

MICKEY CORREA: 1913-2011

It's silence for the sultan of swing

Meher Marfatia pays tribute to the magic that India's lone surviving jazzman wrought as bandleader

He would have turned 98 on Monday, September 26th. But the music has stilled for Mickey Correa just two years short of the century he so wanted to celebrate - "like Sachin Tendulkar", he quipped to students he so brilliantly taught to hit just-right chords and riffs.

To some of us it was incredible privilege: sitting in an apartment at Esperanza building in Colaba across the man who spoke lightly of jamming with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Paul Desmond, Jack Teagarden and Dave Brubeck. An astounding repository of the swing age, Correa held an international record. Resident bandleader at the Taj Mahal Hotel for 21 seasons (1939-1960), his was an unbroken run rivalled only by year-ahead Carroll Gibbons of The Savoy, London.

His face a picture of rapt attention mixed with passion, Correa's fingers flew, till a few weeks ago, over his Schiedmayer piano. To listen to him and his wife Doreen share anecdotal music memories was to sniff a pulsating, sensuous night air from the 1930s - glory years ushering in the swing culture at prime hotels, theatres and jazz halls of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and Lahore.

Born in Mombasa in 1913, Correa was transported from East African soil to Moira in Goa. At church school in this ancestral village, he learnt to sing a cappella and play violin. He put bow to violin publicly for elder brother Alex's group, The Correa Optimists Band in Karachi. Innate musical intelligence ensured he also adeptly taught himself the piano, clarinet, guitar, banjo and accordion.

The tug of Bombay proved strong enough to record baritone sax strains with All India Radio here in 1936. Right off where the Taj stands, Green's Hotel was another venue wooing jazz fans. The morning after he performed here with Theodore and His Boys, a



Correa with Paul Desmond, Dave Brubeck, Hal Green and Hindi film musicians

paper pronounced: "In young Correa the Theodore blowers have an asset, a saxophonist of high merit and definite attraction." He got his break deputizing for King Oliver's clarinetist, Rudy Jackson, in Weatherford's orchestra at the Taj. Next, Afro American Roy Butler and cornet genius Cricket Smith pieced together ensembles, which Correa often led.

With a reputation for pacing every manner of musician through the works, classical to cabaret, Correa found himself in the plum position of being the first Indian offered to form an orchestra with independent charge. His orchestra roped in the cream of players, including Chic Chocolate, George Pacheco, Johnny Baptist, Eddie Tavares and Lester Weeks and gave Bombay its first swing music show on September 15, 1948.

A little-known fact involves a flowing proficiency with which versatile Correa played

classic chords. First clarinet player for no less than Yehudi Menuhin's concerts, he performed with the Bombay Symphony Orchestra under Belgian Jules Craen and Mehli Mehta, conductor Zubin Mehta's father. It was easy for him to render Mozart quintets and Beethoven trios with consummate mastery.

The Correas nurtured the prodigious musical genes of three children, Patricia, Christine and Marc. Exceptional singers all, Christine has earned individual stripes as a cutting-edge musician in New York. Her mother treasures details of early journeys with her feted father... When Correa rubbed shoulders with bandleaders in London and Paris where he performed with two orchestras, played for comedian Danny Kaye and Hollywood greats Errol Flynn and William Holden...

The tribute encores will forever soar. RIP maestro.