

[Ashwin Batish Is Sitar's King of 'Raga and Roll'](#)

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Howard, Lisa Ashwin Batish saunters into the recording studio next to his home in Santa Cruz, California. It is jammed with all the trappings of a high-tech, sound-warping work shop, from state-of-the-art synthesizers set upon one wall to computerized recording equipment nearby. Overseeing this cluster of audio machinery is a reminder of the earlier roots of Batish's music. Hanging on the wall in the studio is a picture of Saraswati. She seems to be calmly appraising the surroundings, which, like the musician himself - clad in blue jeans and a baseball hat - have found a comfortable balance between India and California.

For centuries the sitar has sung melodic verses to listeners who enjoyed its exotic steely sound. Few people ever associated that traditional meditative music with the high-tech, synthesized sound of rock music. But Batish, who is a classically-trained musician, has managed to strike a responsive chord with Western listeners by blending the classical ragas of India with a modern pop beat. Shanachie Records recently signed an agreement to re-release Batish's first album, "Sitar Power," as part of their World Beat series. This makes Batish the first sitar player since Ravi Shankar in the 1960's to successfully cross classical Indian sounds with pop music and gain a sizeable Western audience.

An Ashwin Batish fan club with about 100 members attests to the musician's appeal. His following may not be as large as a modern rock group, but they are dedicated listeners. He humorously tells us in our HINDUISM TODAY interview that on a recent concert tour in New York he was asked to play in Queens, a place he describes as somewhere "you wouldn't expect anybody to know about Indian music." So he wasn't completely surprised when only one devoted fan showed up. Batish did the entire show for the lone listener. Several nights later 6,000 people came to singe their ears with synthesized sitar.

His music has a unique sound. He fuses traditional ragas with the sounds of electric guitar, bass, drums and synthesizers to create songs such as "Bombay

"Boogie" and "New Delhi Vice," two of the cuts on his "Sitar Power" album. The album, first released on his family's own Batish Records label, came out in mid-1986 and proved to be popular enough to grab the attention of the larger recording company. The songs are actually upbeat, modified versions of Hindu ragas, but "as far as they (Western listeners) are concerned, they're just listening to a hip beat," Batish says.

One reason Batish thinks "exotic rock," as he likes to refer to his music, has caught on is that "the sitar creates a dream sound. It's unlike a guitar which a lot of people have been hearing."

Many of his fans are young, college-aged students who enjoy world beat music [ethnic music from global cultures] and are requesting "Sitar Power" on college and FM radio stations across the US. He thinks his compositions attract many young people because he communicates in their own language, the dialect of pop music. "Not everybody will understand," he says, "but something like "Sitar Power" touched people's hearts because it touched ours. Music is our life," referring to his entire family of musicians. In music, "your philosophy, your beliefs, your music all flow together."

Born in Santa Cruz, near Bombay, India, Batish learned to play the sitar at age 12 from his father, Shiv Dayal Batish. The elder Batish, a well-known musician who wrote scores and sang in over 100 movies, would sing to his son, and Ashwin learned by ear. He would listen to his father, then repeat the songs until he caught the music. Learning to play the sitar was easy, he says. Learning Indian music, which has thousands of scales, wasn't. "First you learn the skill, and then you have to learn the music. It's so vast you can never know all the ragas."

Shiv Dayal Batish has been a big supporter of his son's music, joking that he can't wait to make another movie and use some of Ashwin's toe-tapping tunes. He also helps by listening to the songs and making suggestions about composition, something other members of the family also do. "As a family of musicians, nothing is hidden," Batish says. "None of us produces anything another person would object to."

In 1973, after Shiv Dayal Batish secured a job at the University of California at

Santa Cruz, the family moved to the US from England where the younger musician spent his teen years. They opened up an Indian restaurant, too, and it was there that Ashwin started perfecting his "raga and roll" as some have dubbed it. He played at the restaurant almost every night for 15 years. Then, in 1980, the family started Batish Records. In addition to packaging their own sounds, Batish Records also produces high-quality cassettes for other musicians.

The whole family is involved in the business. His sister Meena is arranging some of Shiv Dayal Batish's older film songs to a newer pop mode and they are working on an album that will mix the traditional Indian "ghazal," the practice of putting poetry to music, with the works of William Shakespeare. "We are really interested in introducing this [form of entertainment] to the Western audience," Ashwin enthuses.

Although the Batish family is opening up musical doors for listeners who have never heard instruments such as the sitar or tabla, Ashwin says he is not interested in being the spiritual link between cultures. He is not trying to influence people's beliefs with his music. He simply wants people to enjoy his unique versions of traditional ragas. "Indian people already know what I'm saying," he notes. "A true Hindu will always follow the middle path. I try to, too. I try to stay away from extremes. I'm not trying to blend religions together or cultures together. I'm just doing what I do best."

Batish says that of the nine basic elements of Indian music, he is most interested in Hasya Rasa - happy, joyful music. The artist puts a lot of his personal emotions into his work, and his enthusiasm flows through his music. He observes, "The artist is really trying to put his emotions forward. I really wanted to present my music in the way I heard it. And I heard it as a lot of fun. I think sitar music is fun."

Although he comes from a musical family, Batish never intended to make a living as a performing musician. The industry is too unstable. Music "is like fashion," he says. Clothes fashions change and so do trends in music. What's hot and in vogue today will probably be cold two years from now and the same rule applies to music. Batish knows that. "I don't want to put myself in that precarious position," he emphatically states. His main source of income doesn't come from playing "raga and roll." He goes on tour about four times a year for up to a month at a time. This fall, however, he will be making his first performing tour to Holland and Belgium and will be doing a benefit concert for Oxfam (human relief organization) in San

Francisco in September.

When he's not on the road, Batish devotes his time to the family business. Shiv Dayal Batish has recently published a book on Indian music titled "Ragamala" and the clan has several other projects, including albums and possibly even a magazine, in the works.

Batish doesn't know how long he will be riding the crest of the current interest in world beat music, but for now he is basking happily in the attention and enjoying the power of making music on his sitar. The musician points out the picture of Saraswati hanging in the studio. "We believe very strongly in that power," he tells us. "That's why it's called Sitar Power - it's Saraswati's power."