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Tanvi's fields of gold

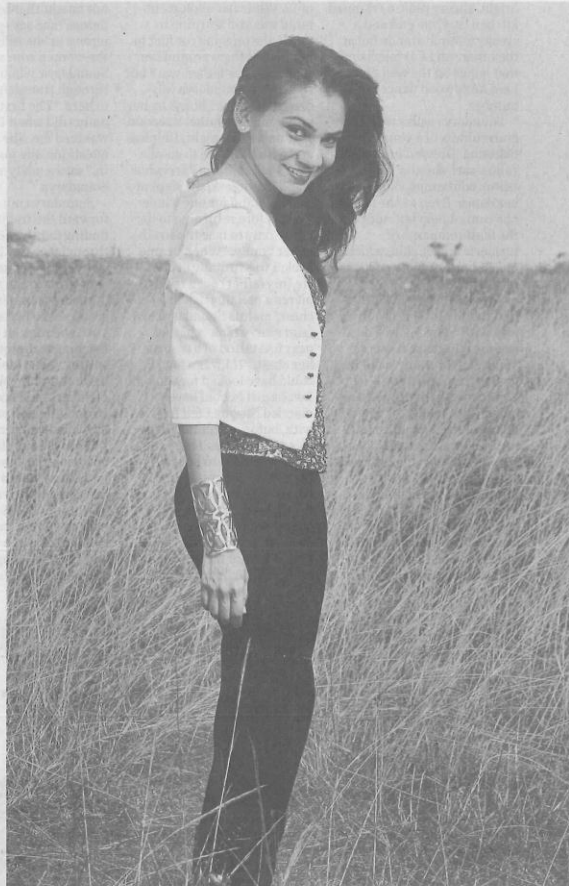
She may be best known for her Grammy-winning song from *Slumdog Millionaire*, but there are more sides to the Chennai-based singer, songwriter and designer

BY ESTHER ELIAS

On early mornings, there's only one place to find Tanvi Shah: out at sea. The calm descends within the moment she paddles out into the waters. With the sky above and little else around, Tanvi surfs the sea's swells, thinking.

From lyrics for her next song-writing project, to rehearsing rhythms and tunes, planning song videos, even deciding band placement spots and her performance moves, this is Tanvi's "me, myself and I" time. The energy in the vast expanses fuels her inventive spirit and this Grammy-awarded singer, songwriter and designer is bubbling over with creative energy.

This Monday though, she's as jittery as a spring wound tight. She hasn't hit the water for three weeks, her band is scattered across town and she has a rehearsal to run for in an hour, for her big gig at Hard Rock on Thursday. Start talking about her music though and Tanvi unwinds, relaxing in the obvious pleasure it gives her. "It's a Latin night!" she says, "I'm going to be singing in Spanish, Portuguese, Brazilian, French and I may even sneak in a



Hebrew song if I can manage it." Tanvi shot to fame in 2010 when her Spanish lyrics for 'Jai-Ho' won her the Grammy with A.R. Rahman and Gulzar, but her love for languages roots itself way back, in her college days, studying ceramics in the U.S.

Born into a family proficient in design, Tanvi never envisioned herself as a singer — "always some environment-friendly activist kind" — but her mother says she recognised voices in music even as a child. She grew up on Asha Bhosle and Kishore Kumar, and discovered Osibisa at 11, but her musical world was thrown open in an American college dormitory.

With an Egyptian roommate who jived to Daniela Mercury on one side and Spanish friends who danced merengue, samba, salsa and tango on the other, Tanvi delved into a truly international culture at the Havana village parties she frequented in Washington DC. She encountered the Latin American greats — Sergio Mendez, Juanas, Pablo Alboran, Celia Cruz, Gloria Estefan — and though it took a while to understand their complex rhythm patterns, she wasn't one to cower at a challenge.

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Back in India, a chance recording of her singing a karaoke cover, reached Rahman, and in 2004, he gave her her first break with 'Fanaa' in the film Yuva. From *Dilli 6*, to *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*, *Enthiran*, *Biryani* and much more, Tanvi has worked the Hindi, Telugu and Tamil playback singing circuit for a decade now, most frequently with Rahman and Yuvan Shankar Raja. "Every time I'm at a Rahman recording, he throws me a challenge — let's sing in Spanish today, let's try a different style today — and I come away having learnt so much about music and language. I've been enormously blessed to work with directors who let me improvise, explore my own talent and draw out what they believe is my potential."

Outside films, Tanvi has collaborated with international artistes across genres, from Snoop Dogg, on the track 'Snoop Dogg Millionaire', to Spaniard Gustavo Alarco on her song 'Lluvia Lejana' and producer JHawk on her singles 'Llamalo Amor' and 'Meant

To Be'. Three more singles, "on love, life and just taking off on a holiday" are set for release later this year and Tanvi currently won't divulge news on more collaborations in the pipeline. With all this genre-hopping, is there a 'Tanvi Shah sound' that has evolved over time? "I don't want there to be!" she says. I have the whole gamut of music genres available to me right now; restricting myself to one would be like eating just the cherry on the cake. I want the whole cake, the cream and the cherry!"

This positive addiction to productivity is what also pushes Tanvi to lead a parallel career as designer for her label Tansha. Her little office on Chamiers Road is bursting with scrapbooks, lampshades she's fashioned from discarded liquor bottles, phone covers sprinkled with her doodles, an up-cycled design table mounted on a bicycle and even a cherry blossom tree made of duct-tape climbing across her wall, all of it drilled, chain-sawed and hammered into place by hand. Shoulder pains, bruises and fractures aren't really deterrents, says

Tanvi. "I probably have too much energy bursting inside me. But it's when my head finally hits the pillow at night and I know I've achieved something today, that I'm most satisfied."

It's Thursday evening and the heavens have opened slushy chaos over Chennai. In a quiet corner of Hard Rock Cafe, Phoenix Mall, though, Tanvi Shah is a picture of peace. The tables around her are slowly filling up and midway through pre-concert photographs she casts quick glances at the lengthening line outside the entrance. Her band sets up on stage; Hard Rock breaks into its trademark YMCA dance, and the evening is set to begin.

A clash of cymbals, drum rolls like thunder and Tanvi opens into the sharp, seductive notes of 'Ojos Asi', Shakira's Arabic-Spanish number that translates to "Eyes like Yours". Dressed in a flowing, floral bustier dress, Tanvi belly dances to the beats, hair bouncing, bangles jangling and

everyone else's feet tapping. It's a mainstream welcome into her world of Latin American music. Her hope though, is to open her listeners to artistes less celebrated than Shakira and Enrique Iglesias. "Within Latin American music alone, there's Merengue, Flamenco, Pambiche and much else, and under Merengue itself there are seven sub-sections. There's a whole wide world out there," she says.

It's a Portuguese song from Salvador Bahia up next, and Tanvi's voice soars, all warmed up now and building from soft whispers into full-throated belting. She comes into her own in the Afro-Brazilian maracatu-dance inspired number about liberation. It's all spunk and power in a call-and-answer sequence with her backing vocalists Roshni Sharon and Priya Krishnan, enough to get the crowd on their feet and dancing. For an audience that understands little Portuguese or Spanish, her music reaches out beyond language, and that's how she wants it. "Music is universal, and as musicians

we have the privilege to step into different cultures. Ninety per cent of the songs in the world say the same things, more or less, but it's the difference in expression that really speaks to us." Despite experimenting so broadly, Tanvi says she's a stickler for perfection. Diction is her pet peeve and she goes into spiels about how the 's' in Spanish is pronounced with a lisp in northern Spain and without one in Mexico, the difference in dialects and how all of this pans out while singing.

By now, the room has transformed into something out of Tanvi's college days and she takes the crowd with her to the Caribbean islands this time. Playing off the beautiful tones from Shyam Benjamin's keyboard, she rouses the crowd into singing the chorus of a song that tells of an old woman who can solve any problem with three drops of her magic potion. For her musicians too, Tanvi's choice of genre is something of a welcoming relief. In a culture popularising rock and fusion, jazz and blues, it's been a while since any of them have done a Latin American music-only night. With Jeoraj Stanly on drums, Allwyn Paul on a whole host of percussion, Napier Peter Naveen Kumar on the bass and Donan Murray on guitars, the band is in full form all night. By the time the skies outside have let up, Tanvi is well into the closing crowd-pleasers Beyonce's 'Single Ladies' and Shakira's 'It's Time For Africa'. When she finally steps off the stage, she's tired but smiles and says, "Now, I'm happy!"

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