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The beat hunt

Muthu Kumar's family gave him the musical grounding. To this day, it is Zakir Husain who leads this tabaliya on, finds KALA KRISHNAN RAMESH

Photo: Murali Kumar k.



Passionate Muthu Kumar: 'What I learnt from Zakir Husain, in addition to classes, was how to make learning fun for the students'

He's one of Bangalore's best-known tabla players and teachers, a part of three bands and has the rare distinction of being taught by both Ustad Allah Rakha as well as Zakir Hussain. Muthu Kumar has been playing tabla since he was five, when fascinated by its sound in the bhajan sessions that were a routine in his mother's Puttapparthi household, he asked for one.

Muthu comes from a very musical family: his grandmother Nagammal was a Carnatic musician, his grandfather the famous "Murugadas" directed legendary musical films as "Nandanar", his brother plays the harmonium, and above all, his mother, keenly interested in music, has always been an inspiration.

Growing up, Muthu would constantly meet musicians who came to Puttapparthi and as he grew older, he was given charge of hospitality for many of them, including Zakir Husain, who first told Muthu - when he was in class 12 - that he should find himself a guru.

It was three years before Muthu could do that; he dropped a Chartered Accountancy course and - on the pretext of visiting friends - went to Bombay to meet Ustad Allah Rakha, one of whose senior students, Nishikanth Barodekar, was a friend. Before he knew what was happening, Muthu was in front of the Ustad, who asked him to play. After watching his

finger work with intense concentration, told him that he needed to “change his playing technique” and that he could start lessons immediately.

For the next five years, Muthu would go to the master’s house thrice a week to attend classes in the garage. This was 1995, and according to Muthu, the “best years that I could possibly have gone to the Master, as this time, till his death on Feb 3, 2000, he had dedicated completely to teaching.”

“He was a wonderful teacher; he gave everything to his students,” remembers Muthu, with a faraway look on his face. “His hands would be always counting, counting the bols; he would compose on the spot and ask students to pick it up on the tabla.” Muthu had to unlearn everything he had taught himself. He started from scratch and practised ten hours a day. During this time, there was nothing but tabla. In addition to learning, Muthu was also teaching tabla to children at the Amritanandamayi Ashram, where he was given boarding and lodging. He also did around 50 recordings for bhajan albums.

After the Master died, Muthu went to the US for a year to complete his training with ‘Zakir bhai’, who he describes as “my biggest inspiration”. Every class was “like a performance” and he made the tabla more accessible, but he was also traditional. “What I learnt from him, in addition to classes, was how to make learning fun for the students without compromising on discipline.”

During the year in the US, touring and playing with different types of music - gospel, hip hop, rap, dancehall, techno, funk –was so inspiring that he made his first album “Tabla Rap” and also, when he returned, took up fusion and got together with other musicians to play in bands.

Muthu is part of three bands: “Kumar and Friends”, (www.kumarandfriends.com), a nine-member band that includes his wife Priya Kalyanpur, an accomplished singer; “Taalization”, and “Atmic Vision” (www.atmicvision.com), a tabla, bamboo flute, double bass ensemble, whose first album “Expanding Horizons” released this year.

Muthu’s word to those interested in music as a career is, “the money is pretty decent, because musicians are required at every level”. Muthu has around 60 students in the city, and also teaches through his website www.singingdrums.com. He loves teaching because “... seeing a student playing well is great, and I get to strengthen my basics.”

Band width

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