



American interest in Indian music has exhibited itself in the musical innovations of two artists from Michigan. Combining guitar and sitar with computer and vocals, they showed audiences in Calcutta, New Delhi and Chennai how purist classical Indian music can be the basis of an experimentation process textured by technology.

Robert Newcomb (above) and Stephen Rush (right), accomplished musicians in Hindustani and Carnatic music from Ann Arbor, Michigan, displayed innovations in a Contemporary Fusion Music concert organized by the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi in August. Newcomb is a sitar player and a classical guitarist and Rush is a keyboard specialist.

Far right: Students from Delhi University's Faculty of Music and Fine Arts perform at the concert and workshop conducted by Newcomb and Rush.



Indo-American Fusion Music

Text by SUBHRA MAZUMDAR
Photographs by VIKAS NARULA

Robert Newcomb is a classical guitarist and sitar player; Stephen Rush plays the laptop computer and sings along. Enthusiastic crowds came to their concerts out of curiosity but remained rooted to their seats, transfixed by the sheer quality of the presentation. The techno ambient music takes birdsong, the laughter of children or the sounds of a geographic situation and improvises them with digitized sounds to a subtle and recognizably Indian link.

With a common musical philosophy and a genuine love for Indian music, the duo have kicked off a revolution of rhythm that *The Statesman* newspaper describes as “a rewarding insight into the world of sound created by their combined skills, ably supported by information technology.”

Though musical mixes are a routine happening on the Indian musical front, such an eclectic repertoire is still novel.

Indian music, for Rush, is far from a casual acquaintance garnered from recordings or concerts of visiting musicians. Rush, an associate professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, has

been learning Carnatic music since 1992 from Sharada Kumar, a vocalist from Mumbai who teaches the South Indian classical music in Michigan. Before this, Rush’s exposure to this music had been somewhat spiritual. “It was a decision made from the heart when I was a student in residence at the Eastman School in Rochester,” New York. Ten years later, he was in Chennai for a week. This was followed by a collaborative stint with the Bharatanatyam dancer Navtej Johar.

Last year, Rush was chosen to host a 90-minute interview of sitar maestro Ravi Shankar. “He shared interesting asides, like his interest in dance, theater, film, and even stated that he hadn’t finished what he has in mind. It was a humbling experience, to say the least,” Rush recalls. As a fallout from this fortuitous session, Rush came in contact with Nita Kumar, who directs Nirman, a volunteer group in Varanasi that integrates popular, folk and classical arts into formal education. She “mentioned that perhaps I would like to teach in residency at Nirman. We then developed a program that I would bring students to Varanasi/Nirman and I would teach them the relationship between Western and Indian music, focusing on the late 20th century. My students would also study with gurus, the flute, violin, sitar, tabla and voice.” Kumar also began to explore possibilities for the two American musicians to give live performances for Indian audiences. “We asked the embassy in India for help,” she says.

The initial journey to Indian music in Newcomb’s case was through what he calls a “poet’s path.” He had been interested in spirituality since his teens and a splintered family background had prompted him to find spiritual guidance through music. “In all, I have just three months of

formal music instruction. Since the age of 17 or 18 I have been a completely self-taught musician,” says Newcomb. During his 30-year sojourn in music, he has explored several instruments and navigated through the differing moods of American, Irish and British musical folk traditions and listened to Indian classical music greats such as Nikhil Banerjee and Ali Akbar Khan. “I finally settled for the classical guitar, which I realized was very accessible, and through which the exploring of different genres and replicating different genres...became possible for me.” Then, as the guitar evolved to suit his needs, the sitar work progressed toward experimentation, with the amplification process and link with electronic sound, says Newcomb, who is director of information technology at the University of Michigan School of Music.

During their tour in India—presented by the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy and sponsors such as the University of Delhi and the Calcutta Chamber of Music—the audiences were quick to appreciate the spontaneous musical exchanges. To Indian ears, the factor of improvisation is the key to all Indian compositional music, and that remained in the forefront of the Rush-Newcomb scheme of things. At one concert, the *padam* that Rush voiced in the manner of Carnatic musical exchanges was aptly counterpoised by the adept sitarist Newcomb, unfazed by an attempt to test his skills. Newcomb then flagged off a traditional Indian beat on his guitar and completed it with an effortless electronic context. “The exchanges...were replete with many magical moments,” said *The Telegraph* newspaper. □

About the Author: *Subhra Mazumdar is a New Delhi-based freelance art and music critic.*

