

BEYOND BORDERS

Saxophonist **Rudresh Mahanthappa**'s uniquely alchemic playing style sympathetically merges complex Indian forms with the febrile cross-cultural creativity of his native Brooklyn. A decade into these explorations, he tells **Kevin Le Gendre** how his music has reached a scorching new level of intensity on his latest album *Gamak*

Groups, not a group. This is often the case for many bandleaders in contemporary jazz who, instead of having a single, unchanging unit, shuttle between various ensembles they may also refer to as 'projects', presumably not with the sub-text of multi-million pound investment the term has for the elite brands of Premiership football.

Over the past decade, alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa has indeed established himself as an artist who conjugates the word group in the plural. The acoustic quartet deployed on 2004's *Mother Tongue* and 2006's *Codebook* stands in contrast to the duo he forms with pianist Vijay Iyer under the title of *Raw Materials*, which in turn differs considerably from Indo-Pak Coalition, a trio that comprises guitarist Rez Abbasi and tabla player Dan Weiss and debuted with 2008's *Apti*.

If that were not enough, last year saw the arrival of *Samdhi*, an electric outfit featuring guitarist David Gilmore and now comes *Gamak*, a band that unveils another fretboard daredevil, David 'Fuze' Fiuczynski, alongside members of Mahanthappa's original quartet, double bassist Francois Moutin and the aforesaid Weiss, who plays western drum kit rather than Indian percussion.

Amid this string of different configurations there is thus continuity and transition. Barely suppressing a wry chuckle on the end of the line to his home in Brooklyn, Mahanthappa knows full well that common instruments and names might disorientate as much as stimulate. "I'm trying to create as little confusion as possible," says the 41 year-old. "I don't wanna have two quartets both with guitarists called David, for example."

Irony notwithstanding, the presence of these musicians in the alto saxophonist's orbit bears testimony to the esteem in which he is held on the New York jazz scene as well as the breadth of the creative vision that he is actively pursuing. Mahanthappa, born in Trieste, Italy and raised in Boulder, Colorado, to Indian parents, has made cultural duality a prime component of the intellectual and musical premise of his work, and the direct integration of the fleet, oscillating rhythms of carnatic music as well as the modeling of his disarmingly potent tone on the shrill, stark Asian double reed instrument, the shenai, highlights that in no uncertain terms. Factor in myriad traditions in African-American music and

you have something that is resoundingly unique.

Yet it would be too crudely reductive to cast Mahanthappa as an Indo-jazz champion who is intent on furthering a form of raga-based improvisation whose previous prime movers include such as Joe Harriott, John Mayer and the somewhat overlooked Charlie Mariano.

The other spirit to invoke would be that of Amancio D'Silva, but the late London-based Goan might resonate with Mahanthappa as much for his

just say that I'm talking about us as 15 year-olds here."

Flippant as that last statement is, it should not distract attention from the wealth of hues that the instrument in question, certainly in the hands of a practitioner such as Fiuczynski, is able to create and the palette that he, Mahanthappa, double bassist Francois Moutin and drummer Dan Weiss present on *Gamak* is strikingly rich. Fuze, by way of his long-running Screaming Headless Torsos

band, has been one of the great exponents of supra-genre sounds and many of the twisted metal, bebop, R&B and Middle Eastern resonances of *Gamak* stem from his state of the art twin-bladed axe. Mahanthappa first saw him in a small club in the east village when he moved to New York in 1997, following studies at Berklee and DePaul University in Chicago. After years of mutual admiration they came together in Jack DeJohnette's Group in 2011 and both felt that their creative bond was strong. The chemistry is given full vent within the context of



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ingenious use of the central sound source of the blues as his path-finding universal vibrations. Six strings have several meanings.

"Even in our high school jazz band I was always jealous of the guitarist," says Mahanthappa. "He had all these pedals and he could scream and make all these sounds. I even tried to get in on a little bit of that action in high school. I found some funky pickup for my horn and borrowed some pedals.

"I was playing through a flanger and digital delay. I think that, playing with Fuze and Gilmore and Rez Abbasi, in some ways, I feel that I'm living out my 1980s rock guitar fantasy vicariously. It's pretty funny. There was always that sense of maybe you can get girls with a saxophone but you can always get them with a guitar. But hey, I gotta

this new project.

"The music was really written with him in mind and geared towards what he can do," Mahanthappa says of Fiuczynski. "He's playing this double neck guitar where one neck is fretless and the other fretted. He can adjust the tuning micro-tonally. There are these things he can do that are incredibly unique. Occasionally, his tone is oud-like, even akin to some of the Chinese classical instruments, but there's all kinds of stuff in there. Fuze's presence basically changes how we play."

Much as the guitar, in its polymorphous glory, is a central dynamo of *Gamak*, the overarching conceptual idea is essential. It boils down to the manner in which a theme or phrase is invested with character by the particular musician and that can mean the very precise attack on the note or the choice of additional ones for the purpose of worthwhile embellishment. The title of the album *Gamak* comes from a Sanskrit word, gamaka, but what it represents has, to Mahanthappa's mind, a very wide global ramification, despite that cultural specificity.

"It's commonly used in South Indian music to talk about melodic ornamentation," the saxophonist clarifies. "So in Indian music the ornamentation of the note is just as, if not more important than, the actual pitch of the raga.

gamaka is what gives those ragas their real personality. In some ways it lends to a greater fullness of sound. For me, with this album, being Indian-American and having this hybrid perspective on many things, I think about gamaka as melodic ornamentation as it occurs in any music, so I hear gamaka in the blues, in the riffing of a soul singer, I hear it in other types of non-western music, African music and many other types of Asian music.

"Of course I hear it in jazz as well," he continues, his pitch often rising for emphasis. "With the music on this album, I'm approaching it with the broad base that I described but that's not to say that it's random, there were a lot of discussions between me and Fuze about how to bring these melodies to life, really detailed conversations about how you approach a particular note, maybe trying to find similar or complimentary ways to do it. In some cases the melodies are a little more simple than in other things but the complexity lies in the ornamentation, not so much the raw notes of the melody or harmony.

"I didn't necessarily grow up with a whole lot of Indian classical music. I think the key is that my awareness of many elements is always there. The way I listen to Indian music and jazz doesn't differ and I see various through lines. There's a lot of Indian percussion stuff that you hear, you know Jack DeJohnette will play something that sounds like South Indian music and he may have checked that stuff out, but that's not *really* the point. The point is that there is this rhythmic language threading through *all* these different cultures and it's as ancient as anything, and the same with melody. We've all had that experience of hearing very purely non-western music that sounds bluesy as hell, like Chinese folk that is like the blues. It's just a question of perspective."

Common denominators may exist between different forms of music found at opposite ends of the planet but the artist who successfully creates new sensations in sound is more likely to be the one who has somehow internalised and synthesised a lot of information rather than the one who expressly attempts to bolt one foreign element on to another domestic one. As Mahanthappa stated, he was not greatly exposed to Indian classical music in his youth but he has researched it intensively in later years, the highpoint of which was a trip to India to study and subsequently record with saxophonist Kadri Gopalnath.

To a large extent, he is an archetypal progressive of improvised music. He has forensically investigated the arc that can be traced from Charlie Parker to Steve Coleman, drawn from elements of the former's bebop and the latter's ancient-futurism and equally integrated several of the intermediate historical stages of development, be it the funky fusion of the Brecker brothers or the widescreen post-modernism of Joe Lovano. Mahanthappa is also quick to point out that he is "a child of the 80s," and the popular music of the day and of the previous decade that impacted on him, is not something he will deny. Ask him about the virtues of Yes' *Fragile* and *Relayer* and he'll tell you not whether but how many times he listened to the music of Howe, Bruford et al.

Gamak works as well as it does is because Mahanthappa, the metrically and rhythmically advanced musician is in symbiosis with Mahanthappa the lover of mainstream western music predicated on the absolute solidity and muscularity of the beat. The overall feeling is one of a sonic vehicle with ignition and drive. It

crosses all east-west borders.

"It's that propulsive quality, that forward momentum – rock and Indian music they both have that element," he says. "They're not sitting still. There's music that is sitting still that can be amazing but I've always leaned towards things that are really chugging along and push forward, and then the trick is to figure out how to do that but imbue a lot of other qualities as well. You know, how can you make something that really stings and captivates but is maybe soft in nature and still has forward momentum. There's a lot of great rock that does that, for sure. And I think that Bird and Coltrane did that too."

This ability to see beyond musical borders is echoed by a strong cultural curiosity that unerringly shapes Mahanthappa's work. The 2004 album *Mother Tongue* was an astute response to the question 'Do You Speak Indian?' or 'Do you speak Hindu?' These were enquiries he had fielded throughout his life as a son of immigrants and it fostered the desire to make the statement that there is no single Indian language.

Beyond the linguistic multiplicity of one of the most culturally rich countries on earth, the art and science of words and symbols in the broadest sense is of enormous interest to the saxophonist and has surfaced time and time again on his discs. 2006's *Codebook* was based on cryptography, and the muse of meanings and semiotics in general, be they western or non-western, has something of a hold on him.

"My relationship with Indian languages is not that close. I'll say that for sure," he offers spontaneously. "But I love the idea of... I guess

there's something about the ancient languages. I find older words to be more encompassing somehow. I mean let's take the word unify. I think it's a very powerful word. But somehow if we look at a language that's thousands of years old and we find the word for unify maybe there's something in there. Maybe unify in that language is even broader or the fact that the idea for unification is that ancient maybe shines a brighter, more humane light on its definition.

"I think that I've always been interested in etymology. I'm also interested in how words are misused. I'm interested in typos. I love typos, I love watching captioning on, say like a news programme where it's being done live and some of the typos or maybe a lack of punctuation that changes the whole meaning of a sentence with mixed metaphors or misuse of a metaphor. I love that stuff because these other images get conjured up and it makes you rethink the words." ■

