

Proponent of living music

By Jakob Steiner

Art

CLOSE to Badshahi mosque, between Heera Mandi and the Wazir Khan mosque, is one heart of Lahore that pulsates with music. This 'music street' stretches for a kilometre, from the west where all bands have their offices to offer their services for weddings or functions to the east where all instrument makers have their small shops. You can get any instrument here, from tabla to guitar, from violin to bansuri. Following the 'music street' to the east you will find, just before Wazir Khan, on Paniwala Talab, a Punjab Band sign on your right. This is the last music workshop on the stretch, and this is where one of the best and most asked for clarinetists of Lahore, Jaffar Husain, rehearses with his band for his concerts.

Walking up a tiny staircase, wondering how the musicians carry their huge trombones through, you enter the Punjab Band room on the first floor. The place has been there since the 1950s when the walled city looked different from today. Now the loud traffic rushes by on the small road where two rickshaws just manage to pass through in opposite directions.

Jaffar Husain's father Ustad Master Rehmat Ali Randhawa had moved the Punjab Band here when he was looking for a more central place. Grandfather Master Din Mohammad Randhawa who played the trumpet had founded the band around 1910 outside Lahore, in Faizpur. Since then the music talent was passed on through the family, Jaffar's third son plays the clarinet as well.

Inside the practice room, TV is running on mute, a band member zaps between the channels, two others doze on the floor, and Jaffar is sitting, drinking tea with a guest. I have arrived by motorbike, and have not brought my instrument along. It is hard to believe how the musicians can play in this environment. It is mere a meeting place, a display room of their instruments and the pictures of their ancestors. Jaffar Husain points to the pictures of his father and his Ustad Haji Sohni Khan. They mean a lot to him; his father's clarinet is kept in a special place. Jaffar



asks me to relax when I want to pull out my camera. "No picture of me today for the newspaper; no shave today," and he touches his face with the back of his fingers. He offers me a photo that shows him in a suit, with a face that looks very young. It must have been taken 10 years ago.

Leading a commercial orchestra band in Lahore is business. You have to know how to present yourself, because musicians have to rely on contracts for big occasions where they play for money. Jaffar says the band is



doing well; financial future is secured.

That settled, it is clear that he has kept his spirit for music. "My best friend is my clarinet, my life is music," he tells me and starts another rag. He likes to play and experiment with his clarinet all the time. When doing concerts (at Chitrkar, the Alhamra at Qadhafi or at festivals like the APMC), he plays eastern classical music, accompanying the lectures or the dance performances. He also stages solo concerts, and is open to incorporating new influences.

Last week two French dancers

visited Lahore and staged a modern dance performance at Chitrkar. Jaffar Husain played the intro and accompanied the duo with tabla and sarangi throughout the performance. Many people in Europe have problems with understanding modern dance, too complex, the movements too abstract, the choreography too original, etc. But Jaffar Husain liked it, and he was very motivated by the cultural exchange. He likes to meet European artists to exchange musical ideas between rag and Jazz scales.

Jaffar has played for the BBC, and with the Punjab Band he has made the background music for Pakistani movies like 'Chal so chal', 'Chirriaan', 'Raja jani', 'Kala tufan' and 'Putar shahiye da'. He has also composed background music for PTV. But his heart beats for music itself and not the business that is linked to it.

He says he enjoys rehearsing for hours with European musicians who give him new ideas and whom he could teach the ragas. "You are like my son and I am your uncle, I am your teacher and you are my teacher," he would say to a young European musician whom he plays with regularly. He picks up western tunes, especially Jazz, and integrates them in his own music — a true crossover musician with an open horizon.

Jaffar Husain will be playing at the Alhamra at Qadhafi Stadium on June 27, as part of a LEAF discussion on Mian Mohammad Baksh at 6pm; entrance is free.—

Photo by Martin Bedeleem

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