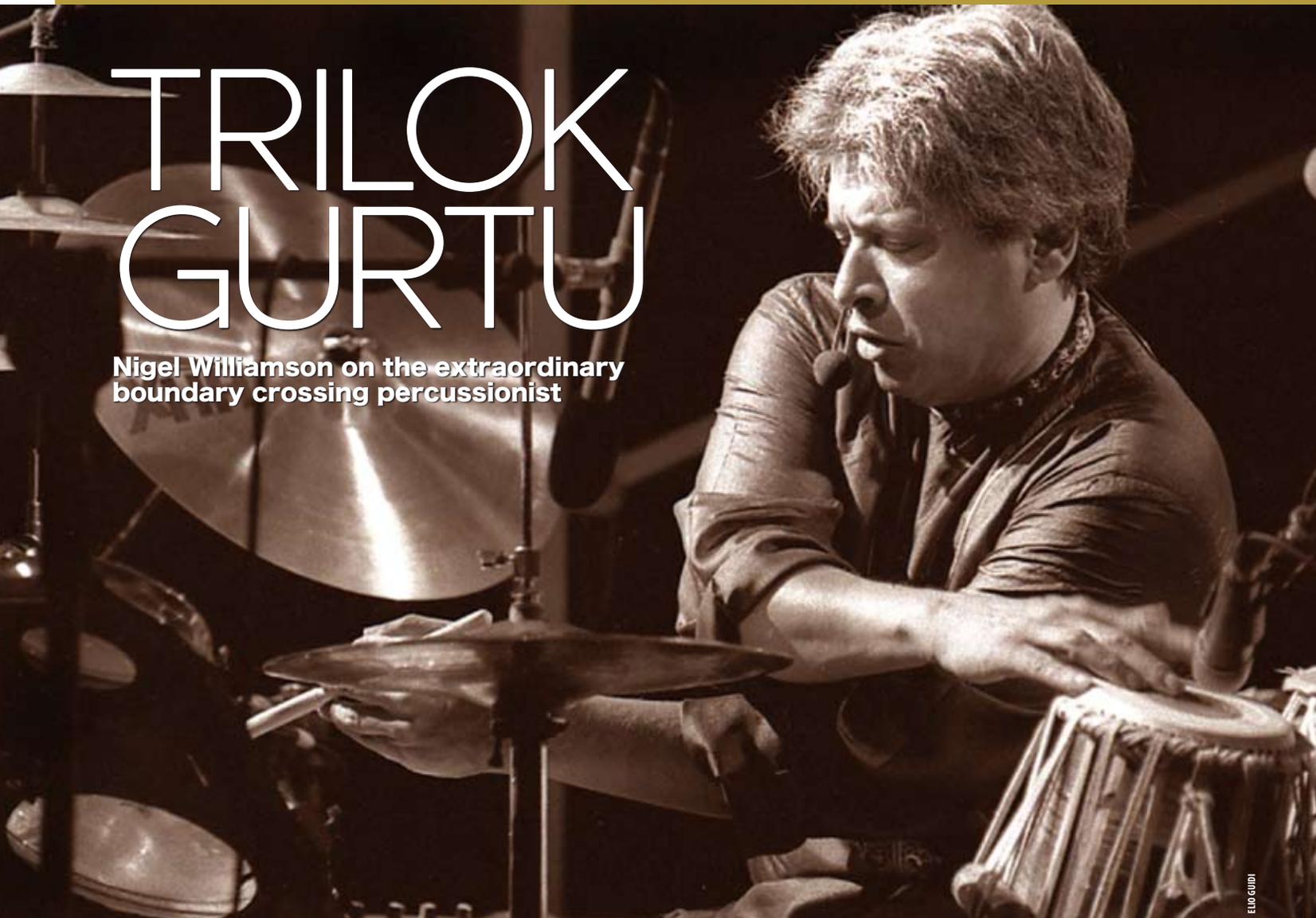


TRILOK GURTU

Nigel Williamson on the extraordinary boundary crossing percussionist



ELIO GUMI

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They always say that drummers don't make good frontmen. Trilok Gurtu is a rare exception – but then he's hardly an ordinary drummer. Jazz man, Indian classicist, mentor to the British-Asian underground scene and audacious global fusionist, as well as being one of the world's most inventive percussionists, everything about Gurtu seems to break the mould. Even his drum set-up is unlike anything

you've seen before – a custom-built East-West hybrid that combines a conventional kit and Indian percussion, augmented by a bewildering array of gongs, shakers, wood blocks, clay pots, bells and chimes.

In addition to being a master of intricate rhythms, he's a striking live performer and a showman who knows how to entertain a crowd. Yet it is in the studio that his visionary fusions of Indian classical music, African influences, jazz improvisation, polyrhythmic

funk and Asian pop are given full reign.

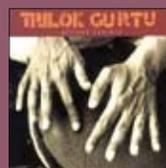
Born in 1951 in Mumbai into a noted musical family, his grandfather played the *sitar* and his mother Shobha Gurtu to this day remains a highly popular singer in the classical North Indian style known as *thumri*. By the age of six, Gurtu was already playing *tabla* and other percussion, often sitting in with the many great Indian musicians who came to visit his mother.

As a teenager in the 60s, he was attracted

BEST...

....ALBUMS

African Fantasy (Blue Thumb, 2000)



Brilliantly cross-pollinated African and Asian rhythms, Trilok Gurtu's percussion perfectly integrates into the

powerful ensemble playing and the Belgian group Zap Mama's Sabine Kabongo, Mali's Oumou Sangaré and Benin's Angélique Kidjo are among the guest vocalists.

The Beat of Love (Blue Thumb, 2001)



Another audacious blending of Asian and African forms, this time glossily produced by Wally Badarou. Kabongo and Kidjo

reprise their guest vocalist roles and Salif Keita lends his voice to the wonderful 'Have We Lost Our Dream?' Even ex-Squeeze man Chris Difford turns up, contributing the lyrics to 'Ola Bombay'.

Remembrance (Universal, 2002)



After his African excursions, Gurtu returns to his Indian roots. Bollywood strings, classical Asian motifs and contemporary

programmed beats are mixed seamlessly on a set of highly sophisticated and melodic compositions. The UK edition of the CD also has remixes by Talvin Singh and Badmarsh & Shri.

to the Western sounds of jazz and rock. He once told me that he had watched the Woodstock movie 30 times in a local cinema and his ambition had been to play the tablas like Jimi Hendrix played the guitar. In Mumbai, he found work playing on Bollywood soundtracks but after touring the US with Asha Bhosle, in the early 80s he settled in Europe, where he threw himself into the contemporary jazz scene. Among those he played with were the trumpeter Don Cherry and jazz fusionists, Oregon.

In 1988, he met the guitarist John McLaughlin and spent the next four years as a member of his trio. He also played in the fusion quartet led by L Shankar and which included Jan Garbarek and Zakir Hussain. By then he had already released his debut album *Usfret* (Times Square, 1987). There was a subtle underpinning of Indian rhythms to everything he did, but his basic style at this time was an avant-garde jazz-rock fusion, a

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direction he pursued on further albums such as 1993's *The Crazy Saints*, which featured Joe Zawinul and Pat Metheny.

Although his virtuosity on these records is undeniable, the music is hard to love. *'Too jazzy, too clever, too self-absorbed in its own complexity for the sake of it. Too flashy. Too many notes'*, I once wrote of this period of his career. If it sounds harsh, it's a judgement with which he has come to agree.

The turning point came with 1998's *Kathak*, on which Gurtu's Indian roots came to the fore as never before. Perhaps he originally intended it as a one-off project before he returned to the world of modern jazz. But when it outsold his previous albums, he realised that there was a greater appetite for his East-West fusions among a world music audience than in the more conservative jazz market. The album's success also taught him a valuable lesson. "I

was too obsessed with technique," he admits. "I had to learn to believe in spontaneity and that was a voyage of discovery for me."

After *Kathak*, he adopted a new approach which involved learning a new language of rhythm, in which the spaces he left became as important as the notes he played. As he puts it, his aim became to "make music that the listener will find easy to enjoy, even if it is complex for the musicians to play."

The result has been a thrilling series of albums featuring his own compositions and which have fused Indian, African and Western elements in a heady global soundclash. Like Nitin Sawhney, he doesn't sing and so guests such as Salif Keita, Angélique Kidjo, Oumou Sangaré, his mother Shobha Gurtu and Huun-Huur-Tu have helped to give voice to his vision. The approach also helped him to a brace of nominations in successive years for the BBC

Radio 3 awards for world music.

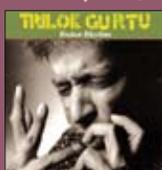
His most recent album, *Farakala* was recorded with the Erikyiwa Family in West Africa and was a Top of The World choice in #38. The only reason it's not among the recommendations below is that Gurtu himself regards it as a collaborative side-project in which he was catalyst as much as creator. Meanwhile, he's already almost finished his next album *Arkeology* for release in late 2006 and a compilation of the best of his world music recordings is in preparation for 2007. The jazz world's loss has been world music's gain. ●

Top left: Trilok with his mother, famed singer Shobha Gurtu. Top right: hanging out in West Africa for the recent Erikyiwa collaboration album



You can hear a track from two of our recommended albums, *African Fantasy & Broken Rhythms*, on this issue's podcast

Broken Rhythms (Sony, 2004)



Like *Remembrance*, mostly recorded in his home town of Mumbai with a superb cast of Indian singers and musicians. But he

throws plenty of other flavours into the melting pot, courtesy of the Tuvan throat singing of Huun-Huur-Tu, the Arké String Quartet and some screaming blues rock guitar from Gary Moore.

....AVOIDED

***Usfret* (Times Square, 1987)**



When it was first released it was highly influential on the development of the Asian Underground scene. But anyone

who has come to Gurtu via his more recent world music albums is likely to be out of sympathy with its frenzied jazz-rock jams and find the Indian ambience too muted.

LIKE TRILOK GURTU? THEN TRY...

DJ CHEB I SABBAH



***La Kahena* (Six Degrees, 2005)**

Talvin Singh and most of the first generation of British-Asian performers regard Gurtu as a mentor and you can also hear his influence on Anoushka

Shankar's recent fusion album, *Rise*. The Algerian-born DJ Cheb I Sabbah (right) comes from a different tradition but mixes Arabic and Asian sounds with contemporary Western elements in similarly thrilling fashion.

