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Notes on the World's Largest Democracy

The Mumbai/New York Photo Project: Music and Dance

March 19, 2013 By Nisha Sondhe and Neha Thirani Bagri

The grand cities of Mumbai and New York differ from each other in a million ways, but are brought together by a few common strands – their entrepreneurial spirit, their dynamic "always on-the-go" nature, their lively sidewalks, their gorgeous coastlines, the diversity of their residents who bring unique culture and religion and their vibrant music scene.

Capturing striking parallels in the everyday between two great cities.

While preachers of globalization talk of economic exchange, it is often musicians and artists who transcend their nations, borrowing from others' cultures and making new hybrids. In the sixth edition of the Mumbai/New



York photo project, Nisha Sondhe photographs some of the musicians and artists building bridges between the two cities.

Mazz Swift, a New York-based violinist, embodies the ways in which exposure to diverse traditions shape an artist's musical practice. Having started out as a classical violinist, over the course of her musical career she has experimented with jazz, hip-hop, improvisational rock music, traditional Irish fiddling, Hungarian gypsy music and Afro-Brazilian music from the northeast of Brazil.

"Cross-cultural exchange has been really key to my development as an artist," said Ms. Swift. "It's a really rich place from which I gather inspiration and I wouldn't have it any other way." In her travels Ms. Swift plays with local musicians and learns their traditional music, and then incorporates elements from it into her own style to produce a unique sound.

Meanwhile, classical Western music is growing in popularity in India. The Symphony Orchestra of India, established in 2006 by Khushroo N. Suntook, chairman of the National Centre for the Performing Arts and the violinist Marat Bisengaliev, is the country's first professional symphony orchestra. Its mission is to generate enthusiasm for western classical music among young people in India and develop musical talent. "The major challenge was to set up a system which would allow us to invite the best Indian players and fast track them by intensive coaching by highly experienced musicians," said Mr. Bisengaliev, who was born in Kazakhstan. "Up till now there were no specialized music schools with established systems, hence there was an absolute lack of good musicians."



In New York, Alvin Ailey founded The Ailey School in 1969 based on the belief that "dance instruction should be made available to everyone." To this day, the school attempts to make American dance accessible to young and old alike through innovative community outreach programs. Tracy Inman, codirector of The Ailey School, was trained at the school and performed with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. "I had never taken a men's ballet class before and had no idea of what was required," said Mr. Inman, recalling his first year at The Ailey School. "My first class was a rude awakening. Most of the terminology I had never heard or thought humanly possible. Eventually, I managed to sort it all out."

In Mumbai, one of India's leading choreographers, Shiamak Davar, recalled his own struggle after deciding to take up dance. Coming from a family of educators, Mr. Davar had studied commerce. Then he traveled to London to attend a summer school for acting, singing and dance. Upon his return to Mumbai, he started a dance school, with seven students in his first class, mostly friends and relatives. "I faced a lot of humiliation and ridicule. People said 'Boys don't dance, and if girls dance then who will marry them?' But I believed in God and my spiritual guides, and I didn't give up," he said.

Today Mr. Davar, the founder and artistic director of the Shiamak Davar Dance Company in Mumbai, is considered one of the pioneers of modern dance in India. His dance company has performed all over the world and his classes have reached millions of dance enthusiasts across India, Canada, Australia, the United Arab Emirates and Britain. By bringing contemporary modern dance into India and showcasing India's heritage to people across the globe, he hopes to "unite people through dance and the performing arts," he said.

Another pioneer, the musician Louis Banks, has done much to popularize jazz music in India over the last 30 years. He has traveled throughout the world picking up varied influences, and brought them back to India. "When we were touring Europe, Russia and Portugal in the '80's we met musicians who could not speak English but were excellent jazz musicians, hence the rapport was instant," said Mr. Banks of his tour with his first fusion band, Sangam. "We played jazz of high standards without speaking to each other and became friends and had a great time – that's the magic of jazz." Although he has collaborated with artists from all over the world, Mr. Banks said that his Indian heritage allows him to draw from both Indian classical music and classic jazz.

In New York, DJ Rekha has brought the rich North Indian tradition of bhangra to the city. In 1997, she founded Basement Bhangra and has been staging monthly parties in order to "have a space that showcased the kind of bhangra and hip-hop music I liked," she said. "I always want to be part of the New York scene and be more inclusive."