

Someone asked: isn't it difficult to read a book about jazz when you don't like jazz? Someone knows me well: it's true, I've never cared for the music that the Marsalises and Monks produce. Yet without fully knowing the difference, I've always liked the brassy sound of big-band, the riffs and improvisations of rocking blues and the infinite sexiness of trumpets and saxophones. No, it wasn't difficult to read this book, because maybe it's not really about jazz, and maybe that doesn't even matter. Yet, sounds from a time that Indian jazz flowered seem somehow to leap off most of its pages (not just because it comes with a CD). This, despite Naresh Fernandes's forlorn observation that "only a pile of yellowing press clippings and faded programme notes remain to fuel our imaginations about what many of these jazz musicians actually sounded like."

And in so fuelling, they soak you in nostalgia. Hard to stave that off! So you can see *Taj Mahal Foxtrot* as another Dr Seuss contraption, this one producing nostalgia on demand. The city Fernandes describes is a long-vanished Bombay, the stuff of memories of which there are fewer and fewer people left to hold on to and flesh out. He mines those memories to etch a vivid, vibrant portrait of a city, a too-brief stretch of time, in detail that is loving and thorough.

But maybe it's not about nostalgia either. As I neared the book's end, I wondered if it was so. What is this book, really? History? Music? Anthropology? Journalism? The urban experience? The indulgence and exploration of a passion? Or is it all these?

The question to ask, perhaps, is whether it matters. The quantity and quality of research on view here is staggering. Fernandes writes with easy familiarity about musical giants of a time gone by, as if they were walking into our homes to warble out a tune or three. Somewhat amazingly though, some did just that. They walked into homes in Bombay to exchange notes, literally and otherwise, with local musicians and fans. Example: Dave Brubeck, in the '60s. For fans of the man, that must have been a treat like none other. It's a memorable feature of this time and place that Fernandes captures for us — at least in jazz, celebrity wasn't a thing made insufferable by ego. What it must have meant to striving young musicians to simply chat with the Ellingtons, the Armstrongs, just as friends would.

Some of the photographs that Fernandes has unearthed capture this mood. With Brubeck, again: in one shot, he's at the piano, pinky straight out as he plays, laughing heartily as the sitar player smiles in harmony. In another, he has his back to the piano and is hunched over, listening intently to a tabla player explain his craft to a roomful of intent listeners. Yet neither photograph even hints that Brubeck is any kind of "outsider":

Exchanging notes

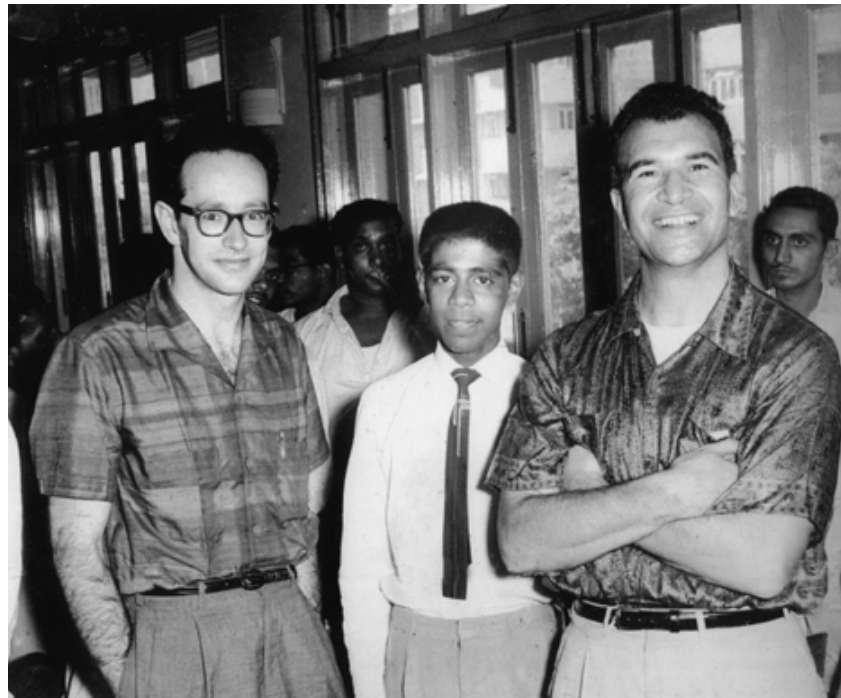
Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay's Jazz Age

By Naresh Fernandes

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DILIP D'SOUZA



Saxophonist Paul Desmond, Dizzy Sal (Edward Saldanha) and pianist Dave Brubeck at the Eros Ballroom, 7 April 1958

the music and their palaver about it brings him inside in every sense.

In some ways, that really sums up *Taj Mahal Foxtrot*. For a glorious generation or two, some of the most accomplished musicians from across the world, like Crickets Smith, Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Carson, Teddy

Weatherford, Louis Armstrong, and including Indians like Frank Ferand and Chic Chocolate, brought their talents here and made music that wove strands into Bombay's story. These strands would later become inextricably a part of this city's own definitive creation: Bollywood,

and its music in particular. Arguably the name that best typified this evolution was heavy-lidded Anthony Gonsalves, whose early passion was, as Fernandes observes, actually Western classical music. But that wouldn't put the money in the bank, so he joined the Bombay film music set. Doing so, he realised that "he actually loved the music he was playing"; it "struck me very hard in my heart and mind". Eventually he, or at least his name, achieved near-mythic fame: the manic song 'My name is Anthony Gonsalves' from *Amar Akbar Anthony* was a doff of the hat to this very Anthony Gonsalves.

The great value of this book, it seems to me, is that Fernandes underlines three features of this tale: one, that the music borrowed and incorporated influences from abroad; two, that this process of borrowing, and the intense creativity it stimulated, was Indian in the best way; three, that these are things to celebrate.

"For much of its history, Bombay, like the music I love, encouraged everyone to find their own voices within the loose confines of a stated theme", Fernandes writes in his Preface.

How do we reconcile that with the parochial bluster that too many celebrate instead today? The empty blowhards, for example, who want those who use the word "Bombay" to be "thrown out" of the city? What's to be said about people who, to beat a jazz cliché into the ground, blow their own trumpets (one of them actually used that phrase in an election rally as I wrote these words) but also insist that others play the same stultifying notes?

The real achievement of this book is that Fernandes manages to make jazz a metaphor for the city, for what it once was, what it could be. He does this despite caveats of various kinds. Isn't this just one more Western influence we can do without, that there's no reason to mourn losing? Or, this is a story



'Free Jazz' by Francis Newton Souza



Louis Armstrong, Jewel Brown and Eddie Shu at the Shanmukhananda Hall, Bombay, 1964

of the Fernandeses and Correias; where are the Guptas and Bansals? Or, isn't this just more gush about folks who have the money and the leisure to devote to jazz, often at the Taj? That is, the elite?

That occurred to Bill Coleman, a "trumpeter-memoirist" in Leon Abbey's visiting band of 1936. They played jazz, he wrote, "for a public that was mostly European — a very wealthy and select clientele." Journalist Dosoo Karaka listened to the band at the Taj and then noted: "Outside ... homeless loiterers of the night, beggar women with half-eaten breasts, poverty on the pavements. It makes me shudder." And in the early 1960s, the visiting American pianist Hampton Hawes realised that "I've never seen anybody as fucked up and pitiful as [in India] ... [they] don't even know what a piece of bread is, let alone Stravinsky or Charlie Parker."

What's the meaning of jazz when it is surrounded by squalor, when it is a "passion of the privileged" that's indulged at a top-notch city hotel? Questions worth pondering, no doubt. I don't have a better answer to that than to say, read the book. Don't just look at the pictures, read the text. To me, it makes a subtle case in defence of elitism. But a defence in the sense that the elite naturally influence the societies they live in: with their tastes, their intellectual pursuits, and in particular, their values. The joy of *Taj Mahal Foxtrot* is that it reminds us of a time when certain values meant something; when they spoke for a city.

To be sure, there are aspects of the book that grate. Half a paragraph is repeated here; over there, another half, or more, is missing. The footnotes are often a delight, but nearing the end of the book, they go haywire — like ghosts, several numbers appear in the text without corresponding notes attached. Photographs appear sometimes a baffling several pages before a reference to the characters in them. In at least one case the caption has no connection to the

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image. The binding on my copy started coming apart ten pages into reading it.

Finally, I also wished there had been more of Fernandes himself in the book. That may be an odd thing to say, because this is a result of his years of research, a triumph of his dogged and yet impassioned journalism, and the book works because he lets the men and women of an era of jazz speak for themselves. In that sense, this is Fernandes's style. Yet the occasional times when you hear his unvarnished voice, only make you wish for more. Like the footnote about a restaurant whose name stuck "despite it being at variance with the outcome of the conflict" it was named for. Like the way he paints the parallels between trends in jazz and other creative outpourings in India: poetry, literature, theatre, art. Like another footnote that tells the sparkling story about someone called Karla Pandit.

As anyone who has followed his writing knows, Fernandes seamlessly mixes humour, keen observation and an enviable way with words to always produce thought-provoking commentary. Maybe I just wanted more of that commentary. Consider the eloquent lines with which it ends:

In its heyday, in the three decades from 1935, jazz seemed to perfectly embody the spirit of Bombay, a slightly wild port city that knew that a tune sounded better when it made room for instruments of all timbres and tones; a city that could be really pretty when it took things slow but which gave you a thrill when it was working at double time; a city that forced you to make it up as you went along; a city that gave everyone the space to play their own melody the way they heard it. That era has passed.

It has indeed passed. But reminders, like this splendid book, are always welcome. Maybe we can be really pretty again. ■



The Chic Chocolate Band at the Bristol Grill on Pherozeshah Mehta Road, Bombay, 1945