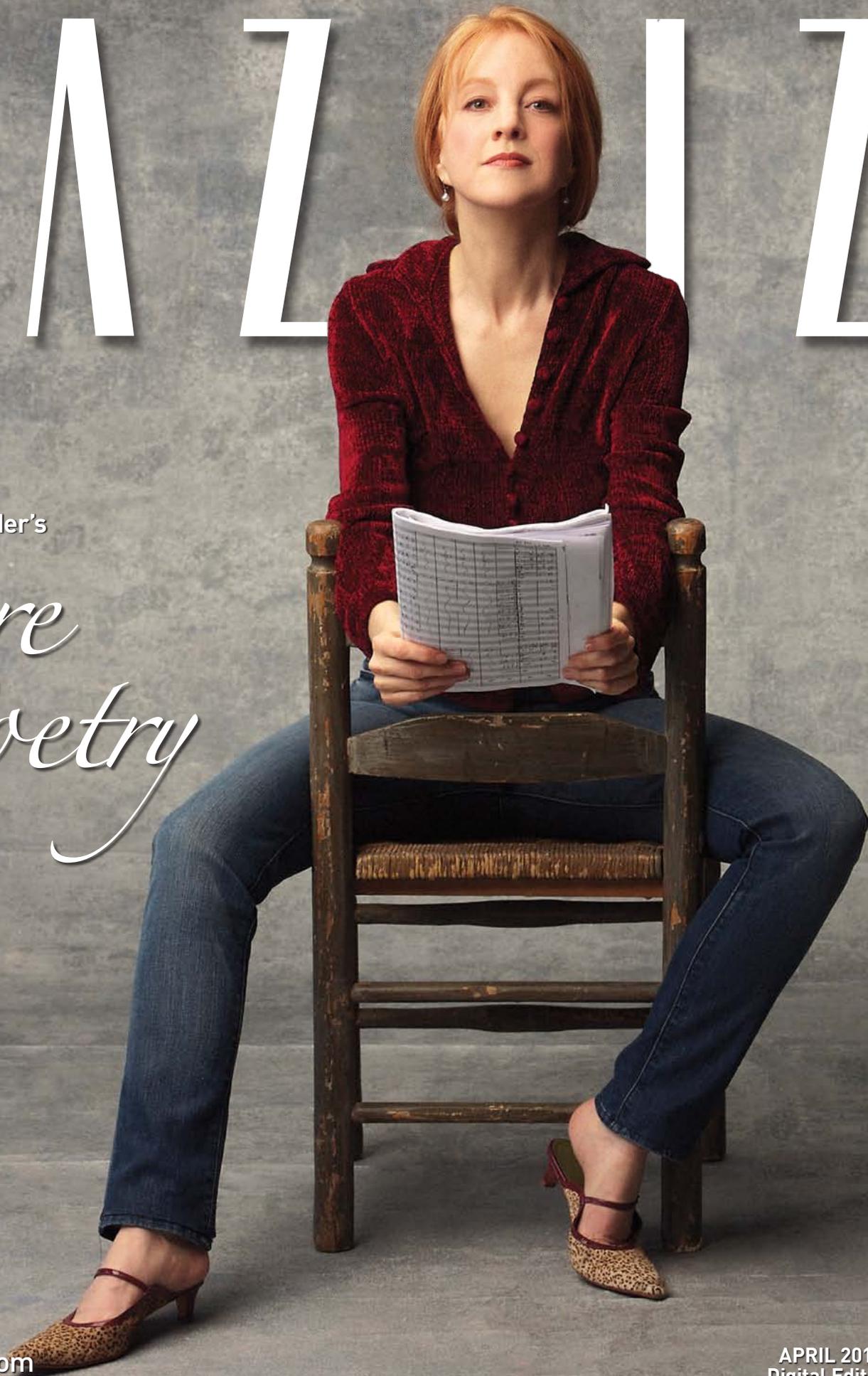


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“I realized that whatever’s in my head and whatever I’m feeling is what’s right. It’s not what I learned in Jazz Theory 3.”

Groove Machine

Sunny Jain and Red Baraat are kicking brass and taking names.

By Bob Weinberg

A seething throng of sweat-soaked festival-goers were helpless before the groove onslaught of Red Baraat. “Put those hands back up in the air,” drummer and frontman Sunny Jain commanded the nighttime crowd at the 25th annual Festival International de Louisiane. “Come on, Lafayette!”

Joined onstage by New Orleans’ own Soul Rebels, the eight-piece brass-and-percussion band from Brooklyn electrified the audience at the 2011 event, which takes over the streets of the bayou college town each April. “This one’s an original written by Rohin Khemani on percussion,” Jain continued, indicating his bandmate with a flourish of the curved mallet he uses on his shoulder-strapped *dhol* drum. “It’s entitled ‘Burning Instinct.’ You got that burning instinct in you to dance? Let me see you unleash that, Lafayette! Come on!”

In constant motion, the charismatic frontman tattooed his *dhol* with mallet and stick, the polyrhythmic ante upped by Khemani and drummer Tomas Fujiwara, before the ecstatic horns kicked the proceedings into the stratosphere. Although the roots of Red Baraat’s joyful music extend to Northwest India, there was no culture shock among the Louisianians in attendance. They boogied to the polyphonic beat as if the band were Bourbon Street regulars. In fact, this was Red Baraat’s first trip to the land where jazz began. They were so well-received here that they reprised their perfor-

mance at the 2013 Festival International. And, a couple of months earlier, they had been invited to throw down in “battle” with Indians of another sort — the Mardi Gras Indian Orchestra — at the Hi-Ho Lounge in New Orleans. During Mardi Gras, no less.

“As a jazz musician, you check out the music of New Orleans,” says Jain, 37, a Rochester, New York, native and son of Punjabi immigrants. “I was hip to [1920s jazz drummer-bandleader] Warren ‘Baby’ Dodds and all the stuff that came before, but not the brass-music culture that’s happening now, with the Soul Rebels or Rebirth. I’d never really checked them out till people started labeling [Red Baraat] as New Orleans brass. And obviously, there’s a very clear relationship. I mean, those Punjabi rhythms and New Orleans rhythms based off the clave, it’s like we’re very much in the same pocket. But when I started the group, it was really just kind of spawned by looking back at the marching bands and *baraats* [wedding processions] I’d seen in India.”

It’s been a whirlwind year for Red Baraat. Liberally spiked with elements of jazz, funk, go-go, ska and hip-hop, the band’s horn-fueled blend of the Punjabi party music known as *bhangra* has been reaching more ears than ever. Their sophomore recording, *Shruggy Ji* (Sinj), debuted in January at No. 1 on the Billboard World Music Chart and reached the top spot on the iTunes World Music Chart that month, as well.



Red Baraat

And if that weren't enough of a career highlight, the band was invited to play the Indiaspora Inaugural Ball at Washington, D.C.'s Mandarin Hotel, one of several musical celebrations surrounding Barack Obama's Inauguration. Jain also scored tickets to the official Inaugural Ball, the following night at the convention center. He and his wife were thrilled to see the president and first lady in person—and to dance to Stevie Wonder, who headlined the gala's entertainment roster. "Every five minutes, I'm just looking at my wife and I'm like, 'I can't fucking believe this,'" Jain relates. "It was a beautiful night and a beautiful weekend to be part of."

Mangoes stretched for as far as the eye could see, more than 500 varieties of the sweet, sticky fruit, all for the sampling, Jain recalls. Visiting his uncle in New Delhi in the summer of 1997, the 21-year-old Rutgers music major picked his way through the succulent offerings at the International Mango Festival, which inhabits the sprawling Dilli Haat in Pitampura each June. Taking a rest from his gustatory amblings, Jain clambered onto some bleachers set up within the open-air marketplace. It was then that he heard a Punjabi folk group playing off to one side, and was captivated by their sound.

"I was just hanging out listening to them, and they had a dhol player and a *tumbi* [single-string lute] player," he says. "I probably listened to them for a good hour, till I came down and started eating the mangoes again. That was kind of my reintroduction back into the dhol. It was something I'd been hearing growing up, and I've had an off-and-on relationship with tabla for years. It was that trip to India where I stopped and was like, 'Wow, I wonder what that would be like to play?'"

Growing up in upstate New York, Jain had indeed absorbed much of the music of his ancestral homeland. His parents'

record collection encompassed spiritual *bhajans*, Carnatic classical music and the pop-flavored soundtracks of Bollywood movies. Of course, like many of his peers, Jain also rocked out to Rush and Smashing Pumpkins, metal and Motown. However, playing drums since age 10, he studied with a teacher who encouraged him to learn swing, bossa nova and salsa rhythms. Inevitably, he gravitated to jazz-drum giants Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones, Art Blakey, Tony Williams and Elvin Jones. By his teens, jazz and Brazilian music were just about all he listened to.

Then a teacher at the Eastman School of Music summer camp turned him onto Bombay-born percussion master Trilok Gurtu, and Jain had an epiphany. "It was *Live at the Royal Festival Hall*, that album with John McLaughlin and [bassist] Kai Eckhardt," the drummer remembers. "[Gurtu] was literally the first person I identified with, someone who was Indian and was playing that jazz/world-music type of thing."

At Rutgers, and later at New York University, where he pursued a master's in music business, Jain plunged ever more deeply into the jazz world, performing with and leading various ensembles. When he started composing, however, he began to feel constrained by standard jazz forms, desiring to delve beyond the standard 32 bars, to build on foundations other than bebop changes. "I realized that whatever's in my head and whatever I'm feeling is what's right," he says. "It's not what I learned in Jazz Theory 3."

Along with saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, pianist Vijay Iyer and guitarist Rez Abbasi, Jain is among a generation of jazz artists combining South Asian roots with modern jazz in tantalizing ways. Their hybrids reach beyond mere iterations of Eastern exotica and reflect the immersion of cultural insiders, albeit ones who are comfortable enough to eschew the stereotypical trappings of sitar and tabla in favor of electric guitar and saxophone. Which isn't to say that the traditional forms and instruments don't still hold some attraction for them.

In fact, Jain says his growing love for the sound of the dhol truly guided the direction of his career. He recalls audition-



Never a Dhol Moment

Sunny Jain heard plenty of bhangra music in his youth, particularly at family occasions such as weddings. But he truly became fascinated with the sound — and its barrel-shaped *dhol* drum — during a 1997 visit to New Delhi. The instrument has taken on increased prominence in his music over the past decade, and provides the percussive engine for Red Baraat.

"The main stick I'm using is a thin bamboo stick," Jain explains. "Bamboo's very thin and flexible, so you get some great retroflex. That's for my high side; that's really the signature sound of the dhol. For my low side, I really just have a curved stick. But you don't hit it like a talking drum, with the curved point; you hit with the side. So, it's kind of curving down, [driving] more action onto the head. That allows you to do little pitch slides and pitch bends, as well."

The switch to primarily playing the dhol also enabled Jain to get out from behind his drum set. His deft sticking — and natural charisma — have made him the focal point of the eight-piece Red Baraat.

"In the beginning, I was going back and forth, playing dhol and drum set," he says. "But I quickly realized I needed to stay up front. I thought it would be a break from the dhol to go and play drums, and it was actually a lot more work because different muscles are engaged. When I was getting on the drums, my touch was just gone. I was just like, 'Jesus, man, how do I do this?'"

But Jain didn't sweat Red Baraat's ability to function as a stone-cold groove machine. After all, he was leaving the drum set in the capable hands of Tomas Fujiwara and fattening the rhythms with percussionist Rohin Khemani. The band nearly levitates as saxophones, trumpet, trombone and sousaphone add layer upon layer of polyrhythmic exuberance that keeps audiences moving — which, in turn, inspires Red Baraat.

"We started seeing audiences dancing and having a great time, and that fed what we were doing," Jain relates. "There are certain sections of songs where we're jumping up and down or dancing around. We just love playing, and we're just having fun, and if people are enjoying that, then we're feeding off of them." —BW



ing for the Jazz Ambassadors' Rhythm Road Program at the Kennedy Center about seven years ago. Leading a group with Abbasi on guitar and Steve Welsh on tenor sax, he utilized the dhol as a bass drum, incorporating the instrument into his drum set. "The essence of what I was getting to in our program was how jazz has changed and been influenced by American society and immigration," he explains, "how people have been imprinting their sound and culture into the music since back in the '40s with [Cuban conguero] Chano Pozo, and just carrying through the Japanese influence on the music of the West Coast, and then moving forward to the South Asian experience."

Immersion into his roots wasn't the only reason Jain veered from the prescribed jazz path. The drummer started to become somewhat disenchanted with

the incestuous nature of the New York City jazz scene, of which he was a regular participant. Looking around the venues he played, Jain noticed an abundance of fellow jazz musicians in attendance, many of whom were Manhattan School of Music and New School students. Basically it was cats playing for cats. "It was great to be amongst that community," he says, "but it was also, 'Why is this music not reaching other folks?'"

Playing wine bars for tips and hustling for gigs was also starting to wear on Jain. While he says he's often nostalgic for the hometown joints at which Red Baraat got their start — including Barbès in South Slope and the Bowery Ballroom, where the band celebrated the CD release of *Shruggy Ji* with a sold-out house — Jain seems delighted to be grooving crowds at festivals, theaters and performing arts centers outside the neighborhood and outside the cloistered jazz world. In fact, the band

wrapped a European tour last year during which they sold out the Luxembourg Philharmonic.

While certainly rooted in jazz, the exuberant music of Red Baraat casts a wide net, appealing to fans of New Orleans brass, D.C.'s riotous go-go music and Jamaica's ska and reggae. That was by design, says Jain. Certainly, Red Baraat is stocked with ace jazz players. Jain, drummer Fujiwara, percussionist Khemani, trombonist Ernest Stewart, bass trumpeter Mike "MiWi La Lupa" Williams, saxophonists Mike Bomwell and Arun Luthra, and sousaphone player John Altieri all boast strong résumés, not just in jazz, but in hip-hop, salsa, R&B, jam and alt-rock outfits. Bearded and beturbaned trumpeter Sonny Singh actually comes from a ska, reggae and rock background. Marrying those influences with bhangra has made for a heady mix.

"I've always been writing, even before Red Baraat, using the influences I grew up listening to or learned later on," Jain says. "And I wanted to head in a different direction, not feel that I'm making a band that has to pertain to jazz. I just realized that it naturally was going to, because that's my background. And I wanted that improvisatory impact onstage. I wanted us to be able to reinvent songs from day to day while we're on tour. But I didn't want to focus on it just being another jazz band."

With a March schedule that brought them to the influential music showcase South by Southwest in Austin; theaters in Baton Rouge and Mobile; the jam-band-heavy Suwannee Springfest in Live Oak, Florida; and gigs in Philadelphia and New York City, where the band held their second annual Festival of Colors celebration of the Indian fete known as "Holi," Red Baraat continues to spread its wings. And its message of musical inclusion.

"We just love playing and putting the music out there," Jain says. "Who knows where it will go for the third album? What we're experimenting with now is, our sousaphone player, John, is playing with some effects on his sousaphone. And I've been messing around with some [effects] pedals for my dhol. And we've been using more samples on stage. We might go into a little bit of that territory, but never letting go of the brass and acoustic drum sound." ▲