



Najma Akhtar / Gary Lucas

Rishte

World Village 450008



Given their respective pedigrees, it's not surprising that singer Najma Akhtar and guitarist Gary Lucas have been drawn into a musical collaboration.

True, Akhtar's debut album, *Qareeb* (1988), was devoted entirely to the *ghazal* (short lyric poem in Urdu reflecting on the pleasures and agonies of romantic love) but, as she commented in an interview at the time: 'You can make a fast or a slow *ghazal*; you could even make a hip-hop type of *ghazal*. I can and will adapt it to any kind of rhythm.' And, asked how she'd been inspired to add innovative vocal backing harmonies to the form, she pointed to her brother's Madonna albums.

Lucas is equally open-eared, having famously collaborated with Captain Beefheart and – most relevantly for this project – with the late singer/composer Jeff Buckley (the latter a huge admirer in his turn of the Sufi devotional music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan).

Rishte consequently has an uncontrived ease and naturalness to it, Najma Akhtar's voice, by turns caressingly delicate and sweetly but powerfully strident, soaring gracefully over Lucas's extraordinarily varied guitar sounds and textures.

Whether the songs concern themselves with humble submission to destiny ('Rishte') or the pangs of unrequited love ('Behaal'), celebrate burgeoning romance ('Naya Dhin') or reflect on the ephemerality of life ('Pensif Khayal'), the mutual compatibility and commitment of Akhtar and Lucas are apparent throughout, and the resulting album (which also contains an intriguing visit to Skip James's 'Special Rider Blues' and a powerfully atmospheric song, 'Soul Taker', inspired by English witch legend) is, quite simply, ravishingly beautiful and comes unreservedly recommended.