

MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA



IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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When September swings

The music stilled for swing king Mickey Correa three years ago, a little short of the century he longed to celebrate. "Like Sachin Tendulkar," he had once quipped as I'd sat in his Colaba flat to interview the man who jammed with no less than Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Paul Desmond, Jack Teagarden and Dave Brubeck, besides having played for Hollywood legends Danny Kaye, Errol Flynn and William Holden.

If September 26 marks the close of Correa's birth centenary year, this month holds another red letter day in the city's jazz history. Resident bandleader at the Taj Mahal Hotel for 21 straight summers (his 1939-1960 run rivalled only by year-ahead Carroll Gibbons of The Savoy, London), Correa introduced Bombay to swing on September 15, 1948. Before going on to mentor a host of musicians who stomped on to captain their own lounge bands.

The foremost orchestra leader of his day, Mombasa-born Correa first put bow to violin for his elder brother Alex's group, The Correa Optimists Band in Karachi. With innate musical intelligence, he also taught himself the piano, clarinet, guitar, banjo and accordion. Entrenched in Bombay by 1937, the multi-instrumentalist played at Eros Cinema's ballroom, the hub of a thriving, jiving nightlife. Architect Charles Correa remembers his distant cousin coming over to listen to clarinetist-composers Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman. Then, with consummate ease, he threw their sounds back—simply, surely, smoothly.

Bands were a part of British legacy at the turn of the 20th century and local acts soon enjoyed a logical extension. Living in Dhobi Talao hostels as Correa initially did, Goans with music brimming in their blood seized jazz as the song of their souls. Wartime in 1939 proved a turning point. It witnessed an exodus of Germans and Italians dominating the big band scene. Correa got his break deputizing for King Oliver's clarinetist Rudy Jackson in Teddy Weatherford's orchestra at the Taj. Rocked by a peaking demand, smoky-toned combo bands serenaded music lovers at restaurants like Volga, Venice, Gaylord and Berry's. The Ambassador Quartet debuted at the eponymous Churchgate hotel in 1947, a watershed year striking India's finest hour. Nehru delivered his Tryst with Destiny speech in Delhi that fateful August 15 midnight-dawn hour, while the Tricolour rose over the stage where Correa's orchestra played the dramatic strains of free India's new anthem, *Jana Gana Mana* at the Taj.

Expertly pacing players for every kind of music, from classic to cabaret, Correa was offered the plum position of being the first Indian to form an orchestra with independent charge. He roped in the cream of talent including Chic Chocolate, George Pacheco, Johnny Baptist, Eddie Tavares and Leslie Weeks. That's how Correa's All Star Band came to form the core of the memorable evening which brought Bombay its inaugural swing show on September 15, 1948. The highlight was Frank Fernand's original piece, *My Heart is a Swinging Door*, inspired by a meeting with Gandhiji.

Two months past that mid-September soiree, November 28 saw the Bombay Swing Club present its inaugural show at Cama Hall. Though the curtain rose on the debut concert in a terrible cyclone, the night was a grand success. A full house of blues fans was treated to a programme of rousing riffs from *Ev'ryone Knew*, *St Louis Blues* and *Atlantic Five*.

Four years after seeing him stoop keenly over the Schiedmayer piano in his home, I'm secure in the thought that it was an incredible privilege to have met the man who got at least two generations smart up on their feet, tapping to his scores... the last lone ranger from India's jazz age heyday.

