



Jaipur Festival

A festival in the heart of Rajasthan state in India seeks to bring exciting innovation to age-old tradition. **Simon Broughton** reports

A contemporary art exhibition, but installed in a Hindu temple. The steps up to the entrance are smoothly swathed in Indian newspapers splashed with brightly painted OM symbols. Inside the courtyard, flags flutter like the kites at the kite festival that had taken place just a few days before. Inside the temple itself is an installation of garlands and saffron-coloured flower petals suspended from the roof above a mirror placed like a reflective pool on the floor. It was a great idea, I thought, to use the garlands and offerings you see all the time in Indian temples in a completely new way. But a lady came up to me looking troubled. "What does it mean?" she asked. I directed her to the New York artist who'd created the installation. "It's Art!" she said, which didn't seem an adequate answer either to me or the women who'd asked the question. She's not the first and certainly not the last person to be confused by contemporary art. But it does say something about the ambition of this festival in the capital of India's largest state of Rajasthan that it was asked at all.

"The Jaipur Festival is a creative festival," explains executive director Faith Singh. "We have lots of festivals in India that celebrate tradition, but we want to inject tradition with a new energy." The organisers, Jaipur Virasat (Heritage) Foundation (JVF), really exploit the fantastic architectural landscape of the city. Jaipur is one of India's prime tourist

destinations, but very few visitors would find the Ramchanderji Mandir temple were it not for the art installation, even though it's just a few steps away from the pink, filigree Palace of the Winds (Hawa Mahal), one of India's most famous monuments after the Taj Mahal. Over the ten days of the Jaipur Festival, there are concerts, exhibitions, talks and workshops held in spectacular locations and special walks around the city. There are top artists – like singers Shubha Mudgal and Hariharan. Each morning, *bhajans* (hymns) are performed in little-known temples. What you soon discover in Jaipur is even ordinary buildings are often architectural wonders.

As a venue for an opening concert, you can't beat the Amber Palace, a magnificent Rajput extravaganza on a commanding rock outside the city. In a courtyard strewn with petals and lit with candles, there's *kathak* dancing, Rajasthani folk and Sufi *qawwali* music. The combination of music, light and location is magical. The next afternoon, there's a performance of folk groups at the recently restored step-well situated amongst the tombs and temples below the Amber Palace. There are groups from all over North India and they're jostling in with the audience to see each other perform. One of the highlights, with fans of peacock feathers, is a dance depicting Lord Krishna enchanting the *gopis* (milkmaids) with his good looks and flute playing. It's a reminder of just how rich India is in traditional folk music, and one of the aims of



ABOVE: **Fire dancer** (John Singh)



TOP: **Gazi Khan Harwa and Barkat Khan** (John Singh)

ABOVE: **Lord Krishna woos a gopi in a folk dance** (Simon Broughton)

OPPOSITE PAGE
MAIN: **Kite art by Chrysanne Stathacos at Ramchanderji Mandir temple** (Sue Carpenter)

INSET: **Mahesharam, a traditional singer of devotional songs** (John Singh)

the festival is to give it new meaning. "In our culture many traditions have got stuck and calcified," explains Singh. "Then people tire of them and they die out. The main purpose of what we're doing is to generate a livelihood amongst artists and crafts people. Most of them are at the bottom of the economic ladder. In a country like ours, you can't have conservation unless it has economic benefits. The festival helps in several ways – it acts as a market place by bringing cultural tourism to the city, but it also makes people here aware of what they have."

An example of this was a workshop on the art of Pabuji Ki Phad – epic storytelling with music and a vast painted scroll as a backdrop. The stories were sung by the Bhopa musician Mohan Ram, accompanying himself on a bowed *ravanhatta* fiddle and the relevant paintings, by Shri Srilal Joshi, were illuminated by a lamp as the story progressed. It's fantastic folk theatre, the precursor of film. But it's been losing out to Bollywood for the best part of a century. These itinerant performers, singing their paintings from village to village, have all but disappeared. The workshops unite performers, painters and scholars and in 2006, the aim is to create new, contemporary stories in this age-old tradition.

Faith's husband, John Singh has a passionate interest in the regional music of Rajasthan and he's organised village festivals for local musicians – the most recent in the Shekhawati district north of Jaipur attracted 20,000 people. Then they invite the best musicians to play on free stages in Jaipur during the festival. It's awe inspiring to see the talent that's there at a village level and the response in the city. The connection between the urban population and their rural roots is still very strong. The JVF gets some state support for the folk-art side of the festival, but the challenge they face, explains Singh, is to demonstrate that "a festival can do more than attract superficial cultural tourism, but generate economic and social benefits too."

Late one evening, I find myself at the most extraordinary disco of my life. We're in the Nahargarh Fort, somewhere up in the hills outside the city. Lights are flashing, thighs are thrashing and rain is setting in, but nobody seems to care. Suddenly I recognise one of my favourite tracks – Juggy D's 'Sohniye' (from *Songlines* #28 covermount CD) expertly spun in by Dutch DJ mps Pilot. He reminds me we'd last met at the Festival in the Desert near Timbuktu! A girl appears with flaming torches, creating vibrant *mandalas* as she spins the fires around her body. John Singh comes up to me thrilled because he's got transvestite *hijra* dancers from the villages to come to the party and dance. "These middle class people have never seen anything like this," he says. A revelation for the Jaipur city slickers. The noise of cultural barriers breaking is intoxicating. ■

**The Jaipur Heritage International Festival is
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