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I cannot believe this news. How can I believe god has called him so soon or that he was sick? I cannot even think about this. He only lived for his tabla, rhythm and melody

— Hariprasad Chaurasia, Flautist

Words fail me. I am completely devastated to hear about Zakir Bhai. Ustad Zakir Hussain was a phenomenon, one of the most loved musicians the world has ever known

— Amjad Ali Khan, Sarod maestro

It's an irreparable loss... He was the most famous Indian musician world over

— Wasifuddin Dagar, Classical vocalist

A great musician a great man a great friend Zakir saheb has left us. We tend to use this word rather casually and carelessly but here is someone who in its real meaning can be called a musical GENIUS

— Javed Akhtar, Veteran screenwriter-lyricist

Hussain was an inspiration and a towering personality who elevated tabla to global acclaim. I regret not being able to collaborate with him as much as we did decades ago, though we had planned an album together.

— AR Rahman, Music maestro

The King, in whose hands Rhythm became Magic, has left us... RIP my dearest Zakir. We will meet again

— John McLaughlin, Founding member, Shakti

Zakir Bhai! He left too soon. Yet we are grateful for the times he gave us and what he left behind in the form of his art. Goodbye and Thank you

— Kamal Haasan, Actor

I've never seen a rhythm artiste with so much musicality and there will never be one more like this. Either there will be knowledge or expertise... It is impossible for an artist to be born of this calibre or to have knowledge, expertise and stage presence. Tabla is never going to sound like this ever again.

— Shankar Mahadevan, Musician and Shakti member



ZAKIR HUSSAIN

Tabla maestro who redefined music across borders

1951 - 2024

NEW DELHI, 16 DEC

His fingers flew, fluttered and floated in quicksilver changes of raga and rhythm, drumming up music and magic. Zakir Hussain was the maestro of tabla, percussionist, composer and even actor – a legend who was India's very own and yet belonged to the world.

Hussain, who made the tabla more popular and recognisable to western audiences and was the founding member of the fusion group Shakti

Hussain died from 'idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis', a lung disease, in a San Francisco hospital early Monday. He was 73.

Considered the greatest tabla player of his generation, Hussain had a career that spanned six decades.

Through his long career, the percussionist was at the front of innovation and experimentation in fusing different sounds from different worlds. He collaborated with several renowned international and Indian artistes but it was his 1973 project Shakti with English guitarist John McLaughlin, violinist L Shankar and percussionist T H 'Vikku' Vinayakram that brought together Indian classical music and elements of jazz in a hitherto-unknown fusion.

His groundbreaking work with Western musicians such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma, jazz musician Charles Lloyd, banjo player Bela Fleck, bassist Edgar Meyer, percussionist Mickey Hart and The Beatles' George Harrison brought Indian classical music to an international audience, cementing his status as a global cultural ambassador.

"The mindset as I was growing up tuned itself to the idea that music is music, it's not

Indian music or that music, so when I actually started working with musicians who were non-Indian it seemed like a natural handshake," Hussain told PTI almost a year ago ahead of a performance in Goa.

As the son of Allah Rakha, one of the greatest tabla players of all time, Hussain was to the music born.

He started early. The child prodigy performed his first concert at the age of seven and began touring at 12. After completing his education in Mumbai, where he was born, he moved to the United States in 1970.

The borders melted away when it came to his music.

In February, Hussain became the first musician from India to receive three Grammys at the 66th Annual Grammy Awards in February for Best Global Music Album, Best Global Music Performance and Best Contemporary Instrumental Album.

At the 2024 Grammys, Hussain earned his first honour for best global music album for "This Moment" as part of the fusion music group Shakti, which includes founding member British guitarist John McLaughlin, as well as vocalist Shankar Mahadevan, violinist Ganesh Rajagopalan and percussionist Selvaganesh Vinayakram.

He later won two other awards for the best global music performance for 'Pashto' and best contemporary instrumental album for 'As We Speak', along with flautist Rakesh Chaurasia, American banjo player Bela Fleck and American bassist Edgar Meyer.

In January last year, the Shakti quintet reunited for a world tour in India to much excitement from fans.

Other than Shakti, Hussain also contributed to many groundbreaking collaborations, including Masters of Percussion, Planet Drum and Global Drum Project with Mickey Hart that was awarded the first-ever Grammy for Best World Music Album in 1992, Tabla Beat Science, Sangam with Charles Lloyd and Eric Harland, CrossCurrents with Dave Holland and Chris Potter, in trio with Bela Fleck and Edgar Meyer, and, most recently, with Herbie Hancock.

Hussain composed three concertos. His third, the first-ever concerto for tabla and orchestra, was premiered in India in September 2015, by the Symphony Orchestra of India, in Europe and the UK in 2016, and in the US in April, 2017.

The composer who travelled and performed all across the globe had reservations against performing at private gatherings and disliked latecomers. He was also very vocal in his views.

Then there was the man himself. His broad smile, boyish good looks and curly locks keeping rhythm with his fingers gave him a distinctive star persona that sometimes went beyond his music.

The percussionist was once voted the 'sexiest man' by women readers of the Indian magazine 'Gentleman' in 1994 in a competition against the likes of Amitabh Bachchan.

"The magazine team came to see me and wanted me to wear all these suits and jackets and Western clothes and feature on their cover. I think they were equally shocked and surprised that I won the greatest number of votes because they had assumed the winner would be Amitabh Bachchan," Hussain is quoted as saying by Kabir.

Besides his work as a tabla

player, Hussain also composed music for many movies, including 'Manto' and 'Mr and Mrs Iyer'.

He also acted in the Merchant Ivory film production 'Heat and Dust', 'The Perfect Murder' and 'SaaZ', opposite Shabana Azmi.

Hussain and Taj

In 1988, Hussain became a household name as the face of the Taj Mahal Tea brand.

In a 33-second TV commercial, the ustad was shown immersed in his tabla riyaz, only to later sip on a cup of Taj tea. The voiceover, by the famous Harish Bhimani, would then compliment Hussain's skills saying "Wah Ustad, wah!". To which, the percussionist would reply: "Arre huzoor, wah Taj boliye!"

That "Wah Taj" became an oft used buzzword for many an occasion, and still remembered all these years later.

The same year, Hussain also shared screen space with his father Allah Rakha in the iconic national integration song "Mile Sur Mera Tumhara" which premiered on Doordarshan.

He is survived by his wife Antonia Minnicola and two daughters, Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi.

Apart from four Grammys, Hussain was the recipient of countless awards and honours, including Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the USA's National Heritage Fellowship and Officer in France's Order of Arts and Letters.

As his countless fans bid farewell to the artiste who transcended boundaries, of music and of geography, and went too soon, many could only say – "Wah Ustad".

—PTI

I MADE HIM THE TABLA, HE MADE MY LIFE: HUSSAIN'S TABLA MAKER

MUMBAI, 16 DEC

For Haridas Vhatkar, tabla making won't be the same again, as he mourns the passing away of his most celebrated customer, Ustad Zakir Hussain.

"I first began making tablas for his father Alla Rakha, and made tablas for Zakir Hussain saab since 1998," an emotional Vhatkar, 59, told PTI.

Speaking from his workshop at Kanjurmarg in Mumbai, Vhatkar said he last met the 73-year-old tabla maestro in August this year in Mumbai.

"He was very particular about what sort of tabla he wanted and when. He paid a lot of attention to

the 'tuning' aspect of the musical instrument," said Vhatkar, a third generation tabla maker, hailing from Miraj in western Maharashtra.

"Innumerable," was Vhatkar's reply when asked how many tablas did he make for Zakir Hussain over the last two decades. He said he also has many tablas which were left behind for him by the tabla maestro.

"Besides making new instruments, I was also his sort of repair department for maintaining the collection of the older ones," said Vhatkar. "I made tablas for him and he made my life," the tabla maker added. —PTI



Haridas Vhatkar who used to make tabla for Ustad Zakir Hussain, at his workshop in Mumbai on Monday PHOTO: PTI

WHEN BABY HUSSAIN HAD RHYTHMS FOR PRAYERS FROM DAD

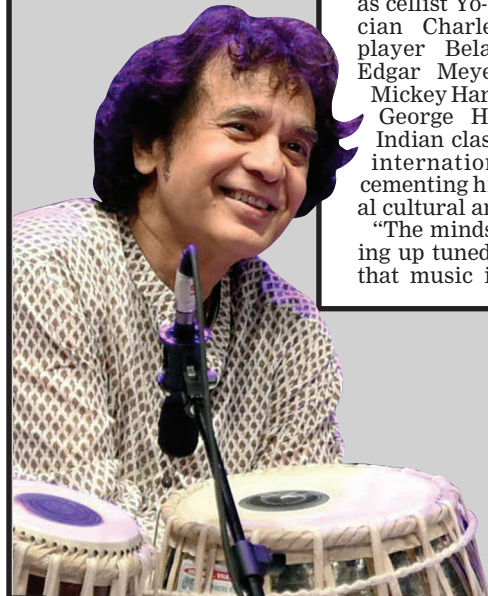
MUMBAI, 16 DEC

Eight years ago, tabla maestro Zakir Hussain had narrated how his father Allah Rakha had welcomed him into this world by putting the musical instrument's rhythms into his ears when asked to recite prayers.

Zakir Hussain spoke of his father holding him in his arms for the first time. Allah Rakha was an accomplished tabla player and a frequent accompanist of iconic sitar player Pandit Ravi Shankar.

"I was brought home and handed over to my dad in his arms. The tradition was that the father is supposed to recite a prayer in the baby's ear, welcoming the baby and putting some good words.

"So he takes me in his arms, puts his lips to my ear and recites the tabla rhythms into my ears. My mother was livid. She said, what are you doing? You're supposed to say, you know, prayers, not rhythms. "And he said, but these are my prayers. This is how I pray. He said, I am the worshipper of Goddess Saraswati and Lord Ganesh. This was a devout Muslim talking. He said this is the knowledge he got from his teachers and wanted to pass it on to his son," Zakir Hussain said. —PTI



MAJOR AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

- 1988 Padma Shri
- 1990 Sangeet Natak Akademi Award
- 1992 Grammy for Mickey Hart's 'Planet Drum' project
- 1999 National Heritage Fellowship from the US National Endowment for the Arts
- 2002 Padma Bhushan
- 2009 Grammy for 'Global Drum Project'
- 2024 Three Grammys for 'Pashto', 'As We Speak', and 'Motion'
- 2023 Padma Vibhushan
- 2022 Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy
- 2019 Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi
- 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award from San Francisco Jazz Center



Clockwise from left: Ustad Zakir Hussain performs with sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar in New Delhi on 27 Feb, 1995; UK's ace fusion and Jazz guitarist John McLaughlin and Hussain (L) at the Gateway of India on 20 Jan, 2005; Hussain, Edgar Meyer and Rakesh Chaurasia accept the Global Music Performance award during the 66th Grammy Awards on 4 Feb, 2024; Hussain smiles as flautist Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia laughs after receiving the Padma Vibhushan in 2023; with Kathak exponent Birju Maharaj; Shakti members: Hussain, Shankar Mahadevan, John McLaughlin, Ganesh Rajagopalan, V Selvaganes