

MAHADEV/ COMETO



made in india

THE MUSICIAN WHO WAS CHANGED BY HIS INSTRUMENT

by Nick Joyce

The times are long gone when a rock musician would be welcomed with oohs and aahs just for posing with a sitar, the instrument most Westerners associate with Indian classical music. Following in George Harrison's footsteps, hordes of sixties musicians tried their luck with the sitar's myriad of moveable frets, sympathetic strings and ringing overtones, and depending on the pretensions of the players, their forays into Indian music were either charmingly amateurish or downright embarrassing. To this day, Jeff Beck remembers banishing a sitar player from a recording studio because the hapless dilettante couldn't hack the riffs to The Yardbirds' hit "For Your Love".

Since then, musicians and music lovers alike have become more aware of the sitar's heritage, which has meant that the instrument is generally approached with more reverence and understanding. Alain Monod typifies this development. For the Swiss musician, the sitar he plays under the assumed name of Mahadev Cometo is not an exotic accessory but a conduit and guide on the sonic exploration he began more than a quarter of a century ago.

"With a sitar, I find that I can achieve the same range of sounds and textures as with a sampler," Monod explains. "When I'm playing the guitar, I find myself going down musical paths I've visited countless times before. With a sitar, I'm on strange territory where I'm constantly challenged to think and play music in different ways."

Monod has pursued numerous musical projects under his stage name Al Comet, creating remixes and music for theatre productions while also fronting his own band. But he is best known for his work with The Young Gods, the pioneering industrial band he joined in 1989. Although being criminally underrated, the Swiss trio has exerted considerable influence on other musicians, inspiring such luminaries as Nine Inch Nails, David Bowie and U2 to make some of the most exciting and innovative music of their careers.

Welcome to India
Bienvenue en Inde



Leaving the Swiss comfort zone, destination Dehli
Laisser la zone de confort derrière moi, destination Dehli

MAHADEV COMETO SPEAKS OUT.

IN BETWEEN A NEW LIFE, A 20 STRING INSTRUMENT MADE OUT OF A PUMPKIN AND A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE.

Interview by Stefan Jermann

STEFAN JERMANN **When did you come up with the idea of going to India to learn the sitar and to explore this culture that was completely new to you?**

MAHADEV COMETO You know, I never planned to go to India or to learn the sitar! I was happy playing my post-nuclear sitar-guitar, which I've had for several years now.

That's the instrument you used extensively on the unplugged tour with The Young Gods and you also recorded a solo album with it prior to that?

Yeah. It's like a classical Spanish guitar with three strings missing. My friend Tim Laser, who invented it, said it was like the little brother of an Indian sitar and that's how it came by its name. I made a record with it and became good mates with Tim. We meet up whenever I'm in Paris, where he lives, and some time or other, I mentioned that I had a real Indian sitar gathering dust in my basement at home. My brother bought it about 35 years ago when he was maybe 15, but he hadn't a clue how to play it and there was no way to get lessons in our town.

Then he just gave it to you so it wouldn't end up in the recycling bin?

Yes, maybe ten years or more after he bought it, but at the time I was heavily involved with The Young Gods, and was into sampling and electronics. I wanted to be able to programme and play stuff with a sample machine, so what was I gonna do with an instrument with 20 strings? *(laughs)*

Did you ever have a go at playing it?

Not really. I tuned one string and did some samples with it, but it needed a bit of a service after all those years, and I had no idea where to start. Anyway, when I told Tim about it he said he could fix it up for me. And I thought, yeah, why not? I didn't think I'd end up playing it or anything, but if you're going to have a sitar in your basement, it might as well be one that works! So, I took it to Paris about a year later, but when he heard I couldn't actually play it, he said I could only have 17 strings instead of the full 20.

He was withholding 3 strings? – because you weren't already a sitar player?

That's what he said. Well, I wasn't going to bring it all the way back to Paris another time to get more strings added, so we argued back and forth, and before I knew what had happened, I'd agreed to learn to play it just so I could get what I wanted. The plan was that when the sitar was ready I'd come to Paris for three days of intensive lessons on 17 strings. We'd pretend this was like a year and a half of practice, and then I'd get the rest.

A year later he called to say it was ready. Another six months after that I decided I really should arrange to go and pick it up so I called Tim one night and he said: "OK, see you tomorrow, one o'clock, at my place." *(laughs)*

But you knew he wasn't just going to let you pick it up, right?

When I got there, he made me play like crazy for three days. The first night – it must have been two in the morning when he said he was off to bed, but he expected me to keep playing. He said the walls were so thin, he'd know if I didn't! Anyway, he left some smokes and coffee to keep me going, and said goodnight.

And, did you really play all night?

Almost. I slept for maybe two or three hours. When he woke me up he said I was doing OK but I still had a lot of work to do. He really kept me at it.

So he taught you the basics, he was your first sitar teacher in a sense?

Yeah.

How is it different from playing a regular guitar?

Totally! Apart from both having strings, there's no comparison. The power of the sitar has to come from your soul and it radically amplifies the state of your own mind. The main challenge for me is to be relaxed enough – you have to be at ease with yourself.

Cool and clean air
Température agréable



“ We set off very early into the countryside on a Sunday morning and drove to a little temple by the River Ganges.

The houses there are made of mud, and yet the women, who were very beautiful, wore incredibly colourful saris that were super clean.”

Jean-Louis on projections
Jean-Louis aux projections



The projector from the sixties
Le projecteur des années 60

10 décembre -
Tonight I'm very
impressed. Guruji, Rajan
and me played Raga
Shivaranjani. A lot
of fun, Guruji smiling
according to the
performance I'm



December 10th

Ce soir je suis impressionné. Gurujee, Rajaneesh et moi jouons Raag Shivaranjani. Beaucoup de plaisir et de Sourires. Je suis sensé jouer la même chose que mon guru mais c'est toujours plus difficile et tout le monde doit rire. Après une heure de musique on arrête et Rabindra me demande si je

voulais venir jouer un concert dans sa maison? Je répond oui, je suis très honoré. Mais je voudrais jouer avec mes effets électronique! Rajaneeshjee prend la parole et me fait comprendre qu'ici on ne peut que jouer de la musique classique Indienne...

Gurujee réfléchit et me répond oui, "prend tes affaires ça sera intéressant"

supposed to play right
after him. After an hour,
we stopped playing and
he asked me if I want
to play on his house...
then I said yea, ...
~~can~~ I will take some
electronic ...!!! Rajaneesh
told me "here is indian
music you know".
Guruji: "electronic ...
yea, you can take it if you
have a little PA" ~~um~~
For the first time ever

... by Rickshaw with Anil,
who is definitely sad to see me go.
I am very touched by the affection
that all the people who I've got to
know over the past 5 months have
shown me. Last chai at Ursula's and a
good last night in a freezing Varanasi.

Rickshaw avec Anil
qui est définitivement
triste de me voir
partir. Je suis personnelle-
ment très touché par
l'affection que je reçois
de la part des gens
que j'ai côtoyé durant
ces 6 mois, Last Chai
chez Ursula et good
last night dans un froid
de canard.



Auto Rickshaw, the backbone of public transportation
Auto Rickshaw, la base des transports publics