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VARIED NOTES

Sitarist's musical expanse & more

Concerts, rare classical concerts, 10 rocking international music albums — albums with Jonis Hellborg, V. S. Ganesan (Kali's Son) and John McLaughlin (Flying Pterod), to name some — world music collaborations such as the Percussion trio with Zakir Hussain, and much Bollywood fare.

With just many musicians have the face of traditional classical music and the groove of fusion music going hand in hand. Not many of them have both a Sangeet Natak Akademi award and an MTV Indies award either. And even more rare is the accomplished musician who looks beyond music, an enterprising and community project. Niladri Kumar (one of the few who has been exploring it all eyes as he continues to delight music lovers across the world. And this rocking sitar maestro has particularly exciting times ahead.

For one, *Zair*, his music hub-restaurant in Mumbai, is to be reopened. *Uttarakhand*, a Kannada film in which he is the music director, will be released. Incidentally, this film is centered on a guitar player who turns a composer, while the hero is a Hindustani exponent — a plot that gives scope to an exciting musical journey.

And then, his next album is to see the launch. Can't say what genre the album comes under. It's a mix of Indian classical music and electronic dance music. In the same time, it branches on its own, says the fifth-generation musician based out

NO CONVERSATION WITH NILADRI KUMAR CAN STEER CLEAR OF THE ZITAR, THE 5-STRINGED ELECTRONIC SITAR HE HAS INVENTED.

of Mumbai. The album is as yet unnamed. "Naming an album is a tough job, even more than making it."

Uttarav — Kumar's brand name for all his projects, which includes *Zair* (the restaurant), his world music and his community project with slam kids that teaches them classical music (ironically, some of these kids have sung in a Bollywood number now with Arjit Singh) — is as groovy and happening as brand names go.

As a classical musician, one doesn't need a brand name, and one can't hardly think of another classical musician who has a brand name. But since Kumar is into as much more than music, he sees value in a brand name. It gives a three-eye view of the essence of all that he does, he says. "Actually, the name was put forth by someone



MULTI-TALENTED Niladri Kumar's 'zitar' has struck a chord with youngsters.

Kikkar, one of my students. As for what Uttarav implies — it's about being rooted locally, once this is so, the branches will grow out and find their own voice and place under the sun."

No conversation with Niladri Kumar can steer clear of the *zitar*, the 5-stringed electronic sitar he has invented. So, has it reached any extraordinary results, or are more modifications on the way? What is the logic behind having only 5 strings? Even 5 strings are too many if the music generated doesn't need it, the modifica-

tions must be in response to the music desired. The idea was to make it easy to handle and reach out to the new generation. Playing an instrument with 20 strings is hardly an easy thing to do, Kumar points out. The *zitar* has struck a chord with youngsters. Bollywood films like *Gangster, Dhoom 2* and *Azadi Ka* are a few of the many films that have chosen our music bits with its help.

The musical instrument is rooted in the 20-stringed sitar, believed to have evolved as a 5-string instrument in 17th or 18th

century. "The word '*sitar*' evolved from the word '*shitar*' in Persian. But history is also connected to mythology; there is a belief that it evolved from the reed. It's up to us to choose what we want to believe. But the *zitar* has nothing to do with the *sitar*," says Kumar.

Speaking of crossing divides, one wonders why the increasing 20-stringed sitar has not entered the Carnatic music scenario. Kumar is no stranger to Carnatic music, as his father, Karim Kumar, himself a *sitarist* and a disciple of Pandit Hari

Shankar, taught at Mumbai's Sri Shanmukhananda Sangeetha Sabha. Kumar learnt to play the *sitar* from his father as a 4-year-old, and gave his first *sitar* concert at a 6-year-old at the Sri Anandhindo Ashram, Pudukkottai.

Kumar adores Carnatic music. We can only imagine how divine he would sound on the *sitar* in a Carnatic *ritham*. "Only 3 non-South Indian musical instruments have managed to blend into the Carnatic genre — violin, mandolin and saxophone. That's because these instruments come close to the sound of the human voice. None of the North Indian classical instruments have been able to play Carnatic as their *ritham*, sometimes and microtones don't match the requirements of the genre. Having said that, I also believe that it takes a genius to tame an instrument and bring it to a new platform. Uttarakhand did it with the maddala, and Kudrat Gulshan with the saxophone. Perhaps, some genius will do it for the *sitar* some day," he muses.

Just Kumar that genius we're waiting for? "No. It needs a genius. The word used frequently these days, he says simply. The 45-year-old has an illustrious career behind him. His sublime journey with the *sitar* continues.

Niladri Kumar is performing on Saturday, June 5, 2016 at 8.30 pm, at the Art of Living International Centre, Kumbhgarh, Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
Hema Vijaya

