getting in was never a problem,” he laughs. After playing at a local club for a few years, Prash opened his own music studio that he ran for over eight years – drawing from a number of genres including those from his Indian heritage.

“I’m into a lot of different types of music – reggae, metal, solo, R&B, guitar, bass – you name it. There’s definitely also some sound design influence when I create my music and I have a real passion for the technical side of it too,” he explains as I ask him if he can define his “musical aesthetic,” so to speak. “It’s not an East/West sort of thing. Our sounds travel across traditions and genres, but it has a culture of its own as well. There are many ambient sounds but they do have some narrative thread – there’s a song in there.”

Prash goes on to say that this approach is reflected in the artists he chooses to work with as well. “It just has to be an artist who I feel has something to say, someone whose music I genuinely enjoy. I’ve been working with Jorja since her first release, *Blue Lights*, and it’s been such an honour watching her become a household name. She’s just someone I really believe in.” He has also been a huge fan of *The Prodigy* since he was a child.

“I really enjoy helping other people find their sound. I’ve found a real happiness in helping artists achieve their visions more than I ever have in making my own music,” he admits to me. “When you are putting your own music together, it’s all about ego, but when you are helping with someone else’s artistry, it’s really nothing to do with that,” he echoed a similar sentiment in a recent interview with *Headliner*. “My entire *raison d’être* is to magnify the artist’s vision, after all.”

His humility and empathy become more and more apparent with deeper conversation – it helps cement the popular belief that there are only a handful of others as deserving of such a nomination. I ask him about *Symbol* – an album that took nearly eight years to complete – and his reaction to the news. “Well, I’m not really into the whole awards thing. The Grammy was more for my parents than it was for me. They’re Indian – they need something tangible, otherwise they’ll be frantic that I’m just some teenager who became a weird electronic producer,” he laughs. “But it’s nice to have some recognition for my work.”

Symbol’s opening track features sounds from a Gujarati ceremony. He talks about the influence of his Indian identity in his personal music, and wanting to reconnect with it beyond that. “I don’t

speak any Indian languages. I've only really reconnected with India through music composition, but it's usually conceptualised by something contemporary and never the focal characteristic of the sound."

"I'm not exactly Indian, but I'm not really English either," he continues. "I'm in a strange no-man's land. But I've been to India many times and it holds a special place in my heart. It took travelling there to realise that my ultimate value as a human being is in the ability to approach people, to fuse cultures."

Melding cultures with nuance and empathy is in rare supply in today's politically charged climate, as we shift closer and closer to an isolationist, apathetic world. These are themes that find their way into his work, whether consciously or subconsciously. "From when I started Symbol to when I finished it, we had gone from a very neoliberal Obama presidency all the way through to a Trump one. And everything that went with that – the destruction of the world order, the falling apart of the curtains of morality – has left us with an ultra right-wing republic. Not just in the United States, but also with Brexit in the U.K., Modi in India, Le Pen in France – across the world we saw fear-mongering and a move towards fascistic nationalism," he says with audible exasperation.

"Looking back on it, the journey of my album was my own diary of that period. I'm coming from a place of trying to wake people up. It's a privilege to be awake in this time, for sure. The façade of 'we treat our minorities well' has really fallen apart over the last decade. My parents are refugees, seeing the country I live in like this is just.." he trails off, but I can feel the emotion in his voice.

"More than anything, my music is a call to compassion. There have been many changes in my life alongside the political ones. I just want people to feel some love in some way, and to continue making and producing music that makes me and others happy."

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Listen to Symbol here and check out Engine-Earz's other work here.