

On the Beat

Thomas Staudter

Red Baraat: World Beat, Local Show

My best advice for readers looking for more ways to stay warm through this brutal dip in temperatures is simple: find some 'live' music that will make you want to dance and move around. With this in mind, I suggest you check out the Red Baraat show at The Purple Crayon Center for Learning and Social Innovation in Hastings-on-Hudson on Saturday, January 25. And don't let this under-the-radar venue dissuade you: Red Baraat is a band that is selling out shows around the world and offers a wide spectrum of sounds that move on propulsive beats.

Red Baraat centers around the *dhol*, a large, hand-held drum from South Asia, played on both the top and bottom. It is the dance drum of Punjabi music and is typically featured in the brass bands leading the *baraat*, a long wedding ceremony in India and elsewhere in which the groom walks to his bride's house, a parade of family members following him, before the nuptials commence.

Formed in 2008, Red Baraat was the brainchild of Sunny Jain, and Indian-American drummer and percussionist. Along with seven other instrumentalists—another percussionist, plus six horn players (alto and tenor sax, trumpet and bass trumpet, trombone and sousaphone)—Jain has created an ensemble that allows the members' personal tastes and influences to drive the band, rather than a singular vision.

As a result, the swirls of rhythms and sounds from Red Baraat stretch from jazz and New Orleans second-line parade music to Indian *bhanga* beats and jazz, R&B, funk and hip-hop. This is the mashed up beauty of globalism, amped up and in joyful celebration.

OK—I get the *baraat* part of the group's name. But where did the "red" come from?

"It's my favorite color," said Jain by phone from his Brooklyn home earlier this week. "It also signifies rebellion, and we're trying to create something different here, make a little trouble. The color also connotes excitement, energy and love. And it sounded cool next to 'baraat.' We tried other colors in the name and they didn't sound as good. Plus, it's the color worn in weddings in India as well."

Several years ago when I was teaching a Business of Music seminar at Purchase College's Conservatory of Music, my students would ask me if there were a few young musicians out there that they could use as models for putting together a strategy of success and survival. Indeed, musical artists often lack even the rudiments of business acumen: unwavering focus on their work doesn't allow much time for management issues, media promotion, financial matters or lining up gigs.

One relative newcomer I often pointed my students toward was Jain. At the time, he was leading the Sunny Jain Collective, a modern jazz band that helped foster the careers of three of today's top jazz artists—pianist and MacArthur Fellowship winner Vijay Iyer, alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa and guitar Rez Abbasi.

The Sunny Jain Collective was succeeding because the leader worked hard to inform fans, agents and music journalists like myself about what was going on. His outreach skills on social media far surpassed what his peers were doing, and it was all accomplished in a professional manner. Jain was persistent but polite; he was keen on making connections and getting people interested in his music. By most accounts, Jain was doing well with his band, releasing two critically acclaimed CDs, *Mango Festival* and *Abazz*, that showed he was trying to play music that was out of the ordinary.



Red Baraat

After a while, Jain said, he wanted to do some things differently.

"I loved the music the Collective was playing, and really enjoyed the electronic, laptop effects we used in the band and what I was doing behind the drum set, but I also wanted to play in an acoustic band, with just horns," said Jain. "And I was getting disgruntled with the jazz scene I liked going to hear friends like (saxophonist) David Binney and Rez at the 55 Bar, but I found myself questioning what I was doing long-term. I wanted to bring together musicianship and education in a fun, entertaining way. I still listened to my favorite jazz albums, yet I saw myself getting away from the other kinds of music I loved, like the Beatles and New Order."

"Plus, I was busting my butt for smaller and smaller audiences. I realized I had to figure out a new way to connect with an audience. When I was 14, 15, the reason I got excited about music was for the applause—and girls! Not all in a rock sense; more to create a community and reach people, give them something on an emotional level."

Now 38, Jain started playing informally with alto saxophonist Hayes Greenfield and drummer Kenny Wollesen at a bunch of offbeat gigs around New York—art installations, puppet shows, parades—and they encouraged him to play his *dhol*, an instrument he was certainly familiar with but didn't start playing seriously until 2004. As his proficiency on the drum increased, Jain started to envision a band in which the *dhol* was the central instrument.

"I remembered being a part of my uncle's *baraat* when I was five years old, and that's the seed from which the band grew," Jain said. "I had the concept and vision, but then I needed to find some friends to develop the band. That's the best

part of jazz, the democratic impulse behind the music. I didn't intend for this to be an Indian brass band. It could reflect the Indian-American identity and sensibility but be something bigger as well."

Jain grew up in Rochester, NY, the youngest of three. His parents were Indian emigrants, intent on making sure their children grew into professional careers. "I was the black sheep, of course, but my parents have always been very supportive of my work," said Jain. While the family listened to Indian devotional music and soundtracks to Bollywood films, Jain's older brother Rajesh was turning him on to Rush, Van Halen, Styx and Stevie Wonder.

Jain studied with bebop drummer Rich Thompson through his grade school and high school years before heading to Rutgers University's jazz program. He later received a master's degree in business at NYU—which helps explain his early savvy in moving his career forward.

Jain has since picked up the sticks again to play in several jazz ensembles, including the Asphalt Orchestra (which opened for the Pixies at the Capital Theater in Port Chester last week) and a new trio he is leading, Tongues and Trees, with vocalist Samita Sinha (featured also on his *Taboo* CD) and guitarist Grey McMurray. But Red Baraat is his enduring focus these days, with the group performing about 150 dates a year, including a gig at the White House in 2012. (President Obama was not in attendance.)

Officially, Red Baraat has released two CDs, 2008's *Chaal Baby* and last year's *Shruggy Jr.* They've also released a 'live' set digitally, *Boogie Bhanga*, plus a new effort, *Big Talk*, which brings together remixes and a few new tracks. I haven't heard everything the band has released, but the sound is certainly an infectious gumbo. I told Jain that Red Baraat's music seemed to me to be akin to a "Sousa-type band jumped up on amphetamines and looking for some love," and he thought that was an accurate assessment.

Red Baraat will perform on Saturday, January 23 at The Purple Crayon Center for Learning and Social Innovation, 52 Main Street, Hastings-on-Hudson. The show is at 8 p.m. For tickets and more info, call 231-9077 or visit purplecrayoncenter.org.