



Once upon a time there was a tango

With his birth centenary year ending in a tribute show, here's tracing the happy harmonica reign of Phiroze Damri

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It's a merry Christmas morning for me, all right. The chance to spend it with the family of a music legend is special. I'm catching up with Pilloo, wife of harmonica maestro Phiroze Damri, and son Kersi in their chintzy Churchgate flat. Devoted pupils prepare to mark his birth centenary with a tribute evening next month.

Damri died at 91 in 2005, leaving three entire generations with cheery memories. Mina Kava, composer of that peppy paean, *Bombay meri hai* once led the Hohner Harmonica Club which Damri founded and helmed for 60 years from 1937. I grew up tapping feet with cousins who blew tunes he taught. I married a student who regales our kids with harmonica class tales.

In the hands of Phiroze Maneckshaw Damri, the humble harmonica was elevated from a small picnic-party toy to a serious concert hall inclusion. Interesting how he gifted both lift and lilt to the simple instrument he stumbled on with self-taught skill.

The eldest of three children, Damri was four when his mother was widowed at 21.

As courageous as she was creative, Banoobai took him along to homes where she gave harmonium and dilruba lessons. Fascinated by melodic strains wafting from Parsi functions in Albless Baug, opposite which they lived, he dreamt of being in such a band some day. "He joined Mehli Cassinath's violin class. Nani Palkhivala was also there," remembers Pilloo about the eminent jurist. "Those excited boys saved the two rupees they got for shows to buy sharkskin shoes!"

If financial constraints forced Damri to drop out from Wilson College, luck brought a turning point. The German mouth organ

manufacturer Matth Hohner asked agent Curset Tengra to scout for an India representative. Charmed by Damri's bowing talent, Tengra gave him a *Teach Yourself Harmonica* book to master within three days. The young violinist who'd never held a harmonica to his lips won the challenge. And a fee of Rs 80 — provided he tutored at schools free of charge. Damri bicycled to the music store James & Co. every month to collect this sum before heading off for harmonica tuitions. The Hohner income funded his own advanced violin lessons with Gool Tata.

The curtain rose on the first harmonica orchestra at Regal Theatre in 1938 with lines of lads from Damri's alma mater St. Xavier's. From an inch-long single octave model called Little Lady to the rare two-foot Akkorda, the city was soon roused by a multitude of fine mouthed organ sounds. With World War II, the German stipend stopped. Damri continued teaching privately, charging a modest eight annas. Later in 1953, Hohner invited him to play at the inaugural world harmonica festival at Duisburg on the Rhine.

Back in Bombay, Damri proudly performed with the iconic Larry Adler at C.J. Hall in 1955. Three years after, the government ban on imported instruments struck. Players were restricted to buying

Chinese harmonicas sold on the streets. These were diatonic, unlike the chromatic examples with black piano keys too. A stint with Hindi films, starting with *Sunday ke Sunday* in *Shehnaiz*, saw Damri work with C. Ramachandra, Naushad, Shankar-Jaikishen and the Burmans. But he and accordionist Goody Seervai felt undervalued by the industry and exited.

The versatile harmonica embraces tempos ranging from waltz and cha cha cha to the samba and blues. Darius Engineer, a member of The Harmonikats trio with Sarosh Sanjana and Farrokh Buchia, shares that Damri especially enjoyed tangos.

"Uncompromising about timing, he knocked hard on the table when we were just slightly out of beat," says Engineer "Yet he was most patient," adds Nahni Sukhadwalla, a star pupil since he was seven — his now 72-year-old fingers still fly over the keyboard at clubs though he earlier played harmonica, guitar and accordion.

Walking out in a nostalgic haze, I feel my head hum Damri favourites *La Paloma* and *La Cumparsita*. Hopefully in tune enough to warrant not much table thumping.

Entries from amateur musicians (any instrument or vocals) for the Phiroze Damri Centenary Tribute accepted till January 15 on dariusengineer51@gmail.com



Phiroze Damri and Nani Palkhivala (second from right and extreme right respectively) pose in traditional dagdis before an Albless Baug performance with Mehli Cassinath's band