

‘What Bismillah Khan’s *shenai* and Pannalal Ghosh’s *bansuri* did, we are trying with saxophone’

■ *Abhijit Ganguly*



John Coltrane, the most influential and revolutionary jazz musicians of the 60’s, had a spiritual awakening in 1957 that led him to start studying Indian religion, philosophy and also Indian Raga music with Ravi Shankar. Coltrane’s famous quartet with pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison, and drummer Elvin Jon has been regarded as one of the most influential jazz groups of all time. They explored the extended modal improvisations and the time- frame found in Ravi Shankar’s music. John had given up eating meat, had become vegetarian and read books on Shri Ramakrishna and also did yoga. He even named his own son Ravi.

This meeting of spirit and music sparked interest among his saxophone playing brothers, Jonathan and Andrew Kay. Right now, this Canadian troupe is in Kolkata learning the finer points of Indian classical music. As Jonathan says, “Once hearing the transcendental music of Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, we knew that we needed to come to India to explore the deep musical traditions.”

During the past seven years, Jonathan, Andrew and their bass playing friend, Justin Gray have been frequently travelling to Kolkata to learn the traditional art of Hindusthani Raga music and its application on their western instruments. They have named their band, Monsoon, an integral part of Indian life. They have been exploring the culture of Indian Classical music and its synthesis with western music and creativity. (www.monsoon-music.com). They have a specific and unique area - rendering Indian classical music on saxophone. Jonathan said, “The journey of not only learning the traditional Indian Classical music but

also its best application and expression on the saxophone has been a great challenge. It has also made us grow as musicians and artists far beyond our expectations.”

He goes on, “In order to authentically express the delicate nuances, inflections, subtle micro-tonal tuning (*shruti*) and bending (*meend*) of vocal and instrumental music, I have had to innovate a new playing style and even make some technical adjustments to the saxophone. I have added micro-tuning adjusters and modified the tuning system of the saxophone to use a pure (just) tuning system, which is necessary in the Indian system of drone-centric music.”

“The beauty of Raga music is its unique ability to be universal and timeless, but at the same time evolve along with present day society. I am eternally grateful to Bismillah Khan and Pannalal Ghosh, two pioneers, who through their brilliant realizations and mastery of their instruments brought the shehnai and bansuri, respectively, from folk music to Hindusthani Classical music. They have been my greatest inspiration, showing how Ragas can be expressed on woodwind instruments, in which saxophone is a modern member.” The band makes much of that typical Indian institution of Guru-Shishya Parampara. Talking about this Jonathan says, “I feel so blessed to have entered this sacred relationship with my Guru, Pandit Shantanu Bhattacharyya, who is passing on the true essence of Raga music in this ancient oral tradition. Through our experience we have come to know this is the only way to receive the true teachings of Raga music, and by immersing ourselves in the traditional Indian lifestyle and learning music as a form of Sadhana or Yoga, we are beginning to identify with the spiritual essence of the Ragas.”

Learning classical music does help one to gain a better perspective of life, he notes. He says on his experience, “When I first came to India I was in search of musical inspiration. I left India with much more than that. Indian Classical music has helped me understand the need for a greater sense of purpose in life and how our thoughts and actions should reflect that. Through the pursuit of Raga Music Sadhana I feel a deeper connection within myself and an opening of the inner senses to the perception of the more subtle vibrations of nature. I see music now as a vehicle of transformation and a path towards a greater perfection and universal harmony.” ■