

METRO PLUS

An unsaid goodbye



A friend pays tribute to Sengen Joachim, an icon of Chennai's music scene in the 60s and 70s

On Friday evening, the phones of the older generation of musicians in Chennai were abuzz with the news that one of the city's best-known musicians of the 60s and 70s, Sengen Joachim, had passed away in his California home. As the news spread, calls poured in from Australia, the UK, and the US, from people for whom Sengen was an icon.

The 60s and 70s witnessed a shake up in the music world, with the emergence of a new unruly, rebellious brand of music – Rock n Roll. Tremors were felt in Madras too, with long-haired college kids wearing bell bottoms, smoking marijuana, strumming guitars and giving their parents sleepless nights.

The Connemara Hotel had just opened its new coffee shop, and was looking for a band to play the music of the times. Amongst the many that auditioned, Sengen and The Avengers was chosen to play. Architect Praveen Aiana, who studied at College of Engineering, Guindy, in the early 70s, recalls, "Our idea of a night out in town was to go to the Connemara coffee shop and watch the Avengers play till the wee hours. The place was chock-a-block, even on weekdays." Sengen was 17 at the time, fresh out of Loyola College. His father Harold Joachim, Principal of St Georges School, was also a trained pianist and gave Sengen a solid background in formal music and piano. Sengen could fluently read, write and compose music by the time he was in his early teens. Australian guitarist Monty Stephens, who's performed with Sengen, says, "Even though Sengen was best known for his sax playing, he was equally good at playing the keyboards and guitar and was a great vocalist too. He could also play any genre from western classical to rock, blues and jazz."

Over 10 years, the Avengers became well known and performed to audiences all over the South: in Goa, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Kochi. When the band was at its peak, Sengen decided to pack up and migrate to the US. He's lived there for the last 40 years and continued performing in the US, Australia, the UK and India. He was a prolific songwriter too.

Sengen drew inspiration from his friend of 30 years, jazz legend George Benson. Benson once remarked to Sengen's wife Irene that "Sengen eats, sleeps and breathes music". Guitarist Dudley Madeira, who performed at The Ashok and Maurya Sheraton, Delhi in the 70s, and now plays professionally in Australia, reminisces, "I first met Sengen in 1966. He was my idol. He came home to ask for my father's permission to join his band as a bassist. He later switched over to tenor sax, fluently playing all the jazz standards. It is because of Sengen that I became a guitarist. When singers like Ajit Singh and Usha Uthup used to perform in Chennai, they would ask Sengen and me to back them up. All the musicians

would come together after work to jam, teaching and learning from each other. Sengen was a mentor to all of us.”

Sengen’s last performance in India was in April 2015 in Chennai, when he performed for the St George’s School’s 300th anniversary celebrations. Dominic Johnson, Secretary of the St George’s old students association, says, “When news that Sengen was performing for the school celebrations spread, a number of old students made the trip from even far away.” As for me, I met Sengen just seven years ago, when I was an amateur and he the consummate professional. He was in his sixties and I in my forties, yet we bonded like the best of buddies.

I am playing one of his CDs now, and my thoughts go back to chilly nights in Yercaud, when “the hills were alive” with the sound of his mesmerising sax. He was to have come to India in December to play a few gigs. This news is all too sudden, all too soon.

The most painful goodbyes are the ones that are never said... Rest in peace my friend.

(The writer is the founder of Chennai-based band, Second Coming)