

## South Asian group reworks Cohen classic

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A Leonard Cohen song reworked as an Indo-jazz tune is drawing new fans to Toronto fusion band autorickshaw.

"It seems to be an entry point into our music," vocalist Suba Sankaran says of the song "Bird on a Wire" and its effect on listeners here and overseas.

"People say, `Leonard Cohen – I've been listening to him for years.'

"I say, `Really? But you live in Bangalore.'"

Last week, autorickshaw received a Juno nomination for Canadian world-music album of the year, *So the Journey Goes*, which includes the Cohen song. And for the same disc, the quartet is up for an Independent Music Award, an international prize, in the world-fusion category.

"We remain steeped in the traditions of the classical music of India," Sankaran is quick to add. "We don't want to get away from that too much and just become an avant-garde jazz band."

Autorickshaw formed in 2003 when Sankaran, a Toronto native of South Asian heritage, met Ed Hanley, a Toronto anglo-Canadian who had studied North Indian-style tabla drumming for 13 years.

They brought in Rich Brown on bass and Debashis Sinha on percussion – since replaced by Patrick Graham – and named themselves after urban India's motorized three-wheeled taxi, itself a hybrid of tradition and modernity.

They view their music as true Indian-Western fusion.

"You often hear a band doing X and Y fusion when they know a lot about Y but almost nothing about X," Hanley explained recently at a coffee shop with Sankaran.

"So they'll take an X element that is really identifiable – maybe put their guitar through an amp so it sounds like a sitar – but they're really just playing a jazz tune.

"It has nothing to do with Indian music. They've just coloured it."

By contrast, autorickshaw's musicians know Western and Indian classical forms well. In all their work they display true cultural adventurousness, their version of "Bird on a Wire" offering a handy example.

They began with a bass line that changed the 3/4 time signature to a seven-beat rhythm, like a slow 7/4, Sankaran says. They also transposed the bass line to the Lydian mode, a Greek scale that includes all the white keys on the piano from F to F.

"(The Lydian mode) has an equivalent in South India – the Kalyani raga," Sankaran says. "So we had the two sides meet."

"We manipulated the melody so we could fit into this particular mode and at the beginning I do these South Indian traditional improvisations, the authentic microtonal inflections."

Autorickshaw plays the first of three scheduled 2008 Lula Lounge concerts next Tuesday, the others slated for May 29 and Sept. 25. Tuesday's appearance includes local guests Mark Duggan on percussion and Dylan Bell on keyboards.