



# Hariprasad Chaurasia

India's leading *bansuri* flautist comes to the UK this summer. **Oliver Craske** reviews a career that has ranged from Bollywood film scores to classical mastery

The music of India has famously antique roots, going back two millennia or more, but some of its most familiar features are of surprisingly recent origin. It is only within living memory, for instance, that the much loved *bansuri* (Indian bamboo flute), has evolved from folk instrument to being accepted as a vehicle for classical music. The artist most responsible for this change is Hariprasad Chaurasia.

An engaging personality with a mischievous sense of humour, Chaurasia has done things his own way. For a long time he was best known as a prolific session musician and composer in the Indian film industry, or for *Call of the Valley*, the 1967 album he recorded with *santoor* player Shivkumar Sharma and guitarist Brij Bhushan Kabra that was a massive hit for the hippie generation. But gradually he became recognised as a classical master.

Born in Allahabad in 1938, Chaurasia is not from one of India's traditional musician families. His father was a professional wrestler who wanted his son to follow the same career. So as a young man he trained as a wrestler, even after he fell in love with music and began taking secret vocal lessons from a neighbour at the age of nine. Revelation came at 15 when he heard the flute being played on All India Radio by Pandit Bholanath Prasanna from Varanasi.

He became a disciple of Prasanna, but kept it secret from his disciplinarian father. It was only when, still in his teens, he was offered a job as staff musician by All India Radio in Cuttack that he came clean.

Over several years in Cuttack he blossomed. There he heard Pannalal Ghosh, who was paving the way in playing and teaching classical music on bansuri, but Ghosh's death left unfinished the task of truly transforming the instrument's profile. Meanwhile Chaurasia became a favourite of the local Odissi dancers who loved him to accompany their performances. This led him to neglect his radio work and eventually he was forcibly transferred to Bombay in 1961.

This was the most fortunate of punishments, for in Bombay he was invited to play on his first movie soundtrack. His sound was so fresh and distinctive that he was soon in constant demand from top film music directors, including SD Burman.

The multitasking Chaurasia was so busy that he would keep a different flute box in each studio. "Sometimes I used to play in the morning in Bombay, noontime in Calcutta, and evening time in Madras," he recalls.

Bollywood brought material comforts but he came to realise that he was not stretching himself musically. He wanted to learn the *dhrupad*-based instrumental style of *Maihar gharana*, founded by Allauddin Khan, whom he considers the greatest musician he has ever heard. It took him three years to persuade Annapurna Devi, daughter of Allauddin Khan and then wife of Ravi Shankar, to agree to be his guru, but she transformed him as a classical player. Incredibly she insisted that he switch to playing flute left-handed, wanting him to relearn from scratch. He agreed. She encouraged him to find his own style, to explore the music's depths while also allowing his playful nature to show through. The results were plain to hear, as he became India's most accomplished flautist. "For me she is my mother, my teacher, my goddess," he says.

*Call of the Valley* brought him to an international audience. When George Harrison came to Bombay in 1968 to record his soundtrack to *Wonderwall*, he was one of the chosen musicians. In those sessions Harrison also recorded 'The Inner Light', so Chaurasia may well be the flautist on that Beatles song (precise credits were not kept). He started to tour abroad, and was one of the instrumentalists chosen by Ravi Shankar to

appear on *Shankar Family and Friends* (1974) and *Music Festival from India* (1976), and to tour the US on Harrison and Shankar's 45-date Dark Horse expedition in 1974.

Chaurasia has notched up some brilliant collaborations since, including *jugalbandi* duets with Kishori Amonkar or Balamuralikrishna (both of whom sadly passed away recently), and performed with John McLaughlin and Zakir Hussain on the albums *Making Music* and *Remember Shakti*. But his greatest musical partner has undoubtedly been Shivkumar Sharma. In their hands, flute and santoor are a heavenly combination.

In 1981 they took their association onto a different plane by teaming up as a composer duo for film music, known as Shiv-Hari. They proved highly skilful at writing songs for playback singers like Lata Mangeshkar and Kishore Kumar. Their first outing, Yash Chopra's *Silsila*, starring Amitabh Bachchan, Jaya

Bachchan and Rekha in a forbidden love triangle, was a slow burner as a movie but the music caught fire immediately, earning them the first of three Filmfare nominations for Best Music Composers. Over the next decade Chopra engaged Shiv-Hari regularly for his

films, including *Chandni* and *Lamhe*.


In the mid-90s Chaurasia stepped back from Bollywood and reduced his touring in order to focus on his dream of creating a school for flautists run on traditional *gurukul* lines with the students living and learning with their guru. Today there are two branches of Vrindavan, one in Mumbai and one in Bhubaneswar, Orissa. He has also taught for many years in Rotterdam. He continues to play selected solo concerts, and on special occasions he reunites with Shivkumar Sharma for a duet.

He remains the bansuri's best loved exponent and one of the world's great soloists. Others may worry about the challenge to Indian classical music posed by changing tastes, but he is confident in its future: "You cannot stop the sun from rising, the water from flowing, the moon from spreading its light, and you cannot change the seven notes to anything else. Classical music will retain its lustre – the pollution will be washed away." ♦

+ **DATES** Hariprasad Chaurasia appears at London's Union Chapel on June 22, and in a duet with Shivkumar Sharma at Zunderstrandtheater in The Hague on June 25  
+ **MORE** See p7 for Max Richter's playlist including a Hariprasad Chaurasia track

An engaging personality with a mischievous sense of humour

## BEST ALBUMS

 **Shivkumar Sharma, Hariprasad Chaurasia & Brij Bushan Kabra**  
*Call of the Valley*  
(HMV India, 1967, reissue EMI Hemisphere, 1995)


This concept album, a '*symphony in Indian classical music*,' is themed around a day in the life of a Kashmiri shepherd. Kabra's Hawaiian guitar represents the shepherd, Sharma's *santoor* his beloved girl, Chaurasia's flute the spectacular landscape. Unmissable.

 **Shivkumar Sharma & Hariprasad Chaurasia (Shiv-Hari)**  
*Silsila*  
(HMV India, 1981)

Shiv-Hari's talent for melody translated brilliantly from classical *ragas* into Bollywood numbers. Lata Mangeshkar and Kishore Kumar melt your heart on 'Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum' and 'Dekha Ek Khwab'. Superstar actor Amitabh Bachchan also sings on hit song 'Rang Barse', now a perennial favourite every Holi festival.

 **Zakir Hussain, Hariprasad Chaurasia, John McLaughlin & Jan Garbarek**  
*Making Music* (ECM, 1987)


Chaurasia's flute is a key element alongside McLaughlin's guitar, Garbarek's saxophone and Hussain's percussion wizardry on this seductive studio album recorded in Oslo.

 **Hariprasad Chaurasia**  
*Sans Breath*  
(Navras, 2006)

Chaurasia at his mature peak as a classical artist, exploring 'Raga Yaman'. After a celestial *alap* introduction, he shows his mastery of the *bansuri* as rhythmic effects are gradually added in the *tor* and *jhala* phases. Two *gat* improvisations follow, with Sabir Khan on *tabla*. Phenomenal virtuosity and yet such feeling. Reviewed in #43.

## IF YOU LIKE HARIPRASAD CHAURASIA, THEN TRY...

**Ronu Majumdar**  
*Hollow Bamboo*

 (Water Lily, 2000)  
Fellow *bansuri* flautist Ronu Majumdar is rooted in the same Maihar school as

Chaurasia; his guru was Vijay Raghav Rao, senior disciple of Ravi Shankar. Here he teams up with legendary guitarist Ry Cooder and ethereal trumpeter Jon Hassell, with *tabla* by Abhijit Banerjee. His flute takes the central role in a deftly judged, meditative suite.