

Bhi Bhiman is an American original, yet he seems transported from an era in which songs were more important than the pretty faces that delivered them. His rich, bellowing tenor can soothe or explode at a moment's notice. His lived-in, knowing delivery belies his years. His songwriting, too, is quick to captivate: a mix of humor and deep empathy puts him in the company of distinguished (and much older) lifelong songsmiths like John Prine, Nick Lowe and Randy Newman. And Bhiman's technical, emotive guitar playing rises to the challenge that his striking voice presents.

It's fitting, then, that there truly only is — as far as anyone can tell — one Bhi Bhiman. His parents, emigrants from Sri Lanka, named the songwriter after Bhima, a central character in the ancient Indian text *The Mahabharata* known for his size and strength. But Bhiman's own American experience was markedly less exotic than his name would imply. He came of age in the '90s in St. Louis, reared on Soundgarden and Nirvana, and later relocated to the Bay Area, where he lives today. Bob Dylan and Stevie Wonder might have first inspired him to write songs, but Bhiman's approach — comical, curious, whip-smart — remains wholly unique. As a songwriter, he consistently exceeds the expectations that should rightly rest on the shoulders of a well-adjusted twentysomething: Bhiman can inhabit any number of disparate characters and make them his own.

On his forthcoming disc, *BHIMAN* he sings from the perspective of a railroad-riding hobo ("Guttersnipe"), a North Korean patriot ("Kimchee Line"), a happy-go-lucky redneck ("Ballerina") a jealous lover ("Eye on You") and a hopeful retiree ("Take What I'm Given"), among other characters. The wide stylistic range Bhiman covers — without losing the cohesiveness of his sound — is just as impressive: "Guttersnipe" is a sprawling, nearly seven-minute epic folk testimonial with a deep empathy for the downtrodden, "Mexican Wine" is an instrumental that sounds like Simon & Garfunkel jamming in West Africa, and "Crime of Passion" is a buoyant murder ballad (as unlikely as that seems). Through every deviation of style, Bhiman's love of wordplay and that jaw-dropping voice carry the listener through to a new track and a compelling new story.

Of course, it helps Bhiman's fine songs to have expert help in crafting his sound. While some of the more minimal tracks on *BHIMAN* were recorded by the artist on his laptop, the bulk of the disc was tracked at John Vanderslice's famed Tiny Telephone studios by engineer Jay Pellicci. With those sessions in hand, Bhiman traveled to the Great North Sound Society in Maine to work with producer Sam Kassirer (Josh Ritter, Langhorne Slim), who also contributes instrumentation the album. Together, they have created a deep, layered record that is urgent enough to grab listeners at first listen and deep enough to keep them coming back to hear the subtle, soulful shifts in both instrumentation and that powerful human voice. "BHIMAN" is his first truly great album, but one gets the impression that Bhi will be singing his stories for a very long time to come.