

PEOPLE

The Rhythm SPEAKS...



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Tabla maestro Bickram Ghosh has carved a niche for himself as a classical musician, new age composer and one of the greatest artistes of our times

Jaya Sarkar

Clad in denim jeans and a smart casual shirt, Bickram Ghosh looks like a rockstar in contrary to the typical image of a tabla player with his curly uncombed hair, goatee and broad copper wrist band.

The late George Harrison (of The Beatles) gave him the title of Prince of Tabla. Bickram Ghosh is a tabla maestro, who has composed music for 12 films in Hindi, Bengali and English. A professor of music, he has taught in universities in India and as a brand ambassador and an actor, he has many feathers in his hat. He has over 70 albums to his credit worldwide and has worked on one Grammy-winning and three Grammy-nominated albums. Growing up in Kolkata, India, he learnt tabla from his father Pt Shankar Ghosh, one of the greatest tabla players and Carnatic percussion intricacies from Pt S Sekhar, and grew up in a house where great music maestros like Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Pt Ravi Shankar, Ustad Alla Rakha, Ustad Zakir Hussain and Ustad Aashish Khan used to come for informal music sessions.

From Royal Albert Hall to homely musical sessions, he delivers the dexterity and erudition of a master musician with modesty and musical sensibility. He has wings to explore new horizons yet, he is firmly rooted to the soil.

What does it mean to be the only son of a great maestro like Shankar Ghosh: a pleasure or pressure?

Both. My father held my hands to teach me tabla and when he developed confidence in me, he left my hands loose and told me, "Go and find your horizon without using my name." He had never recommended me to anyone. This evoked a sense of responsibility and a desire to establish myself as a musician. I have paved my way from there.

You come from a lineage inheriting traits of great masters in a musical atmosphere, have been accompanied by great musicians and had the freedom to pursue what you want — basically, all the ingredients for success. What else helped?

Luck and a catalyst in your life which can trigger your inner passion! In 1993, during a casual music session at a family friend's house in Belgium, I was going to play the tabla with some musicians. Suddenly, the atmosphere turned still and I overheard that Pt Ravi Shankar was visiting us. After the programme, he went to everyone individually and complimented each person. But when he came to me, he asked who had taught me the tabla. "Pt Shankar Ghosh," I replied, without revealing that he was my father. He said nothing and left. I was very disappointed.

In a while, someone came running to me saying that Pt Ravi Shankar was on the phone and wanted a word with me. I took the phone nervously and



heard, "Bickram, will you play with me tomorrow for the concert?" His offer was as musical to my ears as his sitar.

I have played in over 1,000 concerts and travelled all around the globe with him. This gave me great exposure to music and the musicians of the world. I have worked with him on his prestigious project, produced with former Beatle George Harrison called 'Chants of India'. I have also played on the title track of George's posthumously released, Grammy nominated album *Brainwashed*. Pt Ravi Shankar has refined me as a musician and as a person. This is luck.

Luck by chance! What about the catalyst?

Ustad Zakir Hussain influences me immensely. He is like an elder brother to me. I was doing a lot of concerts those days, accompanying great musicians, and had attained a certain degree of confidence in performance. He heard me playing in a concert and invited me for dinner. We were talking like two pals. Suddenly he asked, "Bick-

ram, don't you think you need to give more to the world? Music is enough for a lifetime but a lifetime is not enough for music. Give what the world deserves from you." His words served as a catalyst and ignited fire and desire in me.

So you formed a band called Rhythmscape to create and give the world a new genre of music?

Absolutely, I handpicked some very talented and versatile musicians and started creating a new genre of music which intricately weaves the complexity of Indian classical music with that of other forms of world music. Through Rhythmscape, I added on some elements like groove, a bass frequency and a certain interactivity with the audience to the basic framework of classical music. This allowed my music to become more accessible to younger people who are sometimes intimidated by classical music and its aura.

My rigorous training in Hindustani and Carnatic music, and exposure to diverse forms of music across the globe has been instrumental in honing my ability to experiment and create a genre of music accepted and respected by traditional classical musicians while being simultaneously liked by the younger audiences. The sole content of the classical music should touch the discerning listeners.

Just as Ustad Zakir Hussain acted as a catalyst for you, would you say you are an influence for someone else? If so, who?

Frankly, I have not found anyone so far, but I am sure I would like to groom deserving, budding youngsters. Time is a major constraint though. I travel a lot for concerts and recordings. I am working with some western musicians like Pete Lockett, Jesse Banister and Djamel Beynelles. In India, I am working on five albums, reality shows and classical concerts. I want to teach and hone youngsters but maybe that will have to wait a little.

A 360-degree take on life

Leen Thobias talks about his fascination for a different kind of photography

Jethu Abraham

When Leen Thobias talks about 360-degree photography, there is an unmistakable sparkle in his eyes. He can't be blamed; the concept is exciting and one that requires not just credentials — but talent as well.

The photojournalist who has been in his profession for the last twenty years was working as a photographer with the *Malayalam Manorama* newspaper in Kerala, India, when he heard of a specialist form of photography known as the Panorama or 360-degree photography. Used extensively in the UK, this form of still photography allows viewers to see images or a venue as if the normal eye viewed them — and it is this that makes 360-degree photography different from normal still photography.

"Panoramic photography is a series of still images taken differently which offers viewers a chance to have a virtual tour of a room or a locale in a 360-degree angle, and see objects minutely in a clearer and better format," says

Thobias who is in the city to cover the Dubai Shopping Festival and on the last leg of a Middle East tour.

He explains the concept better through a virtual tour on his laptop: the venue is the Golconda Fort in Hyderabad, and as he scrolls his mouse across the screen, you get a 3D view of the place. The screen literally becomes your eyes.

"A device called the Panorama head is fitted onto the tripod and before the camera, and the head functions the way the human head does. The tripod stand functions as the neck. The Panorama head can then take a 360-degree tour of the specific venue," he says.

Though panoramic photography is virtually unknown in India, the technology is quite common in the UK and with the FBI where "the first shot of a crime scene is taken with this kind of photography."

Thobias uses HDR (High Dynamic Range) images as opposed to the normal LDR (Low Dynamic Range) images which ensure that every detail is captured in the lens and every shade absorbed well — a limitation that the ordinary still photograph has.

"When we use LDR images, it darkens that area where we do not focus or which comes under a certain spectrum of light, but with HDR images, the imaging technology functions in such a way that the lens adapts to the light or dark situation giving equal visibility to the object or venue in focus — just like

the human eye functions," he explains.

Once the pictures are taken, he converts them into HDR imaging format and writes the script for the scenes using the Flash software on his computer.

Thobias' curiosity about this stream of photography prompted him to study its techniques via an online course based in Denmark, and he soon left his job to spend more time specialising in this area.

For someone who has an intense passion for his field, he has a strange story that inspired him to take up photography in the first place.

"The famous Indian singer Dr K J Yesudas visited our school and it was very difficult to even catch a glimpse of him, as the crowd around him was unbelievable. That's when I saw the photographers — they were given access to get as close to him as possible to take his pictures and that's when I desired to become a photographer," he laughs, adding that he himself has "an undying passion for music."

Later on, Thobias had the idea of doing a photo-biography on Dr Yesudas which snagged him a position in the Limca Book of Records for India's first photo-biography.

Currently, Thobias hopes that he can promote his flair for panoramic photography and reach a much larger audience around the world. "Photography is the truth but 360-degree photography — is the real truth," smiles Thobias.

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DIFFERENT SPIN: Photojournalist Leen Thobias. KT Photo/Juidin Bernarrd