

Global warmth of Irish-Indian singer Sarah Packiam

By Ben Crandell - May 9, 2012

Sarah Packiam was born in Ireland, outside Dublin in County Wicklow, and spent part of her youth in Spain, south of Barcelona, where she performed in a band with her brother and her father, Peter, a jazz-blues guitarist from Agra, India.

With that worldly background, it was only natural that she'd end up in Miami, though she did have some uncommon help. One of the digital publicity kits she and her dad made in Spain ended up in the hands of a singer who was looking for unsigned talent for his new production company.

Soon, Packiam was on her way to South Florida on Jon Secada's dime. That was in 2004, and she's never left.

"I love it here. It's very international, the people, the music," she said recently from her home in downtown Miami.

Anyone who has heard her originals and the earthy treatment she gives to her favorite classic American soul and R&B songs — including a riveting version of Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine" when she opened for Jason Mraz at last year's SunFest — knows we're happy to have her.

"That's what I grew up with, traveling around with my dad. Weather Report, Stevie Wonder, the Carpenters," Packiam said.

With a beguiling, global-pop sound spiced with elements of mandolin and tablas, Packiam performs twice-monthly gigs at the chic Balans in Brickell (901 S Miami Ave., Miami, 305-534-9191) and also plays the funky Bardot (3456 N. Miami Ave., Miami, 305-576-5570), where her next show is July 25. And every Friday in May, Packiam performs at the Seminole Casino Coconut Creek's Legends Lounge, a room that makes her feel right at home.



"The nice thing about the lounge is that people have come to really listen," she said, estimating most of the crowd to be in their late 30s or early 40s. "They really seem to be into the music."

Packiam varies her set list between covers — including interpretations of Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely" and Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors" — and originals, some of which are drawn from her new album, "One for Two."

The album includes "Homeless Teenage Girl," a grim tale she wrote at age 14 that brought Packiam her initial fame when it represented Ireland in a European songwriting contest for young people, leading to a

development deal with EMI Records' Irish affiliate.

“One for Two,” with Packiam on guitars and keyboards, Gary Thomas on bass and Andy Russell on drums and tablas, was recorded at Cutting Cane Studios in Miami by Grammy Award-winning producers Tim Mitchell (Shakira), George Noriega (Ricky Martin) and Jodi Marr (Mika). Mitchell also was the producer when Packiam sang backup for a couple of Shakira performances.

Packiam's next big project is getting out of town: She's headed to Dublin to perform during Indie Week Ireland, a May 30-June 2 showcase of hundreds of musicians competing for a spot to headline Indie Week Canada in October. Of course, she'll also be rekindling old passions.

“I'll be gigging and seeing old friends and family, and feeling out the music scene over there,” Packiam said of her return after a couple of years' absence. “The last time I was there, I came back totally inspired. It's the weather, the greenness, the people ... And there's so much good live music. It's everywhere. It's part of our culture.”

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