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MUSIC

Autobiog-Ravi

The life-story of the ambassador of Indian culture to the West as told by the man himself

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Too often today in the world of mass media, value is placed on quantity not quality, on sensation, not substance. Which explains why you won't find Raga Mala: The Autobiography of Ravi Shankar on the New York Times best seller's list, and you won't find it at Barnes and Noble either. Yet the quality and substance of it will place it among the most lavish and elite productions of recent times.

This limited-edition book is contained within a silk-screened presentation box which opens like an altar to reveal the life of a cultural icon. The autobiography is 336 acid-free pages master-printed in brown and gold with four sections in full color. Each of the 2,000 numbered copies is personally signed by Ravi Shankar, bound in Bangalore raw silk and individually finished by hand with gilt tooling and gilded page edges.

But this is much more than a feast for the eyes. Two compact

discs, royally boxed in the same Bangalore silk, feature 80 minutes of exclusive and rare material from different stages of Shankar's career: including the Western version of I Am Missing You with George Harrison and Dakshini, a previously unreleased Carnatic-styled original based on raga Malaya Marutam. But the real prize is the joyful new 34-minute classical sitar performance in raga Tilak Kamod, which features accompaniment by his daughter and musical heir apparent, Anoushka, on sitar, and Bikram Ghosh on tabla.

As we anticipate, Shankar discloses his personal rapport with his music. He explains, "In one's daily life and existence it is hard to attain cosmic consciousness. Most of the time the only self-realization states one is aware of are physical and mundane ones. But music--that is the thing for me! Mostly it has been when deeply immersed in my music that I have felt that surge of joy, merging into that indefinable 'drunken-with-beauty' moment. Especially when I become attuned to my sitar, that is the route for me to touch the heart and the God within myself, and within my millions of listeners over the years. Through music you worship God. Saying a mantra or doing yoga... these are long processes for obtaining some state or feeling of divinity. Music is the fastest vehicle. I believe in the age-old saying, 'Nada Brahma; Sound is God.' "

A mere 2,000 consumers can enjoy this life story in words, sounds and smells, assuming they can afford its Mt. Everest price: ^{us}\$325.00 plus \$17.00 more for shipping. There is no doubt that Genesis would profit from selling the book in a lower priced hardback or paperback edition in order to reach the masses who would love to see and hear the story of this man and his music.

And what a story it is. Over 120,000 words and 200 photographs, many previously unseen, document one of the first and foremost pioneers of global citizenship in this century. Even though his writing style is pedestrian and functional, the literary voice that unfolds captures the same qualities that have endeared his music to countless millions. A wonderful combination of charm and candor, dignity and humility, deep soulfulness and mischievous fun saturates each page with entertainment just like one of his playful ragas. The sepia-drenched photos are almost worth the price of the book alone. They take us into a world few can imagine--at once exotic and familiar--and richly illustrate his historical and episodic narrative. George Harrison edits Shankar's writing and provides insightful commentaries along the way, summarizing and bringing to closure events and passages in Shankar's life. An illustrious group of friends also discuss their association with him including Zubin Mehta, Yehudi Menuhin, Philip Glass, Zakir Hussain and Ravi's wife Sukanya. The book comes complete with a comprehensive index, glossary and chronology of his life and works.

Ragas by Ravi: The autobiography begins with Shankar's birth on April 7, 1920, at his family's rented house in Benares. His father, Shyam Shankar Chowdhury, was a brahmin from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) who had achieved distinction as a statesman, lawyer, philosopher, writer and amateur musician. Shortly before Ravi's birth, Chowdhury left to practice law in Calcutta and London. Ravi's mother, Hemangini, raised her five sons on a pension and without much help from his father. Ravi did not see his father until he was eight. He was, instead, profoundly influenced by his eldest brother, the legendary Uday Shankar, who brought Indian dance and music to the West.

Ravi was only ten when Uday took him from his sheltered and simple life in Benares to the sophistication of Paris as a musician in his dance troupe. Ravi's life would change forever, and change and travel would become the recurring tala of his life. His absentee father and the many cultural transitions took their toll, initially. He was still wetting his bed at ten and feeling resentment for his father. A few visits eased those feelings, but when his father was murdered in London in

1935 while working on a scandalous legal case, Ravi describes it more like a reporter than a son. In contrast, he describes with great feeling his life with Uday, his love of travel, people and other cultures and his growing interest in music. All this eventually led him to acclaimed classical musician Ustad Allaiddin Khan, the man who would later become his guru.

He goes on to describe his seven years of study with Khan, his growing stature as a musician and his marriage to Annapurna in 1941. He also describes openly his difficulty in being loyal to one woman, a challenge for most of his life. The strain of marriage, career and living during the Independence of India in 1947 was almost too much for him. He contemplated suicide. But a mysterious encounter with a spiritual guru and yogi known as Tat Baba started Ravi's spiritual turnaround. "Tat Baba was the first great yogi I had contact with, and he came to me when I was in the lowest state of mind and spirit. All my problems seemed to vanish from then onwards, and things changed dynamically. I believed in him, and he bestowed such love and strength upon me. He also provided me with mantras,

which one chants at times, or preferably all the time inside one's mind."

Ultimately what has helped him stay focused and centered musically and spiritually through three relationships (two marriages), the death of his only son, Shubo, a heart attack, a quadruple bypass, two angioplasties, the pressures of being internationally recognized as the premiere Indian classical musician of his time yet criticized by the musical orthodoxy in India for his experiments in "World Music," being embraced by Hollywood, hippies and Presidents--in other words being tossed and turned by all the vagaries that global living can bestow--has been his music.

He relates, "Baba (A. Khan) always said that music is not for selling. Music is like worshiping. Though it is difficult for a professional musician to follow this doctrine, it is true that you feel godliness much more quickly through music than any other medium."

For Indian music lovers with means, Raga Mala is

a sound investment. This set puts new meaning into the concept of sensory surround experiences. While reading the book and listening to the recordings, you can even light up George and Ravi's favorite incense (included). All that is missing is a warm roti and robust dahl for intermission!