

Sitarist and Composer Anoushka Shankar

The artist whose father turned the Beatles on to Indian music brings modern elements to an ancient tradition.

By ANNA DUBROVSKY

Legendary sitar master Ravi Shankar and “trip hop” pioneers Massive Attack have at least one thing in common: Anoushka Shankar counts both among her musical influences. Her love of classical Indian music, electronica, and other genres gave birth to her fourth and latest album, *Rise*. Now, she says, she’s addicted to experimenting with sound.

“I started getting more creative in general over the last few years,” she says. “I found myself stepping outside of the classical and really enjoying that. I wanted to see what I would create if I didn’t have boundaries.”

What the 25-year-old sitarist and composer created was an album one reviewer called “delicate and lyrical one moment and dense and deep the next.” It marries Indian instruments such as the tabla and santoor with the cello, didgeridoo, and electronic elements. It’s an album that Ravi Shankar, her famous father and life-

wasn’t her bag; innovators captivated her.

When the woman whose surname is synonymous with classical sitar began experimenting with music manipulated on computers, her father gave his blessing. “While he may have been apprehensive about what I was doing, once he started to hear it, he actually got it,” she says. “Because a lot of what I do is so rooted in what I’ve learned. I don’t butcher it in order to push it forward.”

Anoushka began studying with her father when she was 9, after her parents



BEYOND TRADITION Anoushka Shankar mixes it up on her CD *Rise* using a range of music styles.

“Sitar players sit in an extreme cross-legged position for hours. So my pre-concert practice includes plenty of opening asanas.”

long teacher, wouldn’t have made.

“He did so much barrier-breaking and boundary-pushing for his time, but that was where his line was,” says Anoushka, whose previous recordings adhered to classical tradition. “He didn’t really get fusion music. He wouldn’t play non-classical stuff on a sitar.”

It’s not surprising that Anoushka would blend musical styles. She’s been straddling East and West her whole life. She was born in London and lived there until age 11, when she moved with her family to Southern California. Part of every year is spent in India. Her childhood homes were filled with music and musicians, including disciples who lived with the family while studying with her father. In her teens, she discovered bands like Massive Attack and Portishead and singers like Björk. Mainstream music

had a small sitar—about half the size of a normal one—made for her.

“My mom and dad were both very clear that if I didn’t like it, I could always stop. They just wanted me to try. That was great for me because, otherwise, I think it could have been a daunting, very frightening thing to take on, with my father being who he is.”

Ravi Shankar taught Anoushka almost every evening and twice a day on weekends. She performed for the first time at 13 in New Delhi, and her first album was released while she was in high school in Encinitas, California. In 2002 she opened the *Concert for George*, a benefit held on the first anniversary of the death of Beatles guitarist George Harrison, who studied with her father and was a close family friend. The following year, she received a Grammy nomination in the Best World

Music category for *Live at Carnegie Hall*, a recording of her opening set for her father’s Oct. 6, 2000, sold-out concert.

Rise, released in 2005, earned Anoushka her second Grammy nomination. By then the Grammy Awards included two categories for world music: traditional and contemporary. Anoushka’s album was nominated in the latter.

She has no intention of giving up traditional music. Even over the past year, while promoting *Rise* in the U.S., Europe, and India, Anoushka has given classical concerts. She is careful when touring to let audiences know what they’re in for. The last thing she wants is a couple of elderly people with a passion for classical Indian music mistakenly buying tickets to one of her harder-to-categorize concerts. “Please note,” her MySpace page warns, “that Anoushka’s *Rise* tour is not the >>



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same as her normal classical concerts.”

“I’m known as a classical sitarist, and I would never want to impose the music I’m creating on people who wouldn’t be interested,” says Anoushka, who’s also a classical pianist. “It’s just been a matter of presenting it as my creation. This is crossover. This is different. When it’s placed in the right space like that, it’s actually been overwhelmingly well received. It’s been the most amazing thing for me.”

Finding a balance between ancient and modern will be her challenge in coming years. Her yoga practice is about finding balance, too. Sitar players sit in what Anoushka calls an “extreme version of a cross-legged position,” leaning slightly to support the instrument. On days when she has sound checks and concerts, Anoushka assumes that pose for up to five hours. It’s torture on the hips and lower back, she says, so her pre-concert practice includes plenty of opening asanas and twists. Between concerts, she spends a lot of time on buses and planes. She tries to do a series of sun salutations every day.

But Anoushka’s yoga is as much introspection as it is exercise. “In every aspect of my life, I tend to look for the deeper side,” she says. “In that sense, yoga is obviously unique in that it can offer both.”

Anoushka also enjoys writing articles about music and culture. In her book *Bapi, the Love of My Life*, she tells her father’s life story through photos and anecdotes. She contributed chapters to *This Day: Diaries from American Women* and a book about accomplished Indian women.

She’s tried her hand at acting, too. Her role as a classical Indian dancer in the 2004 film *Dance Like a Man* earned her a nomination for a National Film Award in India.

Her latest experiment is a collaborative album with several musician friends. Norah Jones, Anoushka’s half sister and eight-time Grammy Award winner, sings on one of the tracks. “It’s a very different kind of fun, stretching me in different ways,” Anoushka says of the still-unfinished project. “Being able to explore becomes very addictive.” +

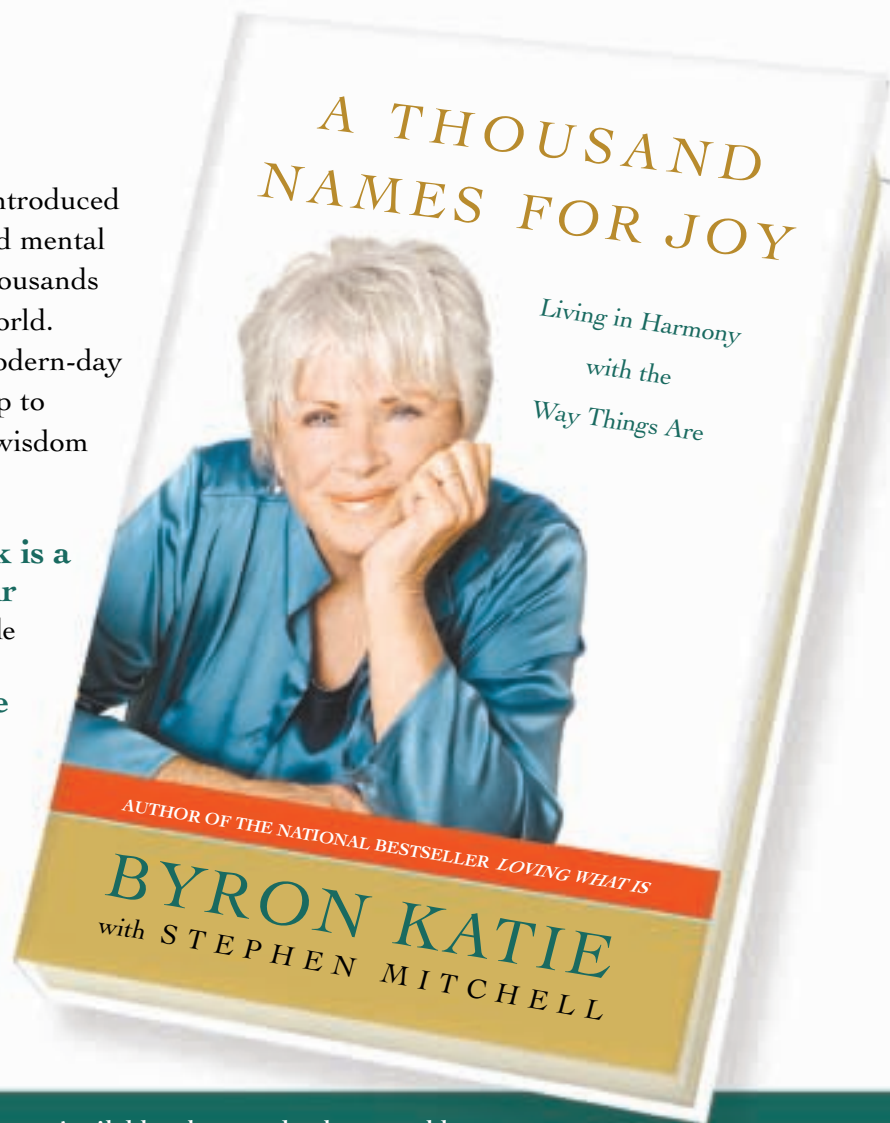
Anna Dubrovsky, a former editor and reporter at Bloomberg News, now writes from Chennai, India.

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