



L. SHANKAR

BY JOHN PIETARO

To describe L. Shankar as a chameleon is nothing short of trite. The violinist's drive toward change has continuously been in the service of growth. Shankar's tapestry embraces Indian classical, free jazz, fusion, folk and world music, pop, rock, dance and no wave. This global view guided his founding of Shakti with guitarist John McLaughlin and cast a mind-numbing CV boasting Jan Garbarek, Don Cherry, Lou Reed, Alice Coltrane, Frank Zappa, Ed Blackwell, Swans, Peter Gabriel, Kenny Wheeler, Public Image Ltd and Madonna. And while reveling in such creative ventures, Shankar, so committed to the experience, developed a reputation as vocalist rivaling his fame as a violinist and has been known to alter both name and appearance to fit a given musical moment. Such fluidity is born of an inexhaustible spirit. "I know it is confusing," Shankar explained, brushing back the strawberry-blonde locks of recent years. "For the last two albums I went back to 'L. Shankar', though many recall my ECM years when I was simply 'Shankar'. But I've been billed as 'Shenkar' on pop recordings. This gives you a clean slate. I've been around for some time and listeners sometimes don't want anything else, so I become what's needed."

Shankar was born in Chennai, India on Apr. 26th, 1950, relocating to Sri Lanka where his father V. Lakshminarayana was a music professor. Shankar's mother, L. Seethalakshmi, was a vocalist and played veena (traditional South Indian stringed instrument) and her children were viscerally engaged in music. Formal tutelage in voice began at age two and within several years Shankar was studying violin and mridangam (double-sided drum). At seven, he had performed in concert, but the family fled back to India during the 1958 ethnic riots. Several years later, Shankar and brothers L. Vaidyanathan and L. Subramaniam began performing as a professional trio. While they found acclaim playing Indian classical music, Shankar desired expanse, the blending of Carnatic (southern) and Hindustani (northern) styles. But experimentalism was met with consternation. "In India those who were close-minded were afraid of the dark. People have to learn that there's light in darkness. But I cannot stop at the simple. We must educate the listener."

Indian culture flourished in the West throughout the '60s, from Gandhi's teachings, already decades old, to trends in yoga, meditation, even Nehru collars. Integration began as early as the '50s when United Nations delegations presented sitar master Ravi Shankar (no relation) to the U.S. Within a decade the sitar was heard on commercial records, most influentially to Western ears via George Harrison of The Beatles. But traditionalists shunned the opportunities and, seeing no room for advancement, Shankar moved to the U.S. in 1969, studying at Wesleyan University. "The cold was hard to get used to, but no one was telling me what to do. John McLaughlin came to Wesleyan to study veena and we started jamming. I told him he can apply the same

music he'd been playing to Indian music. [Former John Coltrane bassist] Jimmy Garrison was also teaching in Massachusetts."

1975 saw the premiere of Shakti, the ensemble Shankar founded with McLaughlin and brilliant percussionists Zakir Hussain and Vikku Vinayakram. The guitarist's celebrity as both a protégé of Miles Davis and Mahavishnu Orchestra helmsman foresaw Shakti's path to fame, yet Shankar was uncertain. "Our first gig was at The Bottom Line. We were all sitting on stage, never expecting what the future might hold," but suddenly there were world tours with Weather Report. Shankar, by then living in New York, recorded three critically acclaimed albums with Shakti, crossing paths with luminaries. Looking back on the period, Shankar explains how such multi-culturalism developed: "Improvisation is central to Indian music. It goes on as long as you want; you can play until the cows come home. I'll sing for 14 hours, play violin, without being tired. I can travel and still focus. I meditate within myself so every time I'm playing, it is like playing in my living room, even if in a stadium filled with people."

The stadiums continued even after Shakti's dissolution. Shankar toured with Zappa, who then signed the violinist to his label, releasing *Touch Me There* in 1979. It featured Shankar's electric five-string and standard violin with guitarist Phil Palmer and drummer Simon Phillips. Zappa's vocal on one cut, split with Ike Willis from his own band, demarcates the endorsement given Shankar. Prominent is "Darlene", a beautifully flowing work of continuous meter shifts, which the violinist continues to revisit. "It is one of my most complex pieces; it includes so many cycles. I had just come off a tour of India and the band rehearsed in England for ten days. But 'Darlene' required 57 takes," he explained.

However, the boundary-shredding continued. In 1980 Shankar reconceived his instrument, designing the electric 10-string double violin, which covers the orchestral string family's range. "Some said I was ruining the instrument. In India I had a press conference with 500 in attendance. I told them we had to be open, that no one can stop time. The audience in the past was 60 years old, but after we started expanding the music, the youth came." The instrument was unveiled in 1981 on *Face Value*, the acclaimed solo debut of drummer/vocalist Phil Collins, and Shankar's own *Who's to Know?*, with the violinist comfortably straddling atmospheric hit "In the Air Tonight" and ECM's expansive sonorities. "Manfred [Eicher] put me on a long European tour, a double bill with Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell. I had no band, so I used effects and asked them to join me on some pieces. Don really loved Indian music and I invited him to a big show with Alice Coltrane, Trilok Gurtu and Zakir Hussain: the Bombay Jazz Festival. We played an outdoor stage on the beach." Among his ECM releases, *Song for Everyone* remains most memorable. "It is a highlight that stays

with me, the melodies keep coming up in my playing. We toured this widely, sometimes including Nana Vasconcelos. In Yugoslavia there was a huge concert. When we ended, the audience was crying."

Over years, Shankar's contributions to both planes has been continuous. "When I worked with Peter Gabriel and Martin Scorsese on *The Last Temptation of Christ*, I was only on vocals. It is funny because I was raised as a singer and practice voice as a primary thing. When you hear my violin, I'm singing." Shankar toured with Gabriel and became part of the *Sun City* record, raising awareness for Black South Africans and then joined the Princess Trust and Human Rights Now tours.

Composing for film saw his relocation to Hollywood, supplementing work with Talking Heads, Marianne Faithful, Sting and much-loved collaborations with the World Music Institute. "Madonna came to Gabriel shows and loved my *Passion of the Christ* score. Her producer asked me to lay down tracks and the next day, Madonna wanted me to tour with her. But I needed to play my own music. I didn't begin playing for money. I chose to continue my education." Shankar's progressive vision was never at the expense of artistry. "Lou Reed asked me if I can play real emotion in four bars. I said four bars is more than enough."

Shankar has released two dozen albums under his own name and guested with Archie Shepp, Yoko Ono, Material, Adam Rudolph, Maurice Jarre (*Jacob's Ladder* score), Ginger Baker and Swans and was prominent on Public Image Ltd's *Album*, which boasted Tony Williams, Bill Laswell, Steve Vai, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Nicky Skopelitis, Jonas Hellborg, Malachi Favors and Steve Turre. He returned to his homeland in 2016 to teach at the Shiva Conservatory. "Music is about unity. I'm a U.S. citizen and can return any time, but I left when Trump was elected. There was so much hatred." Still, he is maintaining a busy, fluid career. 2020's *Chepleeri Dream*, composed during brutal storms in India and bearing the sounds of relentless downpour, remains a global sensation. Now, amid a seven-city tour, Shankar muses, "You must be humble. It is very important as a human being to embrace others as students of life. If I thought I knew everything, I'd simply stop playing." ❖

For more information, visit lshankar.com. Shankar is at *Roulette Apr. 2nd*. See *Calendar*.

Recommended Listening:

- Clifford Thornton Ensemble—*Communications Network* (Third World, 1972)
- Shakti—*With John McLaughlin* (Columbia, 1975)
- Shankar—*Who's to Know* (ECM, 1980)
- Shankar—*Song for Everyone* (ECM, 1984)
- Trilok Gurtu—*Utsfret* (CMP, 1987/88)
- Shankar/Zakir Hussain/T.H. Vinayakram—*Eternal Light* (Moment, 2000)