

MUSICAL EXPRESSION

For drummer and composer **Sunny Jain**, *anekant* opens the door to musical creativity

MUSIC IS A VERY spiritual thing. My lifestyle adheres to the belief of minimal consumption of goods and products. I'm not interested in making loads of money and having the biggest house on the street with several expensive cars. I'm interested in playing music and living within my means. I'm very happy doing this." So says Sunny Jain, a passionate young jazz musician whose star is most certainly in the ascendant. His group, the Sunny Jain Collective, released its debut album *As Is* to critical acclaim last year, and he himself has long been making a name for himself in jazz circles, having played with such luminaries as Ted Dunbar, Kenny Barron and Earl May.

As Sunny observes, his music and lifestyle are inextricably linked. He listens to life with a percussionist's ear, detecting seeds of creativity where most of us would simply hear noise: "I'm a musician 24 hours of the day, 7 days a week. It can be as simple as walking down the street to a deli and hearing the rhythm of a jackhammer working on a pothole. My mind functions as a musician all the time. That's how I perceive the world."

Sunny recalls that he was exposed to different kinds of music from an early age, from Jain *bhajans* to New Order and The Cure, reflecting the multicultural environment he grew up in: "Both my Indian heritage and my Jain background have manifested themselves in my music and my aspirations, just as my upbringing has in America. All my experiences in life have naturally shaped my personality, but growing up with *bhajans* and Indian music in the household has particularly had a direct impact on me as a musician. There are certain sounds that I'm drawn to because of growing up with the sound of the *tabla*, or the melody of a certain *bhajan*. Attaching myself to elements of Indian music and



Living to an ancient rhythm:
jazz drummer Sunny Jain

Jain *bhajans* allowed me to reconcile with the difficulties of growing up in a Western world with traditional Indian parents. Music became the bridge that could connect the two cultures I felt were worlds apart when growing up. Music was the one thing I could find solace in as I searched for my identity as an Indian-American.

Now, as I compose and play music, I find myself naturally wanting to infuse elements of the Indian music I grew up with. For instance, on my latest album I arranged the Ghandiji *bhajan*, *Raghupati*. I wanted to do this song for two separate reasons. The first was that the melody was something I grew up with as I learned to recite the *Navkar Mantra* to it. It's a catchy melody and one that has always stuck with me. The second reason was its historical significance. This song was popularised during the freedom fights of the 1940s against British rule. To me, this song represents the pride I have in being Indian and the struggle of being a minority in America."

Jainism continues to influence Sunny in the lifestyle choices he makes: "I observe certain Jain

festivals, but more than anything, I am a believer in the spiritual values of Jainism. I continue to be vegetarian because of my firm belief in the value of life and minimising killing or destruction. I also try to be as environmentally conscious as possible because of my awareness and respect for how the ecosystem works. The way my parents taught me Jainism was that the religion is very open-minded and tolerant of differing opinions, lifestyles or religions. This idea of *anekantvada* (multiplicity of viewpoints) is the main thing I draw upon from Jainism. This, above all, leads my life."

The spirit of *anekantvada* clearly infuses Sunny's musical outlook: "I'm always open to new possibilities of creation. I never like to be closed-minded in terms of how music can be played. I like to play music and not boxed-up styles." A believer in the idea of music without boundaries, Sunny's definition of his genre, jazz, is also open-minded: "the word jazz doesn't imply a style anymore, but rather a non-discriminatory approach to playing. I listen to Indian music, African music, Brazilian music, drum & bass, Brit-pop, and also 'jazz'. Jazz isn't just about swing as some folks would like to uphold, it's also about improvisation, spirit and conversation." In the future, Sunny would love to collaborate with musicians as diverse as Zakir Hussain and Radiohead. This aspiration, along with the multicultural stamp on his latest album, emphasises just how important a creative force *anekantvada* is for Sunny. 🙏

Sunny Jain is a drummer, composer and educator living in New York City. He plays with the Sunny Jain Collective, whose album "As Is" is available on NCM East Records. To learn more about Sunny, visit www.jainsounds.com