

Badshah of the Bombay Ballroom

Multi-instrumentalist Mickey Correa once jammed with legends. Now a nonagenarian, Correa continues to grace the Mumbai music scene

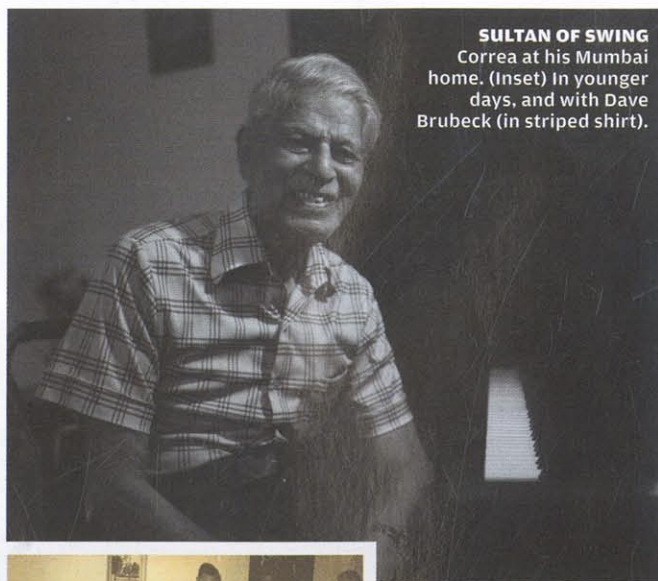
By Meher Marfatia

FASCINATING HOW A LINE becomes a lived experience. "Going back in time" is a phrase that teems with crystal-clear imagery as I hear the rousing notes of a panoramic orchestra play from a century ago. Visualise smart-jacketed band boys nod to encores before a ballroom filled with flushed dancers and applauding diners.

Even as he turns 97 on September 26, Mickey Correa is a living legend from an era resolutely past, but still teaches music to pupils a quarter his age. It is an incredible privilege sitting in his downtown Mumbai apartment, across the man who speaks lightly of jamming with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Paul Desmond, Jack Teagarden and Dave Brubeck. An astounding repository of the swing age, India's lone surviving jazzman holds an international record. Resident bandleader at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai for 21 seasons (1939-1960), his unbroken run is rivalled merely by year-ahead Carroll Gibbons of The Savoy, London.

His face a picture of calm attention, Correa lets his fingers fly over a Schiedmayer piano to accompany Dr Farhad Kapadia on the saxophone. They have done this every midweek evening for 15 years, with Dr Kapadia, an intensive care specialist at Hinduja Hospital in midtown Mahim battling north-south traffic routinely for lessons.

Born in Mombasa in 1913, Correa recalls being transported from East African soil to Moira in Goa. At his church school in this ancestral village, he learnt to sing a cappella and play violin. In 1924, the family moved to Karachi, their Napier Street home a 10 minutes' walk from his St Patrick's School.



SULTAN OF SWING
Correa at his Mumbai home. (Inset) In younger days, and with Dave Brubeck (in striped shirt).



Destined to display his skills publicly, Correa put bow to violin for elder brother Alex's group, The Correa Optimists Band. "An Englishman in the ensemble urged me not to be restricted to violin, so I picked up playing saxophone on my own," Correa laughs. Innate musical intelligence ensured he taught himself the piano, clarinet, guitar, banjo and accordion as well.

In Karachi, he shyly tasted performance potential. The tug of Mumbai proved strong enough to record baritone sax strains with All India Radio there. It was 1936 in the city of dreams which pulled him into its throbbing heart. If bands were a British legacy at the turn of the 20th century, local acts steadily multiplied as logical extension.

Living in Dhobi Talao hostels like his, Goans with music brimming inextricably in their blood, seized jazz as the song of their souls. At 24, Correa readily embraced the genre whose

full-throated, seductive liberty of expression had trumpeter Frank Fernand, of Theodore (Teddy) Weatherford's famed Taj band, exult, "You play jazz the way you feel; morning you play differently, evening differently."

The heat was on. Mumbai's ears flapped receptively to this wealth of exciting new sounds. Fresh tunes on sheet music came in imported boxfuls. Youngsters tried to hit notes they heard on records. Architect Charles Correa remembers his distant cousin coming over, to take in clarinetist-composers Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman. Then he threw their sounds smoothly back.

By 1937, Correa could showcase his learning at Mumbai's Eros Cinema. Its ballroom was the hub of a thriving, jiving nightlife. The

multi-instrumentalist played tempos that soared and seared with gliding moods, for Beppo and his Rhythm Orchestra, before moving with that German act to Majestic Hotel.

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 paper pronounced: "In young Correa, the Theodore blowers have an asset, a saxophonist of high merit and definite attraction."

It was 1939 that brought a turning point in Correa's routine. The War witnessed an exodus of Germans and Italians dominating the big band scene. Correa got his break deputising 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. The Correa Swing Orchestra roped in the cream of players, including Chic Chocolate, George Pacheco, Johnny Baptist, Eddie Tavares and Lester Weeks.

In the current restricted live act landscape, it's hard throwing back to a time the city was dotted with cafes and clubs that sizzled jazz over lunch, tea and dinner. Rocked by peaking demand, smoky-toned combo bands serenaded lovers and music buffs at restaurants like Volga, Venice, Gaylord, Berry's and Bistro. The Ambassador Quartet debuted at the eponymous Churchgate hotel in 1947. That was a watershed year, striking India's finest hour. It gave Correa's career a grand highlight. "The magnificent opportunity," he says, of presenting the August 14, 1947 evening concert. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru delivered his stirring Tryst with Destiny speech in Delhi that fateful midnight-dawn hour on August 15. In tandem, the Tricolour rose

onstage over Correa's orchestra, to dramatic cadences of unfettered India's national anthem.

Waves of applause kept rolling in for Correa's band. The maestro responsible for giving Mumbai its first swing music show on September 15, 1948, had indisputably arrived. 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.

Night after silken night at the Taj, the band boomed, before the lights dimmed for Correa to end with Charles Trenet's evocative chanson 'La Mer.' He charmingly observes, "The Catholics were gifted talent, the Parsis cultural inclination and finance." These communities joined hands with Anglo-Indians, to infuse their beloved city with distinct pep and verve. An archival brochure mir-

roring the magic of the times, lists 65 bands gloriously sexing up the Bombay of 1949.

That year paralleled a milestone in Correa's personal life, when he married Doreen D'Souza. Their wedding suite hugged a corner on the third floor of the Taj - exactly where terrorists fired, that horrific night of November 26 almost two years ago when the iconic hotel burned.

It's evident Doreen is the solid backbone behind the creative spirit she has lived with. As parents, they nurtured the prodigious musical genes of three children, Patricia, Christine and Marc. Exceptional singers all, Christine went beyond to earn individual stripes as a cutting-edge musician in New York. Training vocalists at Columbia University, she belongs to the acclaimed Frank Carlberg Quintet. Her father possessed a number of violins. He made Christine sit in another room, as he played the same phrase on each instrument. "I would have to rank every violin in terms of its sound. That was the earliest aural training I received," she says.

As painstaking with his pupils

as he was with his own children's musical sojourn, Correa demanded diligence. No more than 19 when he picked up sax basics, Ryan Sadri of Mumbai jam band Something Relevant, says, "His quirky style of teaching theory stays with me each time I'm at one of my gigs." Always fond of jazz, in 1960 theatre owner Minoo Master learnt the clarinet. He recalls lessons squeezed in on working afternoons. "They were the pleasantest sessions, happily filled with engaging anecdotes about the jazz world."

On her part, Doreen vividly remembers every pupil walking into their lives. Just the way she treasures details of shared early journeys with her feted husband. Rubbing shoulders with bandleaders in London and Paris where he performed with two orchestras... Playing for comedian Danny Kaye and other Hollywood actors like Errol Flynn and William Holden...

Eyes scrunched in faraway recall, she reaches Correa's swansong concert on October 1, 1960, when he bowed good-bye at the Taj. The music man played a decidedly

wonderful innings, till ill health cast a pall. The diagnosis was diphtheria, damaging to breath and heart. Mindful, Correa exited the Taj after 21 unforgettable seasons. Goody Seervai and Nelly Battiwala (our only woman bandleader) continued to get Mumbai grooving. Accomplished as they were, neither managed the Correa charisma which outshone all after.

Correas from around the globe gathered for a twin celebration last December. The occasion was the couple's 60th anniversary, plus the 96th birthday of the most illustrious member of its clan. "What a night our children planned," he reminisces contentedly.

I leave with an even more warming story from Doreen. Her husband loves gazing at a special view from the sixth-storey bedroom of their Colaba Causeway flat. He won't let her draw the curtains shut on it each morning. Not even when blinding sunlight streams in.

I look out of that window... to see the beautiful, brave dome of the Taj.

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