

Artist taps into sound of various cultures

By Jae-Ha Kim
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Born in Honduras and raised in that Central American country, as well as the United States, Thailand and Puerto Rico, musician Lily Vakili said hearing so many different genres of music set the tone for what she wanted to do with her own music.

"Coming from a multi-cultural background, I grew up accustomed to listening to music from all over," Vakili said in an interview from her home in Montclair, New Jersey. "Blues, folk and rock of the U.S., the Afro-Caribbean sounds of salsa and merengue in the Caribbean and the tomback percussion of Persian music. All of it has inspired my work. As I continue to travel, especially on tour, I seek out other musicians and listen to their way of making music. It's truly a privilege to learn from other artists."

This interview with Vakili has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What do you remember about your first professional gig?

A: It was a solo gig, just me and my acoustic guitar playing a house concert. I was excited and very nervous. I remember feeling I couldn't hear my voice. I've since learned it just takes practice to learn how to hear your voice. I never looked back.

Q: Have you worked on any songs while you were on the road?

A: Absolutely. Being on the road is a true source of inspiration for me. There's just so much time to observe and to be in your



Lily Vakili seeks out other artists while traveling to hear their way of making music. **BILL HEUBERGER**

own head without a lot of distractions. I love it. When I come back from tour, I always have new material to work with.

Q: Do you have any free time built into your tours to enjoy the city you're in?

A: I definitely love to get out and explore wherever I find myself. One of my favorite jaunts was to the Parthenon in Nashville (Tennessee), where I paid the necessary tribute to the great golden goddess Athena! If you haven't been, you must. It is spectacular.

Q: What is your bucket-list venue that you have yet to perform in?

A: Well, let's just say there are quite a few. I love old-school theaters with carved and gilded prosceniums, big velvet curtains, chandeliers ... like the phenomenal Kings Theatre in (New York City's) Brooklyn or the Williams Center in Ruthersford, New Jersey. There are still a few throughout the country like that. I'd love to do a tour of restored concert halls. A girl can and should dream.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

A: Puerto Rico, because I grew up there and I miss its people, language, poetry, art, music, cuisine, the sun and mountains and beaches. It has my heart and always will.

Q: What untapped destination should people know about?

A: The Sternberg Museum of Natural History in Hays, Kansas. Trust me, go. It inspired my album "Oceans of Kansas," and if you go, you'll find out why.

Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?

A: When my family lived in Bangkok, Thailand, I remember going to the beach for a holiday as a very small child and being knocked over by the waves. Turns out I laughed, got back up and ran back toward them. Story of my life.

Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?

A: Perspective and awe at the goodness inherent in most people. That and patience, because sometimes things really don't go your way, and you just gotta deal with it and keep a good attitude about it. You can always scream into your pillow at night. (Laughs.)

Q: What are your five favorite cities?

A: I can't answer that! But any big city is a source of amazing adventure for me, be it Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Nashville, Newark or New York.

Q: When you go away, what are some of your must-have items?

A: Moleskine notebooks, pencils, pens, a camera and headphones.

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