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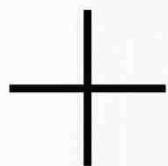
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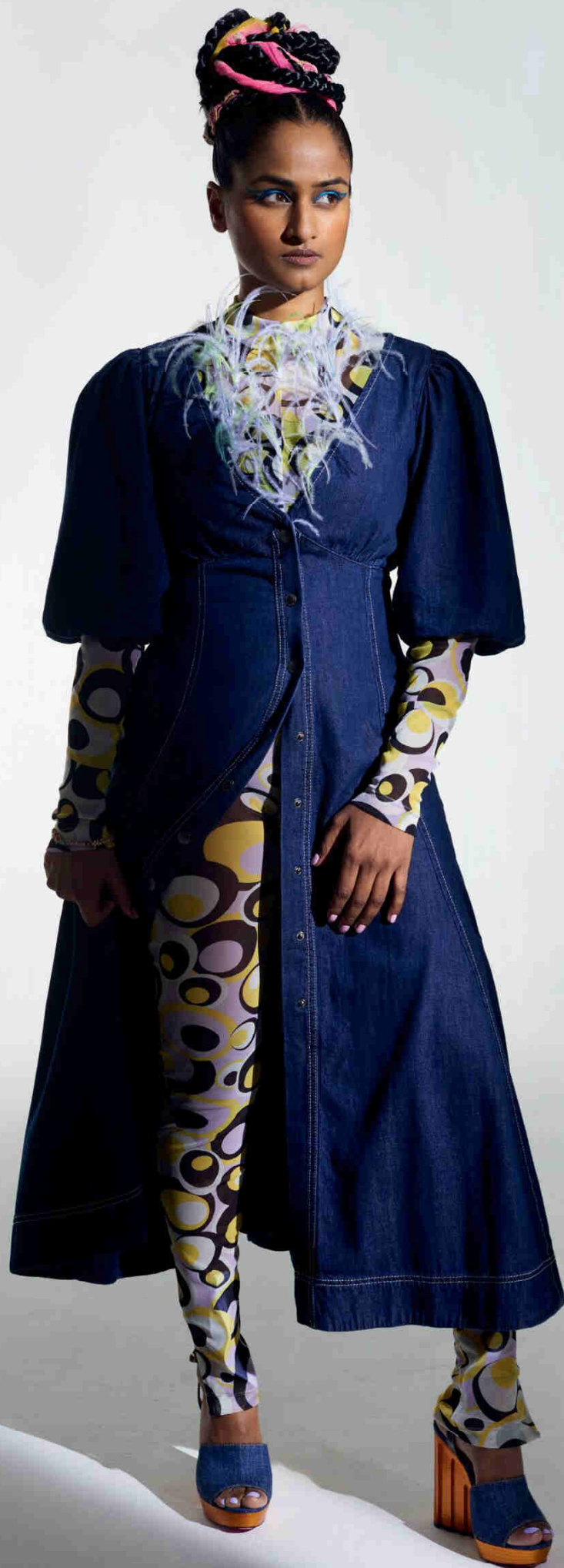
NEW WAVE

Singer-songwriter Priya Ragu taps into the sounds of her Sri Lankan heritage, mixing it up with R&B, electro-pop and hip-hop to create her unique sound. Now she's hitting the high note and becoming a musical tour de force

Words BECKY DONALDSON Photography OLI KEARON Styling LAURA WEATHERBURN

Blazer, £375,
Trousers, £225,
Earrings, £85,
Bangle, £85,
Ring, £95, all
Kate Spade





Dress, £350,
Kate Spade
Jumpsuit,
POA, Vivetta
Sandals, £945,
Christian Louboutin
Bracelet, £135,
Kate Spade

Tamil-Swiss musician Priya Ragu spent years honing her talent before establishing herself within the music industry with super-charged speed. It was a little over a year ago that she released debut single Good Love 2.0, a homage to her parent's "love marriage".

Her single, Lockdown, referencing her desire for human contact during the pandemic, made it onto the Hottest Record on Radio 1's Future Sounds and spent five weeks on the station's playlist.

"In 2021, I was in the momentum," she says, when we speak on a Friday evening following her cover shoot fitting. "One thing after the other happened. I think it must have been a force bigger than who I am, like there were higher gods working. Because, for me, it still feels insane that everything worked out so nicely."

Adding to her glee, Priya performed Lockdown on Later With Jools Holland, a show that has introduced countless musicians who have gone on to huge chart success. "I thought I'd have needed to release a few albums first, because I've seen all my favourite acts on his show like, The Roots, Fugees and Amy Winehouse."

"Unfortunately, it wasn't filmed at the show itself, we recorded it separately because of Covid. But it was just so nice to see him introducing me and the song – it was legendary."

Drawing on personal experiences and also her own "spiritual journey", Priya's unique musical style combines R&B, electro-pop, hip-hop and jazz; with sonic folk music from the Tamil population of south Asia – in reference to her heritage. She regularly darts between singing and rapping in both English and Tamil.

Referencing her genre-blending style, she says, "I like to call it Raguwavy. The music comes in waves – ups and downs, like your emotions. It sounds low with the verses but then goes up," she explains with hand gestures. "And, during the chorus and second verse, it becomes low again before the bridge comes up."

As well as paying homage to her Tamil roots in her music, she also adds elements to her styling. "I am constantly on a journey of discovering my heritage, as it is also a way of finding out my true self."

Her outfits are a mix of 90s hip-hop and traditional south-Indian dress. "I love to layer clothes. The most important thing is to feel comfortable. And

while I'm on stage, or performing on video clips, I love to wear baggy stuff that I can move around in and feel free. I work with my stylists telling them what I want and they take it to the next level."

Priya grew up in the Swiss city of St Gallen, her parents had fled Sri Lanka during the civil war of the 70s. Her father, who worked for the Post Office, and mother, who was a pharmacist's assistant, didn't speak about their relocation as refugees to Priya and her brother when they were children. "It's crazy how strongly it affected my father and mother. So we never really talked about it."

She says that, although Switzerland was a beautiful place to spend your childhood, growing up between two cultures wasn't easy. "At that time there weren't many Tamil people, or even like-minded people there. So it was difficult for me to connect. I think it was quite hard for everyone trying to adapt and to also embrace our background."

However, bringing the south-Asian culture home, her parents would hold regular jam sessions where they would sing Kollywood songs with family and friends. "My father is very musically talented, back in Sri Lanka he was always singing and playing the tabla."

"Once they came to Switzerland, he organised get-togethers at weekends and we would sing Tamil songs together. He would take the laundry basket and flip it over playing the rhythm. Then my uncle would take a fork and knife and play along."

And her brother, Japhna Gold, who is now a successful music producer and Priya's producer and co-writer, would be on keyboard. "He had to memorise all these songs, even the interludes. I think that's the

biggest influence in the music that we create today. Everything comes from that time."

Her father then created a Tamil band and the family would play at birthdays and weddings, with Priya the reluctant singer. "At first there were a lot of uncles singing. And then it was like, 'Well, we need a female voice', which ended up being me. It wasn't really an option," she laughs.

"I was maybe nine years old, singing these Tamil songs that are quite difficult to do, because the pitch is so high. And so, at that time, I wasn't really enjoying it."

The moment she did begin to appreciate singing was when she discovered Lauryn Hill and the Fugees, which she would secretly listen to in her bedroom. "It was then I felt, whoa! this is my world. There's something magical about Lauryn Hill's voice, it really touched my soul. And that rarely happens for me with voices. It's similar with Donny Hathaway's voice, which I also feel really connected to."

When she was growing up, her parents were protective and didn't allow Priya to perform western music on stage. "They thought there was no future in it and it's safer to have a normal eight-to-five job ►

**'I CALL IT
RAGUWAVY
– THE MUSIC
COMES IN
WAVES,
LIKE YOUR
EMOTIONS'**



A woman with dark hair styled in two buns is posing against a solid red background. She is wearing a long, flowing, bright pink cape with a wide, ruffled collar. Underneath the cape, she wears a black top with a vibrant floral pattern in yellow, white, and blue. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the camera.

Cape, £750,
hardlyever
wornit.com
Top, £200,
Atelier Mimii
Dress (worn
underneath),
£250,
Kate Spade

Jumper, POA,
Roksanda
Jeans, £100,
Kate Spade
Sandals, as
before, Christian
Louboutin
Ring, as before,
Kate Spade

OPPOSITE
Dress, £325,
Kate Spade
Kilt (worn
over), £703,
Esaú Yori
Bangle, as before,
Kate Spade



– or work for the government. I understand, as they’ve been through a lot. They came to a new country, didn’t speak the language and had to build up everything from zero. So then for their children to say, ‘Hey, I want to become a pop star!’ it just doesn’t seem realistic in a way.”

It was when Priya was 16 that she learnt this the hard way. After hearing her sing Alicia Keys’ Fallin, her brother invited her to perform it with his band, The Wolves. “I was like, wow, this is amazing, because my brother and his band were quite popular in our town at that time.

“And for me, it was a big honour. So I wrote it down in my diary, but left it open on that page and my father read it. On that day, he was like, ‘You’re not going anywhere’. I was really looking forward to it. I’d even bought an outfit, jeans and a crop top, to perform in. It was just very, very devastating.”

Years later, in 2017, when she was working for Swiss Air Lines, brokering the purchases of aircraft components, Priya decided to pursue her dream of becoming a musician. “I was working at an office and life was comfortable. But this music thing was always following me. It was knocking on the door, but before then I’d never opened it.”

She also didn’t dare to dream big, as she hadn’t really seen anyone from Switzerland making it internationally. “I thought, it’s not really a possible thing to do. So I ignored it. But then I said to myself, ‘Man, you have this talent and out of respect you need to recognise that and make something out of it’.”

She quit her job and moved to America for six months with the goal of writing ten songs. And her friend, rapper Oddisee, lent her his Brooklyn studio while he was away on tour.

“I didn’t really go with a goal of connecting with musicians or making things happen in New York. It was about giving my creativity space and time, because I didn’t have any pressure. It was about trying to find out what my purpose in life was. So that was parallel to music, discovering music was also discovering myself spiritually – it goes hand in hand.

“For the first five months, I just enjoyed myself, drinking a lot of coffee and hanging around. In the back of my mind, I knew that I had to write these songs, but I found it difficult to approach them. But in the last month I did it. I tend to work better when I’m under pressure and the thing is, even if I’m just hanging out, my mind or my spirit is working.”

In that final month of creativity in New York, Priya worked remotely with her brother Japhna, who was back in Switzerland. They would send voice memos back and forth on WhatsApp. “It was the right time, stories came and I would... spit them out.” Most of the songs made it onto *Damnshetamil*, her debut mixtape released in September 2021.

On her return to Zurich, Swiss Air Lines

offered her another job, which she took, investing her monthly salary into recording, mixing and mastering music videos.

“I felt the key was having fun doing it. I didn’t have it in the back of my mind that I had to be successful and I want to be signed by a label. None of that, I just wanted to create something really nice.”

Her favourite song is Kamali, which is based on the short film of the same name by director Sasha Rainbow, about a single mother. And she will always open her shows with it. “It’s super joyful. I love everything about the song, the melody, lyrics and the story behind it.”

At first Priya didn’t think she would enjoy performing and was quite nervous about the prospect. “When you play at a festival, the people don’t necessarily know your music. But on tour, it’s a different story, people actually buy tickets to see you. The first time I experienced that was last

November. Once I came on-stage, I saw all these faces that were expecting me and singing along to the songs. I really enjoyed it.” Since, she has completed her European headline tour. “We travelled around with my tour ►

‘IT WAS ABOUT GIVING MY CREATIVITY SPACE, WITHOUT ANY PRESSURE’





Top, £220,
Hanne Bloch
Necklaces,
£160 each,
Bangle, as
before, all
Kate Spade

OPPOSITE
Jumper, £220,
Kate Spade
Dress (worn
underneath),
£620, Bragger
Sandals, £850,
Jimmy Choo
Necklace (worn
on wrist), £160,
Bracelet, £85,
Charm bracelet,
£135, all
Kate Spade

ADDITIONAL STYLING: HOLLY MACDONALD STYLIST'S ASSISTANT: CHLOE GALLACHER PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT: NIC ROQUES MAKEUP: ADAM DE CRUZ AT ONE REPRESENTS USING GIVENCHY BEAUTY HAIR: LISA LAUDAT AT THE WALL GROUP USING AVEA ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES INSTAGRAM: @PRIVARAGUOFFICIAL

bus. I have a really nice band. We're very close, which is important." She also had a sell-out show at the Jazz Cafe in London.

And this summer, she will do the festival circuit. "I have some cool festivals coming up. One that I'm looking forward to is Primavera Sound in Barcelona. I always wanted to go to that festival just to be in the audience. But this time, I can be on-stage." Her Instagram handle, which has 45k followers, is full of short videos of her performing, she has received 35 million views on TikTok and was highlighted as Facebook's Global Artist of the Day. Although, she does think social media can be draining, "Honestly, I just post my stuff and then I'm not really on it".

Although her team is based in London, she still lives in Zurich with her eight-year-old dog, Crooks. "He doesn't like men. I don't know why, but he's very protective, it's too much. I need Cesar Millan to help me out," she jokes.

So, for now, she flies between the two cities. "I like to be Peter Parker in Switzerland and then I'm Spider-Man once I'm in London. I like being in London, I love the vibe. There is so much going on, so many restaurants and different cultures. Plus, all my friends are here. I'm really close to my booker, Claudio, and his fiancée. They will invite me over and cook food, we always have a lovely time together. But I don't tend to have much free time when I'm here."

When she does have time to herself, to stay relaxed she likes to meditate. "I'm very proud because, for the last two weeks, I've been meditating every day and I feel really, really good. I can recommend it to everybody."

Before she goes, we ask if her father is now happy she pursued a career in music. "For the longest time he wasn't. I mean, he's only proud now because he sees the fruition of it," she laughs. ■

Priya's new single, Illuminous, is released on 2 March

● Go to [hellofashion.com](https://www.hellofashion.com) to watch our cover shoot video



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Priya shares her cappuccino love on Instagram; with her debut album: "Holding my first-born for the first time"; the singer-songwriter performing at the Jazz Cafe, London, in 2021