

Concert Review-The Record 05

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New ensemble shows why acclaim is merited

With just two CDs to their credit, autorickshaw are a relatively new ensemble that have almost instantly gained acclaim from audiences, critics and peers.

Nominated for a Juno Award for world music album of the year in 2005, they won the 2005 Canadian Independent Music Award for world music artist of the year. Those impressive credentials, combined with the hip, exotic appeal, have made them the current darlings of CBC radio.

On Friday night, at the Registry Theatre in Kitchener, the Toronto-based quartet's live performance justified the uber-hype they've been receiving.

The ensemble consists of a mash-up of four of Canada's most exciting and musically interesting young musicians: vocalist Suba Sankaran, tabla player Ed Hanley, bassist Rich Brown and exotic percussionist Debashis Sinha. All four have achieved excellence on their respective instruments. When their forces are combined, the results are utterly unique and musically pioneering.

autorickshaw's music lies on the cultural cutting edge. It parallels sociological trends in minority youth culture. The firm basis in classical ethnic tradition is given an overhaul through an infusion of popular culture style, with influences from other far-ranging and exotic cultures.

The whole mix is the musical and cultural equivalent of a masala. autorickshaw's live set consisted of traditional Indian compositions, the jazz standard A Night in Tunisia, a wild and exotic Indo-jazz cover of the Leonard Cohen classic Bird on a Wire, and various original compositions. However, this description doesn't do their set justice. Their music is so much about how they infuse traditional material with current musical styles.

The quartet bill themselves as an Indo-jazz ensemble. Cleverly, the jazz influence goes beyond a retouching and into the realm of the process. The music moves past rigid Indian classical music structures and into jazz performance methods of improvisation. Using Indian classical music rhythms and melodies as a departure point, their compositions build through improv, which includes jazz solo techniques.

Interestingly, through Sankaran's vocal work, the similarities between Indian music and jazz are highlighted.

When singing south Indian traditional music, Sankaran vocalizes syllables, which correspond to Sanskrit. When juxtaposed with her jazz vocal scating passages, the connection between the two vocal styles becomes apparent.

Ultimately, autorickshaw are the current voice of Canadian culture. Their eclectic cultural blend speaks volumes about this country's identity. They are truly an ensemble that could only come from Canada.

-By Daniel Ariaratnam for The Record Kitchener • Cambridge • Waterloo

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