

Ustad Shujaat Khan transcends Indian classical music

Written by Anupma Khanna | Dehradun
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Sporting a funky colourful watch, a vivacious 'ultra-cool' disposition and an attitude that reflects the fluidity of changing times; Sitar maestro Ustad Shujaat Khan transcends traditional stereotypes of Indian classical music in ways more than one. His relaxed manners, natural wise-cracks and a remarkable sense of humour are perfect compliments to a man who has suffered much in life for the cause of his independence.

The seventh generation torchbearer of the embellished legacy of the Imdad gharana that has produced many a virtuoso, Shujaat has in fact cemented a distinct identity of his own. His intuitive genius and spontaneous versatility have floored music aficionados in Asia, Africa, North America and Europe.

He is one of the five Indians who made it to Amazon's 100 greatest music albums in the world in 2009 and has won honour from the United Nations, a Grammy nomination and more. However, for him, reaching the boulevard of fame had its share of toil and tears.

"During my music training years, I was a completely dedicated and submitted disciple of my prodigious father. At times, after strumming the strings of the Sitar for several exhausting hours, overnight practice that would make my fingers bleed, he felt that I wasn't good enough. When I performed, there was always the burden of matching the sky-high expectations set by my father. Treading the path carved by your forefathers is not all glitzy like it appears. The journey is beset with travail," he told The Pioneer.

Visiting the State capital for a concert organised by SPIC MACAY, the humble artist indulged in a forthright conversation with the paper, dwelling on his strained relationship with his father (the iconic Sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan), the decade of struggle that followed and other subjects close to his heart.

"Whenever there is an overlapping of relationships, one of them suffers. I had a perfect relationship with my Ustad Vilayat Khan as a teacher and student of music. But our father-son bond strained. Though an extraordinary musician, he was a very difficult man to live with and I was absolutely resolute and independent. Consequently, we had many a skirmish. At the age of 17, I left home to carve my own life. And hip as it may sound to the Gen X, a rebellion is not easy to stomach. Sleeping exposed in public parks, washing utensils to fund your food, no certainty of your present or future and devoid of familial support, it is a very tough call."

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Reminiscing poignant memories, he went on.

“Sample this — I was admitted in a hospital in South India suffering from an acute kidney infection. Almost everyday, a patient in my ward would die and I was engulfed in this biting fear of losing my life. I was all alone then. As my health deteriorated, I became unable to get out of my bed and in desperation asked a fellow patient to look out of the window and describe the outside world to me. He talked of a beautiful lush garden with flowers blooming as I closed my eyes and transposed myself to this imagination. In a few days that man died while I survived. The day I was leaving, instinctively I walked to that same window and stood stunned. There was no grass, no flowers; but only a plain unattractive building. His description of a garden that didn't exist was the language of a hapless man's hope.” Here are more excerpts from the interview:

Q: Any trend in contemporary music scenario that you find unpleasant?

Ans: Overall, music is doing well around the world. Classical music still has its set of followers. However, I disapprove of lewd lyrics popularised internationally in rap and funk music genres. Brash songs shouting of underwear and gun killings! They reflect a subconscious perversion and mental aberration. Also, these days we come across self-proclaimed Sufi singers at the drop of a hat, most of them inauthentic. Sufi is not in the name of religion. It is singing in praise of anything that is paak, clean.

Q: Tell us about your family

Ans: I have a wife who is from Dehradun and two children. My daughter is 27-year-old and is a product designer in Mumbai while my son, Azhan Khan, aged 23 is a passionate Sufi composer and singer. He trained under AR Rahman in Chennai and is launching his first album next year.

Q: Did you always desire either of your children to be a musician?

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Ans: Not at all! I was rebelliously independent myself as a youth and have always given my children the freedom to shape their lives while instilling in them a sense of responsibility and righteousness. I am happy that Azhan has taken up music but would have been equally delighted had he chosen another calling.

Q: And what would be of the baton of your musical family legacy then?

Ans: This is a myth. In real terms, no artistic lineage actually comes to a stop ever. Had it not been my own children, my cousins and students would have carried forward our legacy. We are not larger than music, music is ceaseless.

Q: What do you enjoy during leisure time?

Ans: Oh, I love traveling. Besides the popular destinations of Europe and America, I dig exploring adventurous spots; Mongolia, Siberia, I have done them all by now!

Q: What does happiness mean to you?

Ans: Happiness is living the NOW!