

Mahanthappa's Indo-Pak Coalition Rocks Litchfield Jazz Fest

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A dozen years ago, Rudresh Mahanthappa seemed intent on establishing the kind of musical connection to his Indian heritage that his upbringing in Boulder, Colorado, hadn't afforded him. So the alto saxophonist formed the Indo-Pak Coalition—a trio, with Rez Abbasi on guitar and Dan Weiss on tabla, that toned down Western influences in favor of a more aggressively Hindustani sound. The group's 2008 album, *Apti* (Innova), won over fans around the globe.

These days, if the trio's appearance at Connecticut's Litchfield Jazz Festival on Aug. 6 is any indication, Mahanthappa is seeking a more balanced cultural synthesis. And he isn't necessarily looking to Charlie Parker for inspiration, though his previous release, *Bird Calls* (ACT), did so to great effect, being named Jazz Album of the Year in the 2015 DownBeat Critics Poll.

As Mahanthappa explained during a pre-concert onstage interview with DownBeat Managing Editor Brian Zimmerman, he has long felt an affinity for the practitioners of progressive rock. His Litchfield set, with the Indo-Pak Coalition, proved the point.

The set was colored by an overlay of digitally distorted, delayed and doubled pitches. At the same time, Weiss' tabla was augmented with parts of a Western drum set, yielding a kind of hybrid kit. While the band retained its collective voice, the musicians made full and forceful use of those enhancements. The effect was to conjure a range of sonic possibilities so expansive they would play as well on a stadium platform as on the Litchfield stage.

To be sure, the band continued to fashion an atmosphere of intimacy, opening the set with the traditional understated vehicle—"Alap," a rubato meditation modeled on the introductions, common at Indian classical concerts, intended to connect player and listener. With Mahanthappa leaning heavily on his harmonizer, Abbasi on his reverb pedal and Weiss on his cymbals, billows of sound filled the Goshen Fairgrounds, enveloping everyone in earshot and preparing the way for the journey ahead.

That journey took a sharp turn when, after a short solo segue by Mahanthappa, the music shifted into high gear with "Snap," a rousing raga, rendered at breakneck pace. The rhythmic cadences gave way to full-blown rock for which Weiss, leading the charge, moved with admirable alacrity from tabla to traps—attacking them with a minimum of restraint as the surrounding textures became denser, the colors more vivid and the level of interplay, in general, more intense.

So heated was the back-and-forth that some relief was clearly in order. It came with “Showcase,” a more laconic exercise built around loping chords, providing the audience with a chance to catch its breath and the artists an opportunity to stretch out before “Agrima” upped the ante again with a synthesized, rapid-fire melody that proved an unambiguously prog-rock moment.

“Agrima,” the title track of Mahanthappa’s new album (out Oct. 17), had not been performed in public, so it qualified as both a world premiere and something of an experiment. Much of the set, in fact, came off as an experiment—one that might at any moment spin out of control, what with countermelodies flying fast and furious, rhythms constantly shifting underfoot and the logistics of performance growing a bit dicey.

Weiss, in particular, seemed a moving target—one moment migrating rapidly from his yogalike position on the floor to his perch on the drum stool; the next moment poised perilously between the two, his hands split between tabla and snare drum or cymbal. The changing dynamics were clearly a challenge for all concerned.

Ultimately, however, control was maintained. The hyperkinetic quality of the presentation—not to mention the absence of a bassist to anchor the whole affair—fostered a kind of free-floating tension that focused attention on the uniqueness of the creative vision unfolding onstage. The presence of a bass might have clouded that vision, imposing its own kind of order and impinging on the freedom to roam that the more open instrumentation allowed. While that freedom may have demanded more of the three musicians, it also set the scene for some of their more striking flights of improvisational fancy.

To their credit—and to the band’s—the Litchfield crowd, which skewed older, seemed to get it. The Indo-Pak Coalition was something of an outlier at the festival, which featured a preponderance of straightahead acts—but it seemed that the bulk of the audience was won over.

All of which suggests that, while the electrification of the Indo-Pak Coalition might well help to expand its audience among a younger urban crowd, it also has the potential to help the group reach a broader-than-expected swath of the jazz-loving public living in exurban outposts—and quite possibly beyond.