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### A qawwali superstar hits town

By Aaron Cohen

Special to the Tribune

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The sound of *qawwali*, Sufi praise music of Pakistan, is big. Not just because of the voices -- although Faiz Ali Faiz's ensemble includes eight strong singers, especially himself. But *qawwali* is large because it continually embraces different influences, while keeping its essentials tied to traditions dating back seven centuries.

Faiz, who is making his first visit to the United States this week, shows how much the music keeps evolving while remaining resolutely traditional. His group emphasizes the time-honored elements: Voices passionately intone -- and improvise from -- Sufi verses (*qawwal* means "word" in Arabic) as tabla drums and exuberant hand claps build syncopated beats underneath them. His ensemble also features *qawwali's* long-established harmonium, an accordion-like keyboard that came from British missionaries (who, ironically, used the instrument to teach South Asians Protestant hymns). But recently, Faiz added his own twists when he recorded with Spanish singers and guitarists.



To say that Faiz has familial roots in *qawwali* is putting it mildly. Speaking from Pakistan, he said that he is the ninth generation in the field. Growing up in Lahore, he spent his childhood absorbing his relatives' deep expertise in Pakistani classical music and Sufi poetry. While *qawwali* singers have traditionally been men, Faiz also learned a lot from his mother.

"My mother was not a professional singer, but being a sibling of *qawwali* musicians, she was tuneful and well-versed in *qawwali* essentials," Faiz said in Punjabi through a translator. "She taught me how to render or recite certain words."

Faiz also listened closely to the most recognized *qawwali* voice in recent times, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. "He is the ultimate inspiration," Faiz said. "I am the humble follower of that great master."

Faiz adds that the goal for a *qawwali* performance -- to bring audiences to a state of ecstasy -- is "not necessarily religious ecstasy." A working knowledge of Sufi mysticism, or lyrical translations, also won't be required for Chicagoans to be swept along.

"I am sure that American audiences will understand that the poetry of my songs is based on divine love," Faiz said. "It gives the message of peace."

[onthetown@tribune.com](mailto:onthetown@tribune.com)

## **Faiz Ali Faiz**

The new voice of *qawwali* makes his first visits to Chicago.

*When:* 7 p.m. Sunday and 6:30 p.m. Thursday.

*Where:* Old Town School of Folk Music, 4544 N. Lincoln Ave. (Sun.); Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park, Randolph Street and Michigan Avenue (Thu.)

*Price:* \$16; \$20, 773-728-6000 or oldtownschool.org (Sun.).

Free, 312-742-1168 or millenniumpark.org (Thu.).

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