A Conversation with Rudresh Mahanthappa

BY DAVID R. ADLER | MARCH 1, 2017

On April 8th, SAADA will host Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive, a day-long symposium in Philadelphia bringing together artists, activists, academics, and archivists to explore ways to challenge the systematic erasure of stories of marginalized communities in America. Five artists, including Rudresh Mahanthappa, will premiere prototypes of new works inspired by overlooked histories of South Asians in the US. Learn more and register now.

Since his emergence as a serious force in jazz in the late '90s and early '00s, alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa has proven to be not only an improviser of uncommon agility and fire, but also a bandleader with a unique conceptual standpoint. His early association with pianist and fellow first-generation Indian-American Vijay Iyer had a significant impact on jazz in the new millennium; the rhythmic momentum and complexity of their frequent collaborations was derived in some ways from the Carnatic tradition but just as steeped in the free, boundlessly imaginative aesthetic of modern and avant-garde jazz.

In recent years Mahanthappa and Iyer have opted to work separately so as to foster their individual growth, but the model of diasporic jazz they helped to articulate remains influential. It has continued to shift and evolve through all of Mahanthappa's projects as a leader, co-leader and sideman, whether he's teaming with fellow alto saxophonists Steve Lehman (*Dual Identity*), Kadri Gopalnath (*Kinsmen*) and Bunky Green (*Apex*); appearing as a featured soloist with Arturo O'Farrill's Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra (*Cuba: The Conversation Continues*) and a commissioned composer with the PRISM Saxophone Quartet (*Heritage/Evolution, Volume 1*); or fulfilling a longtime dream and working with legendary drummer Jack DeJohnette in a high-powered electric quintet. In every instance, the urgency, technical command and exploratory spirit of Mahanthappa's horn continues to spellbind listeners and point the way toward new expressive frontiers.

DA: Your fellow alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón recently made an album called *Identities are Changeable*, mainly about the Puerto Rican experience. Can you speak to that idea of

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identity shifting and changing, depending on the various communities in which you've worked? For instance, I understand that growing up in Boulder, Colorado, you fell in with a group of trad-jazz or Dixieland musicians and became quite proficient.

RM: Yes, they used to converge the first Sunday of every month at this country nightclub and take over for the afternoon. The median age in there was about 70, and I was in high school or early college, and the only non-white guy too. That sort of reaching outside my immediate realm is something I was more inclined to do at a much younger age because I kind of had to. I kept looking for who were "my people." I realized that my communities were not genres, my communities were actually people.

DA: You've said that some of your early inspirations included Grover Washington, David Sanborn, even Men at Work...

RM: Any '80s rock band that had a saxophone in it, I knew all those solos. Men at Work, Supertramp, Springsteen, Huey Lewis.

DA: And ever since, your journey seems to have involved joining different communities — working as a sideman, for instance — while retaining your own core identity. In a sense, every band is a different community.

RM: True. I can't help but think that being Indian-American, I've been able to traverse a lot of racial boundaries that are unfortunately very concrete in this music. By not being black or white I think I'm able to access a lot of communities very easily, because there's no presumption about where I'm coming from. So it's really more about the music. And then stylistically too, I'm comfortable playing with [Panamanian pianist] Danilo Pérez and I'm comfortable playing with [American bassist] Mark Dresser. And I'm not changing a lot of what I do to "fit in." But someone like Dresser is considered kind of avant-garde and someone like Danilo is considered more mainstream.

DA: You wouldn't find Danilo and Mark working together, for instance.

RM: Exactly. That's what I like. I look at all the people I've played with, and a lot of them would never play together.

DA: So in a way, you can create bridges between them.

RM: Yes.

Mark Dresser Quintet at Vision Festival, Roulette (Brooklyn, June 11, 2012)

RM: It's funny, I didn't even realize it when I was getting into this music — ideas of race, ethnicity and identity were totally alien to me. I hadn't even considered them. I just thought this music was great, and music was music, and everybody should play together. It never even crossed my mind. Then when I went to the University of North Texas right out of high school, there was a fabulous tenor [saxophone] player who lived next door in the dorms, Art Hays, a white guy from Michigan, who's not really playing anymore. He said, "Man, don't you think it's really screwed up that this is a jazz program and there's only like three black students?" And it never really occurred to me. I was just like, "Wow, yeah, that *is* really screwed up."

And then when I went to Berklee [in Boston], that was actually the first time I felt kind of discriminated against by either a black community or a white community because I didn't really fit in.

DA: In terms of what you actually played on the horn, or just your identity?

RM: I think the identity kind of set the wheels in motion, and then what I played on the horn didn't really help. [Laughs] They didn't know how to categorize me artistically, aesthetically, whatever.

DA: You've told the story about playing wedding gigs and never getting called back.

RM: My first night with any wedding band was usually my last night. [Laughs] And I was really fine with that. There was this really important time in the summer of 1991, I took a gig on a cruise ship and that changed everything. A lot of [the musicians] were doing drugs, and a lot of them had kind of given up on their dreams. I also developed this problem in my shoulder where it was very painful to play. The whole thing was traumatic. I ended up back in Boulder completely demoralized, unable to play, and I decided that if the horn was going to be in my mouth, it was going to be because I was doing something I really liked. If that meant I wasn't going to play weddings or commercial gigs, then I was going to teach, because I really love teaching. It was either that or just hang it up. It was really 50/50. I was fine with hanging it up and I was seriously considering doing something else. It was that stark for me.

DA: Speaking of teaching, you started in September 2016 as the director of the jazz program at Princeton. How's it going?

RM: It's really interesting. When I was in school in the late '80s and through the '90s, there were a lot of presumptions — people assumed I was an expert on Indian music from a very young age, which was totally unfair and actually made me stay away from Indian music because there was so much baggage attached to it. I felt like I couldn't even just enjoy it, forget learn about it.

So it's interesting to come full-circle and head a jazz education program. In some ways it's a lot more wide open today, not just because of changes in jazz education, but changes in multiculturalism and globalism, etc. How a 20-year-old sees the world is very different from how we saw the world when we were 20, just because of access to information and the speed at which we can access it. The average college student's playlist is much further-reaching, and the idea of mixing genres is more of a given.

DA: Can you talk about things you're trying to implement at Princeton? Philosophies

you're trying to inculcate?

RM: The jazz program there is a very special thing because most students are probably not going to play professionally — they're at Princeton to do something else. The jazz ensembles are all extracurricular. So it's really about providing a stimulating environment for students who still want to play after high school. And it's Princeton, so you have students who are good at tons of things. That gives me a lot of latitude. We can do things that have nothing to do with "making a living." We can engage Louis Armstrong and John Zorn and we can do it all at the same time, in a way where we can see how the past informs the present. We're commissioning [pianist/composer] Billy Childs to write a large piece for the big band this spring. [Saxophonist] Walter Smith III is coming out as a guest with the small groups. The first thing I did was hire [composer] Darcy James Argue to run the big band. I can set things in motion by hiring people who are leaders in the field.

DA: I've noticed that the Indo-Pak Coalition, your trio with Rez Abbasi (guitar) and Dan Weiss (tabla), is back working again.

RM: Yes, we're remounting. We just played a bunch of new music at GlobalFEST and we're going to try to record in April. It's a little more electric now, and I'm doing some audio processing, so it's a bit of a different space.

Indo-Pak Coalition at Verona Jazz Festival, June 2009

DA: It's worth noting that guitar has played a big role in your other recent work as well.

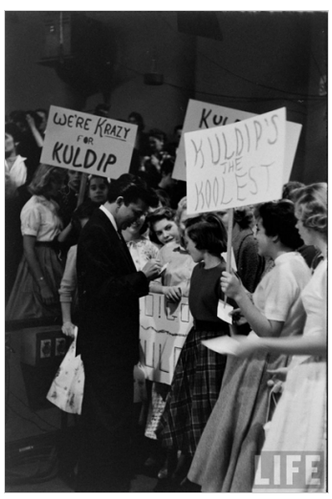
RM: Absolutely. That was a fun thing about *Bird Calls*, getting back to this piano-bass-drums rhythm section after all this guitar stuff [*Apti*, *Samdhi*, *Gamak*]. But it's great — I feel like I've gotten to work with my favorite guitarists. I never imagined I would play with David Gilmore when I saw him with Steve Coleman and Five Elements back in college.

Samdhi at Firehouse 12, New Haven, CT, November 4, 2011

Gamak at Novosadski Jazz Festival, Novi Sad, Serbia, August 11, 2013

DA: You mentioned that your project for the SAADA archive might focus on this really strange and hilarious clip of Kuldip Singh on the Groucho Marx quiz show *You Bet Your Life*. [The clip, from the mid-1950s, features Singh, an Indian-American contestant, charming Groucho and a young female contestant in conversation, then wowing the crowd with an impromptu vocal number.]

RM: Yes! Kuldip's singing is fine, but I was thinking of trying to work with snippets of the things he says, and setting those into some sort of a soundscape. Did you see the pictures of him with all his female fans?



DA: I know! It's uncanny, because the other day I just happened to watch Groucho on William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* from 1967, and he was such a downer! He even says so: "I'm a very sad man." But back to the Singh clip: I was struck by Groucho's razor-sharp wit of course, but also unfortunately the casual racism...

RM: I know...

DA: At one point he asks Singh if he rode in on a camel. At another point he calls him "cool cat" instead of Kuldip, so maybe that's our jazz angle right there. [Laughs]

RM: It's so fascinating on so many levels — how he went on to have a singing career in

Spain, then another career in Germany....

DA: You also mentioned your interest in this early wave of South Asian immigration to America, going back to the 1920s.

RM: Right. I've been learning about that mainly through the archive and I'm fascinated by it — this wave of immigrants who came way before my parents' generation. Whenever I tell other Indian-Americans that my parents came in the 1950s, they're always like, 'Wow, that was early!' My wife's parents came in '76. So it's rare that I meet somebody who came before my dad. But I just did the other day: David Balakrishnan, leader of the Turtle Island String Quartet, his dad came in the '40s and married a non-Indian. Way ahead of the game.

DA: Hearing you on this topic reminds me of your 2002 album *Black Water*, which was inspired by the idea of migration, of crossing the ocean. It's interesting to look back on your older projects, where you were grappling with issues of identity but in a different way musically than you would now.

RM: *Black Water* will be 15 years old this April, which is kind of nuts.

"Are There Clouds in India?" from *Black Water*

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I think back then it was more blatant: I was dealing with these issues head-on. Coming to New York was the first time I really got to interact with an Indian-American artistic community that seemed to have ... "unity" is not the right word, but some sort of cohesion. Something that went beyond camaraderie, some sort of mission and message. So these things were very much at the front of my mind. Things like *Black Water*, *Mother Tongue* [2004], it's very much about "this is who we are," staking a claim. Whereas now I feel like I've done plenty of that and others have too, in lots of different genres and media.

"Kannada" from *Mother Tongue*

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I've also gotten to know myself better and I'm probably more comfortable with myself. [Back then] I felt like I had to prove something, maybe to myself and maybe to the listener as well. Even technically, musically, I wanted there to be real concrete through-lines to Indian music — "this is based on this rhythmically, and this melodically," and so on. Now a lot of it is intuitive.

DA: How did it become intuitive?

RM: Because I've worked on it so much that I'm just not really concerned about it. Even when I'm writing this new Indo-Pak music, I feel like things are going to come out in a certain way and that's great. It doesn't have to be literally based on something traditional. My personal life informs that too. Marrying an Indian-American woman and going on that journey together as well, defining who we are within our relationship,

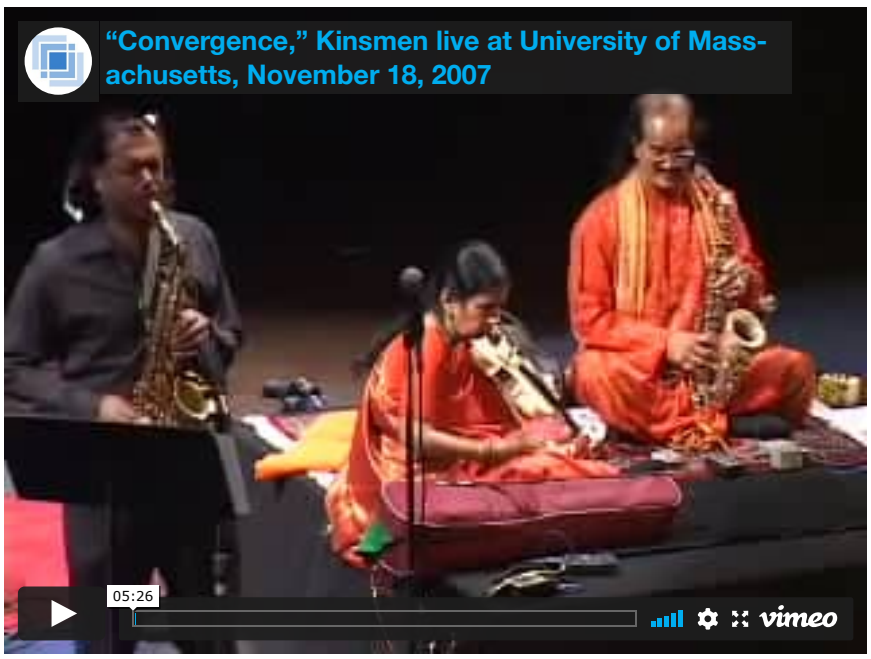
learning from each other, becoming parents — that's the next step beyond that artistic community I found in New York.

DA: Let me ask you about working with [Carnatic alto saxophone master] Kadri Gopalnath on your 2008 album *Kinsmen*, certainly one of your most acclaimed projects to date. Given that you used to avoid Indian music altogether, it's interesting that you ultimately became fluent enough to work with someone like Gopalnath and his cohorts.

RM: I finally felt I could do it on my terms and with authenticity. I was always so put off by how many "fusion" projects, whether they were born of India or the West, they were just superficial — somehow disrespectful to one or the other. I wanted to be equipped with a knowledge base to create something that was respectful. I also wanted to create a space where real collaboration was happening. "Collaboration" is a word that's beaten to death and misused all the time; so many things that are "collaborations" aren't really collaborations. It's a lot of cut-and-paste.

What I liked about working with Kadri is that it wasn't only that he played saxophone, but he had this renegade spirit that was much more akin to being a jazz musician than an Indian classical musician, where it's about lineage, you know, "who did you study with?" He just took the bull by the horns.

"Convergence," Kinsmen live at University of Massachusetts, November 18, 2007



DA: Let me close by quoting you from another recent interview: "Everyone has to visit the mother tongue of whatever it is they do, the cultural homeland." You said this in relation to the New York jazz scene, which I find very interesting.

RM: Yes! You don't have to be the children of immigrants to feel connected to a place, and a place doesn't have to be geographical, it can be a space that's defined by history and emotion and family. I think connecting with that is really empowering, and it leads us to good things.

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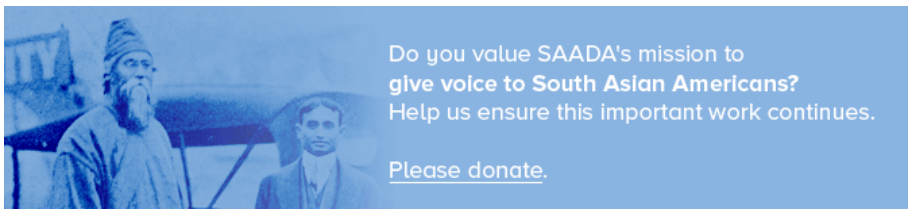
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