

The Globalfest Melting Pot

By **JIM FUSILLI**

Published: January 14, 2009

New York

For its sixth-annual event held at Webster Hall here last Sunday, Globalfest hosted a dozen acts from Brazil, Canada, France, India, Iran, Spain and Tobago as well as Brooklyn, Chicago and New Orleans. But rarely was the music they played anchored in indigenous sounds of their homelands, as the groups eagerly explored musical hybrids. Some of the bands could have melted the ice on the nearby streets.

.....As for Mr. Kher, he's a superstar in India, where he's had big hits, sung in Bollywood films and is a judge on "Indian Idol." When I called him in Mumbai, he described his music as "very traditional with a contemporary theme. The essence is very Indian. There is a Sufi flavor -- a traditional, poetic, very mystical sound. We are experimenting yet trying to stick to our essence."

Now that Western filmgoers are enjoying the Indian popular music in "Slumdog Millionaire," Mr. Kher said he was hoping to find a new, receptive audience in the States for his own works. As for what he had planned for Globalfest: "I'm expecting to create some magic."

And he did. Mr. Kher packed the largest of the three venues at Webster Hall with a crowd that was a melting pot even by New York standards. His seven-piece band moved among styles without hesitation, adding elements of folk, reggae and rock to Indian pop; his guitarist, in one tune, played lines reminiscent of South African mbaqanga and, in another, channeled Carlos Santana. With its percolating rhythms, the Kher hit "Tauba

Tauba" sounded not very different from the bubbling cumbia performed by the excellent Catalan group La Troba Kung-Fú a half-hour earlier.

Mr. Kher has a voice as appealing as it is thrilling -- he can unleash notes that bring to mind qawwali singers -- and he's an amiable entertainer. For one of his band members, a bearded, barefoot percussionist identified as Duke, the show was a homecoming. "He's from New York," Mr. Kher exclaimed. "Give it up!"

- Mr. Fusilli is the Journal's rock and pop music critic.