*The new album from Academy Award-nominated composer and guitarist Rafiq Bhatia, ‘Environments’ conjures worlds of improvised, organic sound that bloom, melt, crackle and combust—an otherworldly portrait of the world around us. A collaboration with trumpeter Riley Mulherkar and Bhatia’s Son Lux bandmate, drummer Ian Chang, the nearly hour-long session heralds Bhatia’s full-circle return to improvised music after a decade-long foray into meticulous studio-based constructions.*

*In this essay, poet Mitchell L. H. Douglas offers his perspective on Environments and the journey that led to it:*

A guitarist who lays hands on strings and builds worlds, Rafiq Bhatia presents the guitar as figurative language: the representation of a physical space, a sound and function beyond conventional uses of the instrument.

We take for granted a writer’s way of stacking words into vision: an open field, a bird in flight—a gasp as it gains speed and passes overhead. This is the work a poet does. But how can a guitarist make you see with sound? How can the song of the string be a conduit for what feels like a door to walk through, a window to loose?

Exploring his latest solo release *Environments*, we find a collection of dreamscapes and a gentle awakening that brings us back to now. In Bhatia’s hands, the guitar is an invitation to new places meant to be explored.

“I’m coming from how folks in more electronic music use noise, and use walls of sound, and the power and viscerality of sound to inspire transcendence,” Bhatia says. “I see a throughline between that and Coltrane and what Hendrix is doing on ‘Machine Gun.’”

If Bhatia’s previous full-length solo release *Breaking English* looked forward by adopting the studio-as-instrument approach, *Environments* reaches further still, feeding those technical innovations back into jazz’s time-honored tradition of improvisation. The alchemy isn’t behind the wall, or the board – it’s live, present, and boundless. Not only are all the tracks improvised, some – like the album opener “Aviary | Sunrise” – were achieved in one take.

Imagine the sound that greets us: Bhatia’s guitar pitched up two octaves, the notes shaped with his foot manipulating a volume pedal. The place he sees and evokes through the strings is a room with an open window at morning, the sun beaming softly inside. As he continues to work the pedal creating envelopes of sound, he samples his instrument in real time, layering notes at different pitches. Yes, what sounds like a bird call – first one and then many – is Bhatia’s guitar, the player ricocheting his pick against the strings and activating the pitch and reverb. He continues sampling and layering notes, dropping sound of the beams down an octave, the note pulsing slower.

“Now instead of it feeling like a beam of light because it's slower and more diffuse and lower, it kind of feels like mist on the forest floor,” Bhatia says.

What follows is a sound lower than any guitar could make on its own, “like a bass or sub synth kind of thing,” Bhatia explains. He continues to sample, layer, and transform the new sound into another voice.

“And then, after all of that, that’s when I play the first sound that recognizably sounds like a guitar,” Bhatia says. It’s an experience that allows him to think “the way that I would if I was sitting equidistant between a set of speakers and listening to the sound come back at me in my studio. But I'm able to do it in real time now, to build these environments and do it with my friends. That’s what marks this shift in my process.”

For *Environments*, Bhatia assembled a trio of kindred spirits and close collaborators. His Son Lux bandmate Ian Chang, contributor of acoustic and electronic percussion on *Environments*, was an obvious choice – over a decade, the friends have explored defying the expectations of their instruments together, and Chang’s signature off-kilter swagger of drumming is as comfortable in producing hush or roar. Trumpeter Riley Mulherkar, whose acclaimed 2024 debut album Bhatia co-produced, brings a breath-driven approach to slowly developing sounds and avian flourishes that are naturally at home on this uncharted voyage.

“I think we’re all looking for expressive gestures on our instruments that evoke these things heard in more studio-type constructions,” Bhatia says. “I’ve been after this sort of world-building with sound, but being able to control and shape it very intentionally and with great care.”

It seems that technology finally caught up with Bhatia’s imagination, and the ability to merge his practice as a sound designer with his guitar playing is now a reality. But before you dive further into the magic of *Environments,* consider a reality that’s almost inconceivable given the creator’s skill and previous success:

Rafiq Bhatia nearly gave up playing the guitar.

In the years before his debut recordings, 2012’s *Yes It Will* and the EP *Strata*, Bhatia witnessed attempts to create recordings with the feel of live music.

“The irony, of course, is that’s not even how that stuff was being recorded. I'd show up to the studio for a session and they’d have the piano under blankets, and everyone was in different spaces,” Bhatia says. “It’s not like it's even being recorded in the way that they invite you to imagine that it is, where everyone’s on a small bandstand playing these songs.”

Outside the studio, the varied musical styles that held Bhatia’s ears – including Flying Lotus, Madlib, and Tim Hecker – offered another perspective on recording.

“I was listening to all these people that are taking the very process by which you capture a sound and using the studio as an instrument,” Bhatia says. “The sound that you record, that’s the beginning of the process, not the end. It’s like farming. The sound that you record, yes, it’s had this progenation and it’s grown from something, and it’s had a life—and hopefully one that might fundamentally shape the meal you decide to make. But once you actually pick that vegetable or whatever, *that’s* when you start cooking.”

The studio-as-instrument concept has a rich history across musical genres. Consider the experiments of BBC studio engineer and composer Daphne Oram who began creating deep, echoing intergalactic tones through the manipulation of tape machines in the late ’40s. Or ambient iconoclast and studio wizard Brian Eno who believes recording “takes music out of the time dimension and puts it in the space dimension.” Coincidentally, Eno has said the first genre to reap a significant reward from recording is jazz: a genre that has inspired and educated Bhatia even if he, like his mentors, don’t always agree with the name. That “space” for Eno is the physical presence of the recording as a permanent entity, providing the listener with an opportunity to revisit improvised music and find new wonders in multiple listens.

By the time Bhatia began work on *Breaking English*, he had fully embraced the studio-as-instrument concept, but wanted to retain “the feeling of jazz and improvised music” that spoke to his deepest feelings as a creator.

“I was interested in: how do you get more active with the process once a sound has been recorded, and really live in that space between the recording process and what comes out of the speaker, and work with sound as substance and sculpt it like clay,” Bhatia says. The tracks were composed “in a very slow, ship-in-a-bottle kind of way.”

“I’d sit there with a single sound and I’d manipulate it, and I’d listen to what was coming back through the speakers and then I’d do more to it, and then I’d maybe add another sound. And then eventually, at some point, it would start to take some shape.”

At this stage, Bhatia says less and less of his art had anything to do with the guitar and he was working more “in this sculptural kind of way” in the studio. His techniques were so based in the use of computers that he didn’t have a parallel approach to achieving his goals on the guitar alone.

”I didn’t feel like I could sit down on the guitar and play something and do what my heroes were doing, where you hear it and say like oh – Rafiq’s whole thing is embodied in that one note,” Bhatia says. “I was finding that more of what really felt like me was occurring from this studio-as-instrument thing more than my guitar playing.”

This reality of his distance from his primary instrument led to the *Standards Vol. 1* EP in 2020, a release in which Bhatia says he barely touched the guitar. The album featured his collaboration with jazz vocalist extraordinaire Cécile McLorin Salvant on Roberta Flack’s “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” and covers of classics by Duke Ellington and Ornette Coleman.

While he pondered a future without guitar (“Maybe the guitar is something that was part of my journey, but is incidental at this point to whatever I’ve become,” Bhatia thought), he got some practical advice from a source he knew he could trust.

“My father-in-law said something to me that I think about all the time now. I told him it took this happening for me to get back to the guitar and fall in love with the guitar again because at that distance from the guitar, I could finally see all the things that I wished that I or someone could do with it. It took getting that far away from it,” Bhatia says.

He said, ‘Yeah of course. Sometimes you gotta walk away from something to be able to walk up to it.’ “

Simple yet profound, those words were enough to make Bhatia reflect on what was missing from his creative life in the absence of his instrument. It set the course for *Environments* and his decision to rededicate himself to the guitar. The results are undeniable.

“The guitar is central to who I am as a musician, and nothing I’ve done as a studio composer beats sitting down with this thing and having it be the conduit between what's inside me and what’s out there*,”* Bhatia says. “I had to figure out how to merge my practice as a guitar player with my practice as a studio composer. How was I going to get the guitar to truly incorporate these techniques I’ve been developing away from it?”

It will not take long into the journey of *Environments* for listeners to understand that Bhatia’s recommitment is worth it, for his innovation and growth as an artist and our good fortune as witnesses of something new, whole, and real. When you hear it, you’ll know exactly where you are and who delivered you.