

DOWNBEAT

JAZZ, BLUES & BEYOND
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Players

Sunny Jain Personal Ragas

In leading the band Red Baraat, drummer Sunny Jain finds himself standing in front of a half-dozen horn players and two percussionists. Rather than playing a trap set, he strikes the barrel-shaped drum strapped across his chest. The two-headed bhangra dhol originated from India; it serves as the focal point of an ensemble Jain likens to a New Orleans brass band steeped in South Asian music.

Red Baraat and the more conventionally configured Sunny Jain Collective place the drummer in the burgeoning vanguard of Indian-American jazz musicians. Though the groups differ stylistically, their respective missions remain the same: to create a hybrid not only reflecting Jain's music background, but also his heritage.

Jain's parents emigrated around 1970 from North India. Jain, who grew up in Rochester, N.Y., earned music degrees from Rutgers University and New York University. While Jain holds the bop tradition in high regard, he has no desire to revisit the era. He looks beyond Indian music, as well.

"To just play jazz music straight-up like Philly Joe Jones was great for



an educational purpose," Jain said in his Brooklyn, N.Y., home. "But it wasn't me. To play like Zakir Hussain on the drum set isn't like me, either: I'm not a tabla player, I didn't grow up in India and I didn't grow

up playing Hindustani classical music.

"But what is me," he continued, "is a confluence of these backgrounds and traditions kind of flowing together. And it's not strictly Indian music and jazz. It's Brit pop like New Order and the Cure. It's Radiohead, it's Smashing Pumpkins."

At a summer gig in a bar in Queens, Jain performed with pianist Steve Blanco, whose repertoire spans pop songs from the 1970s and 1980s. The trio's reading of Pink Floyd's "Us And Them" veered from trance-like to volatile. The Police's "Synchronicity" included sharp tempo shifts and the song's simple structure lent itself to the group's penchant for free playing. "We can't deny that groove we grew up with—the straight eighth-note feel—whether it's rock or funk," Jain said between sets. "You still need to know that vocabulary those bop masters laid out. But to play period music is to not be myself at this moment in time."

Jain recorded Red Baraat last fall, and will release an album early next year. The Sunny Jain Collective has issued several albums, and Jain has begun recording *The Taboo Project*, which will feature a cycle of six songs commissioned by Chamber Music America. Jain premiered the music in December 2007 at Joe's Pub in Manhattan. Jain adapted the work of contemporary poets writing in Hindi, Urdu and English. The poets include Ali Husain Mir and Ifi Naseem, who tackle religious strife, domestic violence and homosexuality.

"These are issues that are not comfortably and openly discussed or dealt with in South Asia. At the same time these are universal issues," Jain said.

In addition to original music, Jain wants to translate India's music traditions to the confines of a jazz group. This songbook encompasses not just the ragas (melody) and tals (rhythm) common in Hindustani and Carnatic music, but also the music of Bollywood, religious songs and bhangra, a folkloric music in the Punjab region of both India and Pakistan. Jain compares this crosspollination to the manner in which jazz musicians adapt music from Broadway and Tin Pan Alley.

"But at the end of the day, it's not meant to be overt," he said. "If I wanted to do that, I would hire a tabla player, I would hire a sitar player and I would say, 'Hey, this is Indian jazz.' There's a few of us doing this here in New York, and we all have our own approach of expressing our cultural identity as Indian-Americans. This is my approach." —Eric Fine