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Drummer Sivamani

One of the most recognisable faces in Indian music with his signature bandana, Sivamani is widely recognised as one of India's best drummers. Siva, as he is fondly known as, has performed all over the world with legends like Billy Cobham, Shankar Mahadevan, A R Rahman, Ilaiyaraaja, L Shankar, Louis Banks, Ustad Zakir Hussain et al. Once, Zakir Hussain, in a live show, introduced Sivamani to the audience as a "phenomenon that walks this planet but once or twice in a century." In 2009, the Tamil Nadu government conferred upon him the title of 'Kalaimamani', the state's highest honour in the field of the arts.

How did it all begin? How did you start drumming?

Drumming runs in my blood. My father, S M Anandan, was a percussionist in the film industry in Chennai, and he initiated me into percussion training at the age of seven. I learnt to play the octoban, darbuka, udukai, and kanjira, and also the violin and harmonium. After my initial exposure to Carnatic percussion, my father put me onto Noel Grant, who was one of the best-known Western drummers in the film industry at that time.

When did you decide to turn professional?

My professional music career started at the age of 12. My first break into film studio work was with music composer K V Mahadevan. A year later, when I was 13, I started playing for S P Balasubramaniam, who I consider my godfather. Around the same time, I also started substituting for music maestro Ilaiyaraaja's group. After a while, Ilaiyaraaja sir began to notice my playing and made me a permanent member of his group. This opened doors for me; in a few years, I was performing for a host of Tamil and Malayalam music directors including T Rajendar, Sam Joseph and Sankar Ganesh. Bollywood came calling a bit later. I've played drums for many Bollywood movies like *Rang De Basanti*, *Swades*, *Taal*, *Lagaan*, *Dil Se*, *Guru*, *Kabul Express*, *Rockstar*...

You are known for your showmanship on stage. How did you make the transition from being an instrumentalist in the recording studio to being a star on stage?

It was Ilaiyaraaja sir who first gave me the idea that people would come to see me perform. He told me, "You're a natural performer, and your talent needs to be seen as well as heard. You have to go out and play live." This was how I forayed into the world of live concerts, and thanks to that priceless advice, I've performed and continue to perform all over the world.

Being recognised as a solo artiste also brought me other opportunities. I've composed music for the films *Arima Nambi* and *Kanithan*, and also acted in a Bollywood movie, *Masaari*, just last year. I've also acted in two Telugu films, *Padamati Sandhya Ragam* and *Sirivennela*.

You are known to perform any genre, from Indian classical to jazz and everything in between. What genre really inspires you?

I've always taken inspiration from Indian classical music, which is what I was trained in. I would never miss an opportunity to speak to and take tips from the legends of classical music like Vikku Vinayakram, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, T K Murthy, Ustad Zakir Hussain, Karaikudi Mani... I like to experiment with genres and collaborate with other musicians.

Could you elaborate on these collaborations ?

From the very beginning, I have been looking to play with as many musicians as I can, and push the boundaries of traditionally defined genres. I was part of a music group called Shradhdha, which comprised Shankar Mahadevan, U Srinivas (who passed away in 2014) and Loy Mendonsa.

I have a fusion line-up called Asia Elektrik with Niladri Kumar, who is a brilliant young sitar virtuoso with a unique ability to play pure Indian classical as well as modern world-music, and Louis Banks, who has been on the forefront of fusion music, and is one of the country's best keyboardist. Our music is mostly raag based, but interwoven with Western orchestration and harmonies. There's a lot of impromptu improvisations, cross-rhythmic explorations, call & response, jugalbandis etc. I'm also part of Zakir ji's Zakir Hussain World Drums Ensemble. I've done a ghazal album called 'Kaash' with singer Hariharan, teamed up with my wife ghazal, sufi & folk singer Runa Rizvi, to form a first-of-its-kind band called NEW LIFE that does a unique fusion of the three genres with world percussions and jazz. In this line-up, we have the multitalented composer Vishal Dhumal on keyboards and harmonium, and Ojas Adhiya on tabla.

You have a special relationship with A R Rahman...

A R and I are childhood friends. I knew him long before he became A R Rahman. He was known as A S Dilip Kumar then, and we were both in a Western music band called Roots. Way back in 1994, A R and I did an album called 'Golden Krithis Colours', which was a Carnatic experimental album with Zaakir Hussain, Srinivasan and Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan. I've played for some of A R Rahman's most popular scores like 'Mustafa Mustafa' (*Kadhhal Desam*), 'Humma Humma' (*Bombay*) and 'Chaiyya Chaiyya' (*Uyire*). I was also part of his Bollywood-themed musical, *Bombay Dreams*. I tour the world with A R Rahman; in fact, I was with him just a few days back in Delhi for a gig.

You have the words 'Rhythm is God' written on your website and Facebook page, as slogans for your live performance...

I was born with a sense of rhythm. From when I was young, my fingers were always tapping and creating beats with anything I could lay my hands on - pots, pans, empty water bottles, suitcases... In fact, I think my first 'click track' was when I was in my mother's womb, listening to her heartbeat. I hear rhythm in everything - rain, footsteps on pavement, rat-a-tat of motorbikes, even my own heartbeat... there's a *jugalbandi* out there if you really listen. That's why rhythm is religion to me.

As I end the interview, I find myself listening to the sound of an old fan rattling its unique 'thalam' from up above. If rhythm is really a religion, I have a sneaking suspicion that I've just had a brief interaction with one of its patron saints.