

Assamese tribal songs in Gurtu's new "world music" album



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Aiyushman Dutta 26 June 2009 10504 views

The Indian terms 'Jai Ho' and 'Slumdog' recently generated a lot of discussion worldwide after they lost out to web 2.0, the latest buzzword in the IT industry, to make it as the one millionth word or phrase in the English dictionary. But despite the non-incorporation of these two popular words, with AR Rahman's enthralling score for Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* and the film's subsequent grand show at the Oscars, having picked up eight Academy Awards - including that of best picture, director, best original score and best song - there is no doubt that world music has definitely come of age and is going to be the next big musical genre across the globe.

India's virtuoso percussionist and bandleader Trilok Gurtu is the latest to have joined the brigade of world musicians with his new project, *Massical*, that was released sometime last month on the BirdJAM label of Germany. With *Massical*, the flamboyant musician, who is known for his experimental work with the music of India and Africa, has managed to develop a form of music that finds hierarchies superfluous and celebrates only music. In fact, that's what world music is all about - the portrayal of the spiritual aspects of music. That's why many critics have labelled the songs on *Massical* as a sort of acoustic balm; when you're listening to it, you forget all the prejudiced notions you ever had or learned about music.

Trilok Gurtu was born in Bombay in 1951 in an extremely musical family. His grandfather was a highly respected sitar player and his mother Shoba Gurtu (who died in 2004) was among the most renowned Indian singers. Till date, he remembers how “my entire family played harmonic instruments and sang and danced. In an interview with Doc Smith earlier, Gurtu had said, “My brother Ravi and I are the only percussionists in the family, although we’re not quite sure how we got there. I was forced to accompany my mother in order to make up for her accompanying percussionist who always used to show up late. That’s how I chose my instrument - or the instrument chose me. I learned just as much song as percussion when I accompanied my mother.”

He later extended his arsenal of tablas on congas, bongos and drums and then he started a percussion band with his brother and was influenced by John Coltrane and Jimi Hendrix. Having toured entire Europe and other western countries, he has worked with innumerable jazz musicians who have helped him expand his musical vision. In 1988, he started his virtually historical work with John McLaughlin that was to continue for four years. In 1988, Gurtu cut his first solo album *Usfrehth*, where along with Ralph Towner, Don Cherry, Shankar and his mother Shoba, he tore down the bastions of jazz and world music. His second album, *Drum ‘n’ Bass* also contained the same rhythmic and harmonic interweaving of musical elements with which his debut album had rocked the world. Many feel that his musical cornucopia has reached its highest water-mark in Massical.

To talk about the music of his latest album, Gurtu wanders between the two diverse worlds of Europe and India, although his sense of direction is much more complex than one would normally expect. He draws circles, spans nets and creates an intensely woven network of influences from various regions and musical epochs. I guess that is why a majority of critics feel that it is very difficult to describe Trilok Gurtu's depth of spirituality, non-judgmental empathy for different cultures and his unending search for new ways to express himself on the solid foundation of a whole arsenal of traditions.

One might now question the link between world music, India's Northeast and Gurtu's *Massical*. Well, there is a connection indeed. Talented Assamiya singer Kalpana Patowary, who shot to fame during the NDTV Imagine musical reality show and her subsequent participation in a few Bollywood projects, has lent her voice to two tracks in the album. It is not possible to miss the excitement in her voice as she tells me, "I was very happy when I got a call to render my voice in two tracks of *Massical*. I have always listened to Shobha Gurtu's songs and have always dreamt of her as my idol. I am happy to be part of this unique concept with the likes of musicians like Carlo Cantini, Jan Garbarek, Phil Drummy, Roland Cabezios and Stefano Dall'Ora." On the songs of *Massical*, she says, "The rhythm and groove factor of the songs is similar to African songs; they are only different geographically. In one track *Mumbai Shuffle*, I have sung tribal songs of Assam, while on the other track, I have performed the vocals of a *Banarasi thumri*."

I have always admired Kalpana's singing style. She has a burning sense of rhythm and is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition; so it was not such a big surprise for me to see her collaborating with such flamboyant international musicians. I was even more happy to know that she is presently working on a new international project with Faizal Quareshi and Nitin Shanke. As I wish Kalpana the very best, I would urge all readers to buy the latest copy of Massical. I am sure you'll love it!

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BY AIYUSHMAN DUTTA

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