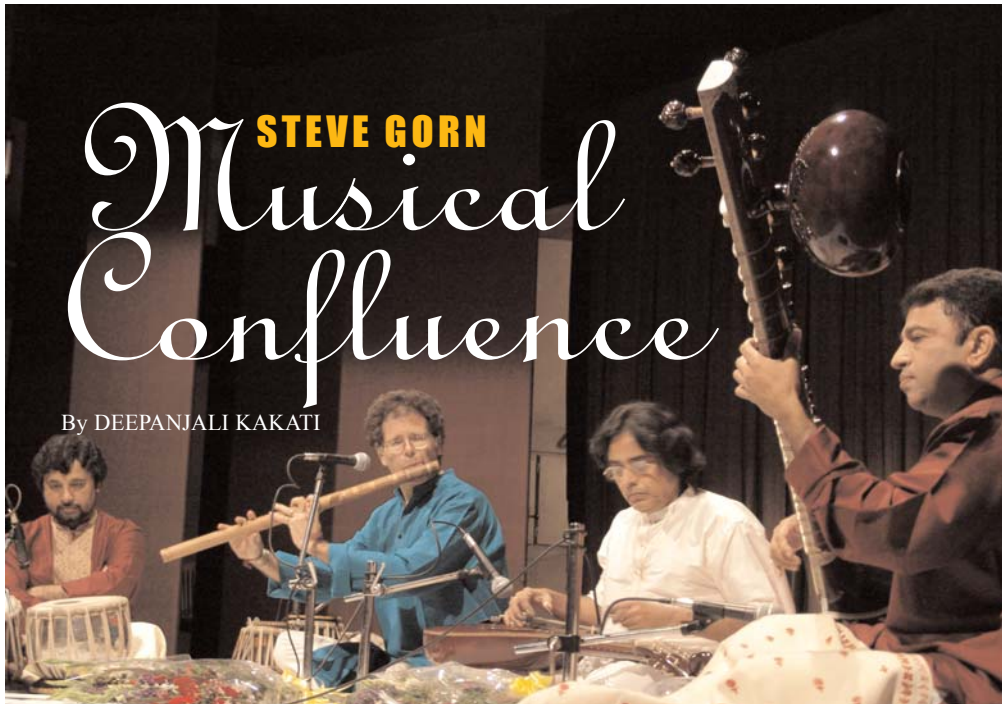


STEVE GORN Musical Confluence

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI



HEMANT BHATNAGAR

(From left) Samir Chatterjee, Steve Gorn and Barun Kumar Pal are among the musicians performing at the Triveni Kala Sangam in New Delhi on February 20, 2006.

The smooth ragas flowing out of the bamboo flute offer a unique experience for Indian audiences. The flutist is an American virtuoso, Steve Gorn, who performs with such expertise that music lovers can close their eyes and believe they are listening to an Indian musician.

“Steve Gorn has adapted Indian classical music on the *bansuri* so nicely and properly that one should feel proud of him,” says Indian master flutist Hariprasad Chaurasia.

Gorn comes to India regularly to perform in concerts and festivals; this year at the Salt Lake Music Festival in Calcutta, Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal and several *baithak* programs in Varanasi. He wound up with stirring performances at the Triveni Kala Sangam and Sri Aurobindo Ashram in New Delhi in February.

Born in New York City, Gorn grew up with a lot of Western classical music in the house as his father was a concert pianist. But long before he went to university, Gorn was drawn to jazz, which he played on the tenor saxophone and later the Western flute. His early influences included John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Eric Dolphy and Charles Mingus. Elaborating on what drew him to Indian music, Gorn says, “It was the way John Coltrane and others were beginning to incorporate elements of Indian music in their approaches.”

He started his career as a jazz musician studying composition at Pennsylvania State University. Around that time Gorn discovered the ethereal sounds of Bismillah Khan’s *shehnaï*, Ravi Shankar’s sitar and Ali Akbar Khan’s sarod. Hooked, Gorn followed the musical trail to India and one evening in 1969 found himself in a boat on the Ganges, with noted *sarangi* exponent Gopal Misra. “I suddenly saw how this music went beyond notes, beyond what we think of as music. How it is, in truth, a yoga, a form of meditation...,” says Gorn.

Inspired, he started studying the *shehnaï* with a teacher in Varanasi. “I knew nothing about India when I first arrived other than having this Western notion that somehow that music was connected to jazz and so I studied the *shehnaï*.” The first of many turning points in his career came when Gorn went to a *mela* at Maihar in Madhya Pradesh. There he heard sitar maestro Nikhil Banerjee play Raga Bhairav. “And I knew I wanted to sign up for this musical journey for life,” he remembers.

In 1970 Gorn moved to Calcutta where he was invited to meet another virtuoso flutist, Gour Goswami. Gorn had already started playing the flute in Varanasi. When they met, Goswami asked Gorn to play something. “When I finished, Gour Goswami said, ‘You have a good sense for this music, but you have not been taught properly.’ He then took out his flute and played for me. The tone was deep, warm and velvety... The raga unfolded and time stopped.” Gorn went on to tour with Goswami, earning the appreciation of discerning Indian audiences and critics. On his return to the United States a year later Gorn introduced the American pop world to the evocative strains of his flute and recorded with Paul Simon, Richie Havens, Paul Winter, Glen Velez. His current teacher is Raghunath Seth of Mumbai who fortunately, says Gorn, “visits the States every year, where we can sit for long sessions.”

Gorn’s flute has found media for expression in concerts, albums, musical scores for films, videos, theater and dance productions. He performed on Paul Simon’s Grammy-nominated CD *You’re the One* and played music in *Ram Dass: Fierce Grace*, a documentary by Mickey Lemle on the American spiritual teacher. The soaring ragas of his flute also featured in the soundtrack of *Born Into Brothels*, a film on children of prostitutes growing up in Calcutta’s red-light district, which won the Academy Award for



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Best Documentary Feature in 2005. “I was given the liberty to improvise musical cues to the picture. That way, I could follow every visual nuance,” he says.

Gorn continues to bridge genres with his recordings in categories including world music, pop, folk, jazz and New Age music. “Over the past few years many people in the West have found my music to be the perfect accompaniment or soundscape for yoga.”

His signature sound, blending classical Indian tradition with contemporary world music, produces a melody that appeals to Western audiences. The future has much in store for those who enjoy this *jugalbandi*. “I think when the craze for Indian classical music started in the 1960s it was a lot more superficial than it is now. Today there are people who are studying it, there are more opportunities to see concerts and there seems to be a real genuine appreciation for this magnificent music.” □