

Indian Music and Jazz: Reflections of Form

The interest of jazz musicians in Indian music was not an offshoot of the trend in pop. The connection between jazz and Indian music had deeper conceptual roots, which had to do with concepts of solo expression and the links between composition and improvisation. Ravi Shankar is one of the central figures. In 1961, long before Indian music became fashionable in pop, he was working and recording with jazz musicians on the west coast of America. His collaboration with flautist Bud Shank and others was the album, *Improvisations*.

The album contained traditional *rāgas*, as well as specially composed pieces for jazz and Indian ensembles, including the theme music for Pather Panchali from Satyajit Ray's famous film trilogy *The World of Apu*. The piece for the jazz ensemble, 'Firenight', was so named because of brushfires in the area at the time. Shankar found no difficulty in working with the musicians or in getting his ideas over to them. Indeed, he felt that jazz musicians were quick to grasp the rhythmic subtleties of Indian music, in ways that pop and classical musicians were not. Shankar went on to become an influence on, and work with, jazz artists such as Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, John Handy, and later Don Ellis, Collin Wallcot, and many others.

Elements of Indian music would continue to appear in the work of musicians as diverse as Miles Davis and Yusef Lateef. The interest in Indian music by jazz musicians had strong cultural, as well as musical, links, which pre-dated the 1960s:

Arab and Indian culture and music have held a special fascination [for jazz musicians]. There have been Islamic tendencies among Afro-Americans since the mid-forties, in other words, when modern jazz originated . . . It was only a small step from religious conversions to Islam to a growing interest in Islamic music.

Jazz musicians were also fascinated by the form of Indian music and how it worked as a model of improvisation, the skill that lay at the heart of their own art. In addition, there was a shared dedication to the practice and the perfection of instrumental technique, a pursuit that is highly valued by jazz musicians, and elevated to almost mystical proportions by Indian musicians.

Throughout the Forties and Fifties, Jazz musicians had been particularly concerned with the idea of form and the creation of new forms. Although the theme/improvisation/theme format still tended to underpin most jazz performances, the ways of working within it became increasingly complex. The breakneck virtuosity and harmonic gymnastics of bebop gave way in the late Fifties to a different style of playing, which increasingly used modes rather than chord changes as the basis for improvisation. One of the great icons of this genre is *Kind of Blue* (1959) by Miles Davis, with a sextet that included John Coltrane in its line-up. This album created a stir in jazz circles, because of Davis's new approach to melodic structure, and hence the shape of the improvisations: 'The advantages of improvising with modal scales centred around the fact that the soloist was

no longer responsible for meeting the deadline of chord changes. The music became concerned with linear expansion, rather than the vertical shape of moving chords.'

For one player in Davis's band, John Coltrane, the use of modes, Western and non-Western, became a hallmark of his brilliant, individualistic performances. As Coltrane's awareness of the African connection in Black American jazz grew and became central to his artistic and spiritual development, he began to develop a world-view of music in all its manifestations through the exploration of scale types, methods of improvisation, rhythmic systems, tunings, timbres, and philosophical backgrounds. By the early Sixties, the music of India had found its ways into his compositions, not as an exotic flavour, but subtly embedded in the structure:

'Naima' was one of Trane's first well-known works . . . this was Trane's description of the piece: 'The tune is built . . . on suspended chords over an Eb, pedal tone on the outside. On the inside -- the channel -- the chords are suspended over a Bb, pedal tone.' The tonic and dominant are used in the drone from which improvisations are developed, just as in the music of India.

Apart from his purely structural use of Indian musical elements, Coltrane also had a deep interest in Indian philosophy and religion. One of his famous pieces is simply called 'Om', the sound that represents the reverberations of all creation in Hinduism. He also composed a piece entitled 'India', in which he plays soprano saxophone, with lines like those of an Indian *shenai*. Coltrane took facets of Indian music not merely as affectations, but as a musical reference point in artistic consciousness that also worked freely with influences from Africa and the Middle East, as well as blues, folk, and Western classical music. His seriousness about Indian music is reflected in the lessons he took with Ravi Shankar in the 1960s.

Shankar was introduced to Coltrane in 1964 in New York, through Richard Bock. Bock had told Shankar that Coltrane was becoming increasingly interested in Indian religious thought through studying the works of Ramakrishnan. Coltrane explained to Shankar that he had been listening to his recordings, and was very interested in learning more about Indian music. So Shankar began to give him lessons.

'He used to come and spend time with me. I would either sing or on the sitar show the basic things of our music like what a raga is, the melody form on which our whole music is based and also the development of different talas, the rhythmic cycles. He would ask me questions and I would answer him. I could give just bare beginning and main things about Indian music and he became more and more interested.'

Coltrane had planned to learn Indian music properly by taking six months free of all commitments in 1967 so that he could study with Shankar at his school in Los Angeles, but he died shortly before. It is tantalizing to speculate about what direction Coltrane's music might have taken, had he pursued his studies of Indian music as he had wished.

Coltrane was a crucial influence on other jazz musicians of the day, not least in his role as prime mover in throwing open the doors to cognizance of World Music in jazz. Indian music was a crucial element in this process, and an important element in the musical language of one of the acknowledged masters of contemporary jazz.

Other jazz musicians were also working with Indian music. Two such bands were Indo-Jazz Fusions, led by the composer John Mayer in the United Kingdom, and Harihar Rao and Don Ellis's Hindustani Jazz Sextet in the United States. Both bands were operating in the mid- 1960s, and the former lasted, with changing personnel, into the 1970s, and was re-formed for concerts in 1992. When jazz musicians attempted to join with Indian musicians in this way, the results usually took a similar form: the sound of jazz instruments was contrasted with that of Indian instruments, and the musical materials were based on Indian scalar and rhythmic ideas, but reconfigured to suit both Indian and jazz methods of improvisation.

In such experiments it was the Indian musical form that exerted the greatest pull in the fusion, as a reviewer noted of Indo-Jazz Fusions' first album in 1966 and Ravi Shankar's album, *Portrait of a Genius*, which included the jazz flautist Paul Horn:

"The worlds of jazz and Indian art music are far from incompatible as both these albums testify, although in both cases the jazzmen involved find themselves having to move distinctly eastwards to find common ground. On *Indo-Jazz Suite* (1966) Mayer uses two groups of five instruments: alto sax, trumpet, piano, bass, and drums, and sitar, tabla, *tānpūrā*, flute, and harpsichord. Mayer contrasts these two quintets, using the flute and the harpsichord as timbral links between the Indian and jazz ensembles. The musical materials of the compositions are based on several Indian *rāgs* -- *Megha* and *Gaud-Sārang* -- and *tāls* -- including *kaharvā* (8 beats) and *jhāptāl* (10 beats). Each composition is introduced by drones on *tānpūrā* and short *ālāp*-like sections on flute or sitar. Bass or piano play ostinato figures which outline the important notes of the *rāga* and work in syncopation around the *tāl*. The melody is carried on flute, trumpet, and sax, and sometimes on piano doubling in unison with the harpsichord. After themes have been stated, instruments take solos in turn, as in jazz."

What is noticeable in these pieces is the marked difference between Indian and jazz instruments when it comes to improvisation. The sitar plays lines that are idiomatic to Indian classical music, while the jazz musicians stick to jazz phraseology. The only instrument that manages to cross the divide consistently is the flute. This instrument exists in different forms in both musical cultures, and the flexibility of its tone allows it to move stylistically between the two types of music. Although the pieces are based upon particular ascent/descent patterns of *rāgas*, which are often delineated in the accompanying ostinato patterns, the outlines are sometimes abandoned in solos by the jazz players. It is interesting that Mayer himself was not a jazz musician as such, but was trained in Western classical music and Indian music. It was EMI who approached him to

put together the band, and Mayer tended to see the project more in terms of composition than from the perspective of jazz.

Ian Carr, writing the sleeve notes for *Indo-Jazz Fusions II* (1968), makes some pertinent observations regarding how Mayer tried to reconcile the structure of jazz and Indian music in his compositions. In composing his pieces, Mayer always felt that a primary concern was the scale or mode chosen for the jazz players to improvise on. Carr comments on how this is realized on the track 'Mishra Blues' (the term *mishra* means 'mixed', thus *mishra rāgas* have mixed scalar material). On this track Mayer constructs a scale which includes all the intervals of the three basic blues chords, thereby allowing the jazz musicians to improvise upon the blues structure and the Indian musicians on the *mishra rāga*.

Carr also comments on the way in which the additive and divisive rhythmic concepts in Indian music and jazz respectively are interlocked:

Purvi variations is a very good example of rhythmic fusion and of how John Mayer simplifies the rhythms for the convenience of the jazz soloists -- the piece starts with twelve beats divided 3,2,3,4, a division not natural to Europeans, but when the jazz solos begin J. Dougan plays a strong 3/4 and the tabla weaves his complex patterns around that basic beat.

Similar structural concerns were evident in the work of the Hindustani jazz Sextet led by Harihar Rao, sitarist and pupil of Ravi Shankar. In the 1960s Rao recorded with several jazz and other musicians, including Don Ellis, as well as recording an album, *Raga Rock*, with three guitarists: Herb Ellis, Howard Roberts, and Dennis Budimir. He also recorded with the country music star Chet Atkins. Speaking as a working, therefore commented: 'My initial reaction to groups like the Rolling Stones using the sitar was horror. But now I'm not totally disapproving and anyway my belief is that if you can't beat them join them. Like Shankar, Rao was cautious about how far, the fusion between jazz and Indian music could go, but he saw structural/musical areas where they might meet and collaborate:

I do believe the fusion of Indian music with pop and jazz is possible in a very elementary way. The problem is that our melodic constructions are more sophisticated than anything jazz or pop will be able to think [sic] for a lot more years yet . . . there is a basis for using elementary Indian rhythmic ideas in jazz . . . time signatures like 7/4 may sound formidable but they swing just as much as the conventional ones.

Don Ellis, Rao's fellow group member, took his work with Indian ideas a step further, and constructed pieces from ever longer additive rhythmic principles, such as by dividing a nineteen-beat cycle 3 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 2 + 2 + 2 -- 'this was the one that swung the most' -- and even longer cycles of eighty-five beats.

The examples of Coltrane, Indo-Jazz Fusions, the Hindustani jazz Sextet, and others show that Indian and jazz musicians were encountering each other on quite different territory from that of pop musicians. The points of crossover lay not in the use of ear-catching textures or the similarity between guitar and sitar, but on the level of structural affinities, the way in which the forms of the two musics could be reconciled, although some of the results may have sounded self-conscious or over-composed. One reviewer felt that Indo-Jazz Fusions worked best when the jazz players 'blow holes right through the rather formal framework'. They nevertheless tried to work with Indian and jazz elements in imaginative ways, using concepts of composition and improvisation stemming from both musics. Also, this was not a passing fad, as it had been in pop. Musical ideas and structures from Indian music which first appeared in Jazz in the late 1950s remained at the cutting-edge of jazz well into the 1970s. One striking example of this is the work of guitarist John McLaughlin and the band Shakti. This was a fusion like no other before it. In McLaughlin's work, not only are jazz and Indian music crossed, but so too are northern and southern traditions of Indian music and instruments. In addition, McLaughlin had his guitar redesigned in order to play Indian music on it.

McLaughlin is a musician known for crossing many musical boundaries in his work: jazz/rock, acoustic/electric, composed/improvised. He has worked with musicians from the field of blues, jazz, classical, flamenco, and Indian music, constantly exploring new sounds and musical combinations to express his ideas. He was also a moving force in the jazz-rock fusion in the early Seventies, a type of music that Carr has called 'the last coherent radical jazz movement'.

McLaughlin's interest in both Indian music and Indian religion goes back to the late Sixties, when he became a disciple of Sri Chinmoy, an Indian guru resident in the United States. He was also learning the *vīṇā* at the time. His music began to take a more overtly Indian turn with the album *My Goal's Beyond* (1971), which featured McLaughlin playing acoustic guitar with a jazz ensemble that included *tānpūrā* and tabla. His next venture was the Mahavishnu Orchestra, the name of which was suggested by Chinmoy. Although this was a five-piece band which did not include Indian instruments or musicians, many of the melodic and metrical ideas used by the group are derived from Indian music. A number of additive rhythmic cycles are employed, such as 7/4 grouped 3 + 2 + 2 and 10/8 grouped in various manners 3 + 3 + 3 + 1 or 3 + 3 + 2 + 2, and 18/8 grouped 5 + 5 + 5 + 3. In his introduction to the published scores of the Mahavishnu Orchestra, McLaughlin includes a list of modes that should be used when improvising on the pieces. The absence of chord progressions in all but a few of the pieces and the long unison passages for the lead instruments underline the modal nature of the music. An example from the album *Birds of Fire* (1973), 'One Word', shows how McLaughlin integrated the Indian ideas seamlessly into the composition.

The central solos in this piece utilize the form of 'trading' -- that is, swapping improvised phrases on set numbers of bars between soloists, a feature common to many jazz performances. This is similar to the idea of *saval* -- *javāb* in Indian performance. The rhythmic structure of these sequences is often planned in advance, in both jazz and Indian music, as dramatic improvised set pieces in the performance. In 'One Word' McLaughlin

adopts a structure commonly used in Indian music of gradually shortening the phrases, in the sequence 4 bars, 2 bars, 1 bar, ½ bar. After a drum solo and bridge passage a long cadence is played in 13/8 time (Ex. 6.6). This is based upon the concept of *tihāī*, or rhythmic cadence (although it is not a strict *tihāī* in the Indian usage of the term). Such long and complex cadences are commonly heard at the climax of improvisations in both North and South Indian music, and also at the end of performances. By the judicious choice of musical elements from Indian music, jazz, and rock which have structural affinities with each other, McLaughlin was able to redefine those elements in creating a new music that was neither self-consciously jazz or Indian, but a clever fusion of both.

In 1975 the Mahavishnu Orchestra was followed by Shakti. McLaughlin had been studying Indian music in the seventies with various teachers, including Ravi Shankar. The group was formed with L. Shankar, Zakir Hussain, and “Vikku” Vinayakram. Shakti was a remarkable fusion in many ways. McLaughlin played a modified guitar, with a scalloped neck and raised frets, like the South Indian *vīṇā*, and sympathetic strings under the main strings, running diagonally across the sound-board. The modified fret-board allowed him to make subtle melodic nuances and inflections by depressing the string between the frets, a technique used on the *vīṇā*. The guitar had standard tuning, and McLaughlin played complex, *bol*-like patterns with a plectrum.

Although at first hearing the sound of Shakti seems completely Indian, a closer examination shows the deft manner in which several musical systems are moulded together. The percussion does not always play in *tāl*, but moves effortlessly between Indian and Western rhythmic concepts; the guitar plays long *ālāp* sections (lower tones being obtained by manipulating the tuning keys of the instrument), crisp single-line *tans* (fast melodic passages), and syncopated jazz chords; the violin moves stylistically between South Indian classical music, North Indian *sārangī*, and riffs reminiscent of jazz/rock players like 'Sugarcane' Harris and John Luc Ponty. There are original compositions and traditional Indian melodies, both Hindustani and Carnatic. For example, in one piece, 'Isis', from *A Handful of Beauty* (1977), a traditional gat in *rāg Bhairavī* is used alongside an original theme. Such is the flexibility of these musical cross-references that the overall effect sounds quite unlike a conscious attempt to fuse two disparate musics. On the contrary, the music is one at all times, and in this sense is quite different from the Indian-jazz fusions that preceded it. The musicians understood each other's musical systems well enough to allow a new form to emerge, an actual synthesis. McLaughlin's work is a striking example of how one jazz musician has used elements of Indian music to redefine the very language of jazz.

There were many other jazz musicians who worked with Indian music, notably Ralph Towner, the late Colin Walcott of the group Oregon, the flautist Paul Horn, and saxophonist Charlie Mariano. All had their own contributions to make and their own ways of working with the elements of Indian music. The influence of Indian music on jazz has been more lasting and far-reaching than it has on pop. It was more than a fad. The coming of Indian music to the West in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with a period when jazz musicians were moving away from older, accepted structures and modes of

expression, and consequently Indian music made its way into the work of jazz musicians on a structural level, rather than merely as something superficially ear-catching.

. During the few months in 1966 when pop musicians 'went Indian', it was largely out of a desire to keep up with quickly changing musical trends, rather than any desire to work with the materials of Indian music in any profound or meaningful way. Other reasons for the trend were almost accidental, such as the perceived similarities between the guitar and the sitar, the presence of Ravi Shankar on the concert circuit at the time, and the misunderstanding of Indian religion and philosophy which would become linked to the use of hallucinogens like LSD which were coming into common use among the young.

The *musical* outcomes of this fad, however, are rather more interesting and far-reaching than they first appear. As noted above, other instruments -- for example, the bagpipes and the Japanese koto -- had been used on some pop records, without starting any fashionable explosion of Scottish or Japanese elements in pop music. This suggests that the musicians themselves may not have been aware that the sitar represented anything more in Western music than just another strange-sounding instrument.

But although surface similarities between the musical languages of jazz, pop, and Indian music helped to promote the 'great sitar explosion', there was also a historical dimension, which tends to become submerged in the hyped up, fast-moving world of the mass media. As previous chapters have shown, there had been a sustained interest in Indian music in the West, particularly Britain, for some 200 years, and this interest had many scholarly and popular manifestations. The appearance of Indian music in pop in the 1960s was just one of the latest echoes of that tradition; and in keeping with the pace of the century, it was one of the shortest, yet also one of the most widely disseminated.

Nevertheless, it remains one of the great incongruities of modern music history that the classical systems of Indian music should have found their biggest audience in the West not through thoughtful experiments in classical music or jazz, but through the channels of the pop song-short, catchy, and ultimately ephemeral.

Adapted by Satyajit Roychaudhury from:
Indian Music and the West: Gerry Farrell
Book; Oxford University Press, 1997