

Tribute to Zakir Hussain

Parker Gambino - January 5, 2025

The concept of "world music" is a relatively recent one, with the term apparently coined in the early 1960's. Later in that decade, music of the Indian subcontinent started seeping into America's pop culture consciousness, largely through the efforts of the Beatles. Most enthusiastic was George Harrison, who embraced and promoted Indian classical music and used it as a touchstone for musical compositions both within and beyond the context of the Beatles. This set the stage for "discoveries" by western musicians of various "other" musics, already flourishing with well-established canons and traditions of their own, extending back into antiquity. Cross-cultural fusions of disparate genre elements were a fertile source of ear candy and more for musicians looking to expand the boundaries for creative expression, and for the receptive audiences that they brought along.

Examples of world music fusions existed well before the term (or the Beatles) came into being, of course, and it would be remiss to omit mention of the seminal roles of Dizzy Gillespie, Chano Pozo, Machito, and Yehudi Menuhin. A sure sign that world music had "arrived" was the creation of a Grammy award category in 1991. The winning album that year was *Planet Drum*, produced by the musicologist and Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart. Tabla player Zakir Hussain was prominent in Hart's vast musical gumbo, which also included percussion giants Airto Moreira and Babatunde Olatunji, as well as the undersung guitar master of the Greenwich Village scene, Bruce Langhorne. Hussain's collaborations with Hart and other members of the Grateful Dead extended back to the early 1970's.

Zakir Hussain was born in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1951, the son of tabla master Alla Rakha Qureshi. He received training early on from his father, starting with his first post-partum moments, and was performing in concerts by age 7. His large and small contributions to various musical projects and films is extensive, so any listing here is more a matter of personal quirk than an exhaustive survey; this man was in demand!! In his 1970 United States debut he accompanied sitarist (and George Harrison tutor) Ravi Shankar at New York City's Fillmore East. In 1973, he played on Harrison's *Living in the Material World* and John Handy's *Hard Work* album of the same year. In 1975 he was part of Shakti, a groundbreaking fusion group that included guitarist John McLaughlin. He contributed to the soundtrack of Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. Most recently he played on the 2023 album *As We Speak* as part of an ensemble that included the fingers-in-many-pots musicians banjoist Bela Fleck and bassist Edgar Meyer, along with longtime collaborator Rakesh Chaurasia.

This month's colored pencil sketch is from an equal-billing duet concert at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, although Hussain is foregrounded as the main tribute subject. He is paired with Rakesh Chaurasia, a master of the *bansuri* flute, who can coax an incredible range of sounds out of what is basically a bamboo stick! (interesting small-world trivia note: Hariprasad Chaurasia, Rakesh's uncle, is also a bansurist, who played on George Harrison's *Wonderwall* album). Hussain was not only a performer, he was a teacher of Indian classical music at several educational institutions, where he walked the talk of preparing the next generation of players.

At the Poughkeepsie concert (and I suspect at many others) there was not only music presentation, but also instructional narration, inevitably enhancing the listener's appreciation. The tabla drums are tuneable, which was explained at the beginning of each set as the process was carried out before our eyes and ears. Musical selections were invariably introduced with short, much-appreciated explanatory commentaries. And there was a demonstration of how the drum can "talk" by using one hand to adjust the tension of the drum-skin as the other hand strikes. Yes, the riff from *Smoke on the Water* can be played.

Two quotes from Zakir Hussain best describe his intentions and understanding of his place in the musical world, and of music in the broader world:

"I am from India representing the age-old tradition of North Indian classical music. The way it was played 500 years ago — same way it is being played now, performed now. The difference now is we not only are doing our music, Indian classical music, but we are also learning how to be able to talk our music in as many different musical languages as possible, because the world has become small."

"The bridges have been created in our minds, and we think we have to cross them. These so-called bridges become the reason or excuse for not being able to interact with people in another genre of music or in another country or in some other so-called way of life. But, come on! All you have to do is sit down and talk, sit down and play music together."

Selected Links:

[New York Times obituary](#)

don't overlook the comments for personal anecdotes and accolades

[BBC News obituary \(video\)](#)

[Downbeat Magazine tribute](#)

[SFJazz tribute](#)

[Zakir Hussain & Rakesh Chaurasia 2015 Crossroads Festival](#)

[Solo at Berklee School of Music, June 22, 2020](#)

[Poster art source and concert commentary](#)