

# NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL MASTER FOUND COLLABORATORS WORLDWIDE

With microscopically precise beats and melodic tones, drummer found his musical place alongside luminaries such as Ravi Shankar and forged global hybrids with the likes of John McLaughlin, George Harrison and Herbie Hancock

YAN ZHUANG

Zakir Hussain, a percussionist and composer who was both a master of North Indian classical music and a linchpin of far-reaching world-music fusions, died Saturday in San Francisco. He was 73.

His death, in a hospital, was from the lung disease idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, his family said in a statement. He lived in the Bay Area.

Mr. Hussain earned the honorific Ustad, given to Muslim virtuosos of Hindustani (North Indian) classical music. He performed and recorded extensively with leading Indian musicians, including Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Shivkumar Sharma. His main instrument was the tabla, the tuned drums that accompany Indian classical ragas, but he also played many other traditional and modern instruments.

Mr. Hussain's work reached well beyond the Indian classical tradition to forge global musical hybrids. With English jazz guitarist John McLaughlin, Indian violinist L. Shankar and Indian percussionist T.H. Vinayakram, he formed the group Shakti in 1973. Shakti was not only an East-West fusion, but also, with its two percussionists, a fusion of North and South Indian rhythms.

Mr. McLaughlin, Mr. Hussain and three other Indian musicians regrouped as Shakti to record the 2023 album *This Moment*; it won a Grammy Award this year for best global music album.

Mr. Hussain shared two more Grammys this year — for global music performance and contemporary instrumental album — for the album *As We Speak*, a collaboration by Mr. Hussain, banjo player Béla Fleck, bassist Edgar Meyer and Indian bansuri (bamboo flute) player Rakesh Chaurasia.

Through the years, Mr. Hussain performed and recorded with George Harrison, Van Morrison, Yo-Yo Ma, Pharoah Sanders, the Japanese drum group Kodo, Herbie Hancock and Charles Lloyd.

He also composed soundtrack music and orchestral works, and until recently he played more than 150 concerts a year. To every performance, he brought an eagerly attentive presence, beaming as his hands flew over his tabla drums to deliver fleet, microscopically precise beats and melodic tones.

At the ceremony where he accepted the 2022 Kyoto Prize, a Japanese lifetime achievement award in the arts and sciences,



Zakir Hussain, seen during a 2022 performance in Juan-les-Pins, France, played music late into his life and was a collaborator on the record *As We Speak*, which won Grammys for global music performance and contemporary instrumental album earlier this year. ERIC DERAUX/REUTERS

Mr. Hussain said: "I am from India representing the age-old tradition of North Indian classical music. The way it was played 500 years ago — same way it is being played now, performed now. The difference now is we not only are doing our music, Indian classical music, but we are also learning how to be able to talk our music in as many different musical languages as possible, because the world has become small."

Zakir Hussain Qureshi was born on March 9, 1951, in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. He was the eldest son of Ravi Shankar's long-time tabla drummer Alla Rakha Qureshi. His mother, Bavi Begum, oversaw the household while also taking care of her husband's students. She changed his surname to Hussain a few days after he was born, on the advice of a saint, he said.

Zakir played his first paid concert when he was 12. He became a session musician performing Indian film music, which often fused an international assortment of styles. He made his United States debut at 18, playing with Ravi Shankar at the Fillmore East in New York in 1970, when his father was ill, and con-

tinuing with Mr. Shankar on tour.

In San Francisco, he joined jam sessions with the Grateful Dead and recorded with band members on the 1971 solo album by the Dead's drummer Mickey Hart, *Rolling Thunder*.

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ZAKIR HUSSAIN  
MUSICIAN

Mr. Hussain studied and taught ethnomusicology at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he earned a doctorate. He moved to Northern California to teach at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael, where he led the Tal Vadya Rhythm Band, a cross-cultural, percussion-centered group.

Mr. Hart joined the group in 1975, and led by him and Mr. Hussain, it was renamed the Diga Rhythm Band. It released a debut album, *Diga*, in 1976, featuring the Dead's Jerry Garcia as guest guitarist. One of its tracks, *Happiness Is Drumming*, was reworked into the Dead's song *Fire on the Mountain*.

Mr. Hussain often joined Mr. Hart through the years, on projects including the 1991 album *Planet Drum*, which won the first Grammy Award for world music album. Global Drum Project — a group with Mr. Hussain, Mr. Hart, Puerto Rican percussionist Giovanni Hidalgo and Nigerian percussionist Sikiru Adegboju — also won a world-music Grammy, in 2009.

In 1978, Mr. Hussain married Antonia Minnecola, a dancer in the Indian classical style Kathak. She was also his manager. He leaves her, along with their daughters, Isabella and Anisa Qureshi; two brothers, Taufiq and Fazal Qureshi; a sister, Khurshid Aulia; and a granddaughter.

Through the years, Mr. Hussain appeared on hundreds of albums, equally at home with Indian classical traditions and fresh

multicultural hybrids. He recorded dazzling tabla duets with his father and extended, introspective ragas with leading Indian musicians. In 1991, he started a label, Moment Records, to release his classical and contemporary collaborations. Eight years later, producer Bill Laswell and Mr. Hussain assembled *Tabla Beat Science*, a project that merged tabla drumming and electronics, leading to a studio album and a tour.

Throughout his career, Mr. Hussain continued to forge kinetic musical alliances.

"Music is a conversation that happens amongst people," he said in an interview with *India Today*. "And it happens to be a process or an exercise which transcends all borders and all fences, all religions, all other ways of life, and it's a living process unto itself."

"If people all over the world would consider interacting with each other the way the musicians and the artists all over the world interact with each other," he continued, "we would have a much more peaceful planet."