

# Autorickshaw Tours South Asia

ANDREW TIMAR

**M**y last column, highlighting the music programming at the Aga Khan Museum, noted the concert appearance of Toronto's award-winning group Autorickshaw at the AKM auditorium on November 15. I attended the show to get an overview of their current repertoire, the range of which is wide and the boundaries fluid.

In addition to arrangements of South Indian classical and folk songs, original songs and numbers based on tala principles (overlapping Carnatic *solkattu* and Hindustani tabla *bols*) alternated with good-humoured ironic takes on 1970s Bollywood hit film songs. "Autorickshawified" hybrid adaptations of songs by Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen – "Bird on a Wire" rendered in a relaxed 7/4 – and the jazz standard "Caravan" were among my personal favourites. While vivacious vocalist Suba Sankaran, the heart of the group, claimed front stage centre for most of the concert, the skilled band comprised of Dylan Bell (bass/keyboards/beatboxing), Ed Hanley (tabla), with Ben Riley (drum set) and John Gzowski (guitar) stepping in for the night, shone in solos. "Caravan" was a rollicking example.

Well into Autorickshaw's second decade of genre-blending musicking, summing up its repertoire, which is very often multi-genre and transnational in reach, is not an effortless undertaking; especially so for a *persnickety listener like me*. Autorickshaw's website nevertheless helpfully weighs in, situating its music "on the cultural cutting edge, as contemporary jazz, funk and folk easily rub shoulders with the classical and popular music of India."

That statement makes such hybridization sound like an easy reach. It's anything but. Anyone who has seriously attempted it, or listened to fusion experiments where genres from across the world "easily rub shoulders," knows how easy it is to fail to satisfy musical expectations – and for many reasons. In fact it is one of the most difficult forms of musical alchemy to pull off effectively and gracefully. Having persevered as a group for a dozen years Autorickshaw is proof that diligent work in the transcultural song mines can pay off. In their case it's been rewarded with two JUNO nominations for World Music Album of the Year and the 2005 Canadian Independent Music Award. In 2008 they were awarded the John Lennon Songwriting Competition Grand Prize in World Music, in addition to the CAPACOA Touring Artist of the Year.

Autorickshaw's web statement also accurately geographically locates the overlapping bi-continental musical territories the group primarily explores: North America and the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore testing the effectiveness of such transculturalism in the fire of international audiences via touring seems an essential part of the group enterprise. Autorickshaw has done just that. It's been on the road exporting its "Canadian-made Indo-fusion" not only across its Canadian home base, the U.S.A. and Europe, but also to India during a three-week tour in late 2006.

As I write this the Autorickshaw Trio consisting of Sankaran,

Hanley and Bell is preparing for an unprecedented two-month subcontinent-wide tour of at least two dozen dates in ten projected cities in India and Nepal (in Pokhara and Kathmandu). Departing Toronto on November 28, "we are acting as our own agents, mainly cold-calling our way to India and Nepal" wrote Sankaran in an email interview, building on "contacts [made] the last time we toured India." She further predicted that "once on the ground, we will likely be approached to do other performances in the various regions we are touring. This happened the last time around as well, so we're trying to build some buffer time for that."

I asked about the sort of venues they will be playing. Sankaran commented on their diversity. "We are doing a variety of shows, from soft-seaters to outdoor festivals, from clubs to hotel dates, house concerts, workshops in ashrams, and collaborating with string and choral departments in schools; the majority are performances, [but] we're offering some workshops as well."

The incentive for the tour initially came from the group's desire to commemorate, on December 3, 2014 the 30th anniversary of the Bhopal "gas tragedy," widely considered the world's worst industrial disaster. Sankaran and Hanley have a personal commitment to the affected people of that city. In 2009 they co-wrote and recorded the song "The City of Lakes." All proceeds from the song go to the Bhopal Medical Appeal which funds two local clinics offering free healthcare to thousands of survivors. While in Bhopal the Autorickshaw Trio will also appear as the opening act at the Indian premiere of the motion picture about the disaster, *A Prayer for Rain*, starring Martin Sheen. Another focal point of the tour is the promotion of songs from its strong new album *Humours of Autorickshaw*, in newly-minted trio arrangements.



Autorickshaw  
(from left) Dylan Bell,  
Suba Sankaran, Ed Hanley

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