

autorickshaw develops Indo-jazz-funk

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autorickshaw's Suba Sankaran and Ed Hanley laugh heartily when I tell them that no one knows where to lump them.

Last week, their album, *So the Journey Goes*, was nominated for a Juno Award in the World Music Album of the Year category.

Last October, it was also nominated for two Canadian Folk Music Awards, and the group was named one of Toronto Life's top five jazz acts of 2007.

So, are they a world, folk, jazz or -- as I have described them in the past -- an Indo- jazz-funk group?

Sankaran jokes that the beauty of being hard to categorize "is that between folk festivals and jazz festivals and you-name-it, we stay employed."

But, the drag about being tagged, Hanley says, is that "someone who's a jazz fan might think, 'I don't like world music,' and they won't even give us a chance. Or world music people will think, 'I don't get jazz so I'm not gonna bother giving it a try.' "

Sankaran says that as autorickshaw evolves and embraces more styles, it will "get further and further into this grey area of 'Is it a jazz band? Is it a world band?' Well, we're a little bit of everything and hopefully that'll come across not as a jack of all trades but rather a master of some."

Categories aside, autorickshaw has developed a reputation for artfully weaving together elements of contemporary Western and Indian music since forming five years back. Its core members -- Sankaran, a superb singer and pianist and Hanley, a versatile tabla player -- both hail from a classical Indian background and so autorickshaw's sound boasts the complexity, emotion and beauty you hear in Indian music.

If anything, the innovative group's series of concerts this year at Lula Lounge -- each featuring new material and a special guest -- will further confound the category-obsessed.

Take Tuesday's show, for example. Percussionist Mark Duggan -- who's worked with The National Ballet of Canada Orchestra, the Latin ensemble *Vuja De* and the percussion group *Nexus* -- joins Sankaran, Hanley, bassist Rich Brown, and percussionist Patrick Graham to add a new spin to his and autorickshaw's compositions.

"We're very happy about how everything is sounding," Sankaran says. "If it's autorickshaw repertoire, it's got a new texture and Mark's pieces have an interesting autorickshaw spin. It's exciting having him on the show because he's a percussionist and we already have two drummers, but he's found a way of making his own sonic space so that he's not treading on the toes of the other drummers."

Hanley points out that Duggan's marimba and vibraphone are percussion instruments, but they're also harmonic and melodic instruments.

"We don't have any harmonic instruments if Suba's not playing piano," he says.

"So we're essentially like an Indian chamber ensemble with two melody and two rhythm instruments, and it's like Mark's coming into that and playing a giant percussive piano. He's got all sorts of room to lay harmonic stuff down and it's free and open."

One piece that's getting the remix treatment is *Sunrise*, which appeared on autorickshaw's first disc. A stark song that just featured voice, drone and tabla, it's evolved into a piece that featured Brown "playing some false harmonics and Patrick playing some frame drum.

"Now, Mark's taking a violin bow and bowing the vibraphone to give the piece some very long haunting tones," Sankaran explains. "It kinda puts (*Sunrise*) in a very mystical place."

Listening to Sankaran and Hanley, I get the feeling that they could easily compose for or collaborate with a symphony orchestra.

"I think you're right, that the orchestra is the next giant leap for us," Sankaran says. "I think there are a lot of elements there that we can really capitalize on. You have very complex melodies and rhythms in classical Indian music and on the Western side you've got these endless possibilities of harmony, key changes and counterpoint. So, I'm really excited to dive into that."

