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GOLLY IT'S BOLLY
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TRULY MULTICULTURAL
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The India Connect

A hunt for musicians of Indian origin turned up a chest full of surprises

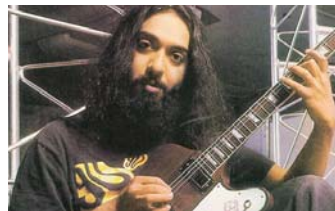
A COUPLE of months back when I wrote about the powerful vocals of Shilpa Ray, a second generation Indian-American who accompanies her songs with an unlikely instrument for a rock band, the harmonium, I did toy with the idea of exploring other musicians of Indian origin who might be making a mark on the contemporary western rock and pop scene. You know, like grunge rock band Soundgarden's lead guitarist Kim Thayil who was born in Seattle to parents who'd migrated from Kerala.

Soundgarden, which, unfortunately, lasted only for around a dozen years since it was formed in 1984, was a towering phenomenon in grunge rock, becoming among the first bands to bring heavy metal sounds to what was then an emerging alternative music scene. Thayil's guitar riffs and vocalist Chris Cornell's singing style trademarked their sound. If you hadn't heard Soundgarden while they were around, I'd recommend buying their 1994 album, *Superunknown*. And, if you've watched the film, *Singles*, you'll have heard one of their great songs, *Birth Ritual*, which is on the soundtrack.

Soundgarden and Thayil apart, I had heard some even more contemporary bands where Indian-Americans were members or even founders. Voxtro is a band that was founded in the university town of Austin, Texas, by Ramesh Srivastava, again a second-gen Indian. If you liked the sound of The Smiths, I'd suggest checking out Voxtro, although Srivastava's vocals are not exactly like Morrissey's and the lyrics are more upbeat and far less reflective than most of The Smiths' repertoire. And, of course, I'd also heard Goldspot, a much more pop-ish Los Angeles band, formed by Siddhartha Khosla, another second-gen Ind-Am. Indeed, in one interview Khosla talked about how he grew up on a concentrated dose of Hindi film music – the only genre that his parents would listen to.

Some of Goldspot's songs seem also to be influenced by Hindi film music, although I can't say I liked their music as much as I did Voxtro's. Then came an email from my friend and music fiend, Hari Menon in Cochin, nudging me in

several new directions to discover a trove of Indian-Americans, many of whom I'd never heard of before. There was Cheetie Kumar, lead guitarist of the Birds of Avalon, a punchy, retro sort of band where she plays mean, screaming riffs. Kumar's husband, Paul Siler, is the bassist for the band and both are erstwhile members of the now-disbanded Cherry Valence, a two-lead guitarist, two-drummer outfit that played even harder rock than Birds of Avalon. I watched a few YouTube vids of both the bands and became an instant convert (check out Cherry Valence's *Bootyshakin'* video and Birds of Avalon's *Superpower* and you probably will too).



THAYIL'S GUITAR RIFFS TRADEMARKED SOUNDGARDEN'S SOUND

That wasn't all. I went on to discover Rupa and the April Fishes, a band led by Rupa Marya who was born to Indian parents in California and grew up in India, the US and France. A polyglot who sings in several languages, Marya, I learnt, is also a doctor besides being a singer, songwriter and guitarist. Her music is unclassifiable, sometimes drawing on Latin bossa nova sounds, Indian ragas, gypsy music and French rock styles – a truly multicultural sound. Their song, *Une Americaine a Paris*, is a good track to start with and the video version on YouTube is great.

Even in Britain, there are second-generation immigrants from India who're making waves. At the prestigious South By South West music festival in March this year, a young Briton, Vijay Kishore, made a mark with his music. Kishore, who was born to Indian parents in Birmingham, has often been compared to greats like Radiohead's Thom Yorke and Jeff Buckley. His voice has a boyish, almost angelic quality, and his songs are accompanied by spare music – often just a drum machine and an acoustic guitar. Given the rave reviews he's been getting in the discerning music press, I expect to hear more about him in the near future.

Soon I realised that I'd opened a chest full of surprises. Currently, I'm discovering Swati Sharma, whose music is described by her as "acoustic metal" because of the style with which she strums her guitar. Sharma performs simply as Swati and her songs are intense, personal and loaded with emotion. I heard one called *2 O' Clock In The A.M.*, with lyrics that are infectious.

True, all of these so-called second-generation immigrants are more American (or European) than Indian. Many of them have either never or very rarely even visited India but it's interesting to discover how they've become part of the melting pot of popular music in the countries their parents chose to live in.

(To stream or download the music mentioned in this column, go to www.hindustantimes.com. And send feedback to downloadctr@gmail.com)

