

## Music

**“My relationship with the spirit in my instrument is such that I cannot imagine that we will ever tire of each other.”**



In an exclusive interview with *Khabar*, ZAKIR HUSSAIN, the delightful maestro, talks about his lifelong love affair with tabla. **By AJAY VISHWANATHAN**

Since my college days, I have pondered over how a favorite icon would communicate and behave if put in a room with me. I've imagined myself having *chai* with Obama, picking the brains of Anand Viswanathan, or soaking up the soft aura of Mahatma Gandhi.

When I was asked to talk to Zakir Hussain, I sat there numb, asking myself, What can I ask the maestro that has not been thrown at him a hundred times before? The mere thought of our voices coming together, of words bouncing off each other, of shared laughter, gave me goosebumps. This time, here was a man who was not sitting on stage, not on a magazine spread, not on TV; he was responding directly to me, my thoughts and comments. The feeling was dreamlike. I realized how refined and down to earth he was, exuding warmth and unending gusto. In fact, the few questions on luck and money seemed to stoke his energy further, and the conversation reached a different plane of enthusiasm. Thirty minutes of Zakir Hussain far from satisfied me, but it was enough to give me a glimpse of genius carefully cocooned in unmistakable humility and hunger to reach even greater heights.

Here are some excerpts from our interview.

**You have always mentioned that you don't usually have a choice when you're born into a**

**musical home. You are automatically inducted. The tabla rhythms were literally whispered in your ears as a newborn. So, looking back, is there any other art form that you would have liked to indulge in?**

From the age of two or three, I've been with my best friend, my tabla. My buddy, my best toy in the playpen. With that connection, I did not feel a void of any sort. Of course, I delved into the piano a little bit. I can play 30 or 40 different types of drums from around the world. Yes, I can sing a little bit. You have to have this [repertoire] to be a good supporting artist to instrumentalists or vocalists or dancers.

But I have never felt less or incomplete. For me, the tabla was the whole universe, the Milky Way—begging to be explored.

If you've been doing something for 30, 40 years, you might feel bored. That moment has not arrived yet for me. My relationship with the spirit in my instrument is such that I cannot imagine that we will ever tire of each other.

**In one of your interviews you had mentioned that when you play other instruments you sometimes develop cracks in your hand. But then when you go back to your tabla, your hand automatically heals.**

It heals. Like we say in India, every instrument has

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a spirit. Half the battle is to get the spirit to accept you as the microphone through which that spirit is going to speak to the audience.

The spirit in the instrument has accepted me as a friend and I am eternally grateful for that privilege. But that hasn't stopped me from absorbing, assimilating information of all sorts from all over the planet. In that way, I have grown as a tabla player and hopefully, made my instrument a bit more universal.

**Going back to your childhood, I heard you were paid a hundred rupees for your first public concert, which was a big deal for a 12-year-old. Comparing your thought process that day to your views today, how have your perspectives evolved on money and wealth?**

(A long sigh) If I was money oriented, I would accept each and every offer that came to me. I don't do wedding concerts. I don't do corporate or private concerts. I don't do concerts sponsored by tobacco or alcohol companies. These are principles that have been in place for 35, 40 years now. The fact is I refuse something like half-a-million dollars' worth of income every year.

I have worked hard, playing concerts all over the world. I have a small house in California. A simple Ford. My home in Mumbai is actually my parents' home. I have nothing more. From what I get, I am trying to support young musicians and bring them from India, present them over the world as much as I can. I keep a bare minimum for myself. So the point is, money is not my first criterion.

That's where my friend and wife Toni comes in. Her support is crucial. She has never questioned me, saying we should buy a flat or a special car for our daughters. Or buy some farm land. So you must take this or that assignment. It's always been: play the music you want to. So that's very important to me.

**You have said that your mother did not want you to play tabla because there was no money in it.**

Yes, there was no money in it.

**But you insisted and have shone, though.**

There was my father's support. At a very young age, when I was 14 or 15, people like Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Ali Akbar *sahib*, Vilayat Khan *sahib*

supported me. And then later on, Shivkumarji, Hariji, Amjad Ali Khan *sahib*, Birju Maharaj. They took me under their wings and gave me an outlet. They allowed me to present what I had learned. Most importantly, that gave me the confidence that I should continue.

**Didn't they do that because you were good?**

Being good is one thing. Thankfully, I was able to deliver the goods. When I played with such folks, they understood that I was young, a freshmen. They guided me. I love all of them. I was lucky I got the opportunity at that young age. I was able to come to Europe and America away from the eyes of the critics in India. So, I could develop my music without any hassles or anxiety.

**I've heard you praise your younger stars, and insist that you learn things from new artists.**



**If (the former Beatle) George Harrison thought he knew everything, he would never have become a Ravi Shankar student. If saxophonist John Coltrane felt he had achieved it all, he would not have immersed himself into Hindustani music.**

Every person you come in contact with has a different take on what you have been looking at day-in and day-out. There's always going to be a shade you have not noticed. These young musicians are frighteningly talented, incredibly superb, technically, in the way they execute. It's a great experience to play traditional art with them, and perceive it from their point of view.

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All great musicians are first great students. Only then can they reinvent themselves. Look, all the melodic elements have already been written. We have nothing new to say. So what I have to do is express it in

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a way that makes sense to today's listeners.

**You have a unique way of connecting with your audience.**

Many of us did, including Ravi Shankarji who had a disarming way of expressing. You have to have a simple style that is joyful, and makes people think you are talking to them.

**How are today's youngsters different?**

These youngsters grow up, unlike me or my contemporaries like Shivji or Hariji or Amjad Ali Khan *sahib*, learning Indian music and soaking up other world music at the same time. Whether it's Rakesh Chaurasia, Niladri Kumar, or Anoushka Shankar, they have a real-time, panoramic view of music as they incorporate it as a unified expression, giving it a wondrous touch. For example, Raga Kaushi Kanada is now being expressed using a combination of notes that's different from what was used 30 years ago. Whereas, we learnt our music first, then are becoming students again, learning other world music.



**Talking of tabla, and percussion instruments in general, that world seems to be male dominated. Why do you think that is?**

It's actually not true anymore. Right now, in India, there are female tabla players, drummers. Female *pakhavaj* or *mridangam* players. Not only in India, but all over the world. One of the most famous western drummers is Cindy Blackman, and she's really great. Terri Lyne Carrington is one of the most sought-after jazz drummers in the world.

It used to be a male-dominated society. But that is quickly changing. You see a female flying an aircraft and you don't bat an eyelid. In India, it was difficult for a young lady to be a musician and travel all over the world alone. Socially, that was unacceptable. That doesn't mean that they were not performing or learning. It's just that it was difficult.

Today, you have people like Anuradha Pal or Rimpa Shiva. All young artists traveling all over the world on their own. Anuradha will travel with, say, Shahid Parvez, and no one will bat an eyelid about a young Indian woman traveling with someone who is not a husband or cousin or brother. I am encouraged to see that.



**With so much competition around you, what role does luck play in a person's career?**

Well, anybody can have a bad night. That is where luck comes into play. You could be one of the best players on the planet, and say, Amjad Ali Khan gives you a break. He says, come and play with me. You have all that it takes. But on that day, it doesn't work. You think you're done. But if you're lucky, Amjad Ali Khan will recognize your talent. That great man will see your form or the way you approached the instrument or the way you responded to him. And he will conclude that, well, today you just didn't have it, and will decide to give you another chance.

**Has that happened to you?**

Of course. I was around 15 years old. I went to play in a festival in Nagpur. I sat down to play with this violin player and something was not right or connecting. And we were booed off stage.

That's a tough thing to take for a 15-year-old. It was a big festival and I stayed for a few more days. But nobody was willing to take me to play with them. (*laughs*). Then there were these two artists. A sitar and a sarod player. One was the son of Ali Akbar Khan, one a student. They were supposed to play but their tabla player didn't show up. So I was pressed into service.

I played with them that day, and I don't know what happened. The audience went bananas. They applauded like crazy. The *oohs* and *aahs*. I tell you, it was the most successful concert of the festival.

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And the next day, a front page photo of all three of us. That's called luck.

Another story. This was around 1972. I was in Mumbai. There was a festival called Rasik Sangam. I played with the violinist, N. Rajam. After I finished playing, I sat down in Rang Bhavan with friends and artistes, waiting for the last item, which was by Ustad Vilayat Khan *sahib*. I don't know what happened, one of the concert organizers was looking towards the audience. Then he came to us, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, Ustad Vilayat Khan *sahib* is calling you.

So I went backstage. Turned out the great Kishan Maharaj who was supposed to play tabla with him could not make it from Delhi. The concerts went late those days and it was around 12.30 at night. Ustad Vilayat Khan *sahib* looked at me and said, "Chacha, you have to play with me."

It so happened that when I was born, Ustad Vilayat Khan *sahib* had come to my father's house with toy tablas and hung them over my crib. He had said I would be a tabla player. My father asked me to call him *Chacha* but I never did. So Ustad Vilayat Khan *sahib* said that instead, he would call me *Chacha*.



And he called me that till he died.

So that day, he said, "Chacha will replace Pandit Kishan Maharaj."

I got to play with Ustad Vilayat Khan *sahib* for the first time, and that concert is still talked about. After that, he used to tell other folks, "Zakir ko bula lo. Get Zakir." That's luck for you.

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A virologist with the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Ajay Vishwanathan is also a widely published fiction author, and a connoisseur and dabbler of singing and the performing arts.