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Jazz artiste Radha Thomas

Radha Thomas is an author, a columnist and a businesswoman. But what she is best known for is her role as one of the country's best-known jazz singers. Over the last 45 years, she's represented India at many jazz festivals the worldover, and has performed with the likes of John Scofield, Ryo Kawasaki, Alex Blake, Joel Farrell, Louis Banks, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Allah Rakha et al.

Excerpts from an interview with India's 'First Lady' of jazz...

## **I've heard that you were trained in Hindustani music early on. How and why did you make the transition to rock 'n' roll with Human Bondage?**

Actually, even before I learned Hindustani vocals from Kumar Gandharva's school in Delhi, my mom had me take Carnatic singing lessons. It's a sort of traditional thing in South Indian Iyer households, I suppose. But both my mom and I loved all sorts of music and the house always had jazz and other types of music playing. I went off to boarding school, and the 60s happened, and the rock 'n' roll revolution totally spun my head around.

I met Suresh of Human Bondage in Delhi when I was around 16 and found myself singing a few songs with them once in a while. Before you could say 'Janis Joplin', we were married and I was singing full-time with the band.

From rock 'n' roll you then made a further transition to jazz. How did this happen?

It was a natural thing. Everyone in the band slowly shifted to listening to more and more of jazz, and pretty soon, rock 'n' roll was mostly forgotten.

Tell us about why you chose to go to the US to live and perform there for 20 years?

Well, someone chose me. There was an organisation called Jazz India, and Niranjan Jhaveri, who founded it, had heard about me. We were in Bengaluru at the time, and Niranjan came down to Bengaluru to audition me at Chin Lung (Yes, the dive on Brigade Road) and said that if he thought I was good enough he would send me to perform in Europe representing India at jazz festivals.

Fortunately, I made the cut and he sent me and Suresh off. We went to America and began the long journey called jazz.

How different was it performing in the US to India, and what prompted you to return after 20 years?

It was fantastic to perform in the US. It is still fantastic to perform in India, or anywhere for that matter. Just performing is fantastic. I love it every single time. I came back for personal reasons. I go back to the US very often. I haven't left it completely, you know.

Is there a defining moment or event that you would call the highlight of your music career, and why?

Recently, after performing for 45 years or so, I did a concert in Delhi for the 7th Delhi International Jazz Festival. It was the first time I did a concert entirely with my own songs - music and lyrics. There were 7,000 people in the audience. I won't forget it.

Any interesting incidents you can recollect of singing for 20 years in New York?

One incident I will never forget is my first encounter with sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar many moons ago. I was auditioning for him at the Lincoln Centre in New York City, and I had heard he was moody. I was very nervous. He strode into the entrance, a tiny man surrounded by about 10 blonde goddesses. One of the beauties pointed a painted nail at me. I obeyed and we entered a dressing room filled with the scent of jasmine where a man sat fiddling with tablas. I realised he was Allah Rakha.

Ravi Shankar looked at me and said, "These clothes won't do. You have to wear a sari."

"Yes sir," I said, gleefully. Clearly I'd passed the audition!

"What's your name," he asked, an afterthought.

"Radha," I said.

"Ok Radha, let's do a little *riyaz*," he commanded.

I began the rhythm of the strings. He began the *alaap* to a *Megh Malhar*.

"Give me that," said the maestro, grabbing my instrument.

"It's out of tune," he barked and tightened the wooden knobs. He handed it back. "It's fine now," he said. His sense of pitch-perfect. I reshuffled my legs and began twanging.

"What did you just do?" he cut in sharply. "Nothing!" I said hastily. "I'm just getting comfortable."

"No," he said conclusively. "No comfort. You may not budge. Not even an inch. Like a statue. A statue with fingers that move. Do you understand me? You cannot uncross your legs once they are crossed."

"Yes, sir," I said. I could see my legs falling off like dead branches from a tree by the end of the night. That concert lasted for about three hours. At the end of it, the audience clapped thunderously, and as I wobbled up with Mr Rakha and Mr Shankar to take a shaky bow in front of New York's finest.