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MUSIC

Getting to Know A Mandolin Master

A chat with the man who helped make the mandolin as respected as the vina in South Indian music

Kalyani Giri, Houston, Texas

An ancient adage contends that talent does what it can, genius does what it must. In the 1980s when he was barely a teenager, child prodigy Padmashri Uppalapu Shrinivas stunned the elite Madras Carnatic music world with a musical facility far beyond his years. Concert halls burst at the seams to accommodate music lovers piling in to hear his music and watch his nimble fingers dance their magic on the mandolin.

Shrinivas was born in 1969 in Palakol, West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, and received his training in Carnatic music from R. Subbaraju, a disciple of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar. Over the past 25 years he has received 30 major titles and awards in the field of South India's classical Carnatic music--among those, the coveted Government of India title of "Padmashri."

Today Shrinivas continues his musical evolution on a convoluted journey that has been essentially spiritual and steeped in tradition, yet enriched with courageous discovery. In 2002, the innovative East-West fusion group, Shakti--consisting of Shrinivas playing with supergreats Zakir Hussein and John McLaughlin--was nominated for the Grammy Awards, losing only to sitar maestro, Pandit Ravi Shankar.

My husband, Krishna, and I have shared a special history with Shrinivas. Twenty-one years ago in Chennai, he performed at our wedding. I will never forget that performance. Despite adulation from a global legion of fans, Shrinivas remains shy, almost otherworldly. I talked with the soft-spoken musician after his concert here in Houston last year. Here are some intriguing excerpts.

What was it like bringing the mandolin into the world of Carnatic music? It was initially difficult. Many people discouraged me. They believed there was no scope for this instrument in Carnatic music and advised me to take up vina or violin instead. But it was the sound of the mandolin that attracted me. I decided that if I was going to be a musician I would play mandolin. My father taught a variety of music instruments, and the mandolin was one of them. I was confident that it would lend itself easily to Carnatic music, but I had to modify the instrument to accommodate the tonal range required to play the many ragas of Carnatic music.

How would you assess the popularity of classical Indian music among the youth of India? Compared with 20 years ago, it has improved. Lots of youngsters are attending Indian classical music concerts and many are taking up the music in practice. There is a big cultural revolution underway.

How has fame influenced your life? I think all that has come to me is the result of the blessings of my spiritual masters, Sri Kanchi Paramacharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam and Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi. Personally, I don't believe I have any extraordinary talent. It is only by the grace and blessings of my masters that I have survived.

You are deeply religious. What are some of your spiritual practices? Every morning after my bath I do puja (worship). If I'm in Chennai, I go to the temple every day. There is a small Pillaiyar and Hanuman temple close to my house. Even on tour I visit temples whenever possible. I have been to the Sri Meenakshi Temple here in Houston, too.

When you are recognized in the streets, are you bothered by people vying for your attention? Are you ever mobbed? It's really a pleasure to talk to people. I always like spending time like this because there is so much I can learn. I'm not that much of a star. Not many people recognize me. I'm certainly not mobbed.

Does audience reaction effect the quality of your performance? I always believe that the audience dictates the success of the concert. Their reaction is very important. The more they enjoy the music, the more I'm inspired to play. When they applaud, it brings me joy.

Have you experienced difficulties in music? In life, there are ups and downs. Without hard work, we cannot succeed. I had to make music a priority to be successful.

Must you compromise your classical training to play with fusion groups like Shakti? I have to learn the music like everyone else. The improvisations can be done according to your own imagination and must happen spontaneously on stage. L. Shankar and I work very well together. He also has firm Carnatic roots. If you have a strong foundation, you can play any music easily. My big ambition is to perform with all the great musicians of the world.

You have accomplished so much already. What are your plans for the future? I have started a school in Chennai called the Shrinivas Institute of World Music. My main intention there is to popularize Carnatic music and extol its greatness.