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BlackMahal: Punjabi funk hop with a dash of humor

Michelle Broder Van Dyke

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BlackMahal was started by Vijay Chattha, who says of the beginning, "I combined golden-era hip-hop instrumentals with live Punjabi freestyles of Ustad Lal Singh Bhatti, a Punjabi American music icon at shows across San Francisco." Seven years later, the band has grown in number and expanded musically - fusing styles into what Chattha calls "turban groove" or "Punjabi funk hop."

Not only do they span nearly every musical genre, touching on reggaeton, soul and funk, but they also include an extra special ingredient: a great sense of humor. With a whole song dedicated to the mustache rocker ("Save the Flavor") with lines like, "keep a mustache fly, like Magnum P.I. / let it drip dry / baby don't dye it off / it's so sexy," what's not to love?

Lineup: Jay Slim, turntables; Satish Pillai, keys; Mandeep Sethi, vocals; Vijay Chattha, vocals; Ustad Lal Singh Bhatti, vocals, dhol percussion; Sandeep Bhatt, sax; Pang Fua Chang, vocals; Tim Chang, bass; Jon Cook, drums; Dave Wood, trumpet.

How did you name your band? what does it mean?

It started as a fascination that Vijay Chattha had as a kid with the Black Taj myth of India. According to the Black Taj myth, Shah Jahan had planned to build a mirror image of the Taj Mahal he built for his wife Mumtaz, albeit in black, on the other side of the river and connect the two by a bridge. So yes, the BlackMahal that never was ... has now been built in San Francisco.

Who are your musical influences?

P-funk, Gurdas Maan, Fishbone, Lee Scratch Perry, the Roots, Afrika Bambaataa, Kalyanji Anandji.

How do you approach live music differently from recorded music?

Most of our recorded music is for the clubs while our live music has more of an organic funky dance feel.

How has your music evolved since you started playing together?

Over the past three years, we've stepped up our game and transformed into a fully live music experience that performs all original compositions.

What is the funniest thing said to you about your music?

A film producer (told us): "Your music is perfect for my new porn film."

Check it out: www.blackmahal.com.

Next gig: 9 p.m. Fri. \$18. With Das Racist, Ren the Vinyl Archaeologist. Mezzanine, 444 Jessie St., S.F. (415) 625-8880. www.mezzaninesf.com.

- Michelle Broder Van Dyke, bandwidth@sfchronicle.com

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- Michelle Broder Van Dyke, bandwidth@sfchronicle.com

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