

Musicians without borders

Mumbai's expat musicians tell us what brought them here, and made them stay on

COMMUNITY

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WE meet Anthony Cammarota for the first time at a gig in Andheri on Thursday night. He is from southern California and, these days, teaches guitar at True School of Music (TSM) in Lower Parel. Cammarota's first visit to India was for a holiday in 2005. Then, in 2006, his friends Zoya Akhtar and the late Karan Johar convinced him while they were in the US to pack his bags and shift to Mumbai, which is where he's based now.

Jazz musician D Wood's love affair with the city began a lot earlier, in 1984. He's also originally from California. But India keeps calling him back. "It spits me out and

then pulls me back with a better deal. I have a crazy relationship with this country," he says.

So, it seems, does Ramon Ibrahim, a music director and instrumentalist who also works on Bollywood projects. He landed here from the UK in 2011 and never went back. Why? "I could see progress happening in Bollywood. My whole life is a day-to-day thing, so that I see how this month is going and how the next one is looking, and at no point has there been an unreasonable dip here. If someone told me, 'Come to New York, I'll book you up with work, why wouldn't I go? But that hasn't happened, and so I've stuck around.'"

Heather Andrews, however, has returned to her native London for a few months to evaluate her prospects. She, too, was courted by friends in 2004 to forge a career in Mumbai, and is coming back in January next year. "The collaborations and performances I had were beyond anything I had dreamt of back in London. I'm also a novelty [in India], being a foreigner and female. Sadly, I think this gives me opportunities Indian musicians would not have been offered," she confesses.

The common thread between these people, then, is that they are not short of work, and this reflects how the western music industry has taken shape in India. Think of the '80s. Back then, Back Machine was the only Indian band coming up with anything original. Schools like TSM were unheard of and if young-

sters proposed picking up the guitar as a profession, parents were likely to point them towards an engineering book. But now, cross-border cultural exchanges are so common that even Indian bands are playing in festivals abroad.

This gives the community of expatriate musicians in the city a place under the sun that, possibly, they might not have found back home. Wood runs Bandra Base, a jazz club in the city, and says, "In the US, you are a second class citizen if you don't own a car. But here, I can live happily with a lower carbon footprint and lower down on the food chain, even though we get invited to classy corporate gigs and make tons of money just to play jazz."

Ibrahim adds, "I feel a lot of hope, it's a flourishing scene now. People are taking it a lot more seriously than before."

Nonetheless, Cammarota points out that his provocation does pose certain barriers. "I am an alien here. People are alien to me as I am to them, and it's crazy. But you break those boundaries as a person, as a human being, because there's honesty, and that's what it comes down to," he signs off.



'India spits me out and then pulls me back with a better deal. I have a crazy relationship with this country'

D Wood



Ramon Ibrahim at a gig in Andheri



D Wood at a gig in Andheri



Shrinashir Sen at a gig in Andheri

Ramleela for tiny tots

Hand-crafted puppets and Ravana with balloon heads await kids at an interactive retelling of the Ramayana

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A BASKET of fruit is passed around among the young audience, as Lord Rama and Sita pluck berries from a tree while on vanvas. And as Sita chases the golden deer through a narrow alley amidst the spectators, their little eyes widen in wonder. True to tradition, Lord Rama's victory over Ravana is also celebrated by shooting arrows at his effigy — this one has balloon heads — as the kids join the vanar sena temporarily. Who doesn't like pricking balloons, after all? That's how this version of Ramleela unfolds.

"The city has a lot of toffee children aged five and above, but toddlers aren't as lucky. Moreover, most kids grow up with English rhymes, and in-



Kids help Sabha Shandula (left) set Rama and Sita on sail

ing Disney characters. Through Ramleela: Believe the Story, we want to nurture ethnic pride among children, making Indian references accessible and relatable along with keeping this rich oral tradition alive," shares Pratiksha Seth, one of the directors of Grooming Babes, an initiative that curates engaging content for children.

In its fifth year, the puppet drama has had over 100 successful shows. It also won a state-level award last year. The show is hosted by veteran puppeteer and academician Sabha Shandula

along with puppeteer and storyteller De Puja Jain. "Fine features don't work with such a young age group. So, this time, the puppets are slightly bigger," says Shandula, who has crafted her own puppets and is also the lead narrator. "It's not just telling a tale, it's about keeping the little ones engaged. For instance, to introduce the context of King Dashratha's promise,

we ask kids if they keep their promise of going to bed on time," she adds.

To help them retain what they see, a puppet kit is provided to the young viewers in the end. They are asked to create their own puppets and retell the story to friends and family.

"It's not about teaching mythology to children. We want to aid raising emotionally secure individuals, with high self-esteem," says Seth. The team,

which has also staged a dance drama of Tagore's Chitrangada using ballet and Indian classical dance, among other productions, is now working on Mumbai Panchsankh's classic, Eidgah. "In the age of instant gratification, how do you believe you have enough? Nobody could have given a more beautiful answer to this question than Panchsankh," Seth concludes.

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