



# MARTIN DAHANUKAR EXPLORING INNER JUNGLES

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The idea of 'jungle' has a particular resonance in jazz, from Duke Ellington's early hot compositions to Pierre Dørge's New Jungle Orchestra, but apart from a certain nervous recognition that the word suggest primitivism and danger, no one examines it very much. So it's worth considering what we mean when we talk about 'the jungle'.

For the most part, our common sense understanding of the word implies darkness, impenetrability, in human wilderness, an uncontrolled profusion of growth that is beyond our understanding.

Recently, however, serious thinking about jungle has shifted again. Experts like Fred Pearce have started to point out that most jungle is not, in fact, impenetrable at all, except perhaps at its edges, and that far from being uninhabitable wilderness it contains the site of long-abandoned human civilisations, whole African and South American kingdoms only buried under tangles of invasive growth as a result of invasion, war, disease, cultural decadence, and other forms of mismanagement. Pearce also follows a line

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of thinking that repositions the 'jungle' not as a place where missionaries happen across one another in dim clearings ('Dr Livingstone, I presume?') but where scientists go in search of new medical cures, new fabrics, new miracle foodstuffs. In other words, a place of plenty and not lack or danger.

**N**ow consider the title of trumpeter Martin Dahanukar's CD *Scent of Jungle*. Doesn't that imply richness rather than impoverishment, or that very immediate and powerful olfactory reminder, as we make a landfall or climb out of the jeep at the road end, that here is a place that is new and different, exotic and full of marvels. Dahanukar's music is a jungle in this new, positive sense. One doesn't need to hack a path through it. It's modern but accessible, richly spiced but with no whiff of the toxic, and it gives back a healing order.

If one thinks of jungle as mostly restricted to the two great equatorial continents, it's significant that Dahanukar has personal and creative roots in the Indian subcontinent, which we associate more (though not necessarily accurately) with open spaces rather than enclosed growth, with connectedness rather than obstruction. There is a long and complex book to be written on the impact of Indian music on jazz, indeed on Indian and later Pakistani/Bangladeshi impact on world culture. John Coltrane drew considerable (though again not fully understood) influence from *raga*. Miles Davis put tablas at the heart of his most complex and ambiguous group. Collin Walcott imported the sitar, as pop musicians had done before him, and tried to make it sing within essentially Western ensembles. The word *raga* has an original sense of colouring or dyeing, and it might be said that Coltrane, and Miles in his very different way, changed the palette of modern jazz even more than they affected its harmonics or its rhythms.

They derived new colours, or if you prefer a synaesthetic variant, new tastes and scents. There have, of course, been other, more and less successful attempts to blend Western and Indian styles. One thinks immediately of Joe Harriott's and John Mayer's *Indo-Jazz Fusions*, a well-intentioned but ultimately unsatisfactory effort to blend cultures that only ever sounds like a juxtaposition or rough mix rather than a whole-hearted synthesis. In a different way, percussionist Harris Eisenstadt has adopted the Gandhian philosophy of *Ahimsa* as a guiding principle for some of his large-ensemble music.

**D**ahanukar comes to Indian more directly than any of these. Much of his earlier work was an effort to blend the two philosophies and styles. One hears it on the pioneering *Nanda Devi* album, in the extensive use of off-centre and additive rhythms, flatted notes (no sharps in *raga*!) and floating, bent tones that seem to come at us from close by and a long way off simultaneously. A distinctive voice was evident as soon as one listened to 'Phasr Prom', the opening track, and it was strongly consolidated in the title piece, 'Juhu Beach' and 'Tales of India' as well. The previous record *Apocalypse Now* (and there's a title with 'jungle' – and Vietnam – overtones!) did likewise and with great confidence, but building in ideas like 'Buddy Bolden's Stomp' to affirm that Dahanukar's approach is not just an opportunistic collision of effects, something got up for a Jazz Yatra event or for some cross-cultural occasion in Europe, but a genuine synthesis. He takes from Indian music in much the way Randy Weston took from African music, generously, confidently but always with the instincts of a jazz musician and with a clear sense of where his core language lies. Dahanukar makes this very clear. "My secret probably is that that I don't try to mingle these styles together at all! Maybe you can call my music an imaginary style for after having visited India in the

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mid-90s I knew I had to write pieces which reflected upon the thrilling experience of having been exposed to the subcontinent's spell. My former melodies and improvisations simply got a certain eastern tinge added. What I loved in Indian music was the emphasis put on letting you feel the stream of time your lifetime. And the immersion into distinct moods, the sensual permutation of a selected array of tones. In sum, I am a jazz musician throughout but open-minded as well. Encountering India and its music simply broadened my jazz-based musicianship."

**M**iles Davis died more than twenty years ago, but it sometimes sounds as if he were still around and still giving lessons, or handing out his old Harmon mutes. The truth is that Miles changed the *sound* of the trumpet forever, taking it out of Gabriel's hands and giving it to the Serpent, a quiet, insinuating voice, with beauty and menace evenly balanced. Asked if he finds Miles's pervasive influence to be obstructive or over-determining, Dahanukar answers briskly. "Not at all. For standing under his influence means to me finding oneself. Besides his musical grandeur Miles had a very risk taking, bold personality and did things only few dared and dare to do. He would have become an influence even if I hadn't chosen the trumpet to be my instrument." Miles operates in Martin Dahanukar's music in much the way he operates in Tomasz Stańko's, as a reference point or replenishing stream but not as an orthodoxy. One wonders whether 'Amazon's Morning Chant' on *Scent of Jungle* is a specific reference to Stańko, and to similarly titled pieces by the Polish musician? Asked about influences, he says "Tomasz Stańko for his somber, noir tone; Fela Kuti for his blend of African brass sounds with hypnotic riffs overlaid by his rap-like singing; all Bartók's string quartets for their imaginary and magical pull; Bach's supernal, melodic tangles winding up into the sky; Roy Haynes, the Ariel of jazz drumming; Eddie Henderson and Roy Hargrove for their spontaneous, adventurous solo styles; Wayne Shorter, for searching still; and . . . and . . . and . . .!"

**H**is very first instrument, taken up at six but quickly abandoned, was the violin. "I'll never forget my first lesson. My teacher, an elderly symphony orchestra violist, sat on the piano and played a Beatles song while asking me to play something along! Wow, I thought, this guy is funny. I'd never heard of the Beatles nor had I an idea how to play the violin. So action was guaranteed from the very beginning. And so it went on. I liked these lessons for you never knew what was to come next. Although I never managed to play this instrument properly my love to music originated back then! Later, when I took up music seriously in my teens it happened with ease."

Of course, no one lives entirely outside the wider world. Even the most ardent purist is susceptible to influences from beyond his chosen sphere. Dahanukar's visual and literary imagination is, like Stańko's, exceptionally well honed and he gives welcome permission for culinary comparisons as well! "I love reading and writing and am totally addicted to films (Almodóvar, Kubrick, Tarkovski, Fellini, in fact any good movies with strong casts. In painting I love Picasso, Bacon, Goya, Japanese or modern Chinese art. Food: I love to arrange on a dish bites of different temperatures, consistencies, colours. I'm impressed by Ferran Adrià's experiments or the boldness of Nipponesque cuisine! And of course, dance and music are perfect twins!"

**D**ahanukar gets plenty of air into his horn and lets it vibrate softly. There are overtones that only come through slowly like background spices in a good *masala*. The blend is good, but not bland. There is edge to it, and even when Dahanukar plays in relatively (relatively!) conventional melodic situations, as in his duo with Jerome de Carli, he still skirts an edge of risk. Material that came with *Scent of Jungle* stated "I like irritation, scars, distortion" and spoke of the 'churning stranger' in the music. Jazz is a scar culture, a music of healed-over wounds, of phantom pains and cicatrized skin. To that degree, if no other, Dahanukar's is a quintessential jazz imagination. One cannot, of

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course, reconstruct the psychic materials he draws on, but there are clues in his background and upbringing. "My German father, an engineer by profession, was an amateur violinist with a 360 degrees interest in classical music ranging from ancient Gregorian chorals to wildest avant-garde music. Unforgettable was our common attendance of Messiaen's *Turangalila-symphonie* with Jeanne Loriod at the prepared keyboards! My Indian mother, a Germanist, I remember singing Hindu chants every morning during my youth probably out of homesickness and forlornness in Europe. It irritated me and usually swept me out of the flat. Yet, these mantras surely affected me quite a bit." There are a couple of the irritations spoken of, specks of grit inside the oyster. A mind that is open to all music and that is constantly filtering the water for nourishment is bound to produce pearls. Dahanukar is one of the most exciting musicians working today in Europe, and one of the most precious: for his individuality, for having the courage to inhabit his own imaginative world, and for daring to work without obvious commitment to a single style or to a rigid modernity. "You can compare me with a classical violinist who plays Bach partitas as well as works of his own time. It's not contradictory at all but complementary. In fact, the way I play classical jazz enriches to great extent my renditions of modern music and vice versa."

The great legacy of modernism is that all styles and schools are collapsed in the individual imagination. It is no longer necessary to smuggle in one's private passions. They can be worn on the sleeve. It is a jungle out there, a vast, thrashing confusion of competing voices. The law of the jungle is unforgiving, but it isn't always the predators that survive and thrive. One understands what Stańko means by 'predatory lyricism', but there are other graceful ways of making progress, and Martin Dahanukar is shaping his own and doing so with ever greater confidence. If there is a single test and touchstone for whether and how a jazz musician will prevail, it is the one Miles Davis recognised early, only ever seemed to abandon and returned to passionately in his last work. Dahanukar smiles. "The blues! The way someone plays the blues tells you who he is . . ." On that score, he is the real thing.