

New dawn for Rajasthan's folk musicians

An annual five-day festival celebrates the rich music of India's largest state – and beyond. Simon Broughton reports from this year's event

The setting for the Jodhpur Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF) is a 15th-century hilltop fort – one of the most spectacular in India. Concerts take place at sunrise, moonrise and throughout the day in its gardens, courtyards and sumptuous rooms. “We’re a destination festival,” says artistic director Divya Bhatia. “You need to be here to experience it and it’s timed to coincide with Sharad Purnima, the brightest full Moon of the year.”

A sunrise concert on a high plateau near the fort starts at 5.30am, the pre-dawn sky dark, the musicians barely visible. As the Moon recedes, glowing like a sunset, the five players become silhouettes. Then the sun catches their red turbans while the air grows warmer.

The first group are Meghwals from the local weaving community of the Marwar region around Jodhpur. Specialising in meditative Hindu prayers or bhajans, the singers are Hindu, but the accompanying musicians are Muslim. As the dawn progresses, the music gradually increases in pace – powerful vocals accompanied by a plucked lute, small hand cymbals, and the irregular rhythms of a dholak drum, played on each end of the instrument.

Next comes a troupe of Manganiyar, a hereditary musician community in Rajasthan celebrated for its virtuosity. The players are Muslim, but sing songs for their Hindu patrons – the state is rich in this syncretic music that transcends religious boundaries. When the concert ends at 7.30am the day is already hot and the Mehrangarh fort in the background blazes orange in the suns.

The five-day Jodhpur RIFF, now in its 17th edition, is hosted by the Mehrangarh Museum Trust and its



Above: dawn concert at this year's Jodhpur RIFF. Left: Sumitra Das Goswami performed wedding songs from the female point of view

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chair, Maharaja Gaj Singh II, hereditary ruler of Marwar (Jodhpur state). India's maharajas were stripped of their titles, privileges and privy purse in 1971, yet Bapji, as he is affectionately known, commands huge respect, with

people touching his feet when they encounter him.

As a fan of Rajasthan's music, when Gaj Singh married in 1973 he arranged for a group of local Langa musicians – another hereditary community – to

play in both Jodhpur and Delhi. “I feared they might be the last surviving group of musicians, but I took them to Delhi to give them more exposure and they were very well received,” he says.

Pre-independence, musicians would have played for the Maharaja at a huge number of royal and religious events, but now his resources are much diminished. So while there is support from the trust, there is also a greater reliance on tourism and ticket sales.

“Tourism can help, but it is a double-edged sword,” Gaj Singh says. “It can earn musicians a living, but at the same time it dilutes the authenticity. You have an audience that doesn't understand the music so it becomes limited.” When local musicians are playing to tourists they tend to concentrate on a small selection of familiar pieces that get a good response, rather than sustaining the deeper repertoire.

Rajasthan is India's largest state, and

20th century. Sultan Khan, who died in 2011, was one of the latter's most celebrated players and Dilshad Khan's principal teacher. The classical sarangi is larger, more resonant and is played with a song-like lyricism. The folk sarangi is more earthy and free from the complex raga structures that classical musicians have to follow. What makes the performance so engrossing is hearing two masters playing the same instrument in two different styles, making the enormous potential of the sarangi apparent in a very focused way.

Asin Khan lives in a village about 60km from Jodhpur, whereas Dilshad Khan spends most of his time in Mumbai, and though they hadn't played together until recently, they meet as equals. Indeed, part of RIFF's success has been in giving folk musicians the respect they deserve. The Maharaja admits that, in former times, folk musicians were at the bottom of the pecking

“The festival is a force against feudalism, casteism and religious communalism,” adds Bhatia. “And to make people see the value of this music – most will never have heard anything like it, and most of the visitors are from India.” The festival also attracts a healthy number of foreigners – some 15-20 per cent of the approximately 3,500 people who attend each evening concert.

Among the Rajasthani musicians in the final concert was Sumitra Das Goswami, performing wedding songs from the female point of view, rarely heard outside of a wedding. “RIFF is a huge platform for folk artists of Rajasthan, who are scattered in many different villages across the state,” she says. “A lot of artists were discovered here and have made it abroad.” Sumitra is one of them, having recorded and performed with Laura Marling and Mumford & Sons

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at concerts in London and Bradford. RIFF also has its international performers, with musicians from Norway, Estonia, Azerbaijan, Mauritius and Korea. Among the highlights are Estonia's Puuluup (“Wood Loop”), a brilliant duo reviving the talharpa – a moribund plucked and bowed Estonian folk instrument – with looper pedals and electronics. They were part of Estonia's Eurovision entry earlier this year, where their sophisticated music and irrepressible wit ensured they scored pretty badly. But at RIFF they are crowd favourites, the audience warming to their inventive, folk-derived music and amusing stage presence, and dancing in a frenzy in a palace courtyard well beyond midnight.

The Maharaja tells me that, as well as faithfully preserving tradition, he feels RIFF should be stimulating the creation of new Rajasthani music. Perhaps Puuluup can be an inspiration.

Rajasthan is India's largest state, and has an incredibly rich diversity of music and instruments, though with urbanisation and digitalisation traditional musicians are suffering. This was one of the reasons for the founding of RIFF, which has since broadened its remit to include musicians from other parts of India and abroad – more than 400 performers this year.

Among the highlights are two instrumentalists: Asin Khan and Dilshad Khan, on sarangi, one of Rajasthan's most sublime stringed instruments, played with a bow. A speciality of the Langa, it has three playing strings, but also 20 or so sympathetic strings, which resonate behind the melody and lend the instrument a haunting, ethereal aura.

Asin Khan plays in a folk style, Dilshad Khan in a classical manner. The folk sarangi is the original while the classical instrument was developed in the

musicians were at the bottom of the pecking order and many of them wouldn't have been allowed into the fort.

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**Local musician
Dilshad Khan
plays the sarangi**

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