

COMMUNITY NEWS

Toronto Tabla Ensemble Raises Money for Quake Victims

By Preeti Thandi

Can a few sharp strokes on the drum stir a million thoughts?

The Toronto Tabla Ensemble can bring alive such a 'stirring' night of music with every eloquent stroke. This enchanting night of music at the Living Arts Centre was presented in aid of the Kartarpur Charitable Fund on March 10, 2001.

Years of practise, meticulous precision and coordination of movement, constant exploration and innovation are just a few ways to describe the Toronto Tabla Ensemble. Founded and headed by Ritesh Das a decade ago, this group has enthused many a lively evening with various art forms and musical styles. Ritesh traces back his roots to a rich musical legacy. His parents lead the 'Nritya Bharati' the prestigious house of music in Calcutta, India. The house not only presented the best of the best from the Indian classical scene but also attracted western groups. "I was always surrounded by music. It was a tradition well held. I was

always attracted to the sound of tabla," says Ritesh, "and started learning from Shankar Ghosh."

Ritesh himself moved to the United States in 1979 and spent a few years studying tabla at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Francisco. He has worked with the likes of Zakir Hussain and his Guru, Swapan

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Chaudhari, associated with the distinguished Lucknowi Gharana. "Both Swapan Chaudhari and Zakir Hussain showed me that I could do something more," he says. Ritesh was involved with more traditional music in the States and wanted to explore something more.

Ritesh moved to Canada in 1987. After changing various jobs, one of them at the Second Cup, serving coffee, Ritesh and Joanna Das performed at the

Vishnu Mandir and received an overwhelming response - that was just the beginning.

"The richness of the classical music background took me to another level. I never wanted to be a traditional tabla player - I wanted to be unique."

"The sound of tabla evokes something deep within me and stirs. I know I am looking for something and at that point the dead skin that covers the tabla begins to speak..." expresses Ritesh.

Ritesh met Donald Quan during his days at the Second Cup.

Together they created what came to known as Tap Root music. Ritesh started exploring music with other art forms. "It has gone to a different level, I am happy about where it is now. Fusion to me is exploring and respecting. It is like respecting the other form of music, it is like respecting yourself. If that is missing fusion can become confusion," he adds.

This respectful philosophy is demonstrated at the Ensemble's show. Seven tabla players com-



Ritesh Das in action!

bine endless hours of arduous practise. "Practise should be an addictiveness," says Ritesh. "You need to put your mind, brain and soul in it." Beginning with a piece titled, 'Weaving' the Toronto Tabla Ensemble harmonizes various gradients of sound. "Every stroke has a language," demonstrates Ritesh. The show is very interactive and sets hands and feet tapping. 'Restless', is the title of a piece that mirrors the restless sleep cycles one might experience during a nightmare. 'Waterfall', an incomplete piece, is replete with vibrant sounds.

Joanna Das performs Kathak dance on Tap Root music by Ritesh and Donald Quan. Tap Root itself has a lot of significance and meaning.

The instilling stir is provided by the strings of Levon Ichkhanian's guitar and the tabla artiste follows suite. Born and raised in Lebanon, Levon grew up with Arabic music. He enjoys performing with ethnic musicians. He feels that music is like a good conversation, the possibilities are limitless.

The show finishes off with an untitled piece, 'What to Do' and 'Walk'. The Ensemble comprised of tabla players: Santosh Naidu, Gurtej Hunjan, Neel Punna, Anita Katakhar, Prasadanna Keetheeswaran, Devin Persaud and Ritesh himself; drummers: Rakesh Tewari and Morgan Doctor, keyboard player: Sohania and Joanna on the vibes.

The show was graced by Hazel McCallion, Mayor of Mississauga city who encouraged and supported the cause for the medical facility in Kartarpur, Punjab.

Ritesh is looking forward to exciting collaborations one of them being a musical fiesta with a Celtic Drummer and Fiddle player from the United Kingdom.

"Music to me is religion," he says, "and life - food for my soul - my partner - who makes me feel a lot."

Comments for Preeti Thandi? email her at creativeline@hotmail.com