



# Global jammin'

Indian and foreign musicians are coming together and grooving to a new beat, says **Susmita Saha**

So what's music to your ears? Do you fancy tuning into exotic combinations like *qawwalis* mixed with cutting-edge electronic and acoustic world music? Or would you like to turn up the volume for percussionist Bickram Ghosh who's making avant-garde music with soundsmiths across the world?

Ghosh is drumming up a new beat with Pete Lockett, the versatile multi-percussionist in a new album called *Kingdom Of Rhythm*. In the album they pound out new sounds on a multiplicity of exotic instruments like the Arab *dholla* and the Ramwong (a type of Thai drum), the bongo and the congas.

And in case you want to jam with real experimental stuff, lend an ear to Hindustani classical vocalist Dhruv Sangari and Swiss musician Lionel Dentan who have moved off the beaten track with their funky compositions which they call 'Electro-acoustic Sufi'. The two are part of a musical collective called Da-Saz, which spe-

cialises in blending *qawwalis* and *ghazals* with the latest electronic and acoustic world music.

This is fusion music at its experimental best — and a host of Indian musicians are out there at the cutting edge.

Says Sangari: "Some numbers have elements of jazz, contemporary Western music, rave, house and even rock and pop. A lot of the melodies used in the tracks are Mediterranean and Middle Eastern — from places like Kurdistan, Armenia and Iran. We've used music from all over the world."

But the fusion action doesn't stop at the top notes. Foreign musicians are reaching out to deepest corners of India and teaming their rhythms with Indian artistes who aren't familiar names even in this country.

Take a look at British Asian beat boxer Jason Singh (for those who haven't heard of it, beat boxing has its origins in US hip hop and it's a form of music where the artiste vocally produces

Bickram Ghosh and Pete Lockett dressed up as shamans for the music video of the track *Primal in Kingdom of Rhythm*; (Right) Da-Saz does crazy jam sessions combining traditional Indian ditties with jazz and contemporary Western music



drum beats and other musical sounds). Singh has come to India with Bex Mather, who plays a triple role as a lyricist, vocalist and guitarist.

Singh and Mather recently held a musical evening in the

Capital performing with Rajasthani folk artiste Jumba Khan Mewati and a group of Rajasthani musicians who use instruments such as the *sarangi*, *morchang*, *bhapang*, *dholak* and *kartal*. They're also slated to perform at the Rajasthan International Folk Festival next year.

The British musicians will be teaming up with Khan for an album and aim to stage concerts around Europe. They've already made a recording of their performance ahead of the Rajasthan International Folk Festival and released it under the name *Jaipur Express*.

Or look at world music artiste Titi Robin, who's reached into rural Rajasthan and is touring the world with Gulabi Sopera, a Rajasthani gypsy musician and her ensemble troupe. Sopera, who's from a family of traditional snake farmers, has made a name for herself internationally with her music.

In the latest show, *Kali Sultana Lombre du ghazal* (shadow of a *ghazal*), Sopera dances to Robin's tunes — though she sings in other performances. The newest show, according to Robin, is structured like a Sufi ceremony and ends on a note of tranquility. "I don't like my

music being pigeonholed. The numerous influences I encounter while travelling and interacting with different schools of music makes my sound stand apart," he says.

And if you're still hungry for more alternative stuff, take a look at the Yuri Honing Trio, a band consisting of Dutch jazz musician Yuri Honing, bass guitarist Tony Overwater and drummer Joost Lijbaart, that's about to take to the stage with Rajasthani folk musicians at The Bimhuis, a concert hall for jazz and improvised music in Amsterdam, late this year.

The band's performance with the Rajasthani folk artistes will have a live radio and streaming video broadcast available across websites during the event in real time.

But the king of fusion music who's reaching out across the world is undoubtedly Bickram Ghosh. Next year, Ghosh will be playing across India along with Arabic violinist Djamel Beynelles, British saxophonist Jesse Banister, UK-based guitarist Giuliano Modarelli and percussionist Pete Lockett in a live concert called *Sunev*.

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**The new music combines jazz, rave, rock and pop with rhythms from as far away as Kurdistan and Armenia — and, of course, India**

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Similarly, Da-Saz gets together frequently and has done live acts at experimental music festivals around the world. They've also brought out an album called *Jet Lag* by Phat-Phish Records.

Da-Saz is what's called a musical collective with two Indian members, Sangari and Suchet Malhotra. The other key members are Dentan from Switzerland and Gennady Lavrentiev from Russia. Some 25 to 30 other musicians from countries like Switzerland, Italy, Germany, France and the UK also work



Beat boxer Jason Singh and Bex Mather are building up the tempo with folk artistes from Rajasthan; (Below) Dutch jazz musician Yuri Honing is all set to hit the high notes with Rajasthani folk musicians at Amsterdam

## Bickram Ghosh sends his scores over the Internet to his collaborators like Lockett in the UK and that radically speeds up the process of composing

sometimes with the group. *Jet Lag* was produced by four members from different countries.

The fact is that cross-cultural music is the new buzzword for the post-Web generation, who're clicking their way to sound nirvana in nightclubs, live concerts and independent music festivals. Every record label worth its compact disc now has space demarcated for the alternative genre.

In fact, Phat-Phish Records' first album, *The Indica Project*, was conceived by US musician D. Woods and Indian bass guitarist Storms. The record major also has experimental titles by Zambezi Funk and Da-Saz.

Older players in the music market say there's growth in this space. "There'll always be a demand for new sounds even though it's a niche market. In the last three years, sales of experimental music labels by our company have grown by 35 to 40 per cent," says S. F. Karim of HMV Saregama.



"We want club regulars to develop a taste for acoustic music," says Ghosh.

Some musicians are getting backing for their cross-continental efforts from Indian and foreign organisations. Singh and Mather, for example, were supported by the British Council and the Jaipur Virasat Foundation, a charitable trust.

They're working together with Jumma Khan Mewati and other Rajasthani musicians for the Darohar Project and are hoping it will lead to bigger things around the world. Darohar has nine folk artistes from Rajasthan on board along with Singh and Mather.

Many of these efforts may not find a mass following. Take Robin's album *Rakhi*. One track with Gulabi Sapera is called *Bichu Rap* and it's a dialogue between a man and a woman that gradually progresses to a heated exchange.

How do you work together when you live in different corners of the world? The answer is that it isn't so tough in this globalised world brought together by the Internet.

Ghosh, for instance, hasn't let physical distances interfere with the speed of his music composition. He used the Yousendit software application to send his musical compositions to Pete Lockett in the UK. "We were engaging in cross-continental compositions for the album *Kingdom of Rhythm* through this application. I'd upload my scores and Pete would add his version on top of that and send it back. The whole process was

expedited radically," he says.

Similarly, Da-Saz found it wasn't tough to make music in both Europe and India. Says Sangari: "Western classical and small orchestra pieces were specially composed and recorded in Switzerland for us by Laurent Weber. The rest were done in India," says Sangari.

What's drawing the young urban crowds to these alternative, yet funky musical forms is their visual appeal as well. Bickram Ghosh has already jazzed it all up in the music video of the track called *Primal* from his album *Kingdom of Rhythm*.

Set in an imaginary world driven only by rhythm, this video is directed by Riingo, who's made both Ghosh and Lockett dress up as shamans or spiritual healers with bare-bodied fire dancers giving them company. The set where the video has been shot is designed like a landscape straight out of an earlier age.

And the *Sunev* album that's coming out in March was recorded at Henry VIII's hunting lodge in Essex (because they wanted the right ambience to make music in) while the stylish music video has been shot in Cambridge.

As the world shrinks, these types of collaborative efforts across borders are going to hit even higher notes. Experimentation is clearly the order of the day for this talented crop of minstrels who've tuned in to the world. ♦