



Jim McGuire

Zakir Hussain

Nigel Williamson takes a look at the remarkably diverse career of the Indian percussion legend

The way Zakir Hussain tells it, his musical destiny was settled when he was just two days old. "I was brought home from the hospital and the tradition is that the son is handed to the father, and then the father has to recite a prayer in his son's ear, putting him on his way," he says. "My father, instead of reciting prayer, sang

rhythms in my ear. And my mother was very upset and said, 'Why are you doing this?' And he said: 'Because this is my prayer.'"

The story makes perfect sense when you factor in that his father was Alla Rakha, one of the most celebrated *tabla* players in the history of Indian classical music and Ravi Shankar's first-choice accompanist. With his father's

beats ringing in his ear, Hussain went on to follow in his rhythmic footsteps as a classical *tabla* virtuoso. With a little help and advice from George Harrison and the Grateful Dead's drummer Mickey Hart, he also became one of the architects of modern world music fusion, as a fearless collaborator, bold improviser and skilled composer and arranger.

Born in 1951 in Mumbai, Hussain began his serious training in Hindustani classical music when he was seven, his father waking him at 3:30am for three hours of nocturnal tuition. He then went off to the local *madrasa* to study the Qur'an. After two hours of learning Islamic scripture by rote, he would then cross the street to his Roman Catholic day school, where he

sang hymns of praise to a Christian god. "Doing all of that in the space of six hours, I grew up a very confused child," he notes drily.

In his teens he listened to the rock music of the Doors and Jimi Hendrix and considered swapping his *tablas* for a drum set before an encounter with George Harrison put him back on track. The Beatle – a fan of Indian music and friend of his father via their mutual association with Ravi Shankar – told the teenage *tabla* protégé that as a rock drummer he would be one of thousands, but that if he stuck with Indian classical music he could make music that was unique by incorporating inspiration from Eastern and Western sources.

Hussain took the advice and built a career both as an Indian classical musician and as an audacious and innovative fusionista after he landed in San Francisco at the height of the hippie era in the late 60s. There he moved in with Mickey Hart, and says that he learned as much from the Dead's percussionist as from the classical discipline instilled by his father: "He taught me to find the groove and understand the back beat, how to loosen up. I was playing with a 2,000-year-old rhythm repertoire on my *tabla* and you had to be as complicated as you could. But Mickey told me, 'Zakir, you're playing too many notes! Just relax a little.'"

He recalls chemically-fuelled jam sessions with the Dead and their acid-rock acolytes that lasted two or three days. "I remember waking from sleeping on the floor, and looking up and seeing Jerry Garcia and David Crosby playing.

And I'd rub my eyes and pick up a drum. It was a never-ending musical conversation."

He's been collaborating with Hart ever since, including on 1991's *Planet Drum*, which won the inaugural Grammy award for world music, and again in 2007 when *Global Drum Project* won a Grammy as Best Contemporary World Music Album.

Collaboration has been a way of life for Hussain for more than 40 years and he approaches each project with humility. "You come from India and you say, 'OK, I'm representing thousands of years of history,' and you think you're going to teach the world about rhythms and drums," he says. "Then you realise that you're just one little dot in the

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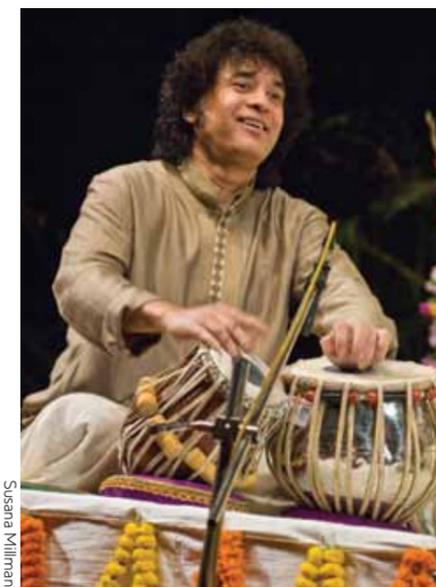
In the mid-70s he was a founder member of Shakti, the groundbreaking East-West fusion group formed by the English jazz-rock guitarist John McLaughlin and Indian classical musicians. "It was revolutionary," Hussain says.

"Indian and non-Indian musicians could come together in a free-form way. It was unique at that time, and it opened up this whole can of worms that has become world music."

Other collaborators over the years have included the Brazilian percussionist Airto Moreira, banjo maestro Béla Fleck, Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek, American jazzers Pharoah Saunders and Charles Lloyd, as well as Gaelic musicians. He was also a founder member of Bill Laswell's *Tabla Beat Science*.

Although Hussain has lived most of his adult life in the US, he has made a point of spending three or four months every year in India, where he is best known for his achievements as a classical musician rather than his fusion projects. It was during one such trip 'home' in the 80s that he assembled the Masters of Percussion ensemble, featuring musicians from different regions of India. He has since toured the world with the group and is keen to remind audiences that, despite his freewheeling adventures in world music, the classical tradition remains at the core of his musical identity. "About 65% of my shows are strictly Indian music," he says. "It's important to me. It's my heritage. These are my roots. It's what keeps me tuned into who I am." ♦

♦ **DATE** Zakir Hussain performs with the BBC Concert Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall on May 20 as part of the Alchemy Festival, see *Gig Guide* for details



Susana Millman

BEST ALBUMS

Shakti
Natural Elements
(Columbia, 1977)
The third in a trilogy of groundbreaking Indo-jazz fusion recorded by Shakti. This is the best of the three, with the emphasis on shorter pieces and ensemble playing as well as solo virtuosity.

Mickey Hart
Planet Drum
(Rykodisc, 1991)
It's the global eclecticism that makes this Grammy-winning album a landmark in world music on which Hart is merely the facilitator as percussionists from India, Brazil and Nigeria join forces.

Zakir Hussain & The Rhythm Experience
(Moment Records, 1991)
Hussain founded The Rhythm Experience in 1984 and this album combines global beats from India, Cuba, Africa, the Middle East and Indonesia into a surprisingly melodic exchange between anything that can be beaten, shaken or struck.

Tabla Beat Science
Tala Matrix
(Palm Pictures, 2000)
Tabla Beat Science's debut fuses Hussain's *tabla* with electronica studio wizardry from Bill Laswell alongside contributions from *sarangi* player Sultan Khan and fellow percussionists Trilok Gurtu, Karsh Kale and Talvin Singh.

Béla Fleck, Zakir Hussain & Edgar Meyer
The Melody of Rhythm
(Koch, 2009)
This album is built around the title-track, a 28-minute suite incorporating Indian forms, jazz, Appalachian folk and Western conservatoire tradition.

Distant Kin
(Moment Records, 2015)
In 2011, Hussain travelled to Glasgow to create a collaborative work with Scottish musicians for Celtic Connections festival. Reviewed in #117.

IF YOU LIKE ZAKIR HUSSAIN, THEN TRY...

Buddy Rich & Alla Rakha
Rich à la Rakha
(1968, World Pacific)
A neglected landmark in early Indo-jazz fusion on which Ravi Shankar was conductor.