



## IN SO MANY WAYS, I AM BLESSED

ANOUSHKA SHANKAR

ment, even if many classical music purists disputed his penchant for fusion. It was a weight she consciously tried to ignore.

"I couldn't avoid the path I took," she has said. Her mother had played Ravi's ragas to her in the womb. Her earliest musical memories involve her father practising the sitar at home. She would prove an eager, nimble-fingered student, even if she still finds the cross-legged sitting position, along with the extra-thin strings and the long wooden neck pressing against her shoulder, physically taxing.

Having lost his eldest child, Shubbendra, who died aged 50 in 1992, Ravi appears to have focused much of his attention on his beloved youngest, whom he fathered at 60. "My father told me I didn't have to learn if I didn't want to but there would be no cutting corners," she says. "I was lucky I got him when he wasn't doing all that intensive touring in the 1960s and 70s."

Norah Jones, two years Anoushka's senior, was born towards the end of Ravi's brief relationship with Sue Jones, a New York dancer and promoter, and grew up in Grapevine, Texas. When, aged 18, she telephoned out of the blue and introduced herself with, "This is Norah, Ravi's daughter", it was Anoushka who answered. "I knew I had a sister somewhere but I nearly fainted," she once said.

The adolescent Anoushka blossomed in California, getting top grades, acting in plays, enjoying being one of few Indian students at her high school. ("It was a big part of me becoming more individualistic.") She joined a feminist society and wrote pieces for the student newspaper, her social conscience piqued by conversations overheard at her parents' dinner parties, where artists, authors and scientists broke bread with world-class musicians including Yehudi Menuhin and her "Uncle George" Harrison.

It was Harrison who, with Ravi Shankar, organised the Concert for Bangladesh benefit in Madison Square Garden in New York City in 1971, with both men appearing in a line-up that included Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton, and raised awareness as well as money for war victims turned refugees. The popular event spawned a documentary, a bestselling live album and a longstanding urban myth. That story about the crowd watching Ravi tune his sitar, then cheering wildly, thinking that was it, and wandering off? It never happened.

"Ah the tuning question!" Anoushka claps her hands. "If you listen to the live recording, you will hear a smattering of applause before he makes a little comment: 'If you like the tuning, then you will like the show.'"

There is a profound beauty to sitar music. Some morning ragas might be soundtracks to the dawning of the earth; there are evening ragas that soothe and nourish. One of the most expressive instruments anywhere, the sitar can reconnect us to our selves. "It's definitely an instrument that evokes feelings of peace, spirituality, connectivity and love," says Shankar, who by 20 had released three classical recordings and had her first (world music) Grammy nomination. She spoke of wanting to write film scores some day, just as her father did in the 50s for legendary Indian director Satyajit Ray.

Her breakthrough album, 2005's *Rise*, brought her another nomination, as did 2011's *Traveller*, a work exploring links between Indian classical music and Spanish flamenco, and 2013's *Traces of You*, which features vocals by Norah Jones — and was her first album following her father's death (a subsequent album of classical ragas, *Home*, was released in 2015). "Traces of



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you linger like a teardrop, fresh upon the air," sings Jones, crystalline and dreamy over Shankar's plangent sitar. The video for the album's title track depicts the sisters in a soft light filtered through refracted glass, and was directed by Wright — whose visual sense influenced *Land of Gold*.

"He constantly turned my attention back to where the story was," Shankar says. "So when I was recording the fast sitar lines on *Last Chance* I was literally imagining someone running and trying to feel like I was running. To work with a producer who cared about the emotional content of the music was really huge."

Her husband of seven years is in the US, promoting *The Darkest Hour*. "He turned into a six-year-old, saying: 'Please, please can I co-produce?'," she says. "We sat down and had a husband-and-wife chat where I said: 'I know as a film director you're used to having the final say but can we be clear on whose word is final?'" She flashes a grin. "He said: 'OK, but we never disagree on anything.' Sure enough, there was a point six months in where I was like: 'Remember that chat?'"

So far, so (relatively) regular. But in the weeks after our interview Shankar posts a series of cryptic tweets: "How do people stay in love? With eyes illuminated enough to close, and a heart content to rest." On December 30 she tweeted a photo of herself in sun-dappled Jamaica, Mohan on her hip, with the words: "Ending the year full of gratitude for the gifts of motherhood, creativity and connection with other souls. Even in times of pain I am grateful to be so blessed." Early January saw her with Jones in snow-covered Brooklyn: "So happy to be staying with big sis for a few days."



On January 12 came the official announcement confirming that Shankar and Wright had ended their marriage. Amid the ensuing fuss, the showbiz pieces speculating on which actress Wright was dating, Shankar got on with her life: there were interviews around her (first) film score to Franz Osten's restored 1927 silent film *Shiraz*, which tells the story behind the Taj Mahal, and which Shankar performed live in London and five Indian cities.

Then on February 1 another tweet, with a portrait of a pensive Shankar holding the neck of her sitar: "Like a rock, like a mountain, like the certainty that the next wave will crash upon the shore, it's always been there," she declared. "When I needed to scream, to cry, or to revel in my joy, it's been my voice, always there. My baby, my axe, my lover, my heart." Eat my dust, read the subtext.

Shankar is surrounded by women who lift her up: M.I.A, the British rapper, singer and activist of Sri Lankan Tamil origin whom she met on a play date with their kids, and bonded with over their respective music projects in response to the refugee crisis. German-Turkish troubadour Alev Lenz, who sings on the title track of *Land of Gold* and lives around the corner; her gang of non-starry girlfriends, some of whom I met when I bumped into Shankar a few days later at an art exhibition at the Barbican.

Fiercely pro-women, Shankar has been vocal in her support of campaigns including One Billion Rising, the movement that evolved in response to the horrific 2011 gang rape of student Jyoti Singh Pandey on a Delhi bus and revealed the scale of sexual violence against women in India. She has taken part in panel discussions and hosted radio shows about gender equality; she views the current #MeToo movement as a hugely positive force.

"It's like a collective global dam of feminine experience has burst," she says. "I hope it means that the boundary has moved. Often with change there's a push-and-pull process that is two steps forward, one step back, and I think that's how progress goes."

"After One Billion Rising, suddenly issues of sexual violence and women's experience were being discussed on a global scale. So this feels like a second spike of something I never thought would happen twice in my lifetime. It's as if every woman is part of this feeling where they want to have their own story validated and told. The fact that there's this groundswell of people reinforcing that you can actually say, 'No, not any more', is incredible."

Believing that being an artist is an extension of being human, Shankar is compelled to use her platform to speak out, to make a difference, to sustain her father's vision that music can promote peace and contribute to the world. "Though my father is no longer here, I still get to interact with him through the music. I'm blessed in that way; not many people are so fortunate. In so many ways, I am blessed."

**Anoushka Shankar** plays at WOMAdelaide on Friday, in Sydney on March 11 and in Melbourne on March 13.

engage in improvisatory passages of her own.

She is one of the few women who play the sitar professionally. But she has never considered herself a pioneer. "I don't know what the alternate experience would be, had he not been my father," says Shankar, who grew up listening to Britpop and techno in between reading the *Mahabharata* and learning Indian songs and dances with her mother. "Maybe it meant people wouldn't f.k with me, I don't know. My parents were very pro-women and independence. They wanted me to have my own career."

"It's not as if playing the sitar is banned for women in India. You see a lot of girls learning sitar at school, but then dropping off when they get to professional touring age and becoming wives and mothers instead. There's simply no infrastructure there for so many things."

Shankar was raised in northwest London by her mother, Sukanya, a South Indian singer who had met Ravi Shankar while she was married and he was going through an acrimonious divorce, and in another relationship. Sukanya would be a single parent, and the baby, Anoushka, a precious secret. ("At first Ravi was not ready to accept her," Sukanya Shankar told Britain's *The Telegraph* newspaper in 2001. "I couldn't take her anywhere because they look so alike.") Ravi met Anoushka when she was three months old, then twice-yearly, clandestinely, until her parents wed in 1989. They moved to the beach city of Encinitas in California three years later, when Anoushka was 11.

While living in London and California, she spent winters attending English-syllabus schools in India, where her decision to take up the sitar came with the pressure of expectation; Ravi Shankar was revered across the subconti-