

The athlete as musician

Nearly a decade after retiring from tennis, Somdev Devvarman steps into music with his first album

Reji Varghese

For nearly a decade, Somdev Devvarman was India's face on the international tennis circuit, winning laurels such as the Arjuna award and a Padma Shri in recognition for his service to the country. Now, nearly a decade after retiring from professional tennis, Devvarman unveils a different side of himself – one that has less to do with blistering forehands and lightning quick footwork and everything to do with emotion. His album, *Infinite*, is the sound of an athlete shedding his armour and leaning into vulnerability.

"It's been years in the making," Devvarman says. "My songwriting has always been a canvas of my experiences. At different stages of life, different songs arrived. Some took endless hours; others were born in a moment."

The slow burn of a second life

A lesser known fact about Devvarman is that he has been playing the guitar almost as long as he has been playing tennis. Devvarman says, "For as long as I can remember, I was obsessed with the guitar. When I was eight my siblings and I shared an acoustic guitar. When I was 18, my parents gifted me my own beauty. I still have it at my parents' home in Agartala."

"From my first pay cheque, as a student, while teaching tennis in summer camps in America, I bought a guitar. From my first paycheck as a pro, I bought a Black Takamine. Played it for most of this album," he adds.

Even while on the ATP tour music was never far away. "I'd travel with a guitar as often as I could," Devvarman recalls. "After losing in five sets at Roland Garros, I went alone to watch Clapton in Paris. After another early exit at Wimbledon, I caught Dave Matthews. Those were my great European summers."

Songs and shadows

The 10 tracks on *Infinite* are like diary entries, coloured by

moods of all hues – doubt, worry, hope, wonder. Devvarman says, "The song 'Not an Alcoholic' popped after a party with friends, 'What'll They Say' emerged in the lonely, disconnected quiet of the pandemic and 'Feeling That September' was a fragment of melody that refused to go away until it finally coalesced into the album a year later".

Then there is 'Bullet Through My Heart,' inspired by his dog Bullet, who lost her vision a few years ago. "I was learning Joni Mitchell songs and just doodling with picking patterns, and suddenly the idea arrived," Devvarman says. Other

songs are lighter, like 'Monkey and the Elephant', a playful ode to his son and his stuffed animal. The title track, 'Infinite', perhaps best sums up the album's mood: a mirror of vulnerability and a willingness to bare his soul.

The leap from scribbled notebooks to a fully produced album might have seemed daunting, but serendipity played its hand. Devvarman met national award-winning music director, producer, and bassist Aravind Murali at a gig. "I told him I wrote some stuff and asked if he'd listen," Devvarman recalls. "Luckily, he didn't turn me down, and I took my wife Shivali along for moral support to the studio. Little did I know that, that first session would become the foundation of 90% of the album."

Aravind's openness brought in unexpected textures – a whistle in 'Easy Love', an accordion in 'Not an Alcoholic', and even a tabla – suggested by Shivali – in the track 'Worry'. The band assembled was formidable: drummer Dhina, guitarist Vikram Vivekanand, Aravind on bass, and hovering in the background, Devvarman's guitar teacher, Michael Dias, a constant sounding board.

Together, they turned poetry into songs, mapped dreams into symphonies. The result is an album that feels intimate, like overhearing someone whisper secrets in their room, but with the warm accompaniment of a band wrapped around.

For Devvarman, *Infinite* is not a reinvention so much as it is a continuation. The same discipline that carried him through brutal five-setters shows up here as patience with the song writing process. The same curiosity that once drove him to research opponents now pushes him to explore sounds, textures, and moods.

Where once Devvarman's job was to never give up till the last point was played, now it is to let the music speak what words cannot. He says, "I think it's about staying honest with what you feel. And then just letting the song do its thing."

Record play

Former Indian tennis player Somdev Devvarman. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Infinite premieres at Aura Studio, T Nagar at 11am on September 28. To register for the event contact 9092310822.