

# RAJAN SPOLIA

## Snake Music & Three Monkeys!

*FoT's intrepid musical explorer, Phil Aldridge, comes face to face with Snake Music & 3 Monkeys!*

No, it's not an Eastern marketplace sideshow or even an early version of a Bruce Willis "save the world from a terrible plague" movie, but something much more prosaic. Not singular at all but the titles of Rajan's first CD and his current one, due for release 21 March, do have a whisper of the exotic about them. However it goes rather deeper than that and with it comes a tale of a talented musician struggling to make his potential public aware of not only his existence but also his musical adventures. This multi-faceted musician not only performs as a solo artist but also as a member of that wonderful cross-cultural aggregation, **Millan**. Armed only with a pen and notepad I boldly went in search of him in that hotbed of musical cross-fertilization, Windsor.

I began by asking about his preferred instrument as he plays both acoustic guitar and electric fretless bass on the CDs.

*"Well I actually started out playing alto saxophone when I was 11, my father ran a music shop. I switched to bass when I was 15 (he's now 39) and have been playing it ever since, although only as a private thing, not as a professional musician. I made my first appearance as a solo artist in 1997, so you could say it was a very long practice session!"*

The acoustic guitar seemed to have just evolved along the way, although that is something he uses to subsidise his existence, being a peripatetic teacher of guitar to 7 to 12 year olds in local junior schools.

Is it a rewarding experience?

*"Well, it's like a lot of things in life, sometimes you come across kids that are really keen to learn the instrument and show promise and then there are, unfortunately, a lot of others who lose interest when they realise it involves a lot of practice."*

Is teaching music your background?

*"Oh no, I went to university in Wales and studied electronic engineering, the music thing just developed whilst I was there."*

I asked Rajan about his early musical exploits and influences and, assuming his

father to have had some input, was rather surprised at his answer.

*"My first bass guitar hero was Lemmy, and I was heavily into bands like the Pink Fairies and Can. My father was always going on about Indian classical music but it didn't interest me at all, I mean, nobody listens to their folk's record collection at that age do they? Somehow, through friends of mine, I started listening to jazz fusion and guys like Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius, who's sadly no longer with us, really opened my ears to the potential of the bass. Strangely enough it was from there that I got into the Indian modal style of music through the music of John McLaughlin, especially his work with Shakti."*



So was this the sort of stuff he was playing at university?

*"No, I was into the student rebellion thing and the first band I played with was called **Landing Party** which performed mainly instrumental anarcho/rock material. This was in 1985 and we did once play support in a local gig to **The Fall** and **Napalm Death** which was pretty good I suppose."*

This led to a two-year stint in a most unlikely direction with an eight-piece vocal harmony band specialising in "all that Haight Ashbury stuff, you know". Always one to keep his ears open the next band he played with, **Zuik Bazaar**, blended Eastern European sounds with Celtic influences, but his credibility was severely dented when

they found out that he had previously performed Mamas and Papas material!

His interest in improvisational music was sparked by jazz fusion and he began to delve more deeply into the whole canon of the jazz world.

*"I couldn't read music at that time, my playing was by ear and although I didn't understand what the jazz players were doing in purely musical terms I had an intuitive feel for it and was hooked on it. I taught myself music theory from books when I had a period of illness and was confined at home for about six months"*

Did he mind my asking more about this time?

*"Oh no, not at all. It was in 1994 and I had a pancreatic condition which was fairly serious, in fact I was given only a 50-50 chance of survival, but obviously I got through that. It did give me time to think deeply about what I wanted to achieve and from that came the realisation that I had my own music in me which I wanted to explore"*

So for the last two to three years he has been practising and recording "the stuff [he'd] been carrying around in [his] head", although like all musicians he has suffered periods of self-doubt. He hadn't taken the plunge and sent his material to record companies, not because of this self-doubt, but because he recognised that he would inevitably lose some of his musical freedom. He explained that "one of the first things they ask is what sort of music you play, which puts you on the spot straight away, because once you mention Indian modal influences and improvisation

they immediately pigeonhole you as "World Music", which is too limiting for me. Either that or it's going to be marketed as Indian music which, as it isn't classical, folk or film music, would mean that my music would be difficult to classify and probably wouldn't get heard by anybody".

The music on his first CD, "**Snake Music**" (which was favourably reviewed in Issue 77) was recorded on a DATman in his front room and he had the results pressed onto CD, of which he sent nearly 200 to many media outlets throughout the country. Without wishing to trumpet too loudly the value of **FoT** (I'd be preaching to the converted anyway) it is to this magazine's credit that it was the only one to actually review it! The musical combination on that



album was acoustic guitar and tablas, the tabla player, **Saquib Qureshi**, contributing to the proceedings as a sort of trade-off for Rajan teaching his son the guitar. Rajan related the tale of the recording sessions (only two) where he had the two of them seated and would just move the very sensitive microphones around to get the best overall position to capture both instruments as equally as he could, rather like the early days of direct sound recording onto wax discs! However the results are anything but amateur, the music sounding fresh and vital, just as he had intended. His new album, "**Three Monkeys (Snake Music Chapter 2)**" features Rajan's acoustic guitar as well as his superb fretless bass playing on alternate tracks, again with just tabla accompaniment. This time he managed to record the bass tracks separately at Art Asia's studios in Southampton. It was the tracks with just him on bass with the tablas that really grabbed my attention this time, the fluid improvisational playing on fretless bass blending perfectly with the rhythm and tone of the tablas.

I can attest to Rajan's imaginative playing as I recently had the opportunity to see him play live at the seemingly unlikely venue of the Turner Sims Concert Hall on Southampton University campus. The venue had just started a short series of concerts playing in the intimate atmosphere

created in the foyer area of the concert hall. I kid you not! A small stage with a black backcloth and seating for about 100 makes an ideal venue for the more adventurous types of improvisational music.

Rajan was making his debut appearance with Millan, one of **Roger Watson's** (he of TAPS fame) cross-cultural projects. This band was set up to explore the (seemingly) unlikely premise of common ground between traditional English folk tunes and Indian modal improvisations through the raga form. Rajan had only three hours rehearsal with the other musicians on the previous day but it certainly didn't show as he sat cross-legged on the stage, sandwiched between the santoor player, **Kiranpal Singh**, and acoustic guitarist **Victor Unukovsky**, (yes I know he's not English or Indian but it works). Listening to them trade licks across him, he underpinned and interwove them with his own very imaginative playing. Rajan had expressed some trepidation to me before the gig as he was aware that they were all professional musicians of some standing and he was self-taught, but he told me that they were very supportive in rehearsal and he was made to feel very much at home with them. For my part, not (to my shame) having heard Millan either in the flesh or on CD before, I was left wondering that maybe the recordings on sale at the gig would sound a little empty without Rajan's

contribution but that is another matter entirely. Rajan had been invited to play with Millan by Roger after playing together with him in one of his many other TAPS projects and as a result of the Turner Sims gig he has now landed himself with a regular gig with Millan.

From bedroom guitarist to member of a superb improvisational band (in a mere 20 years!) attests to Rajan's dedication, sheer hard work and passion to pursue his own musical ideas in his own particular direction and under his own terms. Underneath his quiet, unassuming exterior there is a cauldron of talent just waiting to bubble over. Go see for yourself, either in his work in Millan or if he appears performing his Snake Music, you'll be charmed by the man and his music.


*Phil Aldridge*

#### DISCOGRAPHY

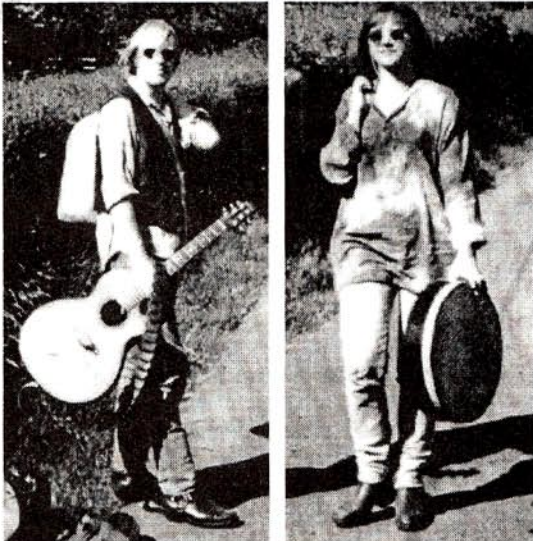
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