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THE CONCEPT OF RESIDENCIES IS NEW TO INDIAN FOLK MUSICIANS, WHO TRADITIONALLY DEPENDED ON PATRONAGE, BUT IT IS HELPING THEM LEARN TO NETWORK, COLLABORATE

HITTING THE RIGHT NOTES

Tuned in A growing number of residencies are helping folk musicians across India keep their art alive

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In October 2011, a group of musicians walked onto a moonlit stage in Jodhpur as a large audience waited patiently. On stage were represented two nationalities, four languages and a beatboxer.

As the musicians set up their instruments and checked their mikes, two things became simultaneously clear: that there were languages and

IN A NUTSHELL

"The reason for the recent rise in the number of music residencies lies in the artists themselves. Over the past five years, we have



IMAGING: SHRIKRISHNA PATKAR

MUSIC ROOMS

barriers were not barriers at all. The group communicated with the wordless familiarity of old bandmates, passing instruments, harmonising vocals and sharing a smile when a four-year-old member of the audience clambered onto the stage.

When the music began — an eclectic collection of beats, raps and Rajasthani folk vocals — the audience, their feet tapping and hands clapping, became part of a collaborative effort that had begun as the Jaipur Virasat Foundation's (JVF) first-ever residency, three years earlier.

JVF is best known for organising the annual Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF) and initiated its residencies, in fact, in an attempt to nurture talent for that fest. Among the performers on stage in 2011 was Jumma Jogi, 45, who attended the first RIFF residency in 2008.

Jogi is a descendant of the Jogi Mewar musicians and a flamboyant singer and composer whose couplets span topics as diverse as unemployment, sexual relations and communal harmony. He has performed in London and sung with English folk musician Laura Marling and folk rock band Mumford & Sons. But he cannot sustain himself on what he earns as a musician, so he also works as a manual labourer, a rickshaw and a tractor driver in his village near Jodhpur.

His story is typical of the Indian folk musician — a tale of dwindling patronage and growing invisibility. It is also typical of how the Western model of residencies is now helping such artists find their way back to artistic relevance, helping them network, collaborate and further their careers through a growing number of residential and nonresidential camps for musicians from across the country and beyond.

Jogi's dependence on his day jobs has been significantly reduced since he participated in the festival's residencies in 2008 and 2010 and became part of a larger creative network. "I have so many music projects now that I find myself turning down offers to write and perform songs," he says.

The concept of residencies is very new to our musicians, says Divya Bhatia, director of RIFF. "A lot of India's traditional music is centred on patronage. Residencies open musicians up to collaboration as an alternative, and expose them to international artists as new creative partners, a mutually beneficial arrangement."

While some of these residencies are organised by formal institutions of learning such as *South Asian Music Institute* in Delhi

and *Garageband* in Mumbai, others are organised by individuals. The artists have realised the benefits of engaging with each other and are proactively seeking out avenues for such interactions," says Tasneem Vahanvati, head of music and film projects at the British Council in India.

"Artists realise they can no longer afford to work in isolation. They have to network and innovate to succeed in a market-driven environment," says Sumana Chandrasekhar, programme executive for arts practice at Indian Foundation for the Arts.

FROM VILLAGES TO TOURS OF EUROPE

FOLK NATIONS RESIDENCY, Mumbai

Set up by the British Council in 2012

Collaborates with folk, tribal, Sufi and classical musicians from Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, West Bengal, Delhi and Rajasthan

Set up in 2012, these residencies aim to bring together local musicians and international artists in an ambience where they can discuss their music, experiment, network and eventually collaborate on new material.

The idea of the residency, which is funded by the Creative Scotland Agency for the Arts, Wales Art International Organisation and British Council, was conceived in 2008, when the British Council brought down English folk musician Laura Marling to collaborate with Rajasthani folk musicians.

"We realised then that there is a real hunger for new music in both the UK and in India, with international audiences increasing and folk acts like Raghu Dixit booming," says Tasneem Vahanvati, head of music and film projects at the British Council in India. "At the same time, the dwindling interest in folk music in rural areas was a cause for concern. So Folk Nations was born."

The first residency was organised in Nagaland last December and brought

together eight folk and tribal musicians from Assam and Nagaland and eight folk musicians from the UK. "We picked Nagaland because young people here are picking up the guitar and learning 'modern' music and leaving behind their folk traditions," says Vahanvati.

The residencies have subsequently been held once a year, bringing together folk and independent artists from the UK and six states across India, in hotels in Nagaland and Kolkata.

In 2013, at a residency in Kolkata, classical artists from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India spent two weeks with folk musicians from the UK, Wales and Scotland.

This collaboration even evolved into performances overseas, with six participants performing together at venues such as London's Southbank Centre, and touring the UK and Wales.

"There was no agenda at this residency, which was very freeing," says Suhail Yusuf Khan, a sarangi player and vocalist and one of the musicians at this residency.

Khan remembers interacting with a harp player from Wales and feeling "overwhelmed". "We couldn't play each other's instruments, and that was daunting, but we soon realised that culturally we had a lot in common," he says. "Eventually we were able to overcome our apprehensions and play each other's instruments, and even try our own songs on them."

NEW BEATS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SOUND TRAVELS, London

Set up in 2011

Collaborates with folk, opera and jazz musicians across India, the UK, Germany, France and the USA, with residencies held in Assam, Rajasthan and West Bengal

After three years of working with the organisers of the Rajasthan International Folk Festival, Giorgio Pope had a rolodex overflowing with the contacts of Indian musicians.

"I thought, why not put these to good use?" says Pope, who is now a press officer for the Glastonbury music festival and is based in London. "So I started the residencies, because there is a real hunger on the international music scene to tap unheard sounds, work with refreshing musicians, and India in particular has garnered a lot of interest."

Set up in 2011, Sound Travels has already arranged 15 short-term residencies — ranging in duration from two days to three months — to bring together musicians, music producers, sound technicians and musicologists.

Sound Travels partners with RIFF Jaipur Virasat Foundation and two travel agencies to put the residencies together. "We had American opera singer Annie Smith come down

this April," says Pope. Smith visited Bikaner and then spent a week touring Assam and meeting and collaborating with local musicians.

While in some cases the interactions happen in hotels, often local musicians invite the foreign artists into their homes instead. "When American jazz singer Marisol Limon Martinez visited India last July, she stayed at folk musician Kutle Khan's home for three days," says Pope. "He also acted as her local musical guide, introducing her to other folk musicians in the area."

Khan, who plans to participate in more Sound Travels residencies, says he had never experienced the kind of songs that Martinez sings. "Creatively, it was good exposure for me, and a big learning experience. For example, I learnt

that there are many tonal similarities in our singing techniques that I could never have thought of before."

Most foreign visitors pay their own way, says Pope. "Martinez paid via a scholarship," adds the project head.

"They see it as an investment in their future." Pope is now in the midst of building a residency space in Golaghat, Assam, which should be functional by April 2016.

"Sound Travels is a social enterprise, which means that it invests all profits back in community projects," says Pope.



■ American opera singer Annie Smith dances with Odisha folk singers during a week-long residency in Assam



CREATING A COMMUNITY OF SOUND

INDIA FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS (IFA), Bangalore

Set up its residencies programme in 2006

Collaborates with folk musicians in Rajasthan

In 2006, IFA, which then supported the traditional arts through fellowships and

These musicians had two very specific problems — dwindling patronage, and opposition from parts of the local Islamic population, which considered music un-Islamic. In 2009, IFA responded by setting up musical residencies in three Mir villages, bringing together 15 to 20 musicians in each village. "We identified

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While some of these residencies are organised by formal institutes of learning such as Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Delhi, Chetan Sangeet Natya Academy in Kerala and the Pandit Ravi Shankar Institute of Music and Performing Arts, many are being initiated by non-governmental organisations and cultural foundations such as the British Council, the Khoj International Artist's Association, the Virasat Foundation and India Foundation for the Arts (IFA).

"The reason for the recent rise in the number of such residencies lies in the artists themselves," says Tasneem Vahanvay head of music and film projects at the British Council in India. "Over the past five years, we have seen folk musicians go mainstream and acts such as The Raghu Dixit Project and RIFF get devoted followings. Now, rather than facilitators seeking out local artists for collaborations, the artists have realised the benefits of engaging with each other and are proactively seeking out avenues for such interactions, applying to art and culture foundations for inclusion in residency programmes, and even urging those without such programmes to consider launching them."

There has been a definite increase in the number of residencies over the past two years, adds Sumana Chandrasekhar, programme executive for arts practice at IFA. "The primary reason: Artists realise that they can no longer afford to work in isolation. They have to network and innovate to succeed in a market-driven environment."

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■ Sarangi player Suhail Yusuf Khan, from Delhi, and British folk singer Hannah James jam in Kolkata during a Sound Nations residency held there in 2013.

Six of the 12 participants, including Khan and James, subsequently toured the UK, Scotland and Wales together as a group. PHOTO: BRIONY POPE

NOTES FROM ALL OVER

KHOJ INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS' ASSOCIATION,
New Delhi

Set up its residencies programme in 2007, revived it in 2013. Collaborates with musicians across Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Delhi

Khoj has been working in the field of sound exploration since 2006, setting up inter-disciplinary spaces for artists to collaborate and experiment in," says Saira Chowla, a member of the programme team at Khoj. These "sound explorations" took the form of residencies in 2008 where the artists are given spaces to live and work in. "We don't discriminate between mediums or genres," says Chowla. "We have had sound artists who work on cityscapes, music, analog sound, digital sound, found materials and so on."

In 2013, a sound art residency titled Auditions explored how electro-acoustic and electronic music could be used. "The artists for the residency were chosen not only for their own work, but how well



their work would mesh together," says programme manager and curator of the residency Charu Malhotra.

Malhotra and 'critic in residence' Robert Mills, an experimental sound artist, worked with the artists, reviewing their work with them from time to time. "We also organised field trips for the artists to cultural bodies and to meet local musicians," says Malhotra.

"Mills helped me redefine a project I was working on by acting as a non-intrusive sounding board," says Abhijeet Tambe (photo above), a 38-year-old rock/post rock musician from Bangalore.

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CREATING A COMMUNITY OF SOUND

INDIA FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS (IFA), Bangalore

Set up its residencies programme in 2006. Collaborates with folk musicians in Rajasthan

In 2006, IFA, which then supported the traditional arts through fellowships and internships, began receiving requests for a type of endeavour that did not fit into any of its existing categories.

"An increasing number of grant requests were being made by traditional communities of musicians," says Sumana Chandrasekhar, programme executive for arts practice at IFA. "Especially from those facing cultural issues, such as adversity from local population or apathy from the younger population. For these, we set up something called Special Grants, which organised artistic residencies for them."

An initial venture began in 2006, with a residency held in Bikaner at the behest of local folk singer Mukhtyar Ali, who was looking to reconnect with his musical heritage and the younger generations.

"We rented a space in Ali's Pugal village and selected 20 participants, both experienced musicians and children who wanted to learn from Ali," says Chandrasekhar. "The group then met every day in their shared space to discuss their history and shared tradition and to play music together."

Seeing the success of this initiative, which revived interest among youngsters in the local folk music tradition, the region's Mir pastoral singers also decided to approach IFA for help.

These musicians had two very specific problems—a dwindling patronage, and opposition from parts of the local Islamic population, which considered music un-Islamic. In 2009, IFA responded by setting up musical residencies in three Mir villages, bringing together 15 to 20 musicians in each village. "We identified two master musicians in each village," says Chandrasekhar. "They taught, held workshops and organised performances."

Erstwhile patrons got involved too. "Each Mir musician family in Rajasthan is attached to a patron family," she says. "These patrons are no longer rich enough to support the musicians, but they attended workshops, requested songs they had heard in childhood, and discussed how they could help sustain the Mir culture."

The residency culminated in the Baba Farid Rang Mir Sammelan (photo below) held in October 2010. "All the artists performed and the locals loved it," says Mir musician Janab Ali, 56. "The best part was when the local mauli, who had said music was against the tenets of Islam, came out and played the tabla while we sang."

