

**Baluji Shrivastav**

Born on 23 January 1951, and raised in Usmanpur in Uttar Pradesh, India, sitar player and composer Baluji Shrivastav was an accomplished musician by the age of six. Having lost his sight as an eight-month-old baby, sound became the primary medium of expression for him. As a one year old child, Baluji would imitate the singing voices of the classical film singers, such as Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle and Mohammed Rafi that he heard played on a gramophone. His father made a point of teaching him religious devotional songs and told him stories from the Baghavad Gita (the Hindu Holy Scriptures) as was the tradition of the time for blind children in rural India. By age two, Baluji began to play his mother's harmonium as an accompaniment to his singing.

At six years old, Baluji was enrolled in a local private school for the blind, where teachers encouraged his musical development. The headmaster immediately recognised Baluji's musical talent and encouraged him to join the school orchestra. Early on, Baluji learnt to play the 'taishokoto' (also known as the Indian banjo) and soon joined the school orchestra along with seventy other children. The orchestra was commissioned by the school board to perform at society functions and community events all over the state, thereby encouraging the private donations on which the school depended.

Two years later, at a rehearsal one day, Baluji was sitting near a sitar. He reached out to feel the instrument and began to explore it with his hands but his music teacher explained he was still too young and small to play this instrument. When the eight-year old Baluji began crying the teacher relented and taught him how to play a few notes. Throughout the summer holidays, Baluji played with his new toy daily, teaching himself different notes and melodies and improvising. But on returning to school the next year, he told his music teacher he wanted to give up the sitar as it made his hands ache.

On hearing the young boy play the sitar, the music teacher recognised his extraordinary musical talent and at nine years old, Baluji was given the responsibility of conducting the now eighty-member school orchestra. By this time, he was writing and performing his own compositions. At eleven years old, Baluji enrolled in Ajmer Blind School, a government school in Rajasthan where his sitar playing brought him widespread acclaim. As a young student, Baluji began to teach other pupils and help them with their musical theory and in practical lessons. He also continued performing at social occasions and religious festivals with the school orchestra, and specialised in musical theory and composing complex, traditional 'raagas'. Remarkably, Baluji was awarded a BA in Music (Sitar) from Lucknow University when he was just fourteen years old and a year later, another in Vocal Studies.

In 1966, Baluji's talent was noticed by the American wife of the Education Advisor to the regional college in Ajmer, who convinced her husband to grant Baluji a scholarship at the college. However, Baluji refused the offer in order to return to his village and support his family. There he continued to teach music and completed his MA in Music at Allahbad University.

At eighteen, Baluji began teaching classical Indian music at primary school level and later taught music at a degree college in Agra in the mid-1970s. He also continued giving private tabla and sitar lessons in the music shops of Agra, which was fast becoming a popular tourist destination, especially for Europeans touring India and Nepal. In 1980, Baluji was invited to accompany one of his French pupils back to France.

In July 1981, Baluji Shrivastav arrived in France with \$20 in his pocket. But, after losing contact with his friend and living in an isolated mountain village in Nice for six months he decided to return to India. On his way to arrange his flight home in Paris, he met an Indian couple, Mr and Mrs Taha Muhammed who worked at the Ministry for Culture in Paris. They were trying to practise and perform Hindi classical music on stage to a western audience, and persuaded Baluji to stay and convinced him of the dire need for trained Indian classical musicians in Europe. In 1981, Baluji began work as an instructor at the Paris Conservatoire de Musique where he met his future wife and singing partner, Linda Shanovitch.

In 1982, Linda and Baluji arrived in London, Linda's home, and began marketing Baluji's public performances. His first performance at the Transcendental Meditation Centre in Hackney in 1982 was well received and he soon developed an enviable reputation on the London music circuit. From 1984 to 1985, Baluji Shrivastav took up the position of Musical Director for the Tara Arts' production 'Miti Ki Gadi' (The Little Clay Cart), and premiered on stage singing and playing the sitar, dilruba, surbahar, tabla, pakhavaj, ghatam, gopi, dilruba and swarmandal.

Since his first classical performance in 1982, Baluji has been commissioned by theatre companies all over the UK, especially South Asian British theatre companies such as Tara Arts (for 'Miti ki Gadi /The Little Clay Cart', 1986), Tamasha Theatre Company for 'Untouchable', 1989 and 'Mán Melá Theatre Company for 'Across the Black Waters', 1998 to compose scores for national touring plays and accompanying their performances. He has also recorded soundtracks for various films and television documentaries such as the 1976 Shakti Film Production (India) 'Ghandiji ka Sapna' (Ghandi's Dreams) and in 2003, he composed music for a documentary film called 'Savitri'.

Baluji's solo classical instrumental and vocal performances, reciting 'ghazals' and Hindu devotional songs, 'bhajans', grew from small audiences at local venues in the early eighties, to packed audiences at increasingly high profile venues by 1986, such as the Royal Festival Hall in London. His very first performance, earned him the title of 'virtuoso multi-instrumentalist' from The Times. He began to tour nationally and then across Europe, Africa and America.

In the early nineties, Baluji began recording with contemporary pop artists who re-worked their music to include his classical melodies on sitar and tabla. This included Boy George's 'Jesus Loves You' in 1992 and in 1995 on both Annie Lennox's album including 'No More I Love You's', and Soul II Soul's 'Love Euff'. In 1997, Jah Wobble invited Baluji to record on his 'Invaders of the Heart' album and since then Baluji has worked with Kylie Minogue, Massive Attack, on Outcaste Records 'Swaraj' album, with British Asian pop group Stereo Nation, and has also appeared on BBC television and radio programmes including Top of the Pops, Blue Peter and several Channel Four documentaries. This phase opened up opportunities for Baluji to work with diverse musicians across musical cultures and genres, fusing Eastern and Western styles.

By the mid-nineties, Baluji had turned his musical development towards fusion and Jazz productions. In June 1988, Baluji and his wife Linda Shanovitch created the Eye of Shiva music and dance show, which toured several venues in London. The performance was a musical celebration classical Indian music and jazz fusion and included a performance by renowned classical Indian dancer Uni Krishnan. In early 1992, Baluji and Linda formed 'Jazz Orient' (Re-Orient as they are known on their label) with Chris Conway, an expert in fusion music. In this group, Baluji aimed to amalgamate three diverse musical traditions, classical Hindi music, South American, and jazz music and to explore the resulting new rhythms.

The group have toured nationally for over twelve years, and have worked with renowned musicians and singers such as Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Talvin Singh and Partho Mukherjee on tabla, saxophonist and pianist Sakari Kukko, and Clive Bell on the bansuri (the North Indian bamboo flute). 'Jazz Orient' have released four CD albums since 1997, and most recently produced 'Jazz Orient: Live at the South Bank' in 2003 on TRG Music.

In 1992 Baluji was invited to join the Grand Union Orchestra, a large scale, cross-genre, dramatic multi-musician collective comprising of nineteen core musicians from over twelve different countries and musical traditions. Led by English composer Tony Hayes, the Grand Union Orchestra creates thematic spectacular shows and performs world music written by the multi-national musicians in the orchestra. The orchestra develops audience participation performances through improvisation concerts and by creating an environment through which the orchestra's knowledge of diverse musical cultures and traditions are used. The Grand Union Orchestra have performed in all major cities in the UK since the mid-eighties, and toured in London, Leeds, Birmingham and Edinburgh during 2003. They have produced several CDs based on live recordings and made especially for broadcast on BBC Radio Three.

In the mid-nineties, Baluji Shrivastav began presenting his own productions for which he composed and directed the music. In 1989, he was commissioned by the Association of Blind Asians to create a show describing his own life as a blind musician. 'Portraits of the Dark' depicted the major stages of Baluji's life through music and drama and became a major production. It toured nationally from 1990 to 1993 and included renowned tabla player Sarvar Sabri accompanying Baluji. Baluji also produced a musical drama about migration entitled 'An Indian in London' which toured London in 1995.

Education work and community participation have been an integral part of Baluji's musical career. Since the early eighties, he has led classical Indian music and vocal workshops in schools as part of extracurricular and curriculum based activities. He has worked with colleges and universities creating specific components as part of formal qualifications such as the creation of the vocal part of a music degree course at the University of North London. Baluji has also implemented teacher training workshops and National Curriculum seminars for key stages in primary school music teaching. Baluji's teaching also contributes to national theatre and drama groups, where he facilitates workshops with actors and writers, such as in the 'new writer' workshops with London based theatre company Mán Melá, for their production "Azadi: The Story of Freedom". Baluji also continues to offer classical Hindi music and vocal training in London and at residential courses in the south of France.

As well as composing his own productions, the early 1970s first saw Baluji begin creating musical scores for small and large scale classical dance productions. He specialised in composing music to accompany Indian classical dance such as Khatak and Bharata Natyam. In 1984, he became the premier sitarist on the UK tours of leading Khatak exponents, Priya and Pratap Pawar. Baluji continues to perform with Pratap Pawar today. He also performed with Nahid Siddiqui from 1988 to 1993 on her European and American tours. Baluji's exploration of fusion music led to Baluji taking up several positions as Musical Director of European-fusion dance productions including 'Polaroid Feet' featuring Akram Khan, which toured Europe and the UK between 1997 and 2002. Baluji has since performed with contemporary and classical dance productions all over Europe, accompanying high profile companies and solo artists. Most recently he accompanied the Pratap Pawar Triveni Dance Company at 'Jashn-e-Bahar' or A Celebration of Spring, held on 27 and 28 February 2004 at Gordon Craig Theatre in Stevenage.

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Baluji is careful to emphasise that '...blindness has been a boon to me'. As a child, he was not forced into music, but that the need for expression through sound led him naturally to music. As a blind person, he felt he was marginalised, however this marginalisation allowed him a degree of freedom which would not otherwise have been available to him. Baluji says that this in turn gave him the liberty to break social, racial boundaries and musical boundaries. By pushing these boundaries, Baluji Shrivastav continues to create contemporary music rooted in Hindi classical music but fused with diverse multi-cultural musical traditions creating new, cross-genre styles.

Currently, Baluji Shrivastav is preparing for a tour to Russia and the USA in April and May 2004 with one of Britain's most revered alternative techno-pop bands, 'The Future Sound of London'. Baluji will also be running a residential classical music course in south western France in May 2004.

Baluji lives in London with his wife Linda and their children.