



Jazzmandu Festival

Eloise Stevens explores the festival where you can find everything from Nepali classical music to West African grooves, all nestled in the Himalayas

While at a voodoo ceremony in northern Ghana, Navin Chettri looked up at the walls of the huts where the high priest was performing his rites. Krishna and Radha statues bedecked the walls, “just like the ones we see here in Nepal!” To this day Chettri has no idea how they got there, but it remains symbolic to him of the similarities linking West African and Nepali music. “The polyrhythms, the way of singing, the 6/8 rhythms... I felt like I was at home,” the organiser of Jazzmandu enthuses. And it is this meeting between East and West, whether the music be American jazz, Nepali classical or West African percussion, that forms the foundation of this festival. In fact, *Songlines* readers may be pleased to discover that Jazzmandu is not really a jazz festival at all, but a true melting pot of global genres.

Every year, in the week leading up to Diwali, the festival of lights, a cosmopolitan selection of jazz, world and Nepali musicians descend on

Kathmandu to perform in the annual ‘biggest party in the Himalayas.’ The venues are as varied as they are gorgeous, ranging from the cosy den of the city’s premier jazz hangout, Jazz Upstairs, to the lush rainforest of Gokarna, from a medieval brickwork courtyard to the five-star gardens of the Yak & Yeti Hotel.

Despite being the largest event, with 1,000 people attending last year’s festival, it is also the most relaxed, and makes for a lovely weekend getaway from Kathmandu’s congested streets. In an atmospheric clearing of the rainforest, families can lounge on picnic blankets, snack on hot momos and chicken rolls, and sip wine or local, potent spirits. As the evening cools, bonfires roar up around the venue, and chilly music fans gather round them enthusiastically, before throwing themselves into the heat of the dancing in front of the stage.

Cadenza Collective, Chettri’s own band, the frontrunners in bringing jazz to Kathmandu back in 1998, held the first festival in 2002.

Their tight compositions of snipped Congolese riffs and Nepali chants seem to have become anthems for the festival, if not for Kathmandu, and waste no time in getting the local fans up and jiving. Last year’s edition also saw performances from sexagenarian rocker Leni Stern, guitarist to African heavyweights such as Toumani Diabaté and Salif Keita who shreds guitar with all the gusto of Hendrix on the verge of joining the 27 club, and the charismatic Cuban Yaite Ramos, of Buena Vista Social Club pedigree, who seduced the audience with her virtuoso flute-playing and rich vocals on renderings of *boleros* and rumbas. Another highlight were the catchy soprano sax melodies and shape-shifting time signatures of the Jerusalem-based band Katamon Cherry.

Less prominent, but by no means less important are the Nepali artists. At Gokarna Forest Resort, the *sitar* and *tabla* duo Bijay Lal and Rabin Lal Shrestha performed an



Musical highlights at the 2015 edition included the Nepal Army Band (above); the classical singer Manmohan Thapaliya (left) and Cuban singer Yaite Ramos (below)

adrenalin-charged set of soaring melodies and rapid-fire dialogue, proving that Nepali classical music is every bit as exciting and rhythmically complex as the West African influenced music.

The classical singer Manmohan Thapaliya and Nepali *sarangi* player Prince Nepali also stood out with their emotional performances of traditional Nepali *ragas*. Nepali classical music falls under the same umbrella as Hindustani classical music, with a few unique ragas of its own. It shies away from the term Hindustani however as that suggests India, and prefers to go by the term ‘Eastern classical.’ The festival provides a tantalising taste of the genre, which, according to Thapaliya, is on the rise as the political situation eases.

What unites the Western and Eastern artists, according to Chettri, is the inclusive and collaborative spirit of jazz; and last year, that energy was crucial. Seven months after the earthquake and in the midst of a fuel crisis, “we needed the festival more than ever, to heal and unite people,” says Chettri. This purpose is greatly served by the fact that the festival is mostly comprised of evening events spread over a week, which “gives a lot of time to experience other musicians and people. Usually you just arrive and take off and you don’t get a lot from the culture you just visited,” says Haim Peskoff of Katamon Cherry.

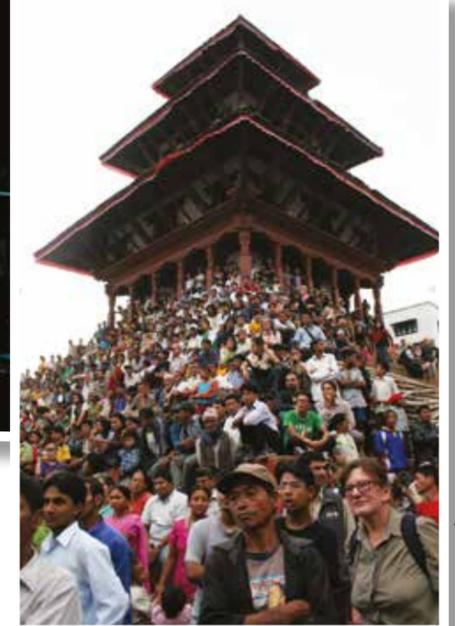
On two of the days there are workshops led by the musicians, popular with

workshops offered a rare insight into the secret vaults of Katamon Cherry’s chameleon-esque rhythms and Leni Stern’s ethnomusicological approach to her work in West Africa. “Record the songs of your elders,” she pleaded with the Nepalis, “before it’s too late.” The lucky winners of the Jazz for the Next Generation competition also received lessons with the visiting musicians.

The main advantage of all this free time for festival-goers, however, is the opportunity it gives the musicians to hone their collaborative acts. Jazz at Patan, the festival’s signature event, is held in the ancient Newari courtyard of the Dhokaima Café. The pieces played range from original jazz compositions to West African songs and Nepali classical music, chosen to bring out the best in each tradition. What is unique in a concert like this is the improvisation that each musician brings to the stage. “The Nepalis have been doing it for 4,000 years, and we’ve been doing it for not even 100 years,” explains



Stern. “They’re way ahead of us! You’re going to hear the singer [Manmohan]. He never repeats himself – he has so much shit! It’s



Photos courtesy of Jazzmandu

really amazing!” David Michaeli from Katamon Cherry adds, “we, the jazz musicians, can learn a lot from them.”

If you don’t manage to sneak in on the artists rehearsing during the day, a week spent at the festival also provides you with a fantastic opportunity to explore Kathmandu and the surrounding valley. Many of the sites, and in particular the medieval temples, have been badly damaged by the earthquake, but Durbar Square and the tiny lanes of medieval Patan still retain their atmospheric charm. The Kathmandu Valley is also remarkably accessible, especially by mountain bike, and is a treasure trove of wide vistas of terraced fields and, in the far distance, the Annapurna and Himalayan mountain ranges.

Jazzmandu 2015 ended in style in the serene grounds of the Yak & Yeti Hotel, with a diverse and exciting set by all the visiting musicians. Despite the regal atmosphere of the hotel and the upmarket food stalls dotting the gardens, the 900-strong audience by no means held back from dancing away to the Cuban, Nepali, West African and jazz tunes. And, just as the music was winding down, garlanded cows and dogs wandered into the streets, vibrant *rangolis* (decorations) and clay lamps popped up along the pavement, folk dancers jangled their way from house to house, and Diwali crowned the festivities. ♦

+ DATES This year’s festival is October 20-26
+ ONLINE www.jazzmandu.org