

# RAJASTHAN INTERNATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL

## JODHPUR, INDIA

**Nigel Williamson enjoys an eclectic line-up of Indian folk and rubs shoulders with a Rolling Stone at one of the world's most romantic festival settings**

**W**e're lounging on huge floor cushions in a open-air courtyard in the magnificent Mehrangarh Fort. Far below the craggy sandstone outcrop on which the ancient kings of Marwar built their spectacular palace more than 500 years ago, sprawls the old walled city of Jodhpur. Beyond it in the distance lies the arid terrain of the Tar desert. Above us is a full moon so bright that its light casts an eerie shadow.

We are listening to the sitarist Vishwa Mohan Bhatt playing a classical *raga* in the rich and elegant form of ancient Rajput court music known as *maand*, when my

wife nudges me and gestures towards a figure sitting to the right of the stage. "Isn't that Mick Jagger?" she asks.

It is indeed and later that evening I bump into him at the bar. "What are you doing here? I didn't know you were into Indian music," I blurt out clumsily in my surprise at his presence at the inaugural Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF). He answers politely that he listens to a lot of Indian music and, to my further surprise, launches into a mini manifesto about the importance of keeping India's folk heritage alive in the face of the rapid modernisation underway as the country rushes headlong to join the digital age.

He also lets slip that he's present as an old friend of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, the festival's patron. One of India's 'midnight children,' the current Maharaja took office at the age of four and in 1972 began the restoration of the long derelict fort. Now magnificently refurbished, it has to be one of the most sumptuous and romantic settings for a music festival anywhere in the world.

For centuries the aristocratic rulers of India's princeling states sponsored and sustained India's proud classical music tradition, employing the best musicians at court, so to hear VM Bhatt playing classical ragas in the former royal apartments is the continuation of a patronage that is

centuries old. But one of the main purposes of the RIFF festival is to give a platform to the village musicians of rural India.

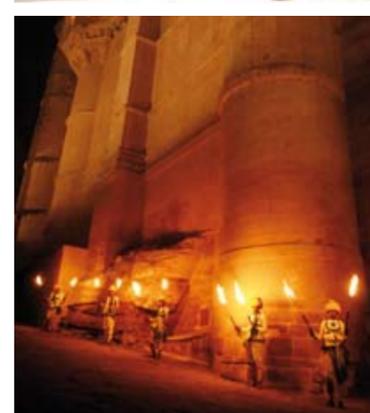
The following lunchtime finds us in the Chowkelao Palace Gardens, a green oasis beneath the old fort's northern wall, containing a profusion of flower-filled verandas, fed by water from the deepest well I've ever seen. There's no sign of Jagger or the Maharaja but a small and attentive crowd under an elegant canvas awning is being royally entertained by a cavalcade of Rajasthani folk groups.

In effect, they are workshop performances, each group playing a short set of 30 minutes or so with informed commentary and context offered by a local 'expert'. Yet there's none of the stilted worthiness that can often characterise such workshops. These are full-on performances and the atmosphere is both relaxed and enthusiastic.

By mid-afternoon, however, it's so hot and the scattered cushions are so comfortable that I'm dozing off. I'm soon brought back to consciousness by the sound of cheering and raise my head to see the bearded, elderly Sajjan Dass doing a pretty fine impression of a rock musician as he plucks his *tandoora* over his head and behind his back while dancing giddily.

Over two consecutive balmy afternoons in the gardens we see and hear musicians from 15 performing communities across Rajasthan. They include the Bhopas, the itinerant singing priests of the Kamad community. From the desert regions around Jaisalmer and along the Pakistani border come both the Manganiyar, who play devotional songs in ecstatic fashion and the similar-sounding Langas, a community of hereditary singers from Muslim stock who perform Hindu folk songs. The Kalbeliya's music and dance reflects the caste's origins as snake-charmers and the Nat, who entertain us with some terrifying high-wire acrobatic stunts.

As the sun begins its descent over the empty vastness of the Tar desert, we take a ten minute rickshaw ride to Jaswant Thada for a sunset performance of Sufi music. The white, marbled tomb built for a famous 19th century ruler of Jodhpur celebrated for expelling the bandits from the city, resembles a mini Taj Mahal as the musicians take their place on a raised platform in front of the cenotaph with the Mehrangarh Fort framed thrillingly on the horizon behind them. Here over three sunset concerts and one dawn devotional recital (which we lazily missed), the longstanding religious tolerance of northern India is celebrated by Muslim singers from the Manganiyar community



Top to bottom: devotional recitals at dawn; a ger dance being performed by folk musicians; the Rajasthan terahali dance; the impressive fort by night



### HOW TO GET THERE

- Specially designed festival packages are available from Tim Best Travel, +44 (0)20 7591 0300, [www.timbesttravel.com](http://www.timbesttravel.com)
- Jet Airways flies from London to Jodhpur via Mumbai or Delhi, [www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)
- Songlines Music Travel is offering similar trips to other world music festivals. See p17 for more details

and Hindu musicians from the Meghwal community, singing devotional songs to Sufi and Bhakti saints in which the words 'Allah' and 'Ram' appear to be interchangeable.

As the sky turns a shade of dark crimson and the lights begin to twinkle in the old city below, I grab a word with the Maharaja about his patronage of the festival. "We timed it to coincide with the brightest full moon of the Vedic calendar, which we call Sharad Poornima," he explains. "It's a traditional time for music and dance and we wanted to showcase the vitality, colour and energy of Rajasthani culture. A lot of these artists face poverty because of the loss of traditional patronage and the erosion of rural communities and find themselves marginalised in a new world order that undervalues their skills. This music evolved through centuries of tradition but if we're not careful it could disappear forever in a single generation."

Much of the vision for the festival came from founder John Singh, with his wife Faith of the fashion chain Anokhi and whose crusade on behalf of Indian folk music has already created the Jaipur International Heritage Festival (see #46). But the dramatic staging of the Mehrangarh Fort promises to make the Jodhpur event the more attractive proposition to world music festival-goers.

After dinner on the ramparts of the fort, we catch the great Hariprasad Chaurasia, first playing classical ragas on his *bansuri* (wooden flute) and then collaborating brilliantly with desert musicians from western Rajasthan. Alongside his virtuosity, he displays an appealing sense of humour. "Can you turn the lights down? It's not like I'm going to dance or something," he demands at one point.

As it was the festival's first year, there were a few teething troubles. Audiences for some events were thin and one or two of the more rock-oriented acts on the bill, such as the fusion band Indian Ocean, were out of place. But when I catch up with festival director Owen Mortimer on the last night, he's justifiably satisfied that a major new annual event has firmly booked its place in the world music calendar. "We've learned a lot and there are a few things we need to work on for next year," he says, looking up at the magnificent gold filigree ceiling of the Phool Mahal, the fort's 'flower palace,' which was once the private pleasure dome of generations of Maharajas. "But with a venue like this, it's going to be hard to fail, isn't it?" ●

**This year's Rajasthan International Folk Festival runs from October 10-14. [www.jodhpurfestival.org](http://www.jodhpurfestival.org)**

Mick Jagger – a guest of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. Main image: the view of Jodhpur from Mehrangarh Fort – one of the largest in India

