



Child prodigy gives new respect and importance to mandolin

RAY PURVIS

U. Shrinivas faced a lot of criticism from musical purists when, at the age of six, he first started to play the mandolin, an instrument not usually associated with Indian traditional music.

"People wanted me to change instruments," he explains over the phone from India. "I was very confident that I should play only the mandolin and prove that it had a respectable status in classical music."

Following the South Indian-born child prodigy's first public concert at the age of nine, where he stunned the sceptics by playing intricate traditional Carnatic music and important ragas on the mandolin, the critics slowly started to accept that the Western instrument ranked in importance with the sitar and sarod.

Thirty years later Shrinivas' lightning-fast fingering and youthful energy have made him a highly acclaimed musician in India. His repertoire ranges across Indian classical improvisations, jazz fusion and south Indian folk music. He took the Western world by storm at age 13 when he shared the bill with Miles Davis in Berlin and has collaborated with guitarist John McLaughlin and tabla player Zakir Hussain (in the group Remember Shakti) and classical violinist Nigel Kennedy.

This month the maestro of the mandolin, his brother U. Rajesh, also a fine mandolin player, and classical singer Anuradha Kuber are touring Australia under the Nataraj Cultural Centre's 28-year old Spirit of India program, playing the Perth International Arts Festival and then as a feature performer at WOMADelaide.

At an early age Shrinivas' musical evolution

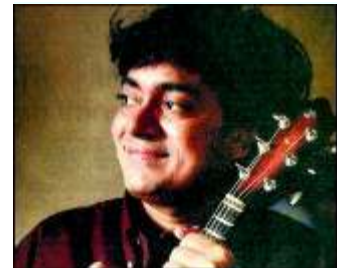
encompassed several Western styles including jazz. His interest was sparked by the jazz-Indian fusion group Shakti, featuring McLaughlin, Hussain and violinist L. Shankar, as well as the collaborations of legendary sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar with Western musicians such as Yehudi Menuhin and late Beatle George Harrison.

"Of course I was listening to Shakti since I was a child in the early 70s," he says. "Later playing in Remember Shakti was a great learning experience. I used to wonder how they played these songs to perfection. So it was an honour sitting next to John (McLaughlin) and playing with him, a brilliant musician."

Shrinivas modified his mandolin with an electric pickup. "The acoustic mandolin did not have the loud noise," he says. "With the electrified instrument, notes have a much longer sustain. I have an eight-string mandolin. I've removed three strings so I can play with all five fingers."

An unforgettable memory was meeting George Harrison in 1990: "I was playing in London and the promoter said he was going to introduce me to a great deity. When he said George Harrison I could not believe it. He was there for the concert and he came to the green room at intermission. He asked me how I tuned the mandolin and told me he was so happy to hear me play."

U. Shrinivas and the Spirit of India perform at the Beck's Music Box on Monday. Tickets through BOCS or perthfestival.com.au



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