

notes



Bombay & The Swinging Sixties

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Stanley Pinto, old Bombay boy and night club pianist, describes the rocking times that the city was witness to in the 1960s

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A nostalgic, and impressive, reminiscence about Bombay's former jazz splendour.

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A man called Chris Perry died in Mumbai a few weeks ago. The news didn't send even the tiniest ripple out onto the turgid waters of this restless megalopolis. In its headlong rush into tomorrow, Mumbai has become a city uncaring of the yesterdays from which its today is cast; constantly moulting, constantly and unconcernedly shedding memories of times past.

Chris Perry is one such forgotten memory of the great jazz age of Mumbai that once was Bombay. Alongside Hecke Kingdom and Norman Mobsby and Tony Pinto and Neville Thomas and Seby Dias and Sweet Lorraine and Wendy and... but I'm getting ahead of my story about the long-ago-and-far-away nightlife of Bombay. A scene of a hundred (or so it seemed) jazz dives and cabarets that made Bombay the centre of India's entertainment world in the 60s, 70s and 80s.

I discovered this exciting world as a 16-year-old in 1959 when I ran into Dorothy Jones on Colaba Causeway. Dorothy was the pianist who accompanied all comers on the late great impressario Hamid Sayani's Ovaltine Amateur Hour over Radio Ceylon, the FM radio of its time. Teetering on impossible stiletto heels, her red hair crowned by a magnificent tres chic turban, she enveloped me in a deliciously bosomy hug. Hello luv, how lovely to see you, do you still sing, how is your piano playing, you must come and see us at Berry's, come to the jam session next Sunday morning. And she was gone in a cloudburst of Chanel No. 5.

Sunday morning couldn't come around soon enough. When it did, I ducked my sainted mother after church, dashed off to the nearby railway station, and ten minutes later there I was at Berry's little restaurant, just past the Tea Centre on Churchgate Street. The band was already swinging: Dorothy at the piano was the Marian McPartland of Bombay's jazz. Her son Robin on drums, the elegant Percy Borthwick on bass and behind the largest dark glasses I'd ever seen, Dennis Rosario, a magnificent guitarist in the Barney Kessel style. A reed of a man, Georgie Rich, who later became a good friend, was doing a Mel Torme on Sweet Georgia Brown.

The joint, to use Cab Calloway's signature phrase, was jumping, and in ten minutes it changed my take on life in the fast lane. I'd discovered the magical, mesmerising, unashamedly decadent and just slightly seedy world of life and dark.

At the far end of Churchgate Street, just across from today's Jazz by the Bay (which didn't exist then) was the bistro Napoli. No live band but with Bombay's first and only juke box, very popular with the college set.

Almost next door was The Ambassador hotel, lair of Jack Voyantzis, its Greek owner, a beautiful woman always on his arm, a giant Havana ever between his teeth. The restaurant at the hotel was called The Other Room and India's most reputed jazz agglomeration. The Tony Pinto Quartet, was in residence. Tony Pinto was a short, bald martinet of a man who drilled his band to perfection in polished, if somewhat pre-meditated, jazz arrangements. The quartet was fronted by Norman Mobsby on tenor saxophone, as aggressive as Coleman Hawkins, as gentle as Ben Webster.

The Other Room was where the well-heeled went to dinner. Every night was black tie night, and you were Social Register if Jack knew your first name and your wife well enough to kiss her gently on the mouth. The wives seldom resisted, I might add.

Fifty yards down was Bombelli's, Swiss Freddi's eponymous restaurant. Advertising men gathered in its al fresco forecourt each evening, sipping the only genuine (or so Freddie said) cappuccinos in town, made from a shiny, hissing coffee machine. A trio played at nights. It was all very Continental.

Right next door, over a fence so low you conveniently held conversations and exchanged criossants for pakodas across it, was Berry's. As Indian as it's neighbour wasn't. The Tandoori Butter Chicken to die for. And the Dorothy Jones Quartet with Marguerite at the mike, as the advertising said. A few years later, after Dorothy and all of her band had emigrated to the UK, I led my own trio there.

Across Berry's was the original Gaylord restaurant. The band was led by Ken Cumine, India's only jazz violinist, replete with soft suits of pure cashmere, a shiny white violin and radiant daughter Sweet Lorraine at the microphone.

Around the corner, just across from the Eros cinema, was the Astoria hotel with its famous Venice restaurant. Famous because this was the jazz musicians' jazz hideout. For years, the diminutive

trumpeter Chris Perry led his quintet there. There was the incomparable Felix Torcato on piano; years later he moved to Calcutta, first leading a wonderful quarter and later a big band at the Oberoi Grand, with his spectacular wife Diane as partner and singer.

On tenor saxophone with Chris was his brother Paul, a happy laughing buddha of a man. And out in front was Molly, a singer in the Sarah Vaughn mould, one of the best we've ever seen in the country.

Some years later, the Astoria opened a second restaurant. They called it Skyline and it opened with a young alto saxophonist who was continued over the next three decades to dominate the Indian jazz scene. The man was Braz Gonsalves and what a heart-stopping quartet it was. Xavier Fernandes, the most cerebral pianist of his time, Leslie Godinho, the 'dada' of the Hindi film percussionists on drums and... dashed if I can recall the bassist. I think perhaps it was Dinshaw 'Balsi' Balsara, advertising art director and clothes horse who later went on to become one of Asia's most successful commercial photographers in Hong Kong.

When Chris Perry moved on to Calcutta, Braz shifted to the Venice. The quartet grew into a quintet with the addition of a tenor saxophonist. Leslie made way for Wency, the most dynamic young drummer of his era, and Bombay rocked to the Cannonball Adderley sound. For almost a decade Venice was the meeting place for jazz men from all over the country and indeed the world. Dave Brubeck visited and sat in, regal if a little incongruous in his particular jazz genre. Duke Ellington came two nights in a row after he discovered half his orchestra moonlighting with Braz and the gang. Venice was the Blue Note of India's swingiest jazz scene and would we miss a single evening of it? Perish the thought.

Across the road at the Ritz hotel was The Little Hut. Neville Thomas, one of the most dashing men around town, led a group called Three Guys and a Doll. The luscious Shirley Myers was the doll. (Thirty years later I met Shirley one evening at Jazz at the Bay and she's still a doll!) Later, when Molly returned from Calcutta to marry her piano player sweetheart Mervyn, they took over at The Little Hut for many years.

From that spot, it was a brisk walk past Flora Fountain, where, plumb opposite Akbarally's, were Bistro and Volga, the two most popular haunts of the younger set. Seby Dias held court at Bistro, with my school friend Johnny at the piano and a hugely talented young lady called Ursula at the mike. She was the daughter of one of India's best known orchestra leaders of the big band era. Chic Chocolate, as unprepossessing as Chic was dashing, and just as gifted. At Volga next door Hecke Kingdom's Quartet held sway. Hecke was India's only baritone sax man, a grandfatherly man, gentle and wise. In delightful contrast, the trio that backed him was more mischief than a tribe of monkeys. Richie Marquis on piano, Percy on bass and Maxie on drums. But what an unbelievable prolific trio it was. There probably hasn't been another like it since.

Off the beaten track at Kala Ghoda, around the corner from Khyber restaurant, suddenly, from nowhere, a restaurant called La Bella opened in 1961. And it opened with a British sextet called the Margaret Mason band, with Margie Mason herself on an enthralling instrument we had never seen before: the vibraharp. As college kids, we swiftly became habitués of the 11.00 a.m. coffee session. All it took was 75p for the Espresso, not to mention the continuous acts of petty larceny to find that princely sum six days a week.

And finally, across from the Yacht Club at Dhanraj Mahal, there was the Alibaba where now stands a Chinese restaurant. George Fernandes on piano, Cassie on bass and Louis Armstrong vocals. Wilfred on drums.

In time, riding the crest of the jazz juggernaut, these niteries were joined by clubs at the Taj Mahal hotel, the Oberoi, the Nataraj on Marine Drive, the Shalimar at Kemp's Corner, the Sundowner at the Sun'n'Sand, and restaurants like the Blue Nile at New Marine Lines, the Talk of the Town on Marine Drive and the second Bombelli's at Worli.

With them came new young stars. Iqbal Singh, the turbaned Navy ensign doing his frantic Elvis Presly thing. Bonnie Remedios, India's Fats Domino. Sunder the Gay Caballero. Not quite jazz but what the hell.

And there was this callow, beardless fellow, barely out of short pants, who sat in on five minutes' notice for pianists all over town when they called in sick. Tony Pinto gave him lessons in jazz progressions so he'd stop inventing 'Chinese' chords of his own. Hecke Kingdom advised him to think long and hard about wanting to make this life a profession, not for someone who has a subscription to TIME magazine, he'd say, only half jokingly. And the cabaret girls were inordinately protective of him because he accompanied them on the piano impeccably, not asking for 'anything' in return. Then, when he inevitably did, they'd grown to like him enough to gleefully acquiesce. Life was grand.

Till one day it was gone. Suddenly, unexpectedly. Sadly. And much, much before it changed its name, Bombay metamorphosed into Mumbai.

We were left with a handful of memories. Now they too have faded. Sic transit gloria?