The Dakshina Ensemble

Featuring Rudresh Mahanthappa & Kadri Gopalnath

With two masters of the alto saxophone at the helm—one a living legend of South Indian Carnatic music and the other a fiercely innovative Indian American jazz musician— the **Dakshina Ensemble** stands to make a contribution to modern music that bears no precedent. While both are improvising musicians with ties to South India who play alto saxophone, the similarities and differences in how they approach their respective traditions are rather complex and intriguing. The music that they have co-composed highlights the multi-faceted intricacies and intersections of jazz and Carnatic music thus creating a sound that clearly transcends the label of "Indo-Jazz fusion."

Kadri Gopalnath is a true phenomenon in the world of Indian classical music. In 2004, he was awarded Padmashree, the highest award given to an artist in India, by President Sri A.P.J.Abdul Kalam. Among many other awards, he was crowned Saxophone Chakravarthy (The Emperor of Saxophone). Gopalnath started learning the saxophone from the renowned T. V. Gopalakrishnan in Madras in 1975. In 1977, he gave his first concert and became an instant sensation. A true innovator, Gopalnath has over many years adapted the complex wind instrument to play Carnatic music of South India. His fame soon spread throughout India where he has frequently been the highlight of festivals and concerts. He grew in stature as a figure of immense popularity not only in India, but also throughout the world. He has participated in major festivals and presentations around the world, including the Music Halle Festival in France, the International Cervatino Festival in Mexico, the Berlin Jazz Festival, and the World Music Institute in New York. He has also toured the US, Canada, Germany, Australia, Bahrain, Qatar, Muscat, Malaysia, Singapore, among others. Gopalnath has played with many leading jazz musicians including the saxophonist John Handy and has collaborated with flautist James Newton on an album. In 1994, he became the first South Indian classical musician to be invited to perform in the BBC Promenade concert. Gopalnath has also participated in many film projects, including the *Duet* by renowned Tamil director K. Balachander, with a music score by A.R. Rahman. Over 500 students have studied under him.

Named a Rising Star of the alto saxophone by the Downbeat International Critics Poll for the past three years, **Rudresh Mahanthappa** is one of the most innovative young musicians in jazz today. By incorporating the culture of his Indian ancestry, Rudresh has fused myriad influences to create a truly groundbreaking artistic vision. As a performer, he leads/co-leads five groups to critical acclaim. His most recent quartet recording *Mother Tongue* on Pi Recordings has been named one of Top Ten Jazz CDs of 2004 by the Chicago Tribune, All About Jazz, and Jazzmatazz to name a few and also received 4 stars in DOWNBEAT. This CD reached #8 on US jazz radio charts and remained at #1 on Canadian jazz radio charts for over a month. As a performer, Mahanthappa has achieved international recognition performing regularly at jazz festivals and clubs worldwide. He has also worked as a sideman with such jazz luminaries as David Murray, Steve Coleman, Jack DeJohnette, Samir Chatterjee, Von Freeman, Tim Hagans, Fareed Haque, Vijay Iyer, Howard Levy, David Liebman, Greg Osby, and Dr. Lonnie Smith. As a composer, Rudresh has received commission grants from the Rockefeller Foundation MAP Fund, American Composers Forum, and the New York State Council on the Arts to develop new work. Mahanthappa has his Bachelors of Music Degree in jazz performance from Berklee College of Music and his Masters of Music degree in jazz composition from Chicago's DePaul University. He now teaches at The New School University. Rudresh Mahanthappa currently lives in New York where he is clearly regarded as an important and influential voice in the jazz world.

Praise for Rudresh Mahanthappa:

"definitely one of the strongest voices on the jazz scene" -*All Music Guide*

"Mahanthappa's chops are practically unparalleled. . . making music unlike anything else in the city today. This kind of elevation and refinement is not simply a cut above the norm; it arguably redefines the norm." -*allaboutjazz.com*

"Mahanthappa displays a visceral tone and a grab-you-by-the-collar attack that dares the listener to turn away. [A] talent to keep a steady eye on." -*The New Yorker*

"Mahanthappa creates a music that is at once technically brilliant yet musically cogent, harmonically adventurous yet expressively straightforward. Mahanthappa takes listeners into fascinating Eastern Idioms that are otherwise virtually unheard in jazz today." – *Chicago Tribune*

"ingenious" – *BETJazz.com*

"he has a significant role to play in jazz, not only as a composer, but as an articulator of the form." – *allaboutjazz.com*

"This alto player has a tone like iron and charges from 0 to 80 in about four seconds. He has been making his name playing tough, rhythmically complicated, challenging music, more and more, by playing with his own group." (highly recommended concert) -*The New York Times*

Praise for Kadri Gopalnath:

"The Music of Kadri Gopalnath would make a stone melt and he can do anything with the bass [register] except eat it", - *The Illustrated Weekly,* INDIA

"Kadri's prowess and skill in handling the saxophone to convey the nuances of Carnatic Music was really encouraging to watch. Despite the fact that the saxophone is a brass instrument and lacks the mellifluous timbre of the traditional nagaswaram. Kadri was able to produce such a rich variety of musical cadences. " - *Daily News*, COLOMBO

His soft, legato flurries meshed perfectly in an unusual grouping of violin, Jew's harp and Mridhangam drum. - *The Times*, London.

"The artiste revealed his commendable control over the instrument and sill in a technique that suited the carnatic music overcoming the instrumental hurdles if any." - *Deccan Herald*, INDIA

"The phrasings ebbed and flowed, encompassing four and a half octaves and when he operated on the sub-bass registered the audience swayed." - *Indian Express*,

"He produced delightful Versions of Hamsadhwani, Pantuvarali, Kalyana Vasantha and Brindhavani. He was able to produce deep bass and long drawn out tonal effects that captivated the audience." - *Sunday Standard*, INDIA

Concert Reviews

Latest Reviews

Archives

search

Jun 19 **A Birthday Salute to Les Paul**

Jun 17 **Wayne Shorter Quartet & Dave Holland Quintet**

Jun 19 **Vision Festival**

Jun 13 **Miguel Zenon**

Jun 12 **Playboy Jazz Festival**

May 21 **Mary Lou Williams Women In Jazz Festival**

May 8 Rudresh Mahanthappa & Kadri Gopalnath

May 15 **Umbria Jazz Melbourne 05**

May 5 **Misha Mengelberg @ The Stone**

May 8 **St. Lucia Jazz Festival**

Rudresh Mahanthappa & Kadri Gopalnath

Venue/ Location: Asia Society, New York, New York USA

Date(s): May 8, 2005 - May 8, 2005

Written By: Bill Milkowski

Alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa has been drawing more and more on his Indian ancestry for musical inspiration in recent years. That was particularly evident on his 2002 outing *Black Water* (Red Giant) as well as his 2004 release *Mother Tongue: Do You Speaking Indian?* (Pi). For the world premiere of "Kinsmen/Svajanam," commissioned by the Asia Society, Mahanthappa dug deeply into his South Indian roots in a fiery collaboration with Kadri Gopalnath, a master of South Indian Carnatic classical music as well as an innovator in adapting the alto saxophone to that complex and intriguing form.

In the past shown Mahanthappa has shown startling proficiency with the bebop idiom -- his sheer command and fluency at blistering tempos is coming out of Charlie Parker while his capacity for rhythmic shape-shifting is heavily influenced by Steve Coleman -- he revealed on this dynamic gig a newfound tendency toward emulating Indian double-reed instruments or Hindustani vocalists. This quality was no doubt influenced by living legend Gopalnath, who himself emulates South Indian double-reed instruments like the nagaswaram in his wholly unique approach to the alto sax. And while both saxophonists are heavyweight improvisers, Gopalnath is coming at it from a decidedly nonjazz approach.

Rather than being just a showcase for American jazz musicians blowing licks on top of Indian ragas, "Kinsmen/Svajanam" was an ambitious attempt by Mahanthappa to meld the two seemingly disparate aesthetics of jazz and Carnatic music into one organic hybrid. Mahanthappa extrapolated on some traditional Indian ragas and other pieces of music he had previously heard on Gopalnath CDs while also weaving in shifting harmonies and polyrhythms against the Carnatic undercurrent. The experiment was a rousing success, due largely to the flexibility that Mahanthappa and his American colleagues Rez Abbasi on guitar and sitar-guitar, Elliot Humberto Kavee on drums and Carlo deRosa on bass exhibited on the bandstand, along with their obvious reverence and empathy for Carnatic music.

Abbasi, who was born in Pakistan, has himself investigated this marriage of jazz and South Indian music on his own recent CD, *Snake Charmer* (Earth Sounds), while the rhythm tandem of Kavee and de Rosa proved to be keenly attuned to the intricacies of the five extended ragas that comprised "Kinsmen/Svajanam." Judging from Kavee's swift and precise attack on the kit, along with his adeptness at dealing with the odd-timed ragas, it is clear that he has had some experience playing mridangam at some

point in his musical studies.

The stage for this world premiere was divided into separate stations with Gopalnath and his South Indian colleagues A. Kanyakurmari on violin and Gautam Siram on mridangam all sitting cross-legged on a carpeted dais stage right while Mahanthappa and guitarist Abbasi stood stage left with drummer Kavee and bassist deRosa occupying a spot in the back. The set of music they explored together opened on a harmonious note with a bluesy-sounding raga which was kicked off by Kadri's dramatic solo invocation to Ganesha, one of the five prime Hindu dieties. The second piece was a very complicated raga, which Mahanthappa treated like a ballad in 5/4 while the third piece of the evening carried a more traditional trancelike snake charmer flavor. This piece was highlighted by some intricate counterpoint between drummer Kavee and bassist deRosa playing against Kadri's explosive sax work, as well as some near-telepathic call-and-response between Gopalnath and masterful violinist Kanyakurmari.

The fourth piece of the evening -- they were all so freshly composed that Mahanthappa hadn't yet come up with names for them -- was a showcase for Kanyakumari, whose keening, vocal phrasing on violin served as an emotive foil to Kadri's intense staccato burn. The fifth and final piece, the most dynamic offering of the evening, featured an extended guitar solo by Abbasi, who has one foot firmly planted in Pat Martino's burning postbop single-note sensibility and the other foot striding into Shakti-land. It culminated in a furious call-and-response between the two great alto saxophonists; a volatile meeting of East and West.

Mahanthappa described his process for composing the material for this "Kinsmen/Svajanam" commission: "I had a bunch of his albums and I narrowed it down from seven or eight CDs to about 30 tracks. I was interested in what was going on, whether it was the raga being used or the rhythm or something else. So when I went to India, the first day I sat with Kadri and played him all that stuff, I asked him, 'So what's going on here? Do I have the raga right?' And that led to some kind of extended sort of dissection, followed by an intensive woodshedding period by me. I spent that night I met him and the whole next day narrowing down the choices to five or six ragas that I wanted to work with. And then within each raga there are actual songs, so I wrote around those ragas and songs."

With this visionary new work, Rudresh Mahanthappa is boldly breaking some exciting new ground while going all the way back to his Indian roots.

cover story
news
opinion
arts
movies
music
naked city
food
listings
classifieds
real estate
jobzone
forums
browse
win
personals
about us
contact us
advertise with us

May 5-11, 2005

music

East Meets Midwest

reed only:"I'm not integrating this into jazz because I feel like I have to," says Mahanthappa. "I feel like it's burning inside me and it's part of a larger picture of who I am."

Altoist Rudresh Mahanthappa puts a classical Indian spin on traditional jazz.

by Shaun Brady

Born and raised in Boulder, Col., Rudresh Mahanthappa didn't grow up with particularly strong ties to his South Indian heritage. "My parents weren't really part of an Indian community. There was an Indian Association of Metro Denver or something, and they'd get together once a month and have dinner, always on Sunday afternoons. And it was that typical thing of all the men watching the Denver Broncos game and all the women were in the kitchen talking and all the kids were beating the crap out of each other in someone's room. I guess the most blatant way I can put it is until I went to college, I kind of thought that I was white."

That sense of integrated cultures pervades the altoist's approach to jazz. Where many such experiments merely graft traditional jazz over top of Indian rhythms, Mahanthappa employs Indian musical concepts organically. The result is a fresh direction for jazz rather than a two-headed musical monster, largely because the ideas are not imposed externally from a desire to experiment with form rather than from a natural predilection. Mahanthappa explains, "I'm not integrating this into jazz because I feel like I have to, I feel like it's burning inside me and it's part of a larger picture of who I am."

Mahanthappa's new Dakshina Ensemble, co-commissioned by the Painted Bride as part of its JazzJaunts series, is his most overt attempt to fuse his Eastern and Western influences. The septet, composed of musicians from both traditions, is co-led by altoist Kadri Gopalnath, who Mahanthappa refers to as a "living legend of South Indian music." Gopalnath is credited with introducing the saxophone into Indian classical music, though any jazz influence stops at the instrument. He approaches the alto as if it were a nagaswaram, the traditional Indian double-reed instrument, which inspired Mahanthappa to try and find a meeting point between the cultures centered on their shared horn.

"I haven't done many projects working with actual Indian instrumentalists, but even the few that I have I've really tried to more work with concepts than just sort of superficially working with the sounds. Along those same lines, I'm trying to highlight what we both do and put our ideas together. I think a lot of my music is influenced by Indian music, as far as dealing with rhythm and even dealing with melody. And sonically, sometimes my approach to how I actually play the horn, I try to evoke some of those sounds. But the piece is really about finding this middle ground where we're both comfortable playing in this setting that is half-Western and half-South Indian, but maybe to a point that it's actually neither."

Related articles:

Aqualung
—Nicole Pensiero

Marching On
Mike Doughty gets clean and bares his soul.
—John Vettese

under the rock
Beyond and Back
—Michael Pelusi

Caribou
—Nick Sylvester

The Philadelphia Singers
—Peter Burwasser

The Decemberists
—Patrick Rapa

Deerhoof
—James Saul

Lynne Arriale
—Deni Kasrel

Tyft
—Shaun Brady

The Wonder Stuff
—Michael Pelusi

Snoop Dogg/ The Game
—A.D. Amorosi

Dr. Dog
—A.D. Amorosi

soundadvice

DJ Nights
—Sean O'Neal

The clash of traditions did present some interesting obstacles, as Mahanthappa recalls. "Indian musicians have what they call their "sruti,' which is the key that they play everything in. [Gopalnath] plays everything in B flat. So that was another issue — can we do something outside of B flat? And he found kind of a nice way of saying, no, we can't. A lot of interesting issues came up over that week as to how am I going to pull this off, because we can't play 70 minutes in B flat. That's gonna kill a Western audience."

Mahanthappa finally found a compromise by settling on ragas that, while rooted in B flat, allowed the Western musicians to start on a different note and "trick the ear" into hearing a different key. But despite the restrictions, Gopalnath warmed to the unfamiliar methods over the course of Mahanthappa's week in India. "There isn't this very strong sense of being a composer in Indian music. The songs that you play are these ancient songs that come from the Vedas. And I'd say, let's play something using this raga and he would say, I know lots of compositions that use that raga. And I'd be like, OK, we're actually gonna make a new one now. And that's a strange notion. So I'm like, I wrote this, can you think of something contrapuntally to play with it? He'd sit there and think for a minute and then he'd be like, how about this, and it would be this beautiful thing, these lines weaving in and out of each other. It was really amazing."

Given the frustration that Mahanthappa has felt in the past over the emphasis on his ancestry over his music — he and frequent collaborator Vijay Iyer have actually been announced as being from India in the past — he approached this project with a bit of understandable trepidation. But the chance to work with Gopalnath overcame his reluctance, and in the end, "maybe in some ways it could work the other way. Oh, so that's Indian music and that's not. And that guy's Indian and that guy's Indian-American. Maybe it seems like a way of splitting the two up finally."

***Rudresh Mahanthappa's Dakshina Ensemble**, Sat., May 7, 7 and 9 p.m., $25, Painted Bride Art Center, 230 Vine St., 215-925-9914, www.paintedbride.org.*

 -- Respond to this article in our Forums -- click to jump there

---

Annual World Music Issue and CD

No longer America's exclusive domain, artists abroad set out to create their own image

JAZZIZ®

art for your ears

Hear the world

A look at the globalization of jazz

Nguyen Le

MAY 2005
VOL. 22 NO.05 CD NOT INCLUDED
$3.99US $5.99CAN
05
0 09281 01416 4

International Festival Guide Inside

Rudresh Mahanthappa

Vijay Iyer

Between riffs and ragas

For two Indian-American musicians, jazz embraces cross-cultural identity.

By Larry Blumenfeld

In his notes to *The Far East Suite,* Duke Ellington wrote of an orchestra full of unfamiliar instruments at a concert in Delhi. Saxophonist John Coltrane delved deeply into the modal scales of Indian music as well as its spiritual core, which changed his music and inspired generations to come. Guitarist John McLaughlin studied under the guru Sri Chinmoy and was moved to create new contexts for Indo-jazz fusion, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and the ensemble Shakti. Recently, saxophonist Henry Threadgill and pianist Myra Melford have immersed themselves in Indian traditions, infusing their work with new energy.

There are clear affinities between jazz and Indian musical traditions: the importance of improvisation; the primacy of rhythm; the subtleties of bent blues intonation or microtonal melodic expression. But there are also contrasts to be reconciled and new expression to be sounded.

Two Indian-American musicians making waves on the current jazz scene — pianist Vijay Iyer and saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa — have inherited Indian classical and American jazz traditions, internalizing them as they've developed. Both have been using the expressive formats of improvised music as a way to realize their complex identities as Indian Americans in the contemporary world.

Iyer and Mahanthappa, both in their 30s and living in New York City, are the sons of Indian immigrants. Iyer grew up in Upstate New York and attended graduate school in the Bay Area. "I remember there was a healthy South Indian community," he says. "And they had a concert series. You'd see audience members beating rhythms in their laps — as Indians are trained to do — really participating. And it wasn't that different at the Birdcage in Oakland, where I was playing for a mostly African-American crowd. It was a communal thing there, too, with lots of physical response."

While doing a residency at Stanford University in saxophonist Steve Coleman's band, Iyer met Mahanthappa, there for a jazz workshop. The two found an immediate rapport. "We had both come to Indian music and to jazz in quite informal ways, and only later came to study these forms in a more focused way," Mahanthappa explains.

For Iyer, "It was more that we just had the same background. Both our parents were immigrants. We shared that confusion of trying to define what Indian-American means. As for the technical aspects of Indian music, I think we had different takes on it to begin with. I focused more on rhythmic ideas and percussive aspects of Carnatic [South Indian classical] music. In West African music — one primary source for jazz — simple rhythmic elements tend to be placed in dialogue or in counterpoint. Whereas rhythmic elaboration in Indian music tends to be more linear — it's much more naked. In the percussion ensemble music of South India you get a lot of unison flourishes. In African drum ensembles, there's a stratification of rhythms, so that there'll be different rhythms working against each other."

Mahanthappa was more interested in the vocal and melodic aspects

of Indian music and its use of double-reed instruments. "The sound of John Coltrane playing soprano sax is not so different from that of Bismillah Khan playing *shenai* [an Indian double-reed instrument]," he says. "All great jazz instrumentalists sound as though they're singing. And that's something I get from all great Indian instrumentalists too."

The latest CD by Mahanthappa's quartet, *Mother Tongue* (Pi), examines cross-cultural expression and issues of identity in a fascinating way. He recorded the voices of fellow Indian Americans speaking in their native tongues — there are many different languages in India — and used the sound and phrasings to guide his compositions. His next project focuses on a specific technical challenge — a collaboration with Kadri Gopalnath, a legendary South Indian classical player who has adapted that music for saxophone.

"Some years ago, my brother bought me an album called *Saxophone, Indian Style*, with this really tacky photo of Gopalnath on the cover," Mahanthappa recalls. "It was supposed to be a joke, but it turned out to be killing music. So I sought him out. I thought it would be exciting to take these two traditions of saxophone playing and combine them. Frankly, I just don't know how he does what he does on this instrument."

Iyer's music has always sounded accessible. Yet bubbling beneath its surface are complex rhythmic and harmonic tensions, not to mention political and social issues. He released two CDs in 2003. *In What Language?* (Pi), a collaboration with poet Mike Ladd and other spoken-word artists, confronts the challenges facing dark-skinned travelers in airports since September 11, 2001. On *Blood Sutra* (Artists House), Iyer's quartet, including Mahanthappa, explores a mode of collective improvisation that mines both jazz and Indian traditions without sounding distinctly like either. Instead, his group finds a contemplative mode that is at once personal to Iyer's experience and global in reach. On his quartet's new *Reimagining* (Savoy), Iyer further refines this approach. The disc is highlighted by a ruminative take on John Lennon's "Imagine," a song that has resonated with political implications for decades.

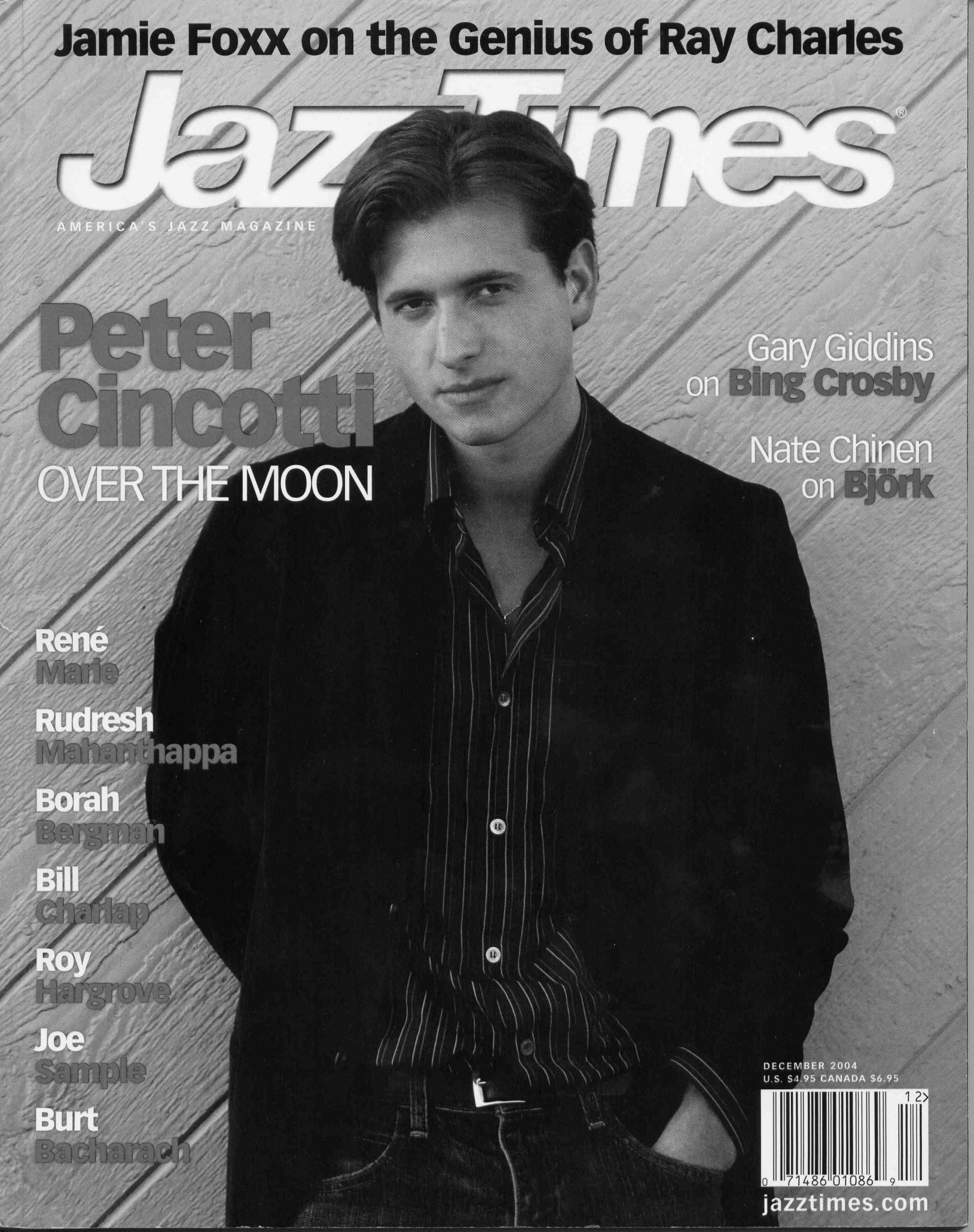
Iyer and Mahanthappa aren't interested in sounding Indian or American, or striking a chord that fits neatly in between. That said, their music-making quite naturally negotiates that space. "I think Rudresh and I both are not interested in doing an overt Indo-fusion project," says Iyer. "I feel very American and I feel very Indian all the time, and I'm trying to express that in some meaningful way." ▲

Larry Blumenfeld is editor-at-large for JAZZIZ.

Jamie Foxx on the Genius of Ray Charles

JazzTimes®

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE



Peter Cincotti
OVER THE MOON

Gary Giddins on **Bing Crosby**

Nate Chinen on **Björk**

René Marie

Rudresh Mahanthappa

Borah Bergman

Bill Charlap

Roy Hargrove

Joe Sample

Burt Bacharach

DECEMBER 2004
U.S. $4.95 CANADA $6.95

12
0 71486 01086 9

jazztimes.com

"Do You Speak Indian?"

With his new recording, **Rudresh Mahanthappa** seeks to bury this tiresome question. In the process, he's shedding light on the complex matter of jazz and ethnic identity.

BY DAVID ADLER
PHOTOGRAPH BY VIDURA BARRIOS

LISTEN PAST THE END OF RUDRESH MAHANTHAPPA'S THIRD album, *Mother Tongue: Do You Speak Indian?* (Pi), and you'll hear the alto saxophonist and composer say the following: "No, I don't speak Indian. There isn't such a language. I speak English. My parents speak Kannada, which is a language spoken in the state of Karnataka, in the south of India. There are many different languages in India…."

You'll also hear a jumble of other voices—all fellow Indian-Americans speaking a version of the same statement, in their own mother tongues. They are telling us that India does not possess a singular culture, nor do Indian immigrants and their children carry a singular history. But Mahanthappa isn't simply venting about ignorance and ethnocentrism; he's highlighting the inherent music of speech itself. He wrote most of the pieces on *Mother Tongue* using melodic material derived from these very speech recordings.

To gather samples of the different languages, Mahanthappa sought volunteers to leave prepared statements on his voicemail. He saved the messages as digital files and then set about transcribing them melodically. "I went first to family," Mahanthappa recalls. His mother spoke the Kannada example,

his father-in-law the Gujarati. "The other ones were more about getting on Indian listservs and letting people know what I was doing," he says, adding that he chose to focus only on Indian languages spoken in America. "Some people were shy about speaking a language they didn't really speak that much anymore. But to me that was part of the process. If you feel shy about it or if it's rusty, I want to document that, too."

With raw transcriptions in hand, Mahanthappa began to compose, and the sky was the limit. One option was to play along with the tapes, as Jason Moran did with Turkish and Chinese transcriptions on his 2003 Blue Note release *The Bandwagon*. But this didn't suit Mahanthappa. "That [approach] is fascinating, but what happens there is you force it into a key center. I wasn't interested in that and it's been done before," citing not only Moran, but Janácek, Hermeto Pascoal and others.

Instead, Mahanthappa used the transcriptions like putty, elongating or isolating portions and even quantizing entire examples with Melodyne software. "You end up having to average those notes to an extent; you can't play all of them. The rhythms that come out of the raw transcriptions are just insane. I'm not even sure I could deal with playing those. As far as making a tune out of it, one thing I would do is double the note values. And to make it playable on the saxophone I had to displace some stuff by octaves. But [the transcriptions] are not only in the melodies—sometimes the bass line is part of the transcription. Sometimes the drum track is even part of it."

Sorting out the results was a task that fell to Mahanthappa's working quartet, featuring François Moutin on bass, Elliot Humberto Kavee on drums and longtime musical partner (and fellow Indian-American) Vijay Iyer on piano. "It seems like things that are almost impossible are somehow playable," says Mahanthappa. "Those guys have an openness that's amazing; they're willing to tackle anything."

Iyer describes this openness as coming "from years of understanding and trust and collaboration." He also remarks on contrasts between *Mother Tongue* and Mahanthappa's previous album, *Black Water* (Red Giant), another meditation on the South Asian diaspora. "Because the [*Mother Tongue*] music was assembled according to a different logic that was initially non-musical, the path back to creating a musical statement was not obvious," Iyer explains. "We all had to figure that out collectively."

Many of the pieces have no prescribed harmony, making Iyer's role particularly open-ended. "Sometimes Vijay's part is written out, and sometimes he's left to develop something that comes from the bass line or the melody," Mahanthappa says. "Sometimes I'll ask him to play permutations of a particular interval grouping, like any voicing with a root, a minor third and a whole step. Bartók played with a lot of those groupings, and the M-Base guys have fooled around with that stuff, where tonality is coming from an intervallic structure and not a particular note."

LAURENCE SVIRCHEV

Iyer has made challenges like these integral to his life's work. "We've been gradually setting each other free harmonically," he says of Mahanthappa, before drawing his own parallels to M-Base and what he calls "expanded post-tonal jazz harmony. You have to imagine that harmony is actually the result of something else, of melodies and dialogues. If you attune your ear you can hear harmony everywhere."

The rhythm section, for its part, must be fastidious and flexible in equal measure. Moutin usually follows or reacts to a written bass line, and Kavee's part might be specified down to the 16th note—or not at all. Mahanthappa has scored each piece with four staff systems, like a string quartet, but the group can leap off the paper, and back on, with great facility. The grooves themselves are metrically ambiguous; even this band's 4/4 is not everyone else's. Mahanthappa, the commanding presence at the helm, has a tone that is hard, biting and emotionally alive. He plays with blinding speed but also draws upon the ardent legato cries associated with Indian double-reed instruments or Hindustani vocalists.

A genial, positive 33-year-old, Mahanthappa was raised in Boulder, Colo., by parents originally from Bangalore. He recounts the experience of being the only Indian family in the neighborhood, and yes, being asked a certain uninformed question about language, not to mention others far less benign. (He jokes about calling his next album *Do You Eat Chilled Monkey Brains for Dinner?*)

In June 2004 Mahanthappa married his wife, Pooja, who was raised in North Carolina. "She grew up in more of an Indian community, where a lot of people spoke Gujarati. She can get by [in Gujarati] better than she thinks." Mahanthappa speaks only English, and so included "English," based on his own speech transcription, as the second track on *Mother Tongue*.

After doing undergraduate work at North Texas and Berklee, Mahanthappa

earned a master's from DePaul University and spent time in the Chicago jazz trenches. He met Vijay Iyer in 1995 at the Stanford Jazz Workshop during a Steve Coleman residency, and soon joined Iyer—along with Kavee, Liberty Ellman, Aaron Stewart, Derrek Phillips and other like-minded Bay Area players—as part of a New York exodus in the late 1990s. In addition to leading his own group, he has appeared on Iyer's *Architextures*, *Panoptic Modes* and *Blood Sutra*, continued a long-standing duo project with Iyer called Raw Materials, and participated in Iyer and Mike Ladd's multimedia performance piece "In What Language?" He recently launched Dual Identity, a co-led project with fellow altoist Steve Lehman.

In May 2005, with support from the Rockefeller MAP fund, Mahanthappa will debut the Dakshina Ensemble, a collaboration with Kadri Gopalnath. "Kadri is a living legend of Carnatic [South Indian classical] music and also an innovator in adapting the saxophone to that music," Mahanthappa explains. "He plays no jazz whatsoever, but he sat in with John Handy, among others." Mahanthappa will travel to India in March 2005 to rehearse the new material. "Collaborating with Kadri has been a dream of mine since I first heard one his CDs at Berklee," he says. "Only now am I prepared to take on such a challenge."

Mahanthappa's Indian influences aren't always so direct and explicit, however. As he details the compositional processes employed on *Mother Tongue*, one begins to appreciate the breadth of his creative stimuli, not to mention the element of chance that informs his end results. "'Telegu' is actually a 13-bar blues with a bridge," he says. It is also one of the few pieces with defined chord changes (and far from conventional blues changes at that). "With 'KonKani' I took some 20th-century approaches—I'm playing something really close to the transcription, a very angular, bizarre melody, and Vijay is playing the mirror image of that melody. 'Tamil' is almost like a free tune that refers to the melody here and there."

There is an interesting backstory to "Kannada": "My mom left me the message twice, so what you hear in the first melody is her saying it once, and the head out is her saying it the second time. 'Malayalam' was also fascinating because I managed to get two different people speaking that. I put the lines together: Elliot and I are playing one and Vijay and François are playing the other. One speaker was a male and the other was a female, and their statements lined up in some really freakish ways—phrases often ended in the same place, even on the same pitch. It almost alludes to some sort of metalanguage."

According to the U.S. State Department, India has 18 official languages. Some claim there are hundreds in all (probably including dialects). For *Mother Tongue* Mahanthappa dealt with seven, whittled down from an initial list of 15. One senses that his work in this area is not done. It may take a while, but *Mother Tongue, Vol. 2* could very well have its day. ***JT***

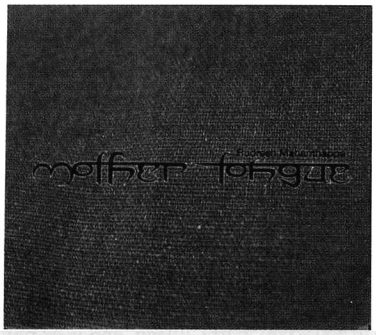
DOWNBEAT
February 2005
VOLUME 72 – NUMBER 2

Rudresh Mahanthappa

Mother Tongue

PI 14

★★★★



There's nothing new about a saxophonist using speech patterns as the basis of his solos and compositions. However, Rudresh Mahanthappa explores relatively uncharted territory on *Mother Tongue* by tapping the vivid rhythms of the various languages spoken in India.

Spurred on by Americans' widespread ignorance of diversity on the subcontinent, the altoist penned several pieces identified by its inspiring language, rounding out the album with compositions prompted by the overarching issue of preserving cultural heritage. Knowing this sharpens how one listens to the CD. Yet, both Mahanthappa and his closest collaborator, pianist Vijay Iyer, have always made music that stands on its own, without polemical support. That's the case with this quartet date, which compares well with Mahanthappa's incisive first CD, *Black Water*.

Its other merits aside, *Mother Tongue* is a fine test of the comparisons between Mahanthappa and Steve Coleman. While Mahanthappa shares Coleman's ability to effortlessly stream unusually shaped phrases, their respective sounds are quite different. Mahanthappa frequently employs a thicker, garrulous vibrato and a shenai-like cry, which, combined with his fluent use of Indian scales, sets his solos apart. Their other common trait is their compositional ability to imbue non-Western materials with a natural, vibrant swing.

Mahanthappa is particularly adept at planting rhythmic shifts in pieces like "Kannada," where several gliding bars are slipped into a metafunk groove. More importantly, Mahanthappa uses counter lines—usually stated by Iyer, who punctuates them with large chords to strengthen the harmonic fabric—to build tension. To these ends, the contributions of Francois Moutin and Elliot Humberto Kavee are critical. Not only is Mahanthappa's approach complex, he has an empathetic rapport with Iyer, making anything less than a melding of precision and passion on Moutin and Kavee's part potentially toxic to the music.

—Bill Shoemaker

Mother Tongue: The Preserver; English; Kannada; Gujarati; Telegu; Circus; Konkani; Tamil; Malayalam; Change Of Perspective. (62:31)

Personnel: Rudresh Mahanthappa, alto saxophone; Vijay Iyer, piano; Francois Moutin, bass; Elliot Humberto Kavee, drums.

Ordering Info: www.pirecordings.com