



The Fading Culture of Anglo Indians: A Case Study on Jazz Music in Calcutta

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Abstract

Far away from the country they called home, certain members of the Anglo-Indian community have always sought to hold on to the cultural ties of their motherland. English in taste and tongue, the cultural rootedness of this European descent community, had its own unique way of establishing its cultural semblance in India. The Anglo-Indian community played an extraordinary role in uniting Western and Eastern cultural influences through their literal and musical creativity. The cross-cultural union resulted in the commencement of a new zeitgeist in the cultural myriad of 1920s musical entertainment zones: live jazz music. In a study titled "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," Robert E. Park claims, "It is in the mind of the marginal man that the conflicting cultures meet and fuse" (1928, p. 881). This approach was adopted for the study of the Anglo-Indian community in India and its cultural dissemination. The Anglo-Indian community in India acted as an intermediary of cultural diffusion, as their contribution led to the creation of a small niche of Indian elites during the Raj who appreciated this transmission of a musical genre different from that of traditional Indian music. Thus, jazz provided an expressive illustration of the role it played in redefining racial, social, and regional boundaries in India during the British period. This paper thus attempts to unfold the blossoming of jazz culture to its ultimate demise in India.

Keywords

Anglo-Indian, jazz music, culture

Introduction

The appearance of jazz music in the cultural scene of India began in the Anglo-Indian residential quarters of railway colonies and gradually made its way to the heartlands of Calcutta, “with the Anglo-Indian settlements of the city taking to ragtime and jazz in a big way, playing it in the posh hotels and clubs of Park Street, and upholding the music’s legacy longer than any other Indian city, well into the late 70s and early 80s in India” (Mulki, 2019). Personalities like Pam Crain, also known as “Queen of Park Street, whose voice mesmerized generations of fans in the eastern metropolis” (News18 Buzz, 2013), gained immense popularity for bringing a genre of music and adding to Indian cultural harmony. “Anglo-Indian musicians acted as conduits, fusing their textbook knowledge of Western harmony and popularizing the use of Western instruments in Indian compositions and classical Indian songwriting, inspiring the next generations of post-Independence India” (Mulki, 2019). These musicians soon emerged as the first Indian performers to gain a reputation for entertaining the crowds of Calcutta and Bombay with their musical sensibilities of jazz and blues during the interwar period.

Anglo-Indian musicians often acted as advocates to bring into effect a new cultural recreation by passing down their expertise of Western harmony and theoretical familiarity with Western instruments and gaining immense popularity throughout generations in Calcutta and Bombay, much until the Second World War. The history of jazz musical tradition is often constructed and produced around the concept of being part of various genres, styles, and historical contexts, with parallel or divergent stories. India’s jazz history, however, is yet to be discovered. There is no shortage of literature on jazz and its affinity with classical Indian music, which may have been popularly known as “‘fusion’ or ‘Indo-Jazz’ in the 1960s” (Dorin, 2019, p. 123). However, such a heterogeneous character tends to direct jazz towards the path of hybridization. “In the first and seminal study on jazz in India, Warren Pickney Jr. insisted on the musicological aspects of acculturation with a study of a couple of Indian recordings that he labelled ‘Native Indian’ Indo-Jazz, by Braz Gonsalves, a Goan saxophonist who began his career in Calcutta in the 1950s and then played in Bombay and Delhi” (Dorin, 2019, p. 124). Thus, there is no one water-tight compartmentalization of the jazz scene in India, as it varies over its conglomeration of musical innovation and interactions with Europeans and Americans, which eventually led to the commencement of an Indian rendition of jazz and the dissipation of this cultural pattern. Jazz became highly popularized in the major cities of British India - Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, and Delhi.

Tracing the Antecedent of Jazz in Colonial India

Calcutta bore testimony to the earliest emergence of jazz music. The city had a significant impact on the cultural growth of the Anglo-Indian community. “Calcutta, because of its legacy as the ancient capital of India—until 1911—was the epicentre

of the distribution and acclimatization of Western cultural forms, particularly jazz music, for the decades preceding World War II, which was revealed to be a turning point in the history of the circulation of jazz in India” (Dorin, 2019, pp. 125). Although the advent of jazz in India is still ambiguous, it is generally attributed to the fact that the genre first laid its footsteps in India in the 1910s (Collet, 1948, p. 281). “According to H.J. Collett, jazz in India has a history stretching back to the late 1910s. Collett cites Ken Mac as the first popular jazz orchestra musician and leader, noting that in the early 1920s, he filled 40 engagements a month, playing as many as 30 to 35 numbers per session. Many years later, in 1947, Ken Mac would perform at an Independence function at the Karachi Club, attended by Muhammad Ali Jinnah.” (Shope, 2008, p. 281). Gradually, by the 1920s, luxurious hotels began to hire Anglo-Indian jazz musicians to play jazz music among an audience consisting of Britishers, Europeans, and a small group of Westernized Indian elites. Even though this paved the way for the blend of cultures, it limited its reception among the Indians. “It could also explain why it has been somehow difficult to produce a local version of jazz since it was associated with racial prejudice and colonial domination” (Dorin, 2010, p. 127).

Since the precedents of the British imperial system in India, western classical music was enjoyed only by the colonizers and a small number of Indian elites, Westernized through the colonial mode of education. The close cultural proximity of the Western musical tradition and Anglo-Indians has always been appreciated since the days of East India Company’s rule in India when marriages between British soldiers and Indians were highly encouraged by the Court of Directors of the Company.

By the end of the eighteenth century, community members were stripped of their rights and reservations in European educational institutes, and in 1795, their numbers in the military and civil services became limited. Consequently, these East Asian communities, who denied their earlier benevolence, found their retreat in music, forming brass bands, as an alternative to being farriers and fifers. “Greene cites a General Order dated June 14, 1798, that all fifers and drummers for sepoy regiments were to come from the Military Orphan Schools, normally joining when they were thirteen or fourteen. This is probably the first example of an occupation effectively reserved for Eurasians (Anderson, 2011, p. 208). This allowed the Eurasians to maintain their close affinities with the European way of life and derive influences from the Western sense of harmony and musical knowledge. “Thus, the military bands became the most common form of employment for the Eurasian sons of the crown and Company troops” (Anderson, 2011, p. 208).

The dominance of Anglo-Indians in popularizing their blend of musical traditions could be attributed to two major factors. Firstly, their knowledge of European music found its antecedent through church music and made a pragmatic path towards gaining popularity among the British. Secondly, the Anglo-Indians were a much-appreciated group amongst the Indian elite section for their “role of

entertainers and Western musical entertainment providers” (Dorin, 2010, p. 128). The musicians of the Anglo-Indian community were the only Indian musicians who were acknowledged for their Western musical performances in both classical and popular genres.

The nature of racial exclusivity in the zone of entertainment became an influential factor in the circulation of jazz music in the high-end clubs of Calcutta, albeit the Calcutta Club. For long after, only being opened to the Europeans, when the Indians were permitted to visit these clubs, it was solely limited to the members of upper-class industrialists and politicians that would benefit the British colonial administrators. “The entrance to clubs and hotels was not always strictly forbidden for Indians; although it could be more stringent in select clubs, such as the Saturday Club, it was impossible to get in dressed in dhotis or not in a European suit, even decades after Independence” (Dorin, 2010, p. 128). Racial exclusivity was undoubtedly preached highly by the British colonial ideology in India against the non-elite class and traditional musicians, which eventually allowed the Anglo-Indian jazz musicians an opportunity to expand and diffuse their musical knowledge through Western instrumentalization and Western harmony. The jazz musical tradition was closely associated with social status among the pre-independent Indian elites, and thus Anglo-Indian jazz bands were largely hired for social gatherings, weddings, and other forms of entertainment.

India’s torrid jazz scene and its influences were not limited to the geographic space of the major towns and cities harboured by Anglo-Indians but even went beyond its national boundary, as American-African jazz musicians from Shanghai and Chicago in the 1930s. These black jazz musicians acted as a source of inspiration and paved the way for establishing new grounds for liberating themselves from “their marginalized position in a highly racist hierarchical society” (*Ajnabi Blogspot*, 2011). Among them, the jazz African-American jazz musician who was highly revered in the orchestra of the Grand Hotel was Teddy Weatherford.

Popularizing Jazz during World War II

World War II opened a new space for the acceleration of jazz culture in India. The rise in population movements led to the unification of Indian musicians into the jazz music genre. Radio, too, provided an excellent medium for widening the sphere of the audience. The circulation of records established a newly formed market for jazz music in the music industry of India. “Direct contact with European and American jazz musicians and their instruments and musical practices had at least awakened Indian musicians’ desire to know more about jazz music—dance programs offered in entertainment included rumba, waltz, foxtrot, ragtime” (Dorin, 2010, p. 132). Jazz soon went on to acquire a multicultural and international character. “Anglo-Indian bands began to dominate the local jazz scene in India in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Bombay Swing Club, founded in the 1940s, featured several outstanding

musicians, such as saxophonists Norman Mupsbee (Mosby?) and Hal Green, and was largely patronized by Anglo-Indians” (Pinckney, 1989, p. 38). Nevertheless, it was the immediate interaction between the Anglo-Indian jazz musicians and their European and African-American counterparts that aided in the diffusion of jazz in India. The impressive presence of Anglo-Indians provided a crucial vehicle for the transmission of a cultural enterprise different from its preceding musical traditions in India and gradually entered the entertainment industry and music scene of India. Thus, the Second World War provided a milestone for the Indianization of a tradition that was once exclusive to the elite section of the Indian population and Europeans at large.

Stuck in an identity limbo post-1947, the Anglo-Indians persuaded their unique lifestyle, continuing to lend their influences to music, food, and literature. However, the success that jazz had first achieved in India soon started to fade away, with the Bollywood film industry dominating every music genre. The nostalgia, however, remained an effective medium to help jazz culture retain its entity and popularity among several jazz music enthusiasts. “Some Anglo-Indian jazz musicians continued their careers in England, a subject addressed in the novel *Queenie* by Michael Korda” (Pinckney, 1989, p. 38).

Current Scenario of Jazz in Calcutta

Looking at the jazz scene in the city of Calcutta, several enthusiasts still exist, and nostalgia still prevails in the minds of aficionados like Brendan Koerner, who explores the music halls of the Grand Hotel and looks back into the days when Teddy Weatherford and Jimmy Witherspoon played in the auditorium of the property. And as 'vibist' and band-leader, Anto Menezes claims, the nightclubs, being in the same circles within Park Street, allow for a vibrant jazz culture in the deluge. Writer and jazz enthusiast Ian Zachariah recalls how Park Street was famous for its lively jazz milieu as artists like Luke Ellington¹ and Paul Gonzalves played in The Park in the early seventies. But a sense of yearning prevails among jazz enthusiasts like Mr. Zachariah, as the dedicated jazz halls have now been turned into swimming pools or parking lots (*Finding Carlton, The Jazz Scene was Calcutta. mov*, 2011). Carlton Kitto recalls that it was once a hotbed of jazz culture in Calcutta, with thriving jazz bands playing in Mocambo, Moulin Rouge, and other eminent places surrounding Park Street being the talk of the town and the glory of 1970s Calcutta (101 India, 2016), but now the only remnants of the thriving culture remain in the memories of jazz enthusiasts. Carlton Kitto maintained his position at the pinnacle of the jazz scene until 1977, a significant year marked by the West Bengal government's decision to levy taxes on establishments such as restaurants and clubs that embraced jazz music and its performers. This measure was aimed at curtailing what was perceived as the

¹ This was Mr. Ian Zachariah's first live jazz experience. He also praised Paul Gonzalves's instrumental talent.

influence of Western culture within the state. Consequently, there was a gradual migration of the jazz scene from Kolkata to Mumbai. Despite this shift, Kitto remained deeply rooted in Kolkata, holding the city close to his heart and soul. He chose to stay in Kolkata, where he transformed a modest one-room dwelling in Alimuddin Street into his sanctuary.

Conclusion

The journey of jazz, however, remains incomplete. Robert E Park, rightly suggests that a sense of “Moral dichotomy and conflict is probably (the) characteristic of every immigrant during the period of transition, when old habits are being discarded and new ones are not yet formed. It is inevitably a period of inner turmoil and intense self-consciousness.” This wave of transition and turmoil was indeed a part of what every member of the “Marginal man” belonging to the Anglo-Indian community felt—for Jazz was not just music but served as a significant medium through which Anglo-Indians leveraged their musical talents to enhance their position within the colonial social hierarchy; and the fading nature of jazz post-1940s meant their vehicle for acknowledgement within the sociopolitical framework of the era was also declining.

Jazz, made its entry through the Anglo-Indian community in India, through the measures incorporated by colonial racial exclusivity, having strong links to the cultural domination of a foreign rule, and nostalgia for belonging - yearning to have close ties with the fatherland. These “musical marginal men” (Dorin, 2010, p. 139) played a dominant role in the adaptation of the new musical form in India. Anglo-Indians were the only Indian actors who laid the groundwork for the evolution and appropriation of jazz music up until the Second World War. The hybridization between various jazz worlds eventually led to the creation of an Indianized version of jazz. “There is even a form of national pride to claim a re-assessment of Indian participation, even if small, in the global jazz tradition” (Dorin, 2010, p. 139). Keeping strong ties with the Anglo-India heritage, the jazz musical tradition in India also rose as a cultural entity that united India with the West, producing a unique facet that claimed its legitimacy to colonial history, an element of nostalgic association, and finally an evolution of new cultural development. “By the mid-1950s, however, many Anglo-Indians had immigrated to England after India finally achieved independence from Great Britain; this contributed to the closing of the Bombay Jazz Club and left a temporary void in the Indian jazz scene” (Pinckney, 1989, p. 38).

Secondly, the rigorous racial and class exclusivity practiced by the British colonizers in India had repercussions on the dissemination of jazz, as portrayed in the years after independence in India, as the enthusiasm once received by just one section of the population soon faded away, along with their waning resources and favours in post-independent India. This made the number of “musical marginal men” even more insignificant. Being a musical tradition only accessible to a privileged few,

created upon the colonial mode of ‘otherization’, the present jazz scene in India has to bear the burden of a challenging approach in the face of tokenism and racism, rendering, as Sarathy Kower, a twenty’s jazz musician, answered in an interview, “no singular brown voice” (Kalia, 2019) in the Indian jazz scene.

“The paradox of any cultural movement is that once it achieves a certain amount of cache with the mainstream audience, that is when it also begins to run its course, due to overexposure” (Mulki, 2019). The Anglo-Indian jazz scene in Calcutta bears testimony to this fact. While the then-emerging Bollywood industry embraced and adapted its musicians, it resulted in the abandonment of the original art form, leaving it “completely marginalized thereafter, to have any significant cultural relevance anymore” (Mulki, 2019).

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