

FC2 and the musical swamis from Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev's Isha Foundation

SOUNDS OF ISHA

The sunlight diffuses as it reaches the windows of a five-star hotel lobby, where three musical swamis sip their tea on plush antique furniture, patiently waiting for a late arrival. Security is tight, and the hotel is teeming with guests attending an Indo-international summit.

The sound of a couple laughing loudly at the doorway raises more than a few eyebrows - the atmosphere is electric. But dressed in their orange and white *kurta pajamas*, the core members of Sounds of Isha, Sadhguru Jaggi's "homegrown band of anomalous musicians", seem perfectly comfortable amidst the chaos and chatter. Not knowing whether to go in for a handshake or press my palms together and say *namaste*, I end up doing both, apparently amusing them with my clumsiness. But soon, I realise, Swami Ullasa, Swami Kevala and Sekhar Venkatram genuinely just smile a lot.

"We're all fulltime volunteers at the Isha Foundation," begins Swami Ullasa, and one is immediately struck by the softness of his voice. "Swami Kevala is originally from London, he used to be an IT professional. Sekhar, here, studied at IIT, Chennai, before joining us permanently with his family. Myself, I'm from the United States, born in Brooklyn and brought up in Jersey."

Although initially known as the Drums of Isha, the addition of the flute changed everything for this band of "anomalous" musicians. Experimental and completely removed from the competitive world of the musical industry, the Sounds of Isha released their debut album, *Exuberance of the Unmanifest*, during Mahashivratri in 2004, and have since toured the country, performing at different festivals and accumulating a strong fan following. So how does people of such varied backgrounds end up at a south Indian *ashram*,

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playing the flute, drums and guitar?

"The Isha Foundation conducts various yoga programmes, and I happened to attend one conducted by Sadhguru himself. And the words he spoke, they were the most sensible things I had ever heard," says Sekhar, laughing to himself. "I mean, I was a proper atheist and against any of this kind of stuff. But those really were the most sensible words I had ever heard. So, I started getting involved with the Foundation. Because, I thought, okay, it makes most sense to take it to other people - spread the word. After a while, I realised that this work was more rewarding than what I was doing with Ramco Systems or anywhere else. So, I moved in to the *ashram* fulltime. And I never thought I would be getting into music, you know? It was the last thing on my mind. I hadn't touched my flute in 12 years. And then, one day, Sadhguru said, 'Why don't you make some music,' and now we're into it in a big way. So, music has become a bigger part of my stay in Isha than anything else, and that was the last thing I expected."

Swami Ullasa, born in Brooklyn and raised in New Jersey, had further to travel. "When I finished high school, I was ready into martial arts. So, I started reading up on Kalaripayattu. And I discovered the myth in which they say that when Bodhidharma went to China, he started teaching the monks Kalar, and that's what later became kung fu." He stops for a second, smirking at my polite disbelief. Suddenly aware of an awkward silence approaching, Ullasa continues. "So, I made an important decision and told my parents 'I was going to India to learn Kalar, and they were overjoyed! So, on my way to Kerala, I stopped by Coimbatore and started looking for yoga programmes. I had four objectives: to learn Tamil, to learn the flute, to learn Kalar, and to learn yoga. My cousin, who had done a course with Sadhguru, suggested I try his programme. So, I went to the introduction. When I saw Sadhguru, the first thing I thought was, 'Okay, he

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looks like he's in really good shape!' I sat through the intro and it just bowled me over. It was the most worthwhile thing I've ever done in my whole life. I saw a transformation taking place in myself in such a huge way. So, I took the final step of becoming a teacher, and I've been with Isha for the past six or seven years. Since then, I've been travelling all over the country, doing programmes, mainly for corporates. And on the side, there's Sounds of Isha."

He sits back and smiles, motioning Swami Kevala to say his piece. The foreigner smiles, hesitating before he begins: "Actually, since I was about 16 or 17, I was always really interested in yoga. From what I'd read about it, it seemed like such an amazing thing. And after I finished my MA in Mathematics at Nottingham University, I was working for an IT consultancy..."

"He remembers nothing of his mathematics," Ullasa breaks in.

"I was really bad," Kevala grins, before continuing. "Then, what happened was, I suddenly got an urge to come to India. I took a sabbatical, and not knowing what I was going to do, I landed up in south India. Within a day or two, I met someone at random who had done the Isha class. I decided to do it, and honestly, it was the most incredible thing I've done in my life. It was a 13-day course, and even when I look back at it now, it was just the most transformational thing. I ended up spending a whole six months at the *ashram*. I didn't move an inch! I decided then that I enjoyed being at Isha more than being back home. So, I went back to England, resigned, and returned to India. And I've been working at the Foundation for about five years now."

“S... all of us were informally making music somewhere or the other - either singing, or banging on pots and pans or something like that,” says Ullasa, clearly the most conversational of the smiling swamis. “So, Sadhguru called us all together one day and said, ‘Look, I’d like you all to make some pleasant noises.’” He chuckles at the memory, recognising a turning point in his life.

Sadhguru began instructing them, teaching them about the science of sound and its impact on people. He would watch as they practiced, giving them advice and pointers, slowly refining their style. “Initially, he used to hit his head and laugh because we used to mess up all the time,” Ullasa confesses. “Then, after about two years, he started giving us the thumbs up! That’s when he gave us the go ahead to do concerts outside. He attended our first ever formal performance in Chennai around two years ago. He stayed for the entire show and saw that we didn’t completely embarrass ourselves.”

Since then, the Sounds of Isha have played with the likes

CD REVIEW

EXUBERANCE OF THE UNMANIFEST & WHITE MOUNTAIN

SOUNDS OF ISHA

Their layering of the traditional folk style fused with foreign influences, has brought a heady and exhilarating feel to the music, appealing to both old and young.

Although *Exuberance* is mostly instrumental, the androgynous vocals on tracks like *Snakes and Ladders* set the tone for the rest of the album. This is the kind of music you'd beat playing on your headphones on a long train journey - the beats follow the sound of the railway tracks, and the flute hypnotises, moving you further and further away from home.

With their first international release, *White Mountain*, the Sounds of Isha pay tribute to the sacred Velliangiri Mountains, the Eden of the south - a green paradise, seemingly untouched by man, surrounded by a ring of mysticism - where Sadhguru and the Isha Foundation have made their home.

Evolution is probably the most evocative of all their pieces, as their instruments and voices merge and interweave. But following the theme of travel and journey, *S3* is a song actually composed on a train, encapsulating the rhythms of a railway *gadi*.

Both albums are rich with variation - light and playful at one moment, and dynamic and energetic the next. While one song might have you dancing, another might find within it a meditative trance. The energy of each song is vastly different to each listener.

of Zila Khan and Shivamani, and opened shows for Remo Fernandes at the Mahashivratri festival. Categorising the Sounds of Isha is a difficult feat. Their sound is experimental, yet rooted in the Indian folk tradition; their melodies are both clear and rich. "When the whole band is together, we're a group of about 12 to 15 people. We have a vocalist who sings in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Arabic. We have people who play the *rudraveena*, the sitar, percussions and the violin. We have all kinds of interesting instruments. Some of our drums are homemade, some are from Lebanon, and some of them are retired parts from the kitchen. We just strap some skin on a pot and it makes a great sound. We have a range of flutes - all kinds of Indian flutes, some others that are Native American - even a duduk from Armenia!"

But the members of the Sounds of Isha make it clear that they're musicians on the side. Their dedication to various social causes has translated into a natural aptitude for music, but their minds are rooted to improving healthcare and education in the south. Their concerts are merely fundraisers, the proceeds of which go directly into improving the standard of living in rural areas.

"The main difference with us is that we're not at all a professional outfit," says Swami Ullasa, underlining the point with a new firmness. "But the one thing we've learned from Sadhguru is to give ourselves over to whatever we're doing. If what you do really means something to you, if you really offer yourself to it, that's what makes the difference. That's what we've learned through yoga, that's what we've learned from Sadhguru - to express ourselves totally."

(Sounds of Isha will perform at Kamani Auditorium on November 2 at 6 pm.)

