

Hariprasad Chaurasia

Musician

'Music is my prayer, my love, my religion'

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Hariprasad chaurasia believes that he becomes fully alive with his music, the language of the Gods.

What does spirituality mean to you?

If you look around, you will find that everything is spiritual – this garden, the leaves, the birds, it is all spiritual, meaning it is all very close to the gods and goddesses.

Especially music. Music is so wonderful. Nothing else I have ever seen or experienced can do what music does, taking your mind and your whole being to another plane, to a spiritual plane.

If you are into music, no matter what you do, whether you are talking to someone, walking, resting, lecturing or performing, your mind is actually always busy with music. I have been learning music for more than fifty years and I still continue to learn. There is no end to it.

I was fortunate enough to work with so many different kinds of musicians, the Beatles, Jan Garbarek, Yehudi Menuhin and many others. When playing with them I learnt so much about different kinds of notes and a different way to enjoy music. I learn to this day.

What do you mean by gods and goddesses?

The power, the energy, the beauty we witness in the world. Who gives beauty to you, to nature? Who creates mountains, rivers, the sky, the earth, the sun, the moon? Who created it all?

Gods and goddesses created it all. We come and go, whereas all those things stay. That is the power. That is spirituality.

Do you feel closer to Krishna?

Krishna is only one of the gods. For me it is about a superpower, a larger force, a larger energy, more than about any particular deity.

And specifically, it is about music. When my music starts, my life starts. That is when I become fully alive.

When I play, it is my puja, it is my prayer. When I play, my mind is completely absorbed by the music. I become like a vessel, like a conduit and I feel some power within. Then also, I find that something happens between the audience and me.

How different is it playing on your own or for an audience?

When you play for someone, there is more formality. You have to dress and behave properly. But regardless, when I perform, I never want to say a word, I just want to see where my mind goes, where the music takes me. I never know where music will take me.

Sometimes I look at my watch and I am shocked to see how much time has gone by. People in the audience often become enchanted, they go somewhere. Some cry, some laugh, some move. And nobody can explain why and how music does it.

Your father was extremely strict, and he didn't want you to practice music?

Absolutely. He thought music was only for courtesans and inappropriate people. He wanted me to be a wrestler like himself. He did not know that I wanted to be a musician. He would have never accepted it. I had to hide when practicing music.

I felt I should do some work and earn a living to satisfy my family. But for myself, for my soul, I knew there was only one thing: music. And it still is the case. No matter whether my family likes or not, it is my life, my love, my religion.

Was it actually a blessing to be born in a family with no music tradition?

Absolutely. There is so much pressure and so many expectations when you are born into a family of musicians. Whereas for me it was the contrary. My mother died when I was very young. And my father never understood music. He saw the beginning of my success and would hear about it through his friends. But he never came to see me. Maybe he felt ashamed or guilty.

You started by being a vocalist then you discovered the flute?

Yes, I used to hum then around ten years' old I started learning how to sing. Then one day I heard the flute and that day, I felt it would be my instrument, my vocation.

You ended up in Bombay working for Bollywood and only later found your guru?

Yes, I used to make everybody happy by making a living and so on. But I was not learning. Then I thought I should become serious and do something so that when I die, I can be satisfied that I did something, that I achieved something that nobody could take away from me. That is when I really started learning and I am still learning, to this day.

Tell us more about finding your musical guru, the reclusive Annapurna Devi, daughter of legendary Baba Allaudin Khan?

She was married for a while to Pandit Ravi Shankar and did not understand why I had come to her to learn music instead of him, especially as she did not play the flute. It took her three years to accept me. She thought I may be interested in her as a woman and not as a teacher.

But I simply knew it had to be her. And it was not about learning a particular instrument. It was about learning music.

Finally, she accepted me. I came to her with my flute and played for a few minutes. She said there was no way we could do this. We had to start all over again from the beginning, if I wanted to truly learn something. To convince how serious I was, I decided to reverse the hands I was playing with, which is as hard as suddenly writing with your left hand when you are a righty. It was like a punishment, but I wanted to do it to convince her of my dedication and determination.