

Confusion in the Karnatic Capital: Fusion in Chennai, India

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## ABSTRACT

### Confusion in the Karnatic Capital: Fusion in Chennai, India

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This dissertation examines how a contested musical practice makes the problems of modernity in India audible. In particular, I look at the relationship between South Indian “fusion” musicians and India’s recent economic and cultural growth attributed to the economic reforms of 1991. Fusion is the local name for a musical practice that combines South Indian classical music with elements from rock, jazz, and world music. During thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the South Indian city of Chennai between 2006-8, I attended countless concerts, interviewed dozens of people involved with musical production, and performed with musicians. I observed how musicians and audiences perpetuated the idea that fusion was contested and I documented the local debates that often expressed a deep uncertainty and ambiguity about the legitimacy of fusion.

What can a contested musical practice reveal about the recent economic and cultural changes in contemporary urban India? Fusion is contested because its multiple and contradicting histories, definitions, and opinions make it a unique musical problem in Chennai. This problem is further complicated when the explicit intension of fusion as musical mixing is also understood as an example of persistent debates of cultural mixing that are so crucial to India’s colonial history and postcolonial present. In this dissertation, I show how fusion triggers debates that provide a unique constellation of irresolvable tensions that help situate contemporary, urban, South Indian musicians within the changing relations between India and the West. The contestation about fusion has led to a lacuna of critical scholarship that this dissertation remedies. I argue that rather than being a reason to overlook fusion, fusion’s contestation loads it with meaning and makes it a rich, unexamined site of expressive culture. It provides a unique domain to understand how musicians in Chennai represent the always-changing relations of India and the West through their discourse about music and musical sound.

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## Dedication

My father, Jon B. Higgins (1939-1984), was an ethnomusicologist and Karnatic vocalist. Much of his influence is implicit in this dissertation because he was an important reason for my interest in Indian music. During my fieldwork, he was also a constant presence in conversations with musicians, audiences, and scholars. This work, therefore, inadvertently *and* intentionally honors my father.

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## Introduction

What is Fusion?

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of musicians in South India who performed music they called “fusion,” which combined elements of Karnatic, or South Indian “classical,” music with non-Indian musical forms and instruments understood as “Western.” I show how Fusion triggered debates that provided a unique constellation of irresolvable tensions that helped situate contemporary, urban, South Indian musicians within the changing relations between India and the West. I argue that the practice of Fusion activated many tensions in urban twenty-first century India because of the ways it symbolized and sounded the contradictions of modernity. To date, there has been a lacuna of critical scholarship on Fusion that I attribute to its deeply contested position in South Indian culture. Rather than being a reason to overlook Fusion, the contestation of Fusion was central to its lived meaning, made it a rich, unexamined site of expressive culture, and provided a unique domain to understand how musicians in Chennai represent the always-changing relations of India and the West through discourse about music and musical sound.

Contestation permeated the practice of Fusion in various ways. Musicians had widely varying strategies of how to negotiate their non-traditional Fusion with the central importance of Indian “tradition” in South Indian music culture. Despite similar projects from previous generations, musicians seldom acknowledged any history of Fusion projects in South India and continually constructed Fusion as “always new.” Musicians defined Fusion in hugely contradictory ways. There was also no performance space committed to Fusion and no institution exclusively devoted to teaching Fusion. No one ever referred to anyone else as a “fusion musician.” Tourists didn’t come to Chennai to attend performances of Fusion. There was no

Fusion “scene” that could have been understood as a linked and coherent network of musicians, but instead there was a disparate number of musicians who performed Fusion seemingly in isolation from each other. Musicians and audience members used the pun “confusion” to describe Fusion: the very mentioning of the word “fusion” seemed to present a problem.

Rather than shy away from the inchoate state of the practice of Fusion, I rectify the silence of scholarship about Fusion by arguing that when taken seriously and closely examined, Fusion offers a unique domain for ethnomusicological inquiry because of the opportunity it provides to answer difficult questions that musicians and audience members asked, questions that frame this dissertation: What is Fusion? How is Fusion a contested musical practice? How do the tensions of Fusion sound the tensions of modernity in India? I respond to these questions by drawing primarily from my fieldwork in the South Indian city of Chennai, which included observations, interviews, and performances with musicians who performed Fusion. I argue that Fusion was a contested musical practice because musicians sounded the tensions of modernity in India that enacted the drama of peoples’ lives.

I organize this introduction into seven sections. First, I provide a brief overview of Fusion by describing the group of musicians that I worked with and what they did during my fieldwork. Second, I list and describe the different uses of the trope of “fusion” to survey the different meanings that overlapped during my fieldwork. In the next section, I offer some contextual background for this project by describing some of the historical influences and the thematic, geographical, and logistical limits of my research. Fourth, I offer a review of relevant literature to distinguish this project from other influential research projects. Next, I describe some specific strategies of writing I have relied on to best present my research. In the sixth section, I explain

this project's history and how my personal background played a role in various stages of this project's completion. Lastly, I explain my methodology and how I organize my chapters.

### Overview of Fusion

Over the course of a combined period of fifteen months, I worked with roughly forty musicians, most of whom performed music they regarded as Fusion or related to Fusion (some preferred variations on the word Fusion as a description of their music and some didn't use it at all). These musicians encompassed a wide range of musical activity in Chennai. The vast majority of the musicians I worked with were trained in Karnatic music and primarily earned their livings performing Karnatic music either as soloists or instrumental accompanists. As freelance musicians, they occasionally recorded for the film industry in addition to performing Fusion either as leaders or as hired accompanists. There were, however, a few exceptions who played Western instruments and therefore performed Fusion and film music exclusively. The musicians were male, with exception to Dr. M. Lalitha and her sister M. Nandini, who I describe in detail in chapter two. In general, these musicians were also mostly middle class Brahmin South Indian Hindus (again, with a few exceptions) and they all spoke English fluently.

This is a study of musicians who, because of their involvement with the practice of Karnatic music, hold a considerable amount of cultural capital as Brahmins (the most powerful caste in India), but with a widely varied range of economic capital. By cultural capital, I mean that they held a considerable power as those who had devoted their careers to perpetuate Indian "tradition" in the form of Karnatic music. This is in contrast to musicians who are disempowered as a part of marginal communities of scheduled castes and tribal populations and also to those with a more diasporic identity from living abroad. This project focuses on mostly middle class

musicians who lived, worked within, and defined themselves in relation to the practice of Karnatic music. More generally, they neither fit any orientalized stereotype of the “classical” Indian musician as immersed solely in music and isolated from non-Indian culture, nor did they exemplify the cosmopolitan stereotype of the global citizen of hyphenated identities and numerous passports. Musicians who performed Fusion ranged from those who were well “inside” the Karnatic music establishment (such as my discussions of Dr. M. Lalitha and Ghatam Karthick in chapter two) to those on its borders and well “outside” of it (such as my discussions of C. Girinandh, Rajhesh Vaidhya, and Anil Srinivasan, also in chapter two).

During my fieldwork, I observed different kinds of Fusion performances. Fusion concerts were most frequently held in venues mostly designated for Karnatic music recitals, such as the Music Academy and Narada Gana Sabha. There were also concerts in different sized festivals, including a one-evening festival named Fusic that had a college auditorium as its venue one year and a chic outdoor cafe the next. Two large festivals were the Satsang festival at the Indian Institute for Technology and the citywide, multi-venue, state sponsored Chennai Sangamam. When the famous and influential band Remember Shakti performed in Chennai, they performed at one of the largest auditoriums in the city, Kamaraj Memorial Hall. Besides concert hall and festival performances, another type was a corporate performance—a private performance for a closed event, usually a party funded by a particular company for its employees. Private parties and weddings made up the last kinds of performances, although most wedding performances featured Karnatic music and not Fusion. As several musicians described to me, the corporate performances and weddings were the lowest ranking gigs for prestige but the highest for pay. Because they were often for audiences who were not primarily interested in the music (although occasionally wedding performances feature short concerts where there is a period of silence and

full attention), musicians took a few more liberties with their improvisations and renditions of compositions. Conversely, because audiences attended concerts and festivals primarily for the music, the stakes for performing well were higher, even if the pay was less.

In Chennai, the nebulous and notoriously difficult-to-define musical practice of Fusion existed between three broadly existing musical practices: Karnatic, Western music, and still present but to a much lesser extent, Indian film music. Musicians often moved back and forth between these different musical practices, performing mostly Karnatic music, but recording film music and performing Fusion as well, even in the same day. Fusion rarely occupied a musician's entire career. Rather, most musicians played Fusion in addition to other forms of music making. There were many exceptions, but some of the most prevalent features of Fusion in Chennai were original compositions, an almost prerequisite technical virtuosity, the distinct absence of devotional practices or spiritual associations, and a predominantly non-vocal, instrumental sound.

#### Theoretical Framework: The Trope of "Fusion"

As a trope with different and related meanings, "fusion" stood for a host of cultural practices that were important dimensions of contemporary urban Indian life. Musicians referred to "fusion" to mean three different but related things: 1. the process of cultural mixing found in multiple domains of culture (like the fusion of different cuisines or styles of attire) 2. the abstracted process of musical mixing, not related to any place, tradition, or specific musical practice, and 3. the musical practice in South India that combined elements of mostly Karnatic and Western music. When musicians spoke about Fusion, they moved between these three

meanings in both intentional *and* unintentional ways. I use these three meanings to frame my theoretical positions for this study of Fusion.

### Cultural Mixing

“Fusion” was a ubiquitous trope in contemporary Indian popular discourse that people used to refer to a set of social processes that described the act of cultural mixing. Its presence had a wide reach; the media and advertising industries used it to celebrate newness and showcase a cosmopolitan worldview, and companies used it to sell products like clothes, cuisine, furniture, and cars. It had the effect of invoking a kind of open curiosity for unfamiliar things—literally being “of the world” in the cosmopolitan sense—but it also meant something more specific and less superficial. Perhaps because of associations with the scientific usage of “nuclear fusion,” the trope of fusion drew attention towards a concentrated effort of synthesis. In the cultural use I observed in Chennai, the trope attempted to unite what was Indian with what was global in an intentional and explicit way. This kind of cultural synthesis was hardly unique to the period of my fieldwork. The period even before British colonialism demonstrates a long history of negotiating the confluence of non-local people and cultures from different regions within what is now known as India to far beyond the present-day national borders. The trope of fusion, therefore, put a fresh coat of paint on processes of cultural mixing that have spanned India’s premodern and modern history. In addition, it also overlapped with certain concepts that have been particular paradigm shifts for anthropology in the latter half of the twentieth century.

I understand the trope of fusion as belonging to a long line of similar concepts developed by cultural theorists interested in cultural mixing. Even though these concepts were framed within social scientific epistemologies contemporary to the period in which they were written,

the main thrust of them remains similar: syncretism (Herskovits 1966), bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1981), creolization (Hannerz 1987), and hybridity (Bhabha 1994) are the most prominent categories in the last several decades that attempt to grapple with the cultural effects of movement and change. One alternative to the different manifestations of the mixture-as-culture model of previous scholars has emerged from Arjun Appadurai's argument of a fractal and overlapping concept of culture (1996): "We need to combine a fractal metaphor for the shape of cultures (in the plural) with a polythetic account of their overlaps and resemblances. Without this latter step, we shall remain mired in comparative work that relies on the clear separation of the entities to be compared before serious comparison can begin" (Appadurai 1996:46). By integrating both a fractal metaphor for cultures and polythetic approaches for the overlapping similarities to culture, Appadurai has effectively articulated the central dilemma that the musical practice of Fusion provoked for the musicians with whom I worked: if Fusion supposedly foregrounded a mixture of Western and Indian musical ideas, how can we think of this synthesis without getting stuck on the character, dimensions, and limitations of the sources? How can we observe and honor the distinctive dimensions of cultures when we look for the overlaps and resemblances as well? As chapters one and two show, defining Fusion (what "kind" of music it was, whether it was "traditional" or "new," and what it actually *was*) helped musicians articulate their musical model for the kind of culture Appadurai has theorized.

In his contribution, Appadurai has expanded a concept of culture to include those previously conceived "in-between spaces" (Bhabha 1994). By extension, I suggest that musical practices like Fusion similarly do not exist in a hybrid vacuum but are inseparably interwoven with other "cultures." Yet as much as the clear separation of "Indian" music with "Western" or "global" forms of music has been reduced to comparative work, such separations remain

pertinent to how musicians experienced these musical practices and must therefore be taken seriously and analyzed as a method of recognizing and analyzing this zone of cultural encounter. The trope of fusion, then, referenced the cultural practice of mixing that contained within it another meaning of the trope—the practice of specifically musical mixing.

### Global Musical Practice

Musicians used the trope of fusion to describe the universal idea of combining, mixing, or blending musical ideas from different sources. There are too many examples to list exhaustively but some of the more prominent ones include the different manifestations of “crossover” in the West, which often combine some form of non-mainstream musical practice with musicians and musical forms more accessible to the mainstream, usually evoke similar themes and debates about authenticity, creative licenses, “selling out,” and reaching bigger audiences. The crossover of Western classical music with Western popular music has been one example. Musicians such as Mark O’Connor, Yo Yo Ma, Josh Grobin, Charlotte Church, Simon Cowell’s project *Il Divo*, and The Three Tenors are just a few examples of how the perpetuation and transgression of genre boundaries has been an essential part of this example of musical fusion. Also, Jeffrey Callen (2006) and R. Anderson Sutton (2008) have documented examples of fusion in Morocco and South Korea respectively, where the practices of fusion have taken on their own identities that were intentionally distinct from categories such as “world music,” “Western music,” or “traditional music.”

### South Indian Musical Practice



Musicians in Chennai used the trope of fusion in one final way: to describe the Chennai-based musical practice that intentionally combined “Indian,” “traditional,” or “local” musics with “Western” instruments and “Western music.” This use of the trope of fusion was complicated by the fact that there has been much music performed and recorded using the name “fusion” from North India. What made Fusion in Chennai unique, was that musicians who performed Fusion were mostly trained in Karnatic music, which gave their Fusion a decidedly South Indian identity. As a result, the overlap between the practices of Karnatic music and Fusion were substantial. But even though Fusion shared performance spaces, audiences, musicians, and musical forms with the firmly established practice of Karnatic music, musicians and audience members mostly understood Fusion as a practice separate from Karnatic music, for reasons I describe throughout the dissertation. As I also show in the following chapters, the relationship between Karnatic music and Fusion was the principle reason for Fusion’s contestation. Because Fusion foregrounded the processes of musical mixing, it drew Indian audiences interested in something “new.” As I later discuss, the opinions of Fusion were sharp and often strong, but whether they thought it was innovative or predictably recycled, audiences mostly endowed the trope of Fusion with a cosmopolitan sheen and therefore as potentially different and exciting.

This use of the trope of fusion potentially overlapped with the category of “world music.” One indication of what Fusion meant as a trope for the local musical practice was its presence in record stores. Music World and Landmark, the primary retail stores for music recordings, had a section labeled “fusion” that was separate from world music. This section consisted of Indian fusion, while the world music section did not include many recordings of Indian music. The bin labeled “fusion” in these music stores held various examples of Fusion: recordings of Indian classical percussionists performing long improvised solos; well-known “classical” singers

performing music from the Karnatic repertoire accompanied by drum and bass samples (referred to by some musicians as Karnatic remix); bands that mixed Indian film and Indian classical music with Western rock, Latin, and jazz-based musical forms, and other recordings of Fusion by otherwise well-known Karnatic instrumentalists. The Kosmic label was the most prominent, with numerous recordings of Fusion mostly featuring the *vina* of Rajhesh Vaidhya (who I discuss in chapter two). Even though a few compilation albums aggregated a kind of recorded canon of Fusion, the selections did not come close to representing the diversity of live Fusion in Chennai. These recordings included South Indian musicians, but the most prominent ones with the more expensive packaging and prominent marketing featured North Indian musicians like Rahul Sharma, Bickram Ghosh, and Hariprasad Chaurasia. Other compilations featured individual musicians like South Indian percussionist T. H. “Vikku” Vinayakram. *Fusion India* (2003) and *Fusion India 2* (2005) featured a combination of Mumbai and Chennai musicians that I worked with during the recording session I describe in chapter four. The grandson of Karnatic flutist N. Ramani, Atul Kumar, had a recording out in stores but did not perform any Fusion (that I was aware of) during my fieldwork. So while there was some overlap, for the most part the recorded representation of Fusion was different from what musicians, audiences, and I experienced as Fusion in Chennai.

In summary, the word “fusion” was used by musicians as a trope for various versions of cultural mixing that included, but were not limited to, music. In this study, I analyze the Chennai-based practice of Fusion to show how the concept of fusion was at once related to a global practice of cultural mixing and made up of distinctive elements that musicians characterized as uniquely South Indian. It was this simultaneous juxtaposition of being linked to a global sense of connectedness while being uniquely separate that charged the practice of

Fusion with contestation and sounded the tensions of modernity in India. But even though musicians constructed this juxtaposition as new and recent in Chennai, the practice of Fusion had a background and history with its own series of tensions.

## Contextual Background

### History and Now

India's department of tourism website has published a short article about Fusion that provides a useful preliminary historical context for the Fusion I studied during my fieldwork. As I later show in chapter one, musicians' historical references comprised one of the central tensions that endowed Fusion with contestation, and this short article contains some of the central issues involved with telling a history of Fusion:

Fusion is not a very old trend in Indian music. [The] Fusion trend is said to have begun with Ali Akbar Khan's 1955 performance in the United States. Indian fusion music came into being with rock and roll fusions with Indian music in the 1960s and 1970s. But it was limited to Europe and Europe [sic] and North America. For some time the stage of Indian fusion music was taken by Pt Ravi Shankar, the Sitar maestro.

Pt Ravi Shankar began fusing jazz with Indian traditions along with Bud Shank, a jazz musician. Soon the trend was imitated by many popular European and American music exponents. In the year 1965, George Harrison played the song, "Norwegian wood" on the Sitar. Another famous Jazz expert, Miles Davis recorded and performed with the likes of Khalil Bal Krishna, Bihari Sharma, and Badal Roy. Some other prominent Western artists like the Grateful Dead, Incredible String Band, the Rolling Stones, the Move and Traffic soon integrated Indian influences and instruments and developed the trend of fusion.

The Mahavishnu Orchestra of John McLaughlin pursued fusion with great integrity and authenticity in the mid-1970s. In the process John joined forces with L. Shankar, Zakir Hussain and others. The trend of fusion took over the Indian-British artists in the late 1980s, who fused Indian and Western traditions. In the new millennium, a new trend of fusing Indian Film and Bhangra music has started in America. Many of the mainstream artists have taken inspiration from Bollywood movies and have worked with Indian artists (<http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-music/fusion.html>. Accessed 4/25/12).

This article appropriately credits post-independence musicians like Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, the Beatles, Miles Davis's jazz/rock fusion with tabla player Badal Roy, and John McLaughlin with the post-independence influences for Fusion in contemporary India. However, for Fusion in Chennai, it was McLaughlin's music that was the important historical precedent. Although this article singles out the Mahavishnu Orchestra, McLaughlin's band Shakti from the early 1970s—with Zakir Hussain on the tabla, violinist L. Shankar, mrdangam vidwan Ramnad Raghavan, and ghatam vidwan T. H. "Vikku" Vinayakram—was the more influential project for the musicians with whom I worked. Shakti featured a combination of acoustic jazz and Indian classical music as well as a combination of the regionally, historically, and musically distinct Hindustani and Karnatic traditions. The band's music showcased various compositional strategies that utilized cadential and melodic phrases and odd time signatures from both Indian classical traditions while remaining accessible and exciting. Fast, virtuosic, and spirited improvisational exchanges were the common ground in jazz and Indian classical music that these musicians foregrounded, and by doing so, they appealed to audiences familiar with these practices. In the last fifteen years, the ensemble has enjoyed a resurgence of activity, returning to an extensive touring schedule under the name Remember Shakti with some different personnel.

In particular, McLaughlin's contribution to Shakti made the band's sound a more complicated blend than just a mixture of jazz and Indian classical traditions. McLaughlin, as I describe in chapter four, has always been known for his genre-bending musical personality, and the influence of Miles Davis, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, and other jazz musicians exploring the confluence between jazz and rock in the 1960s and 70s ended up taking hold in South India far more extensively than did anything presently understood as canonical jazz. Shakti brought all these influences together, but because of McLaughlin, the band ended up

leading more South Indian musicians towards a Western fusion (jazz/rock fusion) sound more than the swing, bebop, hard bop, Latin, or cool jazz of canonical American jazz. The fusion of jazz and rock attributed to Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Spiro Gyra, and other musicians and bands from the late '60s and '70s played an important role in linking American and European jazz musicians with Indian classical musicians and was more influential for the Fusion in Chennai than other musical practices. However, because of the tensions related to various, contrasting, and unheard of historical precedents that I describe in chapter one, most precedents for Fusion were not regarded as importantly as Shakti. In general, whether Chennai musicians referenced Shakti musicians as positive or negative influences on their music, there was no doubt that they recognized Shakti as the progenitor for Fusion in Chennai.

There were other precedents that expand the contextual background for Fusion. Fusion was distinctly connected to several overlapping histories of music making: Indian “classical” music, various forms of Western music including jazz, rock, and jazz-rock fusion, and Indian film music. It was a result of a complicated and multidirectional history of musical circulation and exchange and confounded attempts to construct a neat and tidy genre history. From within the practice of Karnatic music, one of the trinity of composers from the early nineteenth century, Muttuswamy Dikshitar, synthesized scales and intervals played by colonial marching bands into new *ragas* and melodies. From the nineteenth century onwards, musicians in South India started incorporating the violin and clarinet into the Karnatic instrumental repertoire and later also established mandolins, saxophones, and guitars as solo instruments, with varying degrees of acceptance. In the north, Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, and Sri L. Subramaniam and Sri L. Shankar from the South collaborated with dozens of Western classical and jazz musicians in the 1960s and 70s. Pandit Ravi Shankar’s work with Bud Shank, Eric

Dolphy, John Coltrane, John Handy, Don Ellis, and Collin Walcott were projects that combined jazz and Hindustani music. In England, the Joe Harriott and John Mayer recordings from the 1960's are among the earliest recordings of meetings between jazz and Hindustani music outside of India. Many others continued in the following years, including Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, John Handy, and L. Subramaniam. Other recent contributions to the fusion of South Indian classical music and jazz-related musical practices have included Charlie Mariano, T. A. S. Mani, James Newton, Vijay Iyer, and Rudresh Mahanthappa, though few Chennai-based musicians during my fieldwork had heard of them.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to providing a quick historical sketch of the practice of Fusion, the tourism website's article about Fusion is useful for another reason: it raises a crucial problem for understanding Fusion by effectively stumbling upon the wide open and vague criteria for labeling something "fusion."<sup>2</sup> It implies that any music that could generally be construed as "Indian" is Fusion. It is difficult to imagine another context for which the music of Ali Akbar Khan, Miles Davis, and the Rolling Stones as well as Bollywood and bhangra could be

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<sup>1</sup> Since my fieldwork, Vijay Iyer's band with guitarist R. Prasanna and Rudresh Mahanthappa's project Kinsmen with Karnatic saxophonist Kadri Gopalnath and Mahanthappa's band Samdhi with mrdangam player Anantha Krishnan have been performing throughout North America and Europe. Also, for a more comprehensive history of the intersections between jazz and Indian classical music, Kalmanovitch (2008) has outlined different versions of the overlap between jazz and Karnatic music by providing brief histories of jazz in India before Independence (in which she has mentioned musicians from the state of Goa and jazz in luxury hotels in Bombay and Calcutta,) jazz in India after Indian independence (in which she has included the jazz ambassador tours and a Mumbai festival named Jazz Yatra), and Indian music in jazz (which she has organized into Coltrane and Post Coltrane periods). Also see Pinckney (1989), Shope (2004), and Fernandes (forthcoming in 2012). Also see a helpful web resource that provides list of personnel and a Fusion discography at <http://www.freeform.org/music/indyjazz/>.

<sup>2</sup> This article also gives more prominent attention to North Indian musicians and guitarist John McLaughlin than South Indian musicians. The openness of North Indian, or Hindustani, musicians towards Fusion compared to that of South Indian musicians was widely acknowledged by musicians, audience members, and music scholars during my fieldwork, and I address this issue later in this background section under the subheading of "Chennai."

examples, and this huge sprawl of historical references effectively captures the tensions of Fusion that I explore in detail in chapter one. The tendency to use Fusion as an umbrella term that encompassed an almost impossible variety of musical projects perfectly typifies musicians' slippery and unwieldy predicament of describing and understanding what Fusion actually was. In the interest of further defining the scope of this dissertation, I now take up a question asked by one of the musicians I interviewed: "What fuses but isn't Fusion?"

### What Fuses but Isn't Fusion

The two most important features that distinguished Fusion from other musical practices in South India were the explicit foregrounding of musical mixing (whether musicians called their music "fusion" or not) and the predominant character of Fusion as live music, with a performance infrastructure that consisted of concerts in concert halls, festivals, corporate gigs, and weddings. Fusion had an established presence as a form of recorded music, but it was primarily practiced as live music.

This last point distinguished it most clearly from the other musical practice in India known best for its musical hybridity: film music. Music directors (film composers) have combined Indian folk, classical, regional, Western, and world music genres for the most popular musical genre in India (Booth 2008, Morcom 2007, Gopal and Moorti 2008, Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008). Early film music from the early twentieth century combined theater and folk musics and has always been a widely recognized form of fusion. Due to the relative detachment from the film plot—in which the song-dance sequence emerged as a distinct feature of Indian films that can exist independently from the storyline—the film song emerged as a vehicle for music directors' unique ideas, and in many cases, these directors were free to employ

musical strategies and devices, such as instruments and musical structures, that could be unrelated to the setting or plot development. The prolific film industry in India established the fusing practices in film music over the course of several decades, and while different periods and composers have favored certain practices from India and abroad, film music (taken as an entire musical practice) has never been as contested. Even though the more popular songs take on roles independent of the films through the radio and more recently, the Internet, the primary vehicle of film song has always been the visual companion of the film. Therefore, when film composer Ramesh Vinayakram (who I describe in chapter two) and tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain stated that musical mixing “has been there in our film music all the time” (Ramesh Vinayakram 11/23/06; Ramnarayanan 1997: 435), they demonstrated the limitations and resultant tensions involved with the overlapping ideas of musical mixing for the practice of Fusion and asserted the idea that Fusion did not have a monopoly on fusing. But it was also clear that calling music “fusion” distinguished and highlighted the practice of musical mixing to set Fusion apart from other hybrid musical practices such as film music.

In recent decades, Bollywood has become an international icon of Indian culture, “serving as a metonymy for India” (Gopal and Moorti 2008: 3). It is important to distinguish Fusion from film music because while there was some overlap, Fusion was notably different. Most of the musicians who performed Fusion received their training in Karnatic music. While there were musicians I encountered during my research who earned more of their livings through film music recording than Fusion or Karnatic music, they were a small minority. The hybridity in film music—the incorporation of a wide variety of musical instruments and structures—makes it literally a kind of “world music” in the diversity of musical sounds music directors use. As a primarily concert music performed by mostly Karnatic musicians, Fusion was far less



adventurous in its hybridity, and musicians who performed Fusion called attention to their musical mixing in comparatively more subtle ways.<sup>3</sup>

Besides film, the most prominent musical practices that musicians, producers, audiences members, retail stores, and record companies delineated from each other were Indian classical music (Hindustani and Karnatic), devotional, folk, fusion, world music, and various forms of Western music, including classical, pop, jazz, and rock. The state has recently become more involved in featuring the folk music of lower caste and tribal Indians through state-funded music and dance festivals (for example, the Chennai Sangamam). While this has served a Tamil nationalist agenda, musicians have different relationships to their positions as folk musicians (Sherinian 2011). Also, as other studies of folk music have shown, musicians have consistently drawn on film melodies and rhythmic motives, as well as incorporated elements of Karnatic music and Western music (Wolf 2006, Sherinian 2011; forthcoming in 2013). Devotional music is mainly a vehicle for accessing Hindu spirituality, and as such is a kind of classical/film hybrid known as “light” classical music (Arnold 1999). Karnatic music also has absorbed and domesticated much Western and pan-regional Indian musical influences, and because of the various stakes of nationalism, caste, gender, has been continually locked in a cycle of hybridity and purification, with discourses of “music for the sake of music” (or for the sake of Indian tradition) predominating over any openness to outside influence. Further complicating any kind of boundaries between pure classical music and musical mixing is the established practice of musicians performing light classical pieces at the end of their concerts, usually without including

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<sup>3</sup> I suspect that the national and international popularity of Bollywood and film music may be an important influence for practices of Fusion in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkatta, but Chennai has been the exclusive center of Karnatic music since the turn of the twentieth century and therefore the impact of Karnatic music on Fusion was much greater than film music. See Gopal and Moorti 2008; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008; Mehta and Pandharipande 2010; and Morcom 2007 for detailed ways that film music has become a transnationally relevant medium.

any sections for musical improvisation and therefore intentionally designed to “cover” some well known pieces that are even occasionally requested by audience members.

Nonetheless, the intentionality of musicians who performed Fusion and the predominant identity of Fusion as live, concert music distinguished Fusion from a host of other Indian musical practices that all included music mixing to various degrees. If Fusion was a mixture of Indian and Western musical ideas, how was it related to and distinguished from other Western musical practices?

### Fusion is Not Jazz Fusion

Considering how many musicians constructed a uniform and uncomplicated idea of “Western music,” it was not surprising that their Fusion had an overlapping and complicated relationship to Western music. The question of whether or not Fusion in Chennai was jazz— or rather, Chennai musicians’ interpretations of jazz—was occasionally posed by some musicians and audience members, but even though some referred to Fusion as jazz, most of the musicians in Chennai understood that jazz was very different. Jazz had virtually no presence in Chennai; there were no jazz musicians living in Chennai, and musicians in Chennai, for the most part, were not familiar with the music of American and European jazz musicians.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the nebulous category of Western music for Fusion in Chennai mostly referenced the influence of jazz/rock fusion (hereafter Western fusion).

As I previously mentioned, John McLaughlin was the most important link between jazz, Western fusion, and Fusion in Chennai. Most musicians understood that Fusion in Chennai was

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<sup>4</sup> There were a few exceptions. Pianist Madhav Chari and trumpeter Frank Dubier both identified as jazz musicians. Also R. Prasanna played jazz, but his background and multiple projects are much too varied to conform exclusively to jazz.

not “Indian jazz,” nor was it an Indian form of Western fusion, because most musicians who played Fusion were primarily trained in Karnatic music. There were exceptions that I will describe in the chapters that follow, but the rest of this dissertation is less about jazz and more about the contemporary Chennai-based results of Western fusion decades later. Apart from the music of Shakti, I had expected that most musicians would be familiar with the recordings of Joe Harriott and John Mayer (1966, 1968) and John Handy, Ali Akbar Khan, and L. Subramaniam (1981). But they were mostly unknown. Strangely, some recordings that didn’t include Karnatic musicians, such as the Ravi Shankar and Philip Glass recording (1990) and Ravi Shankar with Yehudi Menuhin (1988 [1966, 1968]), were better known, even though they had little influence on what Fusion musicians performed.

So far I have given some historical and contextual background by listing musicians who, in the twentieth century post-independence India, created music that provided some precedents for Fusion in Chennai. I have distinguished Fusion from other musical practices in India that were known for various degrees of musical mixing and have also shown how Fusion was related to, but was not the same as Western fusion. In other words, I have purposefully described this background by describing what it was not in order to set up my chapters that delve into the specifics of what it was. In chapter one, I explore the contextual background of Fusion in more detail by examining the influences of Karnatic music on musicians and these musicians’ various notions of historical precedents for Fusion. India’s tourism website has portrayed Fusion as a kind of junk drawer musical genre, in which almost anything can be thrown in and labeled “fusion.” I take the inchoate and undefined state of Fusion as the main topic of inquiry in the rest of this dissertation and show that such portrayals miss the crucially important dimensions as to why and how Fusion was meaningful in South India. Another key feature of this inchoate and

undefined state was the urban setting of my ethnography and the boundaries of my fieldwork: the city of Chennai.

## Chennai

My choice to limit the scope of this project to the city of Chennai was both practical and strategic. The city provided a bounded and manageable geography for a topic that continually sprawled all over the world. Because of Chennai's burgeoning cosmopolitan presence, musicians constantly traveled to and from Chennai, and the city therefore allowed me a vantage point to observe how Fusion was both local and non-local to Chennai. Many musicians were making music in the major cities of India that could have been considered Fusion, so I needed to simplify my project. There were other practical reasons I focused on Chennai: my several years of Tamil study would have been irrelevant in other major Indian cities and I had few to no connections with musicians in these other places as well. Also, having lived in Chennai for a combined period of almost two years prior to my dissertation fieldwork, I knew that my inclinations to fieldwork were solidly in favor of establishing myself in one place to better absorb the musical life of the city. Given that I found out about most events during my fieldwork on the same day, this was the right decision; the benefits of building friendships led to more and more opportunities that constitute the bulk of the material in the following chapters. But the benefits to choosing Chennai as my field site were more than practically and personally driven. Strategically, Chennai provided a unique lens for Fusion in India because of its distinctive character among Indian cities.

I focus on the practice of Fusion as it was uniquely intertwined with a city less associated by most middle class Indians as a contemporary cosmopolitan Indian city. Chennai had a

reputation as being backward. Compared to the ways many Indians spoke about Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Kolkatta, many Indians characterized the stereotyped identity of Chennai with a kind of conservatism when it came to any kind of regional characterizations: everything from the wearing of veshtis and dhotis (cotton wraps that Southern men wear instead of Western style pants) and the language politics involved with Hindi versus Tamil (regarded by Northerners as regional—and even provincial—instead of national) to generalizations on the more relaxed pace of life in the South and the different ways Southerners ate with their hands (not observing the somewhat unspoken “no food below the knuckles” rule). This study of Fusion then, is purposefully situated in the urban center most Indians would associate as inhospitable to a cosmopolitan and “new” musical practice like Fusion, and because of this, I suggest that Chennai is perhaps a better yardstick to measure the changes in Indian musical practices associated, however controversially, with Indian classical music. Chennai’s history and contemporary character, however, feature the juxtaposition of many forms of old and new, “Indian” and “Western.”

Chennai is not an ancient city, but was founded as a colonial port in the seventeenth century. The British built Fort St. George, presently a tourist destination, in 1640, and the area became a more important port for the East India Tea Company, which gradually amassed more territory in the area. In 1798, the British colonial administration then declared the port city of Madras the capital of the Madras Presidency, a large geographical area that included Telugu speaking regions to the north and Tamil and Telugu speaking regions to the south (Peterson and Soneji 2008: 12). During the Raj, Madras (as it was called until 1996) was a colonial

administrative center and as a result, attracted businesses and became more of a draw for the rural populations elsewhere in state of Tamil Nadu.<sup>5</sup>

Chennai later became an important center of musical activity. Around the turn of the twentieth century, there was a shift in music patronage from the courts of Thanjavur to the urban, more capitalist and musician-driven music economy in Madras. *Sabhas*—or private institutions run by *rasikas*, or Karnatic music enthusiasts—and individual patrons who paid musicians to perform in their homes became the new form of patronage for musicians. The practice of Karnatic music flourished in the mostly Brahmin neighborhood of Mylapore, where several of the older Hindu temples still stand, including the Kapaleeshwarar Temple built in the sixteenth century (Subramaniam 2006, Weidman 2006). In addition to being the center of Karnatic music, Chennai emerged in the twentieth century as the center of the proliferating Tamil film industry that employed studio musicians. Currently it is the capital for Karnatic music and Tamil film production, a combination that has led to a wealth of musical activity and high standards for Karnatic and film audiences.

Because of this, Chennai is the symbol for a Southern musical character in India and the musical differences between the North and South led to some tensions between musicians. Musicians from North India have been far more involved with Fusion than musicians from the South, which has been due in part to Ravi Shankar's work with Beatle George Harrison that initiated the "great sitar explosion." Shankar's music, as well as that of Alla Rakha and Ali Akbar Khan, ultimately enabled Hindustani music to become more familiar to Western audiences as "Indian classical music," to the annoyance of many Karnatic musicians. The fact that Hindustani music is still referred to as Indian classical music is a remnant of this recent

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Hancock (2008) has provided a more thorough history of city of Madras and its transformation into Chennai.

history. I often heard reasons for this based on the opinions that Hindustani music was more compatible with Western music. The comparative emphasis on improvisation over composition, the still subtle but more accessible *gamak*, or ornamentation, of the North, and the success of Hindustani instrumentalists were reasons that musicians cited for Hindustani's greater appeal. By comparison, Karnatic music was often understood as more specialized and distinct in its virtuosity, and therefore less accessible to Western ears. There were also Southern musicians who took the regional qualifier of *South* Indian classical music as a point of pride and distinction, arguing that the inaccessibility of Karnatic music to world audiences compared to Hindustani music has helped make Karnatic music more authentically Indian. Because the North/South dialectic has contributed further to Karnatic music being less familiar to the West, a Western presence was understood as less normalized and less integrated into South Indian music and culture. In chapter four I describe how Fusion provoked some of the present day tensions between North and South Indian musicians in order to describe the multiple ways that Fusion was contested.

Since India's independence from Britain in 1947, the most important shift in national economic policy in India took place in 1991 and led to a profound cultural transformation. The finance minister at the time was Manmohan Singh—India's current prime minister since 2004—who instituted a number of policy changes that opened up India's economy to foreign investors, ending a several decade-long period known for its economic autonomy. The changes were felt quickly. Satellite television, the arrival of Western brands, and call centers meant that there were no longer only two television channels, that Coca Cola sat next to Thum's Up on market shelves, and that an emerging population soon to be called the "new middle class" found themselves with disposable income. Later technologies, such as laser discs, DVDs, and the often publicized

proliferation of cell phones found their ways to this new class of consumers and began revising prior assumptions that new, foreign developed technologies were exclusively for the wealthy elite.

In response to these changes, scholars coined the term “public culture” to account for the cultural transformations driven by the new middle class (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988). Journalists and scholars began referring to this new class of consumers and the concomitant economic optimism as the “new India” and publications with titles that rephrased this optimism and perpetuated the giddiness emerging from this cultural and economic growth: *India Rising* (Lukose 2009: 2; cited from *Newsweek*), *India Becoming* (Kapur 2012), *India Arriving: How This Economic Powerhouse is Redefining Global Business* (Dossani 2008), *The Indian Renaissance: India’s Rise After a Thousand Years of Decline* (Sanyal 2008), and *India Booms* (Farndon 2009). While each author has occupied a different position on a continuum of celebratory versus anxious responses to these changes, they all have agreed that the new India is indeed new.

Practices of cultural and musical mixing obviously predate these reforms, but the trope of fusion arose in conjunction with the rise of the new India. The practice of Fusion activated tensions already present in the new India because the economic and cultural growth was sometimes perceived as being driven by nationalist interests ultimately intertwined with a global economy, thereby paradoxically positing a national self-interest as dependent on global capital. So Fusion, like India, was “new” in the sense that neither was new at all, and in the sense that “new” captured a conflicted and uncertain state. This dissertation describes the sound of this new India, and more specifically, details how the tensions of Fusion were the tensions of modernity in India.



As I show in chapter three, I noticed that musicians, audience members, and the local media characterized Fusion as a result of an increasingly cosmopolitan Chennai that was the Southern urban incarnation of the new India. I observed this version of the new India in different ways. Unlike other cities in the state of Tamil Nadu, Chennai is not known for its “traditional” Tamil culture. The most common way this was described was through descriptions of language: people speak “Chennai Tamil,” which is the heavily English laden form of Tamil that is distinguished from its opposite, *sen* or pure Tamil, spoken in the southern city of Madurai, for example. Chennai’s thriving industries are automobile manufacturing, call center outsourcing jobs, tourism, and it is internationally known for its live music and as the center for the production of Tamil films. Tied as it is to these changes, heavy traffic is a constant complaint, and roads, bridges, and familiar urban routes are constantly being redirected, built, and redesigned, changing the ways people navigate the city. Automobile manufacturers released the one-lakh car (roughly less than two thousand U.S. dollars), making private car ownership no longer a privilege of the rich.

It may seem as if calling inevitable technological and cultural change the “new India” may be clichéd and exaggerated, but these changes in Chennai have truly been profound. My first two stays in Chennai—in 1981-2 when I was six years old and 1997-8 when I was twenty-two—revealed thorough transformations. The home and street where I lived as a boy on Poonamalee High Road in the neighborhood of Chetpet was completely unrecognizable, obscured from the congested road by advertising billboards and scaffolding for new building constructions. The corner of T.T.K Road and Cathedral Road, where the Music Academy stands, was so built up that I couldn’t even see the famous *sabha*. The changes in Chennai over the course of the last three decades have truly been transformative, and a city often viewed by those from other

Northern cities as having a slower pace of life and being more culturally conservative has quickly morphed into an Indian cosmopolitan metropolis—the “changes” that everyone always talks about over the last two decades really have been breathtaking.

One important contribution of this study shows that Chennai has been long regarded as more backward than the more cosmopolitan cities of North India, and the constructed incommensurability of Karnatic music has been a symbol of this attempt at regional isolation and distinction. For musicians and audiences in India, keeping Indian classical music pure has (arguably) been a more pressing agenda in the South than the North. A study of Fusion in Chennai then, shows the musical and cultural changes involved with the practice of Fusion, but not arguing that it’s a thriving musical practice that is competing with North Indian fusions and is taking over Karnatic music. Rather, the contestation of Fusion is the focus of Fusion in this dissertation, and this was manifested in a uniquely Chennai-based way.

Today, visitors to Chennai view the city’s main attractions that represent a diverse array of sites that together, compile a unique portrait of the new India and a representative backdrop for the practice of Fusion. The British foundations of the city are still visible in the museum at the Fort St. George. The Kapaleeshwarar temple from the sixteenth century in the neighborhood of Mylapore has been a destination for Hindu pilgrims and is a thriving area of Hindu religious practice. Marina beach is best known by South Indians for its many features in Tamil films and continues to be an evening destination in the cooler hours. Tourists visit the Government Museum, which features a range of Indian art from around the country but has a special permanent exhibit on bronze statues from the Chola period in South Indian history (from roughly the third to the thirteenth centuries). The Chennai Sangamam is a state sponsored music and arts festival that takes place over the course of a few weeks in the many public parks around the city.

Chennai hosts an annual professional tennis tournament in the beginning of January that attracts some of the best players from around the world. The film studios are also a favorite destination and with the right timing, a visitor can see a few takes of a television series or film. New shopping malls are a huge draw for both shopping and socializing. This combination of features shows how Chennai offered a unique geographical domain to explore the contestation of Fusion in ways that could only be urban and South Indian, but also in ways that have important implications for the rest of India.

### Caste and Class

The caste system, like Bollywood, has a transnationally acknowledged metonymic relationship with India. Because of the central position of Karnatic music in the practice of Fusion, the caste system was important to power relations among South Indian musicians, no matter how much Brahmin musicians occasionally downplayed its significance in the new India. Brahmin involvement in Indian tradition has a colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial history that is still very much observable in the institutional infrastructure of Karnatic music today. Popular notions of caste still perpetuate some of the claims from Louis Dumont's famous study (1980) even though a substantial revision has been published (Dirks 2001), but recent studies have questioned how globalization and the new India have reshaped the power structures of caste to include class as an increasingly important determinant of social power (Newman and Thorat 2007; Harriss 2012). These scholars point out that some arguments of a waning importance of caste are not attuned to its ascendance in different forms, particularly in a more widespread construction of caste such as those used in electoral politics. They argue that the central importance of caste is changing without becoming a less powerful determinant of social status.

Caste played an important role for the practice of Fusion, particularly in the way that it demonstrated a kind of unmarked hegemony. The fact that musicians rarely spoke about it alerted me to its tacit importance. As I show in the following chapters, Fusion was contested not just because of its challenges to the Karnatic music establishment, but also in the ways some Brahmin musicians rejected the label of “fusion” in favor of “contemporary Karnatic music.” The Brahmin authority that was implicit in this creative agency that these musicians located within the practice of Karnatic tradition further established a link between the Brahmin community and artistic agency. But as my fieldwork progressed, it became increasingly clear that understanding Fusion in terms of caste alone could not sufficiently account for its contestation. In this dissertation, I prioritize class over caste when analyzing the power structures that musicians navigated in contemporary Chennai. This isn’t to deny the influence of caste in twenty-first century India, which was still present and quite obviously powerful, specifically in the formation of the Karnatic music establishment, but for the purposes of understanding Fusion in Chennai, issues of caste exclusive of class would oversimplify the pervasive and continual contradictions of the growing Indian middle class.

Most of the musicians I worked with were Brahmins, but the range of financial resources among them varied widely. The majority of interviews I conducted with musicians took place in their homes, and I was able to form a brief impression of their varied socio-economic statuses. Their homes ranged from small, dark flats in colossal apartment buildings to modest homes in and outside of the city, and a few lived in walled off estates in the wealthiest neighborhoods. Also, because the contexts for Fusion performances included Brahmin-run Karnatic *sabhas* on one end, and less explicitly Brahmin, large budget festivals and corporate gigs on the other, these musicians were getting paid with “old” middle class money, “new” middle class money, as well

as “new” upper class money. Fusion was connected to sources of capital that originated from both the old and new India. The economic context for Fusion therefore requires attention to the monetary dimensions of class rather than simply the cultural and religious dimensions associated with caste. If caste was the category of difference used more by the old middle class of Nehruvian socialist nationalism, class has become at least an equally relevant system of stratification in the new India.<sup>6</sup>

Also, in addition to consisting of mostly Brahmin Karnatic musicians who already downplayed the importance of caste, these musicians de-emphasized the role of caste because they were performing music that needed to be heard as “new,” “Indian,” *and* influenced by the West. As seen from a cosmopolitan perspective, they were aware that the provincial associations of caste would stymie their attempts at successful Fusion—the Fusion needed to be heard as not *just* Indian music. Transnationally, the structures of caste didn’t circulate with the comparative ease of those of class. Fusion, as a musical manifestation of the tensions of the New India, sounded the power structures of class perhaps more emphatically than caste.

## Literature Review

Apart from occasional journalistic features and advertisements of Fusion performances, there is a notable absence of literature on Fusion. There have been a few sources that mention and briefly describe Fusion, but no monograph exclusive devoted to Fusion in India. However, this dissertation stands on the shoulders of a number of significant contributions to the

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<sup>6</sup> Another reason why Fusion demonstrates an emphasis on class over caste has to do with the increasing presence of cosmopolitanism among a more diverse middle class in urban areas. This trans-regional cosmopolitanism involves younger college educated workers who are not native to Tamil Nadu and therefore less familiar with specifically southern, Tamil, or regionally specific markers of cultural distinctiveness often connected to caste.

disciplines of ethnomusicology and anthropology, as well as the fields of postcolonial theory, South Asian studies, and jazz studies.

### Indian Music in the West

Two historical projects by Western writers have detailed some of the musical precedents for this study. Farrell (1997) and Lavezzoli (2006) have focused on the impact of Indian classical musicians on Western musical practices. They have mentioned many musicians from Europe and the U.S. who forged musical connections between jazz and Indian classical musicians mostly from North India. The Western side of their histories featured musicians as diverse as John Coltrane, Bud Shank, Don Ellis, Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, John Mayer, Joe Harriott, John Handy, John McLaughlin, Charlie Mariano, Don Cherry, and Collin Walcott, all of whom participated in projects that fused elements of Indian classical music and jazz. Also George Harrison, Mickey Hart, David Crosby, Roger McGuinn, and Bill Laswell are mentioned in Lavezzoli's book as examples of popular musicians' involvement with Indian classical music, in addition to musicians and composers from Western classical music such as Philip Glass and Terry Riley. Some of these individuals formed bands with varying longevity that interpreted Indian musical structures through their compositions and improvisations. Farrell and Lavezzoli, however, have been primarily concerned with the impact of Indian music on Western musicians. As a result, they have effectively argued for the recognition of how Indian musicians have substantially shaped music making in the West. Their inquiry ends where this study begins. I look at how these projects have impacted present-day generations of musicians in India.

Farrell's research helps contextualize the construction of Fusion as "new" in the way he has shown how the encounter of Indian music in the realm of Western popular culture has

demonstrated a predictable cycle of discovery and amnesia. Farrell has suggested that the desire for discovery is a trait unique to the West, particularly in relation to the music of India and it shows the West's compliance in perpetuating a centuries-old series of encounters as new.

Whereas modern ethnomusicology may lay claim to an understanding of the history, structure, and processes of Indian musical genres in an ever-increasing literature, East continues to meet West as if for the first time in compositions and on numerous concert platforms. It appears as if the West has a cultural investment in never meeting the East musically, as if the East and all its works have to remain mysterious in order to retain artistic validity. If the idea of discovery looms large in the present study, it is precisely because Indian music continues to be rediscovered some 200 years after its first appearance in the academic and popular consciousness of the West. As the source of Indian music in the West becomes more remote, through repeated cultural filtration, the possibilities for new discoveries of the original multiply. The idea of discovery is a cultural myth which has deep historical roots in the West (Farrell 1997: 9).

Despite this last claim that Farrell does not provide evidence for, his idea of why Indian music remains new and mysterious was still pertinent during my fieldwork, and continues to feed popular conceptions of the arts in India. One need only open the arts section of the Sunday New York Times to read about the continual exoticization of India to serve the modern and more global prominence of the West.<sup>7</sup>

Farrell's work provides a crucial opening for this dissertation because his story actually reads as Indian music *in* the West, as well as Indian music represented *through* the West. Titling this book "Indian Music and the West" has accomplished a kind of political complicity, that while unintentional, undermines his argument that the West—in several cases—distorted and manipulated knowledge of Indian music as an unconscious tool of imperialism. Although he has briefly mentioned film music as an example of the kinds of musical mixing within India, the book reifies India as a realm of homogenous art music. In his account, Western misunderstandings, imperial agendas, and desires of profit, and hybrid selves of the Indian

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<sup>7</sup> The title of the article is "In India, Eternal Rhythms Embody a National Spirit" (Macaulay 2012).

diaspora are reasons for musical mixing outside of India while music in India remains unproblematically Indian. Farrell disallows India to be a site of colonial musical encounter and inevitable musical change where musicalized cultural interactions occurred as much as in the West. This dissertation about Fusion in Chennai shows that a dynamic process of musical mixing has been essential to “Indian music” all along as it also combines the previous histories of this exchange with decidedly more ambiguous and contested results.

A dissertation about jazz and Karnatic music written by Tanya Kalmanovitch (2008) is the most thematically similar work to this project on Fusion. Her research provides useful summaries of the joint ventures between jazz and Karnatic music, including sections on the influences of Indian music on jazz musicians like John Coltrane and Don Cherry, and a section describing John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu and Shakti. Her speculation on the origins of Fusion in Chennai (where her fieldwork mostly took place) is consistent with my findings, mainly that Fusion has been a local extension of the Western (jazz/rock) fusion of the 1970s. The bulk of her ethnographic data came from an exchange that she organized between musicians from the Jazz and Contemporary Music Program at New School University and those from Brhaddhvani Research and Training Centre for Musics of the World, the Chennai-based institution with which we were both affiliated during our different periods of fieldwork.<sup>8</sup> Her chapter on the history of jazz in India (from pre- to post-independence) aggregates the details of numerous musical projects and has been valuable to position Fusion in relation to jazz, Western fusion, and Karnatic music.

At first glance Kalmanovitch’s topic may seem to be similar to this dissertation, but it differs substantially. She has purposefully limited her project to the “ways in which jazz

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<sup>8</sup> Brhaddhvani was run by vina *vidwan*, scholar, and pedagogue Karaikkudi Subramaniam whose ideas conclude this introduction and supplement chapter one.



connects with Indian music and culture” (2008: 4). She has also written that “although fieldwork primarily took place in India, this project is primarily concerned with jazz” (4). She mentioned that a detailed study of Fusion in India was needed and outside the scope of her project (70), and even identified the uncertain status of Fusion as a genre (70). But most revealing is her stance in relation to Farrell (1997): “I seek to update the work of Gerry Farrell by extending the analysis of Indian music and the West to the context of jazz” (42). Kalmanovitch has repeated the same trap of focusing on the overlap without questioning and exploring its dimensions in India. As a result, the idea of jazz was reason enough to justify research on music without a more critical interrogation of how jazz actually *became* something else in Chennai. Kalmanovitch did fieldwork about jazz in India even though Chennai was void of any jazz, which indicates a surplus of interest in the international reach of jazz at the expense of what many Indian musicians were actually performing. Kalmanovitch has used jazz as her analytical point of entry, which was necessary for her multi-sited project that analyzed Indian and diasporic examples of the intersections between jazz and Karnatic music. But limiting herself to jazz obscured the ways that musicians and audiences activated Fusion as a contested musical practice, which could have profound implications for her study. Kalmanovitch mostly understood Fusion as “Indo-Jazz fusion,” the title given by a Mumbai jazz festival director and not used much by musicians in Chennai. Kalmanovitch has written that “the genre is known under various formulations such as ‘Indo-Jazz fusion’ and ‘Indo-Western fusion,’ but commonly abbreviated as ‘fusion’” (69). In my experience, many more musical projects took place in Chennai under the name Fusion and the word “fusion” had a kind of resonance that overlapped with broader urban conditions that related to cosmopolitanism and globalization in the contested ways that a genre name like Indo-Jazz fusion is too specific and explicit to capture. With all the research on jazz and on the music

between India and the West (see also Shope 2004 and Fernandes forthcoming in 2012), there has remained a gaping hole of literature about Fusion in India.

### Music in India

During the formational period of institutionalization for the discipline of American ethnomusicology, the music of India played a seminal role establishing the discipline as one that raised the awareness of the world's "serious" music in order to compete with Western classical music scholars to find an institutional home in music departments. Scholars produced much important research that provided a foundational first step for translating the kinds of musical materials Indian musicians used and made meaningful in order to teach non-Indian audiences and students (Allen 1992; Brown 1965; Cormack 1992; Higgins 1973; L'Armand and L'Armand 1978; Nelson 1991; Ramanathan 1974; Shankar 1974; Subramanian 1986; Viswanathan 1975; Wade 1979). This predominantly descriptive phase in the approach of these scholars, as well as in the field of South Asian music scholarship more generally, configured Indian classical music as predominantly Hindu and "traditional."

Recent literature about the formation of Indian musical practices as Indian "classical" music questions these configurations and opens up a crucial space for this dissertation (Weidman 2006, Bakhle 2005, Neuman 2004, Subramanian 2006, Peterson and Soneji 2008). This literature shows how the contemporary discourse in India that posits the practice of classical music as an unbroken form of ancient Indian tradition originated in colonial history and was formed in part through the colonial encounter. These authors have therefore disproved present-day assumptions that Indian classical music has survived untouched by foreign influences throughout the last several centuries. They have re-historicized traditional Indian music and dance practices by

foregrounding the ways that certain elites—with political agendas guided by colonialism, nationalism, gender, religion, and caste—constituted these practices as “classical” (Weidman 2006, Bakhle 2005, Neuman 2004, Subramanian 2006, Peterson and Soneji 2008), a value description and political category that was itself a colonial import.

This present-day discourse about an unbroken tradition of classical music and the recent literature that has debunked it were both crucial influences for this project because the practice of Karnatic music was the most influential Indian musical practice for Fusion. Karnatic music provided the foundation of training for musicians and the local infrastructure for Fusion performances in Chennai. Because musicians who performed Fusion intentionally sought out performing careers in Karnatic music as well, they were compelled to navigate the cultural politics of Karnatic music that were shaped by a powerful ideology of classical tradition. These scholars have shown that this ideology, which dovetailed with the project of nationalism, was constructed as a result of the colonial encounter. This helped establish a modernity that emplaced Indian “classical music” as a distinct symbol of Indian tradition (Subramanian 2006; Weidman 2006) even though it was a modernity that wove together Indian and Western influences in unique, if ironic, ways. Born from the colonial encounter and then shaped into Indian purity, the “classical” musics of India therefore currently exist as deft manipulations of musical practices by skilled and charismatic proponents of change to fit political agendas.

As Weidman (2006) and Peterson and Soneji (2008) have shown, one tool of classicization was canonization, and early twentieth century elites selected portions of these artistic practices that would fit into the imagined classical Indian tradition, however intertwined with colonial influence. Repertoires were revised with entire subgenres almost completely excised (such as the song-forms of *padams* and *javalis* in Karnatic music) while alternate

histories and more privileged castes of performers were highlighted and canonized (such as the South Indian dance practice known as *Bharata Natyam* that transformed a Devadasi dance practice into a Brahmin one). Scholars have researched what has been removed from musical practices to establish them as “classical,” but have mostly ignored projects that combined Indian classical music with Western music explicitly as Fusion. As I’ve mentioned, Fusion has been common since India’s independence from Britain in 1947, but also predates independence. One of the trinity of Karnatic composers, Muttuswamy Dikshitar (1775-1835) composed several compositions based on scalar and intervallic melodies from local English colonial marching bands (Durga 2008). These pieces currently make up a part of the music curriculum in some South Indian music schools and are treated as a kind of pedagogical etude, just one example of a kind of musical mixing that is not called “Fusion” because it has been embedded in the practice of so-called traditional Indian classical music. Overall, this study of Fusion builds on this scholarship by continuing the claims that the practice Indian “classical” music was colonially constructed while also acknowledging the inverse: what is “modern,” “contemporary,” and “Western,” about Fusion was also indicative of locally Indian musical forms, compositional strategies, and improvisational parameters.

Weidman

In particular, Amanda Weidman (2006) has opened up a crucial space for this project with her recent research on Karnatic music. She has challenged what she refers to as “postcolonial mythologies of Indian classical music” that envision an unbroken tradition extending back to pre-colonial India by foregrounding the centrality of the voice as an instrument of national identity and as a key factor for the modernity of Karnatic music in India. She has

argued that the violin was domesticated by Karnatic musicians and accepted by audiences because of the way it enhanced this role of the voice:

The late-twentieth-century preference for a virtuosic vocal sound and the claim that this is the natural and authentic sound of South Indian music mark a desire to create a distinctively Indian sound, a representative ‘voice’ not in danger of being confused with anything remotely Western.

This is a distinctly modern and postcolonial desire. To say that the voice in Karnatic music is a modern construct is not to say that there was not vocal music in South India before the violin. Rather the violin in Karnatic music stages the voice in a particular way so that it becomes available as a metaphor for a tradition and a self that have survived colonialism while remaining uncolonized (Weidman 2006: 57).

By showing how the Western violin became naturalized as the primary instrumental melodic accompaniment in Karnatic music, and how it contributed to the construction of Karnatic music as purely Indian by the way it “staged the voice,” Weidman has presented a history of Karnatic music that weaves together South Indian and “Western” influences. Her main contribution for this project is that while Indian elites and some musicians had interests in adapting Western ideologies and instruments into their music and strategically maintaining its Indian purity, the very same issues of cultural mixing also made up the practice of Fusion, but could not be part of the same discourse. The result was substantially different. Explicitly lodged between India and the West in concept and description, Fusion was deeply contested in ways that I detail in the following chapters.

Another of Weidman’s contributions is in the ways that the voice and the musical instrument work with each other, and yet are paired as opposites. Many musicians and audience members frequently assumed that when I was studying Fusion, I was interested in instrumental music: if the voice has been celebrated as distinctly Indian in Karnatic music—albeit in the postcolonial modern way that Weidman details—then the non-vocal instruments performed by musicians who played Fusion could better transcend the sonic associations and boundaries of

India. The primacy of the voice as a metaphor for tradition freed musical instruments like the *veena*, *mrdangam* and *kanjira* (instruments unique to the Karnatic instrumental repertoire) from the potential constraints of Indian tradition. In the context of Fusion, Weidman's work helps show that just as Fusion provided a potential threat for Karnatic music because of its intentional musical mixing and irreverent impurity, it also drew attention away from practices of musical mixing within Karnatic music itself.

Musicians who combined Indian music with non-Indian music to intentionally produce something "new" were (supposedly) not involved with building an Indian tradition, according to the aesthetic and structural criteria used by elites to reinvent Indian musical practices as authentic Indian tradition. The project of classicizing, locating, and re-establishing music within the formation and self-image of the Indian nation then presents an easy fate for Fusion, because Fusion becomes unavoidably inauthentic. Therefore, as the continuously lurking inauthentic presence behind classical music, Fusion had an important role in classicizing Indian music by invoking inauthentic hybridity when a kind of perceived purity of tradition was the standard mode of authenticity that created, produced, established, and perpetuated classical music. Fusion was easily dismissed for this reason and devalued for its obvious and honest assertion of inauthenticity along these political lines. As a result, Fusion served a dual purpose from the perspective of the Karnatic music establishment: it posed the problem of musical mixing as it provided the scapegoat to maintain Karnatic music's purity.

Weidman has made this clear in the set of oppositions she observed among musicians and audience members within the practice of Karnatic music:

Lining up as "written," "technical," "secular," and "instrumental" on one side and "oral," "spiritual," "devotional," and "vocal" on the other, they map "the West" and "India" as musical opposites, destined never to meet... These oppositions, and the discourse in

which they are embedded, are central to the institution of classical music as it is now imagined in India (Weidman 2006: 4).

If Karnatic music has been defined by these opposites and has occupied a relatively unproblematic and definite position in them, the practice of Fusion overtly and consistently upset these neat oppositions. The compositions of musicians who performed Fusion (sometimes quite intricate), an almost prerequisite virtuosic technique, the distinct absence of devotional practices or spiritual associations, and a predominantly non-vocal, instrumental sound were some of the most prevalent features of Fusion in Chennai. Considering that most of the musicians who performed Fusion made their livings also as Karnatic musicians, Fusion posed a considerable amendment to the portrait of musical life in Chennai that Weidman has detailed and historicized.

In addition, Dard Neuman (2004) and Janaki Bakhle (2005)—both of whose contributions I discuss in detail in chapter one—as well as Weidman have utilized the seminal contributions of Orientalism and postcolonial theory as tools to rehistoricize classical music that show how seemingly straight forward discourses of Indian tradition have been shaped by the forces of culture and power. They have shown how the formation of India's classical musics actually arose from conflicts and problems of colonial modernity. However, identifying what the elites' project of classicizing Indian music in the twentieth century has purposefully left out is an important and overlooked dimension that this ethnography of contemporary musical practices of professional musicians in Chennai rectifies. As a result, this project demonstrates how "tradition" has been a site of hegemonic struggle that always entails a form of fusion, the latest form of which is actually being called "fusion."

Wolf

*Theorizing the Local* (Wolf 2009) is the most recent collection of ethnomusicological research in South Asia and provides an example of the current state of this research. Richard Wolf has brought together essays that span various topics, all of which feature a crucial attention to ethnographic detail. In the introduction, he has criticized the tendency of researchers to privilege “the global” and transnational circulation at the exclusion of the local:

Our turn to what we call the ‘local’ is not a departure on all fronts from what our enterprising colleagues have produced before. Rather it is an attempt to think through where we stand in our studies of music in South Asia; to consider how focusing on particular kinds of ‘local’ can offer us ways of thinking beyond the borders of South Asia, and beyond some of the epitomizations of South Asian music (e.g., as a place of ragas and talas) that people from many parts of the world take for granted (Wolf 2009: 7).

Taking Wolf’s criticism seriously, I portray Fusion without highlighting musical hybridity for its own sake—rather, the problem, inchoate state, and the contestation of Fusion emerged from my study of the local musical practice of Fusion in Chennai, one that has direct ties and connections to the West and to other Indian regions, but could have only come from ethnographic research in Chennai, with its distinct combinations and juxtapositions of music politics. In this way, Wolf has helped me position this project in relation to the global and local ways that Fusion activated many tensions and meanings. My research on Fusion is directly influenced by these recent studies of South Asian musical practices, especially the articles by Martin Clayton and Gregory Booth in this volume. In his article on guitar players in India, Clayton (2009) has chosen language that echoes the central conclusions of this project. When he has referred to the “fractured musical world of the Indian guitar” to describe the experiences of musicians (Clayton 2009: 66) and an “accidentally oppositional limbo” (66) to describe Indian musicians who played Western instruments and therefore cast as “Western” musicians, and “discourses fraught with ambiguity in metropolitan centers” (67), he captured the same kinds of tensions that I identify and analyze in this dissertation. His chapter and Booth’s chapter on Indian brass bands (2009)



open up questions of how “South Asian music” actually hinges on an awareness, dialogue, dissent, and a postcolonial relationship with those musicians, musical practices, and discourses of modernity “beyond the borders of South Asia.”

### Peterson and Soneji

In the introduction to their collection of essays titled *Performing Pasts*, Indira Peterson and Davesh Soneji (2008) have sought to detail the roles of music and dance as ways that performers “interface between negotiating tradition and modernity” in South India (Peterson and Soneji 2008: 17). Criticizing other scholarship on music, literature and theater, they have moved beyond the nation as a totalizing paradigm for the performing arts of South India. This collection “illuminates the use of the performing arts for the production of identities that transcend or resist the totalizing agenda of the nation through local, regional, and transnational exchanges. If anything what is most striking about the findings in these essays is the utter heterogeneity of the visions of modernity, and the pasts, presents, and futures imagined through the production of the arts in south India” (Peterson and Soneji 2008: 31).

The volume emphasizes local, regional, and transnational exchanges as fundamental to the South Indian performing arts, and the majority of the essays focus primarily on historicizing high art categories as intersections between multiple groups of people in, around, and outside of South India. The absence of Fusion from this volume leaves the reader with the understanding that the presence of modernity in the South Indian performing arts stops at the high art practices of Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam. This risks an association of modernity and music with elitist artistic practices, implying that the realm of modernity and music is exclusive to the “classical” arts. In addition, talking about modernity in India was not just done by scholars—this

dissertation shows that music was a way that musicians and audiences articulated modernity in India that differed considerably from these portrayals. In the account of music that follows, modernity must include a mandolin virtuoso trained in Karnatic music playing the blues scale in the Music Academy; a teenage band combining Karnatic music, film music, and world music; and a Western fusion rhythm section (a jazz keyboardist and two non-classical percussionists) consisting of entirely Indian musicians performing with Indian classical musicians from around India for a recording project led by a European celebrity musician. However effective Peterson and Soneji's work has been to bring together the kinds of critical approaches to South Indian music history, it falls short of its potential to take their intentions to the logical next step, for example, those Indian musical practices that complicate the very idea of "India," a crucial debate of modernity in India. When its mentioned at all, Fusion makes an appearance at the end of a section as an addition to recent musical and cultural changes associated with hybridity, globalization, or modernity. They have written that Fusion is a part of the "resilient 'heritage' that could absorb and domesticate the foreign and the novel" (Peterson and Soneji 2008: 17) and they include Fusion as part of the "recent history of Karnatak music" (2008: 17). However, these writers have not developed their ideas about what Fusion is and what it does. Focusing exclusively on Fusion brings different aspects of South Indian musical culture to light that studies of Indian art music miss entirely.

## Modernity

While most of the contributors in *Performing Pasts* have asserted the importance of studying the performing arts in South India to better understand modernity in India, they have not clarified what they mean by "modernity." According to Appadurai and Breckenridge,

modernity is “a global experience (even if the term *modernity* is, in some sense, a category of Western history and reflexivity). It is further our assumption that this experience is as varied as magic, marriage, or madness, and thus worthy of scholarly attention and, more generally, of comparative study” (1995: 1). The parenthetical qualification here is significant because this idea was the catalyst for the arguments of both Timothy Mitchell (2000) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000). They have revealed how previous notions of modernity have been configured by Western scholars as geographically and historically Western. Their central claims have been the challenge that the non-West has posed to singular narratives of European centered modernity, including those of “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 2001) and “postmodernity” (Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1993; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991), which as Mitchell has argued, only serve to strengthen the Western oriented logic of modernity (Mitchell 2000: 5). If Appadurai and Breckenridge have effectively described the way modernity is contradictorily unified and varied, Mitchell has addressed this problem by arguing for a notion of modernity that is more accurately represented as a global experience: “At issue, then, is whether one can find a way to theorize the question of modernity that relocates it within a global context and 2, at the same time, enables that context to complicate, rather than simply reverse, the narrative logic of modernization” (Mitchell 2000: 7).

In this dissertation, I show how musicians, audience members, and institutional patrons expressed tensions about Fusion that complicated this narrative logic. The idea of what was legitimately “Indian” and “Western”, whether adopted or domesticated, was constantly in play and was the thematic terrain with which musicians placed themselves with Fusion. The tensions of Fusion demonstrated a particular way in which a musical practice sounded the complications of this narrative logic of modernity. Therefore, this dissertation is not a study of modernity in

India that fits into the kinds of ethnographic and historical work previously written that address some of the more common domains in which writers have identified the experience of modernity as one that “provincializes Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000). A few of these studies have included science, museum exhibitions, and colonial medical practices (Prakash 1999), sati or “widow burning” (Mani 1998); and also Caribbean sugar production (Mintz 1995). At stake in many of these monographs about modernity is the basic understanding of how power creates narratives of progress that have extreme repercussions for the future.

Following Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995), Mitchell (2000), and Chakrabarty (2000), I understand the debates of modernity, with its many interpretations, to be the very same debates and problems of Fusion. At the heart of these debates lies the notion of *being modern*, which is configured in hugely varied ways but most generally comes down to many, often conflicting, ideas of progress. As I show in this dissertation, these conflicting ideas loaded Fusion with contestation and the tensions of Fusion *were* the tensions of modernity in India. When musicians and audience members performed the contestation of Fusion through discourse and musical sound, they partook in the same themes that have also comprised the construction, establishment, continuation, and modification—in short, the “staging of modernity” Mitchell (2000: 23-24) that continually created an entity known as “The West” as much as it asserted a unique role of India in the experience of modernity. My use of modernity, therefore, treats it not as a historical period but as a condition of progress.

My dissertation compliments these studies by shifting the focus of modernity to the effectiveness of sound—including music and discourse about music—to *hear* the questions of modernity in India. Bauman and Briggs (2003) have extended the postcolonial theory of Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee (1986; 1993) by arguing for the necessity of how language

and orality (2003: 13-14) are important “for understanding how modernity produces and structures inequality” (2003: 10). Bauman and Briggs have effectively opened the way for postcolonial studies of modernity in sound and in chapter two I develop the connections between hybridity and modernity by describing and analyzing the tensions that emerged from definitions of Fusion.

In the following chapters, I focus on the tensions of Fusion that each contributed to the constitution of modernity: the debates of history and tradition; the problems and tensions involved with defining Fusion and modernity; the inchoate and contested dimensions of cosmopolitanism and the “new” middle class in contemporary urban India; and the varied ways that modernity was experienced by both Indian musicians and a European celebrity musician (especially in the limited extent to which Fusion could be a world music without the involvement of a Western celebrity). In other words, I show how the disagreements over Fusion—including the history, the definition, and the very legitimacy of Fusion—were ways of debating the features and future directions of modernity in India.

## Fellezs

Kevin Fellezs (2011) has provided a firm foundation for the Western fusion that was so influential for Fusion in Chennai. By describing the “multiple, simultaneous, and contradictory positioning that most characterizes fusion music” (14), Fellezs has shown how the Western fusion that came to India and influenced Karnatic musicians was already contested in the ways it complicated bounded notions of geographical place, race, and genre. Not only did Western fusion provide much of the creative inspiration for the “Western music” that South Indian musicians drew on for their music, but the contestation of Western fusion in the US predated the

contestation of Fusion in Chennai. Fellezs has used Jeff Beck's description of fusion as "ain't jazz, ain't rock" to capture this contestation, which resonates strongly with Mukund Padmanathan's description of the programming for a cosmopolitan music festival in Chennai as "not Karnatic" (Padmanathan 1/2/08) that I discuss in chapter three. These two different manifestations of fusion, separated by a few continents and decades, shared a contentious identity and a strong resistance to their reception; when people described them using negative associations, they communicated these tensions and complications as central to what musicians were trying to accomplish.

The tensions Fellezs has identified with Western fusion also effectively disrupted the potential for understanding Fusion in Chennai as stemming from any kind of pure musical parentage—Fusion was not the hybrid offspring of Karnatic music and jazz. While recent scholarship about Indian classical music is positioned against this tendency to construct purity in Karnatic music, Fellezs has now provided clear evidence that the supposed "jazz" in Fusion is far from the canonical jazz of New Orleans, Duke Ellington, or Bebop, but instead a highly contested practice.

Fellezs has borrowed the concept of the "broken middle" from Isabol Armstrong (2000) to theorize Western fusion as an "overlapping yet liminal space of contested, and never settled, priorities between two or more musical traditions" (Fellezs 2011: 8). This space has "creative tension" and "possibilities" that "arrive...in the efforts to occupy multiple, sometimes contradictory positions" (Fellezs 2011: 8-9). This effectively captures the practice of Fusion, particularly in the ways that Fusion revealed the multiple and contradictory positions of musicians. While some musicians used Fusion to assert their creative desires that differed from

the kinds of agency Karnatic music could accommodate, others framed their original music as existing within the tradition of Karnatic music, despite public disagreement.

I am, however, reluctant to adopt Armstrong's concept for Fusion in Chennai. While Armstrong and Fellezs's use of the "middle" was always ambiguous in the way it existed between traditions and genres, Fusion was contested more for the specific ways it was "not Karnatic" rather than the ways it was Western. The Western side of Fusion in Chennai was, for most musicians I worked with, more imagined than developed. For the most part, there were no musical forms or harmonic and melodic structures that South Indian musicians were consciously working into their music. Western instruments, like the keyboard, drum set, and bass guitar, were often enough of a Western presence to be heard as "Western." Describing Fusion as a broken middle would position a middle that didn't accurately depict how Fusion was between musical practices. Rather, the idea of the "middle" ultimately alludes to a geographical middle that Fusion in Chennai never reached. So while the practice of Fusion may have been broken, in the sense of being defined by its many tensions, it was also contested because of the ways it complicated the idea of a "middle" while remaining in Chennai. Fusion was contested in large part due to the musical politics of Chennai. Many musicians aspired to launch their Fusion into a cosmopolitan circulation only to have it tethered to Chennai by Karnatic structures, discourses, and ideologies. Whereas, as Fellezs has argued, Western fusion was in the broken middle between various musical genres of jazz, rock, and funk, Fusion in Chennai was more antagonistically and less ambiguously unified as "not Karnatic," revealing the central musical politics at work despite the presence of Indian film music and Western fusion.

World Music

During my fieldwork, the terms world music and Fusion were used by musicians in similar but also distinct ways. More often than not, world music referred to the confluence of traditional, popular, non-Western, and Western musical styles that did not include Indian musicians. Fusion tended to refer to world music that involved Indian musicians, whether from Chennai or other major Indian cities. In this study, I draw from Steven Feld (1988; 2000) and Timothy Taylor (1997) who have documented and deconstructed the category and phenomenon of “world music.” For these scholars, world music has primarily involved the commodification of music produced by those non-Western musicians with comparatively much less power than the recording companies that produced and distributed their music. Therefore, as an invention of record company executives, world music became a musical correlate to the politics of globalization in the late 1980s and 1990s. Feld (2000) has outlined some of the conclusions for the globalization of music which included music’s connection to social identity, “sonic virtuality” made possible by increasingly normalized listening and consuming practices enabled by technology, the dominant position of the music industry, and the celebratory and anxious responses to both the proliferation of new musical forms and the loss of traditional forms. These elements are all present in the following chapters about Fusion in Chennai, and yet these alone are incomplete.

The label of world music is most useful to capture musicians’ intentions for the global distribution of their music and their—for the most part—failure to achieve it. By performing Fusion, they hoped that their music would take on a more global relevance. So in terms of the aspirations of musicians who performed Fusion, this dissertation examines a local instance of world music that never reached the world. Musicians were influenced by the same mass market that created world music and they aspired to comparable global success, but for the most part,



their music remained limited to Chennai and to other Indian cities. In this ethnography, I focus on how Fusion was primarily a musical problem and I show how musicians were enmeshed with local, regional, national, cultural politics that redirected and limited the extent to which their music could travel. Caught in a web of music politics that aggravated notions of local and global music, Fusion was an example of a musical problem that, for the most part, failed to leave Chennai.

### Public Culture

The idea of “public culture” in the Indian context (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988; 1995; Dwyer and Pinney 2001) ultimately helps to describe the orientation of this study of Fusion better than the idea of world music. Rather than describing either forms of elite culture or popular culture, Appadurai and Breckenridge have referred to public culture as a “zone of contestation” (1995: 5), which resonates strongly with the position of Fusion in Chennai as neither elitist Indian tradition nor popular music with mass appeal. Christopher Pinney has taken up this contribution by identifying how this contestation demonstrates how public culture shows “the assumption that all cultural systems operate on the basis of potential collapse and all emergent meaning is the result of negotiation in a zone of potential conflict” (Pinney 2001: 8-9).

Public culture has most effectively referred to those popular cultural forms that have more of a mass appeal than an elitist one, but a blurred relationship between the elite and the popular has been a part of the idea of public culture from Appadurai and Breckenridge’s conception of it: “With the term public culture we wish to escape these by now conventional hierarchies and generate an approach which is open to the cultural nuances of cosmopolitanism and of the modern in India” (1988: 6). Fusion was performed by mostly upper caste Brahmin

elites who were, for various reasons that I describe in the coming chapters, looking to create music that wasn't the Karnatic music of their parent's generation, whether they called it "Fusion," "contemporary Karnatic music," or anything else. These musicians sought larger audiences than a Karnatic *kacceri* could assemble—both in India and (potentially) abroad—audiences who may or may not have been familiar with Karnatic music. Fusion demonstrated how musicians who were accustomed to the niche of high elitist culture attempted to reach listeners outside of this relatively stable relationship between Brahmin cohesiveness, high Indian tradition, and the Indian nation. Adding to the complexity, these musicians also upheld this same relationship when they performed Karnatic music.

"Public culture can be thought of as a nexus of overlapping discourses and interests that exist in a state of interruptive tension" (Pinney 2001: 14). However, the practice of Fusion was unique among these studies of South Asian public culture particularly in the way editors Breckenridge (1995) and Dwyer and Pinney (2001) have overwhelmingly favored a public *visual* culture. Whether textual or image based, these studies (with the exception of David Lelyveld 1995) have overlooked aurality entirely. I focus on the ways that musicians created Fusion through discourse and musical sound with tensions that were musical and social. Most importantly, these tensions were always heard, and constituted the experiences that operated and resonated with people making sense of the new India.

## Writing Strategies and Definitions of Terms

### Fusion, fusion, Genre, and Practice

Throughout this dissertation, I use certain strategies of writing to accomplish specific tasks of textual representation. First, I use capital and lower case "f's" to differentiate between

two uses of the trope of “fusion.” “Fusion” stands for the locally named musical practice in Chennai and “fusion” refers to the theoretical practice of cultural mixing. This distinction is most helpful in chapter two when I analyze definitions of Fusion, but I also use it throughout the dissertation to draw attention to the multiple meanings that the trope of fusion evoked in many conversations. This is a strategy made possible by writing and not speaking, so in order to retain part of the ambiguity between Fusion and fusion in my conversations with musicians, I always use the lower-case “fusion” when I quote them directly. This is to avoid misinterpreting or misrepresenting their words, as well as to allow for the overlap between Fusion as a practice and fusion as a theory of cultural mixing. I use the lower case during quotations also because I formulated the strategy of distinguishing between Fusion and fusion during the writing stage of this project and not during my fieldwork, and I would like to present these ideas as I encountered them. Lastly, because I limited my research to Chennai, the distinction between Fusion and fusion becomes more complicated when I refer to practices of Fusion in India outside of Chennai. In these instances, I use the upper case “Fusion” but also clarify that it is not Chennai based Fusion.

My use of Fusion and fusion has another purpose. Rather than understanding Fusion as simply the Chennai-based genre, I purposefully avoid the concept of a genre in favor of Fusion as a musical practice. Both seminal and recent work on genre has shown the processual ways genres are shaped by various individuals and social consensuses (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Holt 2007; Fellezs 2011). These writers have substantially contextualized the concept of genre and have nuanced it with the multiple and complex ways musical genres are constituted. Holt has written that social and discursive networks, the communication and signification of musical codes, a transnational music industry, and the role of mass media are some of the factors that

help establish a music genre and also cause its inevitable change (Holt 2007: 1-29). Fellezs has demonstrated how Western fusion from the 1970s shows a wide variation of fluidity between jazz, rock, and funk, particularly in the ways the idea of genre became a way of problematizing the intersections between race, gender, individual creative agency, and the marketplace (Fellezs 2011). But when they have described how genres foster “new social collectivities” (Holt quoted by Fellezs 2011: 7), they form a concept of genre that is too cohesive for Fusion in Chennai. Holt and Fellezs have qualified their uses of genre in explicitly detailed ways that are persuasive for their research areas, but the use of genre to describe Fusion in Chennai is inadequate because of the ways it still tends to solidify the idea of a bounded musical practice, no matter how qualified. Because I locate the contestation of Fusion in discourse as well as musical sound, such a choice is even more important.

I intend Fusion to stand for a domain of contested creative activity that refers to a series of actions guided, enabled, and shaped by more deterministic structures; this idea is best captured by the concept of practice. Drawing from the practice theory of Sherry Ortner (1996), Marshall Sahlins (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (1990), and Anthony Giddens (1979), I intend “the practice of Fusion” to encompass the interfacing of individual creative agency and societal deterministic structures as they related to a wide range of cultural activities that helped produce Fusion. In particular, I highlight the tensions that arose from this interfacing. Ortner has best summarized this relationship between agency and structure by articulating a contradiction that was fundamental to the tensions of Fusion: “Human action is made by ‘structure,’ and at the same time always makes and potentially unmakes it” (Ortner 1996:2). When musicians performed and talked about Fusion, they revealed various structures that they were interacting with: the habitus of the Karnatic music establishment and notions of Indian “tradition;” constructions of “the

West;” ideas of purity and hybridity; an increasingly palpable cosmopolitanism and a changing middle class; and a global mass music industry that seemed accessible only through an invitation of a European music celebrity. Therefore, referring to the practice of Fusion does not simply mean the doing or making of Fusion, but encompasses the sounds, the words, and the wide range of activities and deterministic limits involved with this entire sphere of behavior. Because I argue that the most central feature of Fusion was its contestation, music as a practice best communicates the criss-crossing of meanings, intentions, and actions that I observed and participated with in Chennai.

The idea of Fusion as a practice came to me during a conversation with a musician. When I asked pianist/keyboardist Anil Srinivasan what he would most like to read in a book about Fusion, he suggested that this study should demonstrate how Fusion is a process (Srinivasan interview 11/30/07). Also, during our conversations, he frequently referred to his own Fusion project with vocalist Sikhil Gurucharan as “a work in progress.” I realized that perhaps one of the most important tensions that perpetuated the contestation of Fusion was the tension between an understanding of music as a cultural practice and music as an object of beauty, immune to cultural influence. Drawing from the discourses and performance conventions of both art and popular musical practices, musicians who performed Fusion struggled with these competing visions among their audiences and themselves. My use of practice allows for these struggles and I make them explicit in the tensions that constitute the chapters that follow.

Another writing strategy related to my understanding of Fusion as a practice and not a genre is my choice of describing the many musicians I met during my fieldwork. I describe musicians as “musicians who performed Fusion” instead of “Fusion musicians.” The former directly describes the versatility of musicians that better depicts the ways musicians navigated

multiple musical practices. The latter describes them solely by their Fusion, which, considering that most musicians I worked with performed Fusion in addition to something else, would be misleading and would also contribute to a more coherent sense of Fusion as a genre that I am intentionally avoiding. Therefore, when I refer to “their Fusion,” I mean the music that these musicians performed and called Fusion.

### Verb Tenses

The last writing strategy that needs clarification is my use of verb tenses. In the opening of his book on Apache songs, David Samuels has written: “Writing preserves—even writing that shuns the ‘ethnographic present’ and all its false rhetoric of timelessness. Yet I feel as though I need to make clear at the outset that people’s lives change” (Samuels 2004: ix-x). Likewise, change was at the center of all of my fieldwork experiences. I do not shun the ethnographic present, but I do choose to represent my fieldwork experiences in the past tense. Fusion in Chennai has been a rapidly changing musical practice— in the interim years since I finished my fieldwork, striking new developments have occurred, particularly in the realm of educational institutions devoted to alternate forms of pedagogy that incorporate methods for Fusion. Opting for the past tense is not in any way a sign of their current irrelevance of Fusion in Chennai today and the years to come, but the ethnographic present—no matter how effectively qualified as Samuels has done—could possibly mislead the reader to believe that this musical practice still exists as it is portrayed in this monograph.

Similarly, when I include the work of other scholars, I use the present perfect (has written, has argued) in order to show how these ideas were written but also have present-day relevance. I favor the present perfect because it emphasizes that the author’s idea continues to be salient even

though it has already been written and published; it helps show how ideas continuously “live” in print even as they were formed in the past.

For that same reason, I choose the present tense for the argument of this dissertation and the arguments of other scholars. While events that happened during my fieldwork are in the past tense, the argument of this dissertation will live on in textual form. When I write about a writer’s work or idea, I use the present tense.<sup>9</sup>

### Contestation and Tensions

During many conversations with musicians and audience members about Fusion during my research, I observed how they created and then navigated the tensions that Fusion seemed to provoke. For many, Fusion was a kind of descriptive impasse: it inevitably led to unanswerable questions and inconclusive descriptions. But however circular these discussions sometimes felt for my interlocutors and myself, they proved to be rich sites to analyze the contestation of Fusion and were the source of much of its lived meaning. In order to describe this effect, I use the terms “contestation” and “tensions” to organize and describe the practice of Fusion.

I explain key terms in this dissertation when I present the corresponding ethnographic material during the course of each chapter. However, “contestation” and “tensions” are two terms on which I center the dissertation and require explanation. When I describe Fusion as contested, I mean that it was unstable and disputed. While many musical practices and genres are disputed, often in particular because of the limitations of genre names (for example, “alternative” and “jazz”), Fusion was deeply contested in ways that touched a kind of collective cultural nerve.

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<sup>9</sup> A complete example is the following sentence: Other writers *have argued* many useful ideas that *contextualize* what South Indian musicians and I *did* during my fieldwork in way that I *draw* from and *extend*.

To explain how, I make the tensions of Fusion the focus of my analysis. With the term “tensions,” I mean a strained feeling resulting from different perspectives—those instances of implicit strain or discomfort resulting from opposing ideas. I write about tensions that my interlocutors and I experienced during conversations and musical performances, but by privileging the tensions of Fusion, I neither wish to imply there are situations without tensions nor exaggerate their discomfort. Tensions of all kinds—social and musical—occur with frequency in any cultural context. My highlighting of them here should not imply that there are places or situations where tensions do not exist. Rather, in the case of Fusion, the tensions were a part of everyday life and it was their quotidian ubiquity that was their potency. Influenced by Laura Ring (2006), I use the idea of tensions as a productive site of social and musical interaction that unsettled. Because of this, they offer what I consider to be the most accurate way of telling this story of Fusion in Chennai.

For musicians in Chennai, Fusion was a rich topic of dissent and disagreement, and the tensions that musicians created and navigated provide an important opportunity for self-invention and identification. The way in which these tensions arose is also noteworthy. The topic of Fusion often led to dissatisfaction for musicians and audience members. Fusion didn’t necessarily provoke very many musicians and audience members to see their points through with resolute intention. The topic of Fusion often didn’t lead to various long winding paths, but instead initiated a series of short dead-ends. I remember wondering if Fusion possibly wasn’t important enough to fiercely argue about. There were exceptions, of course, and I include these as well, but the tensions of Fusion did not emerge from sprawling, passionate, and heated debates that challenged interlocutors to be persuasive. Rather, the predominant tone was interested



uncertainty and the most frequent outcome of most of these discussions was cooperative irresolution.

David Samuels' attention to uses of ambiguity among Apache musicians in Arizona has allowed for a greater possibility for deciphering an inconclusive conversation: "Part of my point is that these performances [both verbal and musical] gain at least a portion of their affective power precisely from the way they combine clarity and cloudiness" (Samuels 2004: 13). Discourse about Fusion, especially with the pun of "confusion" discussed in the chapter two, also led to its own self-termination that resulted in a kind of hanging ambiguity. The difference between the ambiguity in much of the Apache discourse and the discourse about Fusion in Chennai is that Samuels has shown how a forward momentum of conversation was still intact. In Chennai, when the topics turned to Karnatic tradition or Fusion as "Indian" and/or "Western," I often felt as if a steel anvil had fallen on our conversation, abruptly ending it. Sometimes the most productive conversations about Fusion ended up being almost entirely about something else, as a group interview about Fusion conducted by a music journalist in the first part of chapter one shows. I include tensions that I observed in the broader topics of conversation that addressed Fusion in implicit ways as well.

In fact, the stymied attempts to collaboratively define Fusion, the elusive answers to why musicians and the media cast it as perpetually "new," the inability to bring together the issues and meanings that Fusion seemed to produce—in essence, the failure to arrive at any consensus about the practice of Fusion—were not exceptions to conversations and performances of Fusion in Chennai, but the rule. The ways we talked with and past each other in the name of Fusion were representative of the kinds of experiences Fusion provoked. There was no consensus of Fusion, no definition that included and satisfied everyone, no consensual relationship to Indian

“tradition,” no genre history that was comprehensive or accurate. The practice of Fusion was too varied and contested to warrant any kind of concise, descriptive explanation.

### Project History and Personal Background

The genesis of this project extends back to 1997-1998 when I lived in Chennai to study Karnatic vocal music under the guidance of Smt. Rama Ravi and with the funding of a Fulbright Fellowship. This was a year of intense and deeply satisfying musical learning. But I discovered that my education about Indian music and culture prior to this year in Chennai only partly resonated with the India I encountered. When I was a boy, I had lived in Madras for a period of six months during from 1981-1982, but urban Indian culture in the late 1990s was far more varied than I had anticipated. Some family friends helped find me a place to live, which happened to be in proximity to a cosmopolitan professional from Mumbai, and my social life became quite contrasted with how I spent my days sitting on the floor practicing Karnatic vocal music, going to lessons, and returning from concerts no later than nine or ten o'clock. My neighbor next door, a single woman from Mumbai who favored Western clothes, discos (in Chennai this meant five star hotels with loud music, dancing, and alcohol), and very late nights, also noticed this and teased me: “You’re a *good* boy, aren’t you.” I had devoted my year to immersing myself in music that was entirely irrelevant to my new friends. At times, it felt as if I were living in two different Indias: one charged with an energy propelled by a cosmopolitan, youthful discovery of independence (most of these friends had no family in Chennai) and one that was a symbol of South Indian distinctiveness: a kind of rich, proud—and also self-insulating—incommensurability to anything non-local. My friends’ far-from-subtle presence at

my first Karnatic recital—hooting and hollering—perfectly encapsulated the tense co-presence of these worlds that I explore in this dissertation by focusing on Fusion.

There was another point of disconnection during that year that I experienced, one distinctly related to the field of ethnomusicology. I was fresh out of college, and I quickly and thankfully realized how prepared I was to correctly identify the various dimensions of a Karnatic *kacceri* (concert) and how ill prepared I was to understand how Karnatic music, or any music for that matter, related to contemporary urban Indian life. I could identify most of the song forms, languages, and composed and improvised sections of a *kriti* during a concert, hear the subtle differences between styles of performers, identify several compositions, *ragas*, and keep pretty good *tala* (the embodied practice of keeping track of the rhythmic cycles of different pieces). I observed that Karnatic music was extremely meaningful to packed concert halls, and completely meaningless to most of the people who lived in Chennai and South India, but I had no idea why (although I had some thoughts). In addition, I witnessed the complexities of urban Indian life that swirled together Indian and Western culture, and I repeatedly marveled at my naive surprise at having come all the way to India to have Aqua’s “Barbie Girl” and the Backstreet Boys’ “Everybody” blaring from cars outside my window. This India wasn’t the India of my youth, I remember thinking. It was disorienting, unfamiliar, and *extremely* interesting. This experience led me to question what forms of Indian music had reached the curriculums of American universities, and what kinds of questions inspired those writers. The gap between my preparation for that year of study and what I actually encountered sparked my interest in graduate school and led directly to this project as an attempt to make further sense of that disorientation.

But there was an even more influential factor to my disorientation in Chennai that year. My father, Jon B. Higgins, was a musician and ethnomusicologist who sang Karnatic music

professionally. He spent years of his life studying and practicing Karnatic music. He later earned the respect of some of the most conservative critics in the Karnatic music establishment and was also allowed to sing concerts in Hindu temples, places not open to non-Hindus. His recordings are still played on the radio. He was a novelty because it was baffling that during the mid 1960s a foreigner would seriously choose to make Karnatic vocal music his career, let alone perform it in a way that really reached people. To this day, Karnatic *rasikas* (enthusiasts) continue to tell me specific sections of pieces he recorded that deeply move them. My father began learning Karnatic music in his early 20s so he did not have the technical proficiency of other Karnatic vocalists, but what he lacked in virtuosic speed he made up for in precise intonation, near perfect pronunciation, and most importantly of all, *bhava*, or emotion that for many listeners evokes a kind of religious spirituality. The *bhava* he was known for had a kind of melancholic tinge, what one musician described to me as “the sadder side of beautiful.” The obvious novelty was that his *bhava* was American-born. When I was nine years old, his life was cut short at the age of 45 when he was killed by a drunk driver in the U.S. and the novelty of his story was enhanced by his premature and tragic death.

As a Greek American, white male who performs jazz-related improvisational music on my alto saxophone, I learned during my time in India that it was my family identity that constituted the most influential aspect of my subjective positioning for this research project. My last name helped me gain access to many of the musicians in Chennai during my time there. As much as this eased many introductions with numerous esteemed musicians and led to many exciting fieldwork opportunities, it also shaped these opportunities in unique ways. I would occasionally have to ask for clarification about musical terms or aspects of Indian culture with which some musicians assumed I was familiar. I also noted that the topic of Fusion was viewed

by some musicians as unworthy of study, but because of their courtesy to me and respect for my father, they agreed to speak with me. This was sometimes difficult because my father's story sometimes skewed musicians' expectations about my research topic. For example, it was fairly common that musicians wanted to talk at least a little bit about my father. This often led to making sense of what I was doing in Chennai if I wasn't actively pursuing a performance career in Karnatic music. A few times, after I explained my research ideas, some musicians promptly asked if anyone had written a history of my father, and that I should consider doing so since I would have so much access to his recordings and personal items. As flattering as this suggestion was towards my father, it was also a redirection of the conversation topic away from Fusion. While there were plenty of musicians who displayed interest in my topic, I interpreted those kinds of reactions as a disinterest, or even a discomfort, with Fusion, and as further evidence of the contestation of Fusion.

As a saxophonist, improviser, and composer, I also came to this project as a musician questioning how other musicians approached the problem of combining different musical practices. If I was so interested in the overlap between jazz and Karnatic music, how many others were interested in this as well? How did Indian musicians attempt this combination of musical mixing? What did these attempts say about contemporary India?

## Methodology and Organization

To help clarify the methodology of my research, I draw from the main argument of Paja Faudree (2012) who has written about the constructed divisions between music and language. She has asserted that "music and language are socially determined constructs that arbitrarily divide, in fundamentally cultural ways, a communicative whole...I take the position here that

viewing music and language as variably constructed distinctions in a total semiotic field is especially fruitful. The musical and linguistic signifiers making up this field compose an integrated expressive system whose components are differing, sometimes competing, overlapping, mutually influencing signs essential to human societies” (Faudree 2012: 520). In describing the contestation of Fusion, I rely on the sounds of its tensions—in discourse and musical sound—to demonstrate the ways Fusion sounded the tensions of modernity in India. I understand these sounds as comprising a “communicative whole” that musicians and I worked on together, and this dissertation is focused on describing how I heard these tensions during the period of my fieldwork.

Although the beginnings of this project extend back to my compositional interests as an undergraduate music major at Wesleyan University, I conducted more than a year of combined fieldwork over the course of several years. I visited Chennai from December 2004 to January 2005 for a preliminary assessment of this topic before beginning my proposal. I first began actively gathering materials for this dissertation at the end of a summer of Tamil study in the southern city of Madurai in 2006, but my main period of fieldwork was from September 2006 to June 2007 funded by a Fulbright Hays Dissertation Research Fellowship. I also returned to Chennai for a last and very crucial period of fieldwork in November 2007 until January 2008 in order to attend another November Fest concert series, interview more musicians, perform, and attend more performances of Fusion during the December concert season.

My research primarily consisted of these same activities: interviews, performances, and concert attendance. Interviews with musicians usually took place in their homes but occasionally were in more public spaces, like some of the new coffee shops and cafes that have sprung up in recent years. I mostly contacted musicians in person after attending their performances of Fusion

around the city, but occasionally some would give me phone numbers of other musicians and I would call them directly. Not surprisingly, I found that attending their concerts was generally a better way to insure spending some quality time with them for interviews. I attended as many concerts as I could that were related to the practice of Fusion. I also performed several times in Chennai and also once in the state of Maharashtra. Performing on my saxophone allowed me access to the kinds of dynamics and decisions made in rehearsals and more down time with musicians to talk about their careers, their musical interests, and also some gossip.

As I've mentioned, conversations about Fusion were often difficult and some were strained. Sometimes it seemed as if musicians were hoping I might explain what I thought Fusion was in order to better guide the conversations. I never did, but once many musicians realized during our conversations that despite my topic, I had no better understanding of Fusion than they did, this allowed much freer, meandering, and ultimately more productive conversations.

I discovered that researching Fusion was quite different than researching Karnatic music. With Karnatic music, there was no shortage of willingness, time, and personal and institutional resources that were available to learn, debate, and research all kinds of issues related to it. My time studying Karnatic music study in the late 1990s was structured around my thrice-weekly lessons with the esteemed vocalist Smt. Rama Ravi. Lessons insured musical exchange and my musical growth, and provided an infrastructure for musical involvement. They also gave me a stylistic angle from which I listened to and interpreted the other styles that enriched Chennai's musical diversity and breadth of Karnatic music, as well as gave me a welcomed and respected opening line when meeting other musicians. My affiliation with her gave me a place among musicians and showed my commitment to learning the music.

Fusion provided no such infrastructure. As a contested practice, Fusion offered no ongoing conversation with people, but instead it provoked the start, stop, and restarts of conversations that more often than not, rarely achieved any consistent momentum. Other than the performances, there was no place where musicians interested in Fusion met with any consistency and even then, it seemed as if musicians who performed Fusion rarely went to each other's performances. Often I found myself negotiating the challenges of the fast paced urban schedules of musicians and a few times I had to chase them down to talk to them. Interviews took place in the format of the "new" Chennai; scheduling appointments was a must, and the formality and time constraints seemed to go against all of my previous experiences of "Chennai time" as slow and infinite, and Chennai hospitality as unyielding. Each of my interlocutors was gracious and accommodating, but it became clear to me after a couple months of fieldwork that urban ethnography with Chennai musicians, especially during the December concert season when so many of them were performing literally dozens of times, necessitated keen scheduling skills over any kind of "deep hanging out." I did find that the interviews occasionally led to their interest in my music, and therefore towards opportunities to perform. While I did not perform extensively during my fieldwork, I did play enough with Chennai musicians to get a feel for some of the examples of Fusion that musicians worked with, and when appropriate I have included those experiences in the chapters that follow.

Overall, Fusion in Chennai makes a compelling argument for the study of music as a cultural practice because the polysemic meanings of Fusion were observable through various forms of social interaction. Descriptive musical analysis is an important methodological tool, but relying solely on musical analyses for an explanation of the practice of Fusion in Chennai would have missed many of the gaps of information that tell an equally, if not more important story.



While I rely on musical analyses to reveal the tensions of Fusion in music sound, my musical analyses are woven into descriptions of performance settings that better inform the overall musical experience for musicians and audiences. In general, there were many loose ends that Fusion left dangling, and as an ethnographer interested in taking in the multi-sensory experience of my field site, I started to wonder if these dangling loose ends might themselves be a particular symbol, representation, or effect of contemporary Chennai. Grounding this study of Fusion in a certain place and moment opened up questions that must be methodologically answered with ethnographic detail, otherwise a portrait of Fusion in Chennai could end up privileging its own theories of hybridity and lose contact with the discursive *and* musical sounds that fueled its contestation. In this ethnography, I assemble a sociomusical portrait of Fusion by keeping this fragmented nature intact. I therefore privilege the tensions of Fusion in order to best present its fragmented, polysemic, and contested position in Chennai. These tensions, I argue, were what made it unique and meaningful among the various musical practices in contemporary south India and I use these tensions to organize my chapters.

I organize this dissertation according to the tensions that perpetuated Fusion as contested because these tensions guided my fieldwork. I rely on one musician's words, therefore, to describe the most prominent topics of my chapters. Senior musician and pedagogue K. Subramaniam, at the beginning of a group interview about Fusion (that I discuss in detail in chapter one), asked a series of questions about Fusion to get the interview started:

The first question I had is what is fusion? Can we define that?... Why should you fuse and for what? Where does this come from as an artist?... Can we get it [understand Fusion] as an attempt to bring something new? What is new about what has happened as fusion? What is new and what is *really* new? Can you be traditional and do fusions? What kind of fusions do you see happening in the field of music in the world context? What is different in the Indian context? Where do you think this will lead? (K. Subramaniam, Brhaddhvani 12/7/06).

These questions identify the most common and important tensions of Fusion and survey the thematic terrain of this dissertation. Subramaniam mentioned definitions of Fusion (chapter two); musicians' motives for performing Fusion (chapter one, two, and four); the relationship between Fusion and Karnatic music, or "tradition" (chapter one and two); the understanding of Fusion as "new" (chapter one); and the intersections between Fusion and world music, or Indian music and world music (chapter three and four); and future directions for Fusion (conclusion). His thoughts help organize this dissertation and because they were in question form, they also capture the curiosity and the inchoate, unresolved state of Fusion that this dissertation addresses.

Chapter one begins with an ethnographic story that encapsulates the overlapping, co-present tensions of Fusion. I then look at the local debate of how Fusion was "new" by juxtaposing different musicians' historical references and influences for Fusion. Focusing on musicians' discourse, I ground the practice of Fusion in the local musical politics of Chennai that were dominated by Karnatic music.

Near the end of almost every interview, I asked my interlocutors what they would most like to read in a book about Fusion. The vast majority said they wanted to read a definition that would establish Fusion more permanently. Beginning with examples of the playful and disparaging pun of "confusion," chapter two looks at the tensions that arose from various definitions and opinions of Fusion. Here, I examine musicians' discourse of those who did and did not perform Fusion and show how musicians moved back and forth between defining and judging Fusion and fusion—the local, contested genre and the practice of cultural mixing—to argue that the relationship between the practice and theory of Fusion grounded theories of hybridity with ethnographic detail.

Chapter three focuses on tensions in musical sound by examining performances during a cosmopolitan music festival named November Fest. I start with a musical analysis of two projects and locate the tensions in the music of specific performances to show how irresolution played an important role in Fusion's contestation. I also expand my analysis of those tensions to the ways they were amplified by the audiences and the festival's institutional patron. I address conflicting cultural politics associated with classical and popular music alongside competing agendas between middle class, Brahmin cultural elites and a cosmopolitan "new" middle class. Featuring a juxtaposition of various forms of Fusion and Indian and world musical traditions, the example of November Fest expands an analysis of the contestation of Fusion by addressing the involvement of the print media and audience participation.

Chapter four explores the concept of virtuosity in Fusion, in this example, one that was a part of a global network of improvisation-based music drawing from American and European jazz, rock, and Indian classical music. Based on my participant observation of John McLaughlin's recording session of his globally circulated, Grammy-nominated Fusion album *Floating Point*, I show how most professional musicians who performed Fusion relied on a caliber of musical virtuosity that North and South Indian classical music training provided in order to access the global circulation of the mass music industry. At the same time, the recording studio was also a nexus for complex power relations, resulting in a series of tensions that situated Fusion along cultural and regional axes of North and South India, Eastern and Western hemispheres, as well as amateur and professional musicians.

In the conclusion, I underscore the multiple ways these chapters are positioned in relation to each other and draw out the directional flows of musicians, recordings, and musical ideas that loaded Fusion with contestation. I argue that this contestation is central to understanding the

ways local musicians synthesized the changing economic and cultural dimensions of Chennai in the twenty first century and offer additional thoughts on more recent developments in the practice of Fusion in Chennai, as well as thoughts on its future.

## Chapter 1

### Not “Classical” and Always New: Fusion, Tradition, and History

In this chapter, I examine two overlapping tensions of Fusion that were crucial to its contestation. Musicians discussed the practice of Fusion in relation to two vital concepts in Indian music: “tradition” and history. As Henry Glassie has written, history, like tradition, is “an artful assembly of materials from the past” (Glassie 1995: 395). The creativity and intentionality that Glassie has evoked with his description helps illuminate how musicians used these concepts in discourse in relation to Fusion: their discourse was part of their artistry. The assertions and explanations as well as their retrenchments and silences all contributed to the contestation of Fusion. In this way, the tensions of Fusion were made through musicians’ discourse, but as I also show, the tensions were also resources for musicians. Musicians who performed Fusion “artfully assembled” their relationships to tradition and history by creating a dynamic and unresolved zone.

Poststructuralist critiques from the disciplines of folklore and anthropology about tradition as “interpretive processes” and the “invention” of tradition (Handler and Linnekin 1984, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Anderson 1991, Herzfeld 1982) provide a foundation for my understanding of the concepts of tradition and history.<sup>10</sup> After a brief summary of these ideas, I draw more from the recent work of scholars who have shown the complex ways this artful assembly has worked in Indian classical music. While this recent work extends the concepts of tradition and history in regionally specific ways that are compatible with this topic, Fusion also

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<sup>10</sup> For the rest of the dissertation, I will leave out the quotation marks around tradition but still wish to evoke the critique that follows, even when musicians and interlocutors used the word uncritically.

presents a contemporary set of incongruities with this music scholarship because as a contested musical practice, it was ambiguously situated between “classical” and popular musical practices. Local discourse established Fusion as not “traditional,” but also inseparable from the practices of “traditional” Karnatic musicians, young and old. Musicians acknowledged the Fusion projects of older generations of classical musicians, but revised history by casting Fusion as emergent with few, if any, causal connections to these past projects. I show how musicians performed these varying interpretations of tradition and history in discourse and as a result, helped endow Fusion with contestation. Before I describe how these tensions worked during my fieldwork, I first detail the contributions from scholars that have written about the intersections between tradition and history in order to contextualize how I situate Fusion in contemporary Chennai.

#### Tradition and History: From “Invented Traditions” to Indian “Classical” Music

The body of literature identifying “invented traditions” was influential in the ways it showed tradition to be dynamically integrated into the realm of culture and power (Handler and Linnekin 1984, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Anderson 1991, Herzfeld 1982). One powerful critique emerged from these studies that identified the rift they caused between “white researchers” and “indigenous scholars” (Briggs 1996: 436). According to Charles Briggs, the indigenous scholars argued that the white researchers robbed those for whom tradition is a crucial way of establishing claims to cultural identity and property (Briggs 1996). The notion of “invented tradition” seemed to draw more attention to the legitimacy of tradition than to showing the cultural work of tradition, and arguments over the authenticity of tradition prevailed. Marilyn Ivy (1995) has shown the fallacy involved with the common response to this predicament of authenticity, which was to assert that all tradition was invented. “To say that all tradition is

invented is still to rely on a choice between invention and authenticity, between fiction and reality, between discourse and history” (Ivy 1995: 21). Amanda Weidman (2006) has taken up Ivy’s critique to show how India and the West were both involved with the formation of South Indian classical music as a continually evolving project: “It [the idea of an “invented tradition”] forces one to separate what is traditional from what is imported, to see things in terms of an imposition of Western concepts and ideas onto indigenous musical material. In fact, the institution of classical music in South India—not only discourse about it but the very sound and practice of the music—has been produced in and through the colonial encounter” (Weidman 2006: 9).

Scholarship on Indian “classical” music written in the twentieth century has focused heavily on the concepts of tradition and history.<sup>11</sup> A recent turn in this literature marks the incorporation of both poststructuralist approaches to tradition and postcolonial approaches to writing history. Three monographs in particular have revealed how Indian elites used these concepts to establish ideologies that became tools of nationalism (Weidman 2006, Bakhle 2005, Neuman 2004). These scholars have focused on the ways that music making, the notion of the “classical,” and competing visions of the role of music in early twentieth century projects of nationalism intersected.

Janaki Bakhle has written a history of North Indian classical music that has tied together important figures in music history to the contradictions of colonial modernity, thereby dispelling contemporary assumptions that Hindustani music has remained unaffected by colonialism. She

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<sup>11</sup> A selection of this body of literature includes Agarwala (1975); Arunachalam (1989); Chakraborty 1992; Desai 1973; Deshpande, 1973; Deva 1979, 1980; Fyzee-Rahamin 1970; Kuppaswamy and Hariharan 1984; Joshi 1963; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Keskar 1957; Khan 1988; L’Armand and L’Armand 1978; Menon 1999; Pesch 2009 [1999]; Raghavan 1969; Sambamoorthy 1982; Veer 1986; Wade 1979.

has shown how Indian music became understood as “classical” by focusing on two individuals who had radically opposing visions of how to make this music modern. The first, V. N. Bhatkhande, ultimately failed to achieve his vision, but in the process impacted generations of musicians by advocating for a secularized, rational, and theoretical approach to musical pedagogy. The second, V. D. Paluskar, succeeded but at a significant cost of religious exclusion that forecasted late twentieth century sectarianism. By framing her book around a contrast of approaches and personalities, Bakhle has written a history that accentuates a disjunctive and contradictory portrait of early twentieth century Hindustani music that would change as the century progressed into a romantically oversimplified notion of Indian tradition.

Bakhle has shown this most effectively in her chapter on the role of the musicians in the nineteenth century princely court of Baroda in the northern state of Gujarat; her conclusions are sharp contrasts from more contemporary nostalgia-infused celebrations of this patronage era. Addressing other historical accounts of this period and also writing against the present tendency to valorize Indian classical music as unscathed by colonial modernity, Bakhle has criticized the role that tradition played in the writing of music history: “In these narrative accounts, nostalgia is deployed solely to criticize the modern character of contemporaneous circumstances combined with a valorization of an unchanging ‘tradition.’ That this revered tradition was always located either somewhere else, or in a time ‘before,’ only makes clearer the extent to which it was real only in its critical function with respect to the present” (Bakhle 2005: 35). While Bakhle has effectively historicized these takes on tradition, she has not accounted for what other factors may have influenced this present-day nostalgia for tradition. Indian classical tradition has been molded not just by the historical factors she has argued for, but also by the musical practices that have continued to be excluded from the idea of a canonical Indian tradition. I show how Fusion,



as nontraditional musical practice, brought the idea of Indian tradition into relief and was complicit in helping to establish the purity of Indian classical music.

In her account of colonial modernity in the princely court, Bakhle has shown how distinctions of musical difference along the lines of religion, region, and language became sedimented later in the twentieth century. Her evidence has revealed the dynamics of this court patronage system as one with a simultaneous heterogeneity of musical and cultural interaction that dispels any present-day notions of a traditional purity or timeless “classical” Indian essence: “Baroda was colonial, modern, and feudal all at the same time. Attention to these constitutive contradictions explains how and why Maula Baksh [the main subject of her chapter] could envision a school for North Indian music based on his musical education in South India and still conjure up a musical curriculum that could include the teaching of the violin, training in baritone singing, the piano, and clarinet” (Bakhle 2005: 48). The contradictions of colonial modernity yielded the formation of North Indian music as traditional and national. The irony is that a period of colonial, modern, and feudal influences ended up producing a musical practice that is now revered as a pre-modern tradition uninfluenced by colonialism.

If Bakhle has focused more on the elites who refashioned Hindustani music as a national, classical tradition, Dard Neuman has emphasized the roles of musicians in this transformation. Neuman has detailed various ways that musicians have consistently incorporated contemporary sounds and as a result crossed musical boundaries often understood and constructed as inflexible. As it concerns this study of Fusion in Chennai, Neuman’s study has provided evidence that the mixing of musical boundaries in contemporary Hindustani music is clearly not just a recent effect of liberalized India. Rather, he has extended his father's work on the adaptability of musicians (Neuman 1990 [1980]) by showing how musicians wove outside influences into

various modes of their improvisations while also partaking in the discourses of tradition: “The socio-musical transformations occurred rather through craft-based forms of incorporation and creativity as well as craft-based narrative structures that, even as they projected an ethic of purity, always left room for creative ‘impurities’” (Neuman 2004: 28).

Neuman has gone even further than his father and other scholars by suggesting that Hindustani music involves the process of hybrid music making, even though hybridity has never been an explicit goal. Rather, the act of negotiating hybridity with purity was a constant and transformative process: “Creativity occurred not just through the sheer fact of hybridity but also through the constant redrawing the provisional boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, purity and impurity” (Neuman 2004: 28).

In his chapter on the performance practices of ragas, he elaborated on how the practice of Hindustani music is situated between hybridity and purity:

It was neither the fact of purity nor the process of hybridity that opened spaces for innovation, but rather the movement that occurred between the two constructed and provisional zones. Just as a performance of a raga becomes rapturous as it moves into unsuspecting areas, innovations in the repertoire sparked fascination when they crossed between thresholds of rules and regularities on one side, and daring infractions and incorporations on the other side. Conventions had to be established to be broken and it was from within those interstitial zones that productive innovations took place (Neuman 2004: 336).

Newman has identified that creative zone in Hindustani music where musicians required open and inclusive approaches to their craft-based musical practices in order to remain employed musicians and relevant voices of North Indian culture. He has pointed out that the more orthodox *gharanas* that were adverse to these approaches eventually dissipated while the more heterodox *gharanas* enjoyed longevity, showing how these open and inclusive approaches were actually crucial to the livelihood of the musicians and the continued relevance the music. In his portrayal of musicians, Neuman has struck a convincing balance between acknowledging the negotiation

of hybridity *along with* their continuation of the tradition, never privileging one over the other.

He has concluded his study where this project about Fusion begins:

The traditions of craft therefore do not refer just to the passing on of hereditary material but also to training-rituals that prepare the student...to absorb the material of the age in constructive and creative ways...These craft-based practices enabled the musician to incorporate sounds of the always shifting age not by some sheer intellectual process of hybridity or fusion...but rather by “monotonous,” “pointless,” and “boring” marches and walks into those sounds...The ustad participates in history, then, not by isolating himself from the world and composing a traditional art form, but rather by immersing himself in the world and crafting traditions (Neuman 2004: 453-454).

Newman's distinction between “the sheer intellectual process of hybridity or fusion” and crafting tradition is important. From his perspective, Hindustani musicians have struck a balance between musical hybridity and orthodox tradition. But what does it say when Karnatic musicians actually did call attention to the intellectual processes of hybridity?

In this chapter (and even more directly in chapter two), I look at the ways the practice of Fusion brought out this opposition between hybridity and purity, or Fusion and classical Indian tradition. If Bakhle has shown how the contemporary idea of tradition in Hindustani music was paradoxically born from the contradictions of colonial modernity and Neuman has shown how musicians’ practices themselves are syntheses of maintenance and incorporation, Weidman has further added to this corpus of literature that reframes the ways that tradition and history can be understood in relation to Indian classical music. One of her many contributions to this project is her critical use of the description of Karnatic music as “classical.”

The concept of Karnatic music as “classical” music necessitates as much context as the concept of tradition.<sup>12</sup> Drawing from Weidman (2006: 5 and throughout), I refer to Karnatic music as classical music in order to accentuate a central tension that defines contemporary

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<sup>12</sup> As with tradition, I’ll omit the quotation marks around “classical” for the rest of this dissertation, but still wish to invoke the critique that follows.

Karnatic music: the extent to which “the West” has influenced the way Karnatic music is understood as “Indian.” On the one hand, the elites that fashioned Karnatic music as a classical tradition in the early twentieth century worked hard to distinguish it from Western music in order to make it heard, produced, and constructed as distinctly Indian. On the other, adopting the word “classical” for Karnatic music did not refer to a historical period (such as the classical era of Western music) but was used as “a marker of cultural status and authenticity whose original referent was...the West itself” (Weidman 2006: 5). Even though it is intended as marking off a realm of Indian tradition that has been untouched by Western influence, the frequent description of Karnatic music as “South Indian classical music” therefore also captures the central tension of Fusion: the contested boundaries of what is “Indian” and “Western.”

The perception and promulgation of tradition as an unchanging object must be understood as serving the desires of the present, tied as they are to historically continuous and changing narratives of nationalism, race, gender, caste, and class. Rather than perpetuating tradition and modernity as a reified binary opposition, I understand my interlocutors’ uses of tradition as not opposed to, but folded into the condition of modernity in India through the practices of music making. So in discourse, when tradition was positioned as opposed to modernity, this positioning was a strategy of negotiating processes of purification and hybridization and this positioning has been, and still is, a distinctly modern phenomenon (Bauman and Briggs 2003).<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, this work on classical music has qualified Indian tradition as a zone of cultural maintenance and transformation, one that falls between a product of the Western

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<sup>13</sup> I elaborate on the specific ways that Fusion highlighted the processes of hybridity and purification in Chapter Two.

colonial encounter and a pure Indian essence.<sup>14</sup> It is this productive space, this qualification of heterodoxy in specifically Indian ways that provides the opening for the problems, the contestation, and rich meanings of Fusion.

While Fusion was contested and problematic, it never posed a threat to Karnatic music's authoritative cultural essence: Karnatic music remains a thriving form of music making because of a vast institutional network of support that continues to grow and change as part of a world-wide practice of Indian expressive culture. As Regula Qureshi has written: "Dominant culture and its ideology are inevitably implicated in the study and practice of art music. In turn, such involvement in art music powerfully envelops the participant within the bounds of that culture and ideology" (Qureshi 2000: 20). Even though this project is not a study of Karnatic music, the practice of Fusion was inextricable from discourses of classical tradition in South India. The practice of Karnatic music was immune to critiques of tradition as an interpretative process because most musicians would agree wholeheartedly with this idea even as they would (paradoxically) also perpetuate tradition as static and unchanging. As a musical practice so effectively linked with the Indian nation through mostly middle class Brahmin elites, it is thoroughly institutionalized as Indian tradition.

This, however, does not preclude the important need to portray those for whom tradition as an object to be guarded and maintained was such an important structuring concept. Indeed, one central goal of this chapter is to describe a group of people who share roughly similar ideas relating to the maintenance of Indian tradition: a habitus I refer to as the Karnatic music

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<sup>14</sup> Other contributions to this field of scholarship include Subramanian (2006; 2009), Peterson and Soneji (2008); and Wolf (2009). Also, Knight (2010) implicitly extends this approach through a biographical example of tradition as modernity in the Bharata Natyam dancer T. Balasaraswati.

establishment.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, I present stories and incidents from my fieldwork that demonstrate the varied perspectives that constitute this habitus in order to establish the tensions of Fusion in Chennai. Therefore, the curtain of this dissertation opens intentionally on the Karnatic music establishment, specifically on how it provides varying “artful assemblies” of tradition and history that constitute the tensions of Fusion both inescapably from within the place-based music and cultural politics of Chennai *and* the ways these politics are built in and through the postcolonial discussions of “Indian” and “Western” culture.

I organize this chapter in two parts. In part I, I show the ways that Fusion was conceptually and thematically inextricable from the practice of Karnatic music even as musicians and audiences maintained Fusion as oppositional to Indian “tradition.” I argue that the practice of Fusion became contested when musicians accomplished one of two opposing strategies: 1. when some musicians perpetuated the distinction between hybridity and tradition by turning Fusion into the space outside of tradition and 2. when other musicians blurred the lines between hybridity and tradition, thereby uniting them and collapsing the differences between them.

In part II, I look at the topic of history as one of the crucial tensions that shows how decades of historical precedents existed alongside the construction of newness that allied Fusion with the “new” India. In particular, I show how the interpretation of history played an important role in maintaining the contestation of Fusion.

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<sup>15</sup> The Karnatic music establishment can be thought of as a habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) because it organizes a certain history through a group of individuals who are linked through a homologous relationship that, through a web of interconnecting social and musical relationships, centers on the practice of Karnatic music: “Sociology treats as identical all biological individuals who, being the products of the same objective conditions, have the same *habitus*. A social class (in-itself)—a class of identical or similar conditions of existence and conditionings—is at the same time a class of biological individuals having the same *habitus*, understood as a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings” (Bourdieu 1990:59).

## Part I: Tradition and the Karnatic Music Establishment

Indian classical music has stuck to its roots and characteristic identity uninfluenced by alien cultures (N. Ravi 2002 [1999]: iii).

In fact, the institution of classical music in South India—not only discourse about it but the very sound and practice of the music—has been produced in and through the colonial encounter (Weidman 2006: 9).

In this part, I begin with an important event during my fieldwork that demonstrates how Fusion and Karnatic music were conceptually, thematically, and dialectically linked. Because most musicians in Chennai who performed Fusion trained as Karnatic musicians, and most of the performance venues and musical structures in Fusion were based on those established by Karnatic musical practices, Fusion in Chennai was dependent on the practice of Karnatic music. When I refer to the “Karnatic music establishment” henceforth, I intend to foreground a heterogeneous habitus organized around the maintenance and perpetuation of Indian tradition. My use of the phrase includes people who subscribe to this classical ideology and is neither entirely inclusive of Karnatic musicians nor exclusive of musicians who perform Fusion.

### The Brhaddhvani Interview

To avoid rush hour traffic, four distinguished musicians and I spent the very early part of the morning traveling to and from the verdant and scenic Theosophical Society for a brief photo shoot. We didn’t realize it at the time, but one of those photos would later take up most of the front page of the arts section in the local English daily newspaper, *The Hindu*. [SCAN PHOTO AND INCLUDE] Sri Karraikkudi Subramaniam, Sri Trichy Sankaran, David Reck, Eero Hämeenniemi, and I had gathered for a group interview conducted by Lalithaa Krishnan, a music journalist from *The Hindu*. The subject of her interview was Fusion. As we stood around in the cool early morning waiting for the photographer, storytelling and laughter helped establish an

amiable social dynamic that would last throughout the morning. It occurred to me then, and an hour later in one of Brhaddhvani's recording studios when our interview began, how privileged I felt to be among such an exceptional group of musicians, composers, and scholars.

Each of the participants had his or her own relationship with Fusion. At the time, Trichy Sankaran, a widely respected *mrdangam vidwan* (master of the barrel-shaped drum used in Karnatic music), had been based in Toronto, Canada for over three decades teaching in the music department at York University. He had visited Chennai each year for the December concert season. Since moving, Sankaran had been active in Fusion. He recorded and performed with a range of Western musicians, such as David Rosenboom, Vijay Iyer, and Rudresh Mahanthappa; as well as with a Javanese gamelan. He had also been commissioned as a composer by the Vancouver Intercultural Community Orchestra. Eero Hämeenniemi, a Finish composer and Associate Professor of composition at the Sibelius Academy, had been involved with incorporating ideas from Karnatic music into his compositions for several years with his Finnish jazz band, Nada, as well as with other commissions. One of his projects at the time was a composition that featured Karnatic vocalist Bombay Jayshree that would later be premiered in Helsinki. David Reck, a composer, ethnomusicologist, retired professor of music from Amherst College, and performer of the South Indian *veena*, had been deeply involved with South Indian musical performance since the 1960s. The interview was hosted and recorded by Sri Karraikkudi Subramaniam, a *veena* master from the Karraikkudi school, a renowned teacher, and the director of the Brhaddhvani institute and school with which I was affiliated during my fieldwork.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I remain grateful for Subramaniam's invitation for that interview. Even though I had performed Karnatic music and, as a jazz saxophonist, had incorporated some melodic and rhythmic elements of Karnatic music into my own music, my experience with Fusion was by no means comparable with the others in the room that day.



The interview was a unique opportunity for me to be a part of a serious conversation with experienced musicians, composers, and scholars about the many musical and cultural dimensions of Fusion. I was also excited because this gathering brought together a varied group in the name of Fusion, something I realized was unusual during just my third month of fieldwork. Already, I had observed that Fusion concerts took place only semi-frequently in venues scattered around the city, and that there was really no Fusion “scene.” I therefore realized that such a gathering was extremely rare, so I looked forward to it as an opportunity to explore, question, and document these musicians’ perspectives on Fusion. When we were all seated, I set up my recorder in the middle of the room after receiving permission from the participants. The fact that there were three different recordings of this conversation happening at once—Brhaddhvani’s, in order to document the interview for its archives; Lalithaa Krishnan’s, to later assist her writing of the article; and mine—only added to the excitement in the room.

Subramaniam got us off to a particularly provocative start. He asked a series of questions to prepare us for his intended themes of the conversation.<sup>17</sup> His questions addressed significant themes I had observed as pertinent to Fusion: definitions of the practice, the potential for conflict with South Indian musical tradition, and questions about its novelty.

### Karnatic Tradition

After the microphones were tested and the recording had begun, Lalithaa Krishnan chose a different theme. She started by asking the foreigners in the room—Hämeenniemi, Reck, and myself—about our backgrounds in Karnatic music. “What brought you to Karnatic music?” “Who did you study with?” And even more specifically, “How did you break down the

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<sup>17</sup> See the introduction for the full quotation.

complexities of Karnatic music into learning about melody (*raga*) and rhythm (*tala*)?” (Lalithaa Krishnan 12/7/06).

After our brief answers, she turned to Sankaran and Subramaniam and asked about their relationships to tradition. First, she addressed Sankaran and offered her perspective on Karnatic tradition, followed by a very specific question:

For a lot of us tradition is [for] those of us that are lucky enough to learn from gurus. We know the meaning of that because in some way the tradition is a part of our lives. But for a lot of other children who are learning now, tradition is...it's only hearsay. They've heard that these practices are there, that these things have been observed. But for you, it's been a way of life, living with your guru, being in the *gurukulavasam*. Can you tell us from the point the view of how it is to be reconciled today? That is, you had a very self-effacing approach. Your guru was everything. But today the confidence is equated with self-projection.

It's very difficult to explain to these children what we see now is not the external trappings of tradition. But when it comes to this attitude of respect, which has to come from within—this and this have to go together. Now how is the younger generation to learn about this and how do we find a middle part between going along with commercial stream and knowing what tradition is and paying respect to it (Lalithaa Krishnan 12/7/06)?

Lalithaa Krishnan began a group interview about Fusion with questions that addressed central issues about tradition in Karnatic music. In this excerpt, she revealed significant features of her concept of Indian tradition. Tradition was something to be defined and respected. She set up an opposition between the “commercial stream” and the traditional values with which she defined Karnatic music by invoking the ideals of the *gurukulavasam* system.<sup>18</sup> Most importantly, her question framed this opposition without suggesting that any compromise might be possible.

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<sup>18</sup> In this system of education, students live with their gurus and provide for their everyday needs. The ideal model of *gurukulavasam* is one that unites the transmission of music, everyday life, and human relationships. Music is imparted to the *sishyas* through a relationship of humility and respect that they learn by serving their gurus. Music therefore resides in this day-to-day relationship between *guru* and *sishya*, and is not something that can exist apart from it. See Neuman (1980: 48-58) for a detailed description of this relationship among Hindustani musicians

Sankaran acknowledged and accepted Lalithaa Krishnan's perspective by emphasizing his ideals of *gurukulavasam*:

The *gurukulavasam* system is the best way to learn...I was fortunate. Of all the disciples of my guru Palani Sri Subramania Pillai..., [he took] me to many concert platforms and I performed in tandem with him. [He took me to] GNB's concert in 1958...Of course I was sweating bullets, but just on the day of the concert and checking the *mrdangams* and he [Sankaran's guru] said, "why don't you play with me today." And I cannot ask him, "Sir, what kind of *tani avartanums* are you going to play today," or "what kind of *mora*, what kind of *korvai* are you going to play today." Nothing. I have to really prepare myself to face anything that will happen there that day. So that was of course, very dreadful. It was really something. I can't comprehend in words. That's the essence of *gurukulavasam* system. Of course you are staying with *guru* and tending to all his needs that's a part of it. I think a good student will observe what a *guru* does. That's the essence of the *gurukulavasa* system (T. Sankaran 12/7/06).

Sankaran's brief account of his experience with *gurukulavasam* grounded Lalithaa Krishnan's portrayal of tradition with a lived history that was filled with a clear and colorful reality. In his story, communication was trumped by respect, which in turn, demanded musical preparation and competence. It is possible that as a musician who has lived in Canada for a few decades, Sankaran reflected on *gurukulavasam* with an additional nostalgic patina—glossing it with a tinge of romanticism that only a senior musician looking back over the years and across the hemisphere could create; however, all in the room were moved by his powerfully credible portrayal of it. He brought us to that real world of musical learning by living and sharing music with his guru and by doing so, contrasted his experience with the often lamented present-day, more school-based, multi-guru standard of education. His story demonstrated this contrast in a way that abstract laments about the loss of tradition could not accomplish.

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and Weidman (2006: 3; 246) for a description of how *gurukulavasam* is discursively used as a pre-modern essence of Indian tradition.

Sankaran then finessed his articulation of the essence of *gurukulavasam* by accenting it with a concern for present-day realities. These realities nuanced Lalithaa Krishnan's portrayal of the problem just enough to offer a slight but significant amendment to her position:

As we talked about, things have changed over a period of time... Blame [it] on social conditions, students not being able to find time to spend with their *guru*... I was telling David [Reck] earlier, my *guru* asked me to discontinue my school education and just live with him but again I wouldn't ask that [of my students] today. Only after insistence from my father, my *guru* agreed to send me to the college, and those were the days. So these days it was rather hard to demand to such a relationship between the *guru* and the student (T. Sankaran 12/7/06).

Sankaran here acknowledged an incompatibility between *gurukulavasam* and contemporary music culture in Chennai. In doing so, he implicitly offered a question that highlighted this incompatibility: who wouldn't want to maximize the number of employment options for their child? Only after Sankaran's father intervened was he allowed to attend college, possibly a crucial step that enabled his future employment in Canada. In his response, Sankaran both underscored the belief in tradition as an object of cultural essence that should be maintained and respected and as a process of change intertwined with "social conditions."

Lalithaa Krishnan then asked a slightly different version of the same question to Subramaniam:

You have lived this aspect called tradition. It is a part of your life. It is not just some concept that the present generation talks about or hears about... And also because of all the developments, the fast pace of life which is there nowadays, it's very difficult to explain this concept to them. So how would you define tradition? Now, today there is so much self-projection. The media is also a part of it... And the press also plays it up. So how do you advise the children of today? How do you explain this concept of tradition to them (Lalithaa Krishnan 12/7/06)?

In this framing of her question about tradition, Lalithaa Krishnan articulated a problem for herself as a journalist—what she understood as a conflict of interest between reporting on individual musicians and contributing to the media's "self-projection." She used "fanfare" and

“self-projection” as terms that linked contemporary musicianship with a business acumen that she apparently associated with the present generation. These terms described the competitive field of Karnatic music as they also criticized it, implicitly romanticizing a previous era unfettered by such material needs. Here, she subtly identified her ideological positioning that would later emerge in her article: she would not praise musicians who performed Fusion with celebratory fanfare and “self-projection,” but portray Fusion as stemming from tradition.

Subramaniam responded by stating that his musical roots lay within the Karnatic tradition. In his case, his training also took place in a local school deemed by many to be rooted in traditional musical values, even if it wasn’t exclusively one-on-one *gurukulavasam*:

Hardcore traditional musicians were all there in Kalakshetra...Even as a tradition[al] person, what I’m doing is related to my past. That was a very traditional atmosphere...That atmosphere gave me the idea...the tradition as a core...My education gave me a more in-depth idea of tradition...(K. Subramaniam 12/7/06).

Then, like Sankaran, Subramaniam also finessed this more static notion of tradition:

At the same time Kalakshetra was very forward looking...So I was questioning: What are we doing? Old or new? Is this new? Is this tradition? What’s new about the tradition? Can there be anything new about the tradition? So my mind was thinking along those lines (K. Subramaniam 12/7/06).

Subramaniam’s understanding of tradition accentuated flexibility and change without compromising what he experienced as the integral parts of Karnatic tradition. In my many long conversations with him over the course of my research, it became clear that in his school’s educational curriculum he highlighted certain aspects of the Karnatic aesthetic and theoretical system—sound, voice quality, rhythmic combinations and permutations—as ways to reach out to musicians from around the world. For him, tradition was more of a continual process of interpreting those elements from Karnatic music that could forge connections with musicians

unfamiliar with Karnatic music, as evident from the extended workshops with musicians such as saxophonist Steve Coleman and the Finnish composer Eero Hammeniemi.<sup>19</sup>

After Subramaniam finished, Lalithaa Krishnan further lamented the loss of Karnatic tradition by choosing a different point of entry, perhaps drawing from Subramaniam's question "what's new about tradition":

LK: There's another aspect here. This is [a] slightly delicate aspect when we're talking about tradition. We come to the question of artistic integrity... When you have been a part of a tradition, artistic integrity is something that doesn't need to be taught separately. Invariably it comes. It becomes a part of our system. That is, even when you're innovating you know the extent you are linked to the past and to what extent you're trying something new. And the most important thing is you know when to stop.

TS: Right.

LK: You know where to draw the line to maintain the dignity of the music... Nowadays the scenarios [are] such that everything goes and anything goes. That's because people who are experimenting don't have an idea of tradition. They may have even learned from a guru but they have not absorbed the philosophy of what really is tradition. Which means that they don't draw a line at where to stop (Lalithaa Krishnan 12/7/06).

Here, Lalithaa Krishnan's anxieties about the state of Karnatic music really came through. Even though she acknowledged innovation was a part of tradition, she emphasized that the most important thing about artistic integrity as a feature of tradition is "knowing when to stop." She characterized tradition as an object with bounded creative limits, as that quality in musicians that demonstrates restraint. Tradition was knowing what *not* to play.

Although Lalithaa Krishnan had not yet mentioned Fusion at all in this interview, which was supposedly about Fusion, her circumlocution provided an implicit and encapsulated critique of Fusion. Her expression of value judgments in the form of "integrity" and "dignity" gracefully

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<sup>19</sup> See Kalmanovitch (2008: 89-93) for a detailed description of Subramaniam's pedagogy that he named Correlated Objective Music Education and Training.

prescribed how to dismiss music outside the realm of Karnatic tradition. She did this swiftly and deftly, without ever identifying Fusion or what “non-traditional” music might sound like.

Sankaran reiterated her concern and also broadened it:

TS: My guru was the best example. I have seen his *tani avartanum* not applauded because he was so engrossed with his music...But [also the] art of accompaniment. [It] doesn't come in one day. It comes only through experience...Tradition is not stagnant. We always bring new things...If somebody's just reproducing what their master did, I don't think it would really stay long. Rather, this is exactly what I have experienced, what I have been told by my guru. Absorb. Learn. Absorb. Be your own. You have got to be more. If you really look at the masters they have established themselves...There is the Palghat Raghu style, Umalaypuram Sivaramen style, Trichy Sankaran style, Karaikkudi Mani style, because we have shown what individual artistry is.

LK: And that cannot come unless you are totally confident of the foundation.

TS: Exactly. That's what the foundation really gives. And then again it relates to my background and my living abroad and teaching in an academic institution and my experience with collaborations. And if I have diverted myself and if I have been successful in fusion music I would say it is because of my roots, stronger roots in my tradition (T. Sankaran and Lalithaa Krishnan 12/7/06).

Sankaran's powerful statement contained many balanced articulations of the Karnatic tradition that both reified and challenged Lalithaa Krishnan's more static notions of tradition. Sankaran mentioned the lack of applause for his guru's *tani avartanum* as a model of artistic integrity, implying that his guru's creative expression was derived from a dignified creativity impervious to the desires of his audiences. This distinguished art from entertainment and connected his guru's musical integrity to a romanticized tradition as pure and independent from popular influence.

Sankaran clearly valued Karnatic tradition both as a respectful framework to perpetuate the work of great musicians from the past and as the foundation for his version of Fusion, but he also accentuated the generational changes of tradition. Notably, he did this by quoting his guru. This implied that the notion of individual expression was not a result of static Karnatic tradition

becoming corrupted by outside forces. Rather, it was woven into *gurukulavasam* itself: becoming a master Karnatic musician involved much more than reproducing what he learned from his guru, just as it supposedly was for his guru's guru. His examples of the four most respected mrdangam *vidwans* or masters, who are well known for their individual styles, bolstered his point that exceptional musicians are individual manifestations of tradition, and that these *vidwans* are as admired for their own innovative contributions as they are for continuing their gurus' legacies.

And yet interestingly, three of the four musicians he cited as examples were performers of Fusion. At the time this point went unexamined, but in retrospect, it gave his response to Lalithaa Krishnan's question a tense implication. If these were the unanimous traditional masters of Karnatic percussion and most of them performed Fusion, were they examples of musicians who "know when to stop?" Did Sankaran consider himself one of those musicians? He began referring to his Fusion projects by saying "if I have diverted myself," which suggested that he thought of Fusion as a potential diversion from Karnatic music and even valued Fusion less than Karnatic music. He also connected his Fusion experience to living abroad, and then ended his thought by reassuring us that his success in Fusion was because of his "stronger roots in tradition."

But most significantly, Sankaran answered Lalithaa Krishnan's questions about the dignity of tradition by mentioning Fusion. This was the first direct reference to Fusion in almost an hour during an interview supposedly all about Fusion. I remember thinking at that point, "Finally, we're going to talk about Fusion." While some present that day might argue that the first hour of the Brhaddhvani interview might have meandered towards issues exclusively related to Karnatic tradition and not Fusion, the intended topic of Fusion and the resulting newspaper



article show that these questions and responses were directly relevant to the topic of Fusion.

After all, Lalithaa Krishnan began the interview by asking Reck, Hämeenniemi, and myself to describe our Karnatic backgrounds—not Fusion—a way of questioning the authenticity of our relationships to Karnatic tradition.

The multiple voices in this interview, discussing and politely disagreeing about what constitutes Indian “tradition,” represent a discursive practice inherent to Fusion: the topic of Fusion made the tensions of tradition audible. Subramaniam and Sankaran, the two distinguished South Indian musicians, continually agreed with Lalithaa Krishnan that the idea of tradition was an object to protect, while they also included elements of change, innovation, and individual expression—in short, their own process-based interpretations. Even with their nuanced interpretations, the fact that the interview was focused more on the anxieties of loss than on understanding Fusion is central to understanding how the practice of Fusion was contested in Chennai.

Finally, Fusion...?

When the interview discussion shifted towards Fusion, I remember feeling uncertain that we were all talking about the same thing. Near the beginning of the interview, David Reck had mentioned that Fusion was “an interfacing of musical cultures” (Fieldnotes 12/7/06), and later Sankaran said: “to me the real fusion is the blending of cultures and what we can really give and take from each culture” (T. Sankaran 12/7/06). Since no one challenged this, it seemed as if we were in agreement that Fusion would be defined prescriptively, and that Fusion could include any musical style featuring musicians from different musical traditions. I remained silent but I felt uneasy about this, since I had already attended several explicitly named “Fusion”

performances featuring Indian musicians specializing in different combinations of Karnatic music, rock, jazz, and film music. Based on what I had heard at that early point in my research, it seemed that most of the Fusion happening in Chennai did *not* feature musicians from abroad. Perhaps the international mobility of the participants had some influence on their views.

Later, after describing the criteria for evaluating a performance of Karnatic music, Reck asked the group, “Are there parameters with which one can judge fusion?” Several minutes later, Reck and Sankaran seemed to resolve this question with Sankaran’s opinions that Fusion “shouldn’t be a hodgepodge, it should be meaningful” and that the music should be blended in a “proper way” with “proper aesthetics” (T. Sankaran 12/7/06). These were hardly the results of the deliberation and debates I anticipated. After the interview I felt enormously dissatisfied that I had lost a rare and valuable opportunity to mine some of the central themes of Fusion through these specialists’ experiences and some spirited debates. As far as I was concerned, I also felt that Lalithaa Krishnan had directed the interview away from any productive opportunity to learn more about Fusion, whether intentionally or not. Then, two weeks later, the article was published.

#### “Fusion in the Truest Sense”

Lalithaa Krishnan began her article with one of Sankaran’s stories to which she referred in the title: “As the mrdangam played jazz” (Krishnan 2006). The story she chose tells how Palani Subramania Pillai, Sankaran’s guru, performed in the All India Radio recording studios for the Dave Brubeck Quartet, which was visiting Madras on a U.S. State Department sponsored tour. In the article, this story provided a historical precedent for Fusion and also for Sankaran’s music. Months later, Sankaran told me this same story during a one-on-one interview and

concluded it by saying: “Then, when I had a chance to play [Fusion], it was a premonition that happened here in India with my master, which I am doing now, you know” (Sankaran 3/23/07). His guru’s experience performing Fusion provided a kind of guiding example that, for Sankaran, was sanctioned by the practice of *gurukulavasam*.

Under the subheading “Fusion defined,” Lalithaa Krishnan’s article gave a verbose but empty definition:

When East meets West in a musical dialogue, the resulting blend of melody and harmony, emotion and intellect, improvisation and composition constitutes fusion in the truest sense (Krishnan 2006).

After brief biographical descriptions of the participants, she continued with a portrayal of both Sankaran’s and Subramaniam’s understandings of tradition that was faithful to our group conversation. However, she ended the article with what she positioned as our unanimous critique of Fusion:

But today, with even fledgling musicians hopping onto the fusion bandwagon to produce an anything-goes admixture, isn’t fusion better left to senior musicians? “Ideally, yes,” concur the artistes. “Their maturity reflects experience and constant internalization.” As Sankaran sums up, “Fusion should not become confusion. The artiste should know what he is doing and why. This is only possible if his foundation is rock-solid and his ideas are rooted in tradition. The bottom line for meaningful fusion is discipline, responsibility and aesthetics (Krishnan 2006).

Leaving aside the ethics of inventing a quotation that we were all supposed to have said simultaneously, the article’s conclusion represents our conversation as one in which we unanimously discouraged amateur projects of Fusion, or in the context of the preceding section of the article, any Fusion project not “rooted in tradition.” This conclusion troubled me. Just about three months into my fieldwork, I was concerned that amateur musicians would read the article, feel excluded, and be unwilling to speak with me. I also felt I was just beginning to realize that musicians were calling a wide range of musical projects “Fusion,” most of which

overlapped with Karnatic music, but not all. But even then, I realized that the conclusion of this article stemmed from the author's and Sankaran's opinions more than those of others in that room.

Only after several months of dismissing this experience did I realize that it was enormously relevant to the practice of Fusion. The differences between what I was expecting, what we all said, how Lalithaa Krishnan conducted the interview, and what Lalithaa Krishnan wrote were examples of the multiple perspectives that continually constructed Fusion as elusive and contested. The multiplicity of ideas about Indian tradition opened up varying approaches to Fusion that gave the semblance of a uniform meaning, but actually involved very different ideas about the identity of Fusion in contemporary Chennai. This conversation and article provided a discursive example of an important tension surrounding Fusion, and one that has been inherent to musical practices in South Asia and around the world. Richard Wolf has argued that this tension permeates many of the region's musical practices:

In South Asia, performers and listeners continually rearticulate a tension, common to many performance traditions, between faithfulness to received versions of the past and aspirations to create something recognizably new... Performers disagree about what innovations are superficial or substantial, but they all strive to keep their arts alive, keep them new (Wolf 2009: 18).

This tension between faithfulness to the past and creative aspirations to innovate has been built into the ways in which musicians absorb the lessons of their teachers, remain attuned to their listening publics, and express their individual creative agency. This is a way of framing the concept of tradition that is so flexible in India and so crucially important to the understanding of how music is transmitted through generations of musicians. With regard to Fusion, this passage applies to the musicians I highlight in this dissertation and clarifies the ways they were all looking to create "new" music—whether from within or outside of Karnatic musical practices.

The Brhaddhvani interview shows how the Karnatic music establishment was made up of various perspectives regarding the maintenance and role of Indian musical tradition; perspectives that both encouraged and discouraged Fusion. The following examples demonstrate how the Karnatic music establishment also functioned as a force for exclusion and describe additional themes that emerged from tradition as a tension of Fusion.

### Universal Competence

The presence and authority of the Karnatic music establishment was observable whenever the topic of Fusion provoked a comparison between Karnatic music and the rest of the world's musical practices, not just Western music. I encountered the following perspective numerous times, but perhaps the most articulate expression of it during my fieldwork came from *mr dangam vidwan* Sri Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman. He was invited to speak at the CD release function of a local teenage Fusion band named Oxygen, and agreed to participate, perhaps because one of his students was the set drummer for the band. The conventions of such an event demanded some necessary rituals, such as garlanding and presenting shawls to the few special guests who then gave short speeches to honor the band and its new recording. Sivaraman was one of the master percussionists T. Sankaran mentioned as distinguished examples of individual style and tradition, and who also had a great deal of experience with Fusion. During his speech, he mentioned how advanced training in Karnatic music provides necessary skills for performing with musicians from all over the world.

So a highly traditional artist like me is participating in Fusion... You will really appreciate that we Karnatic musicians based mostly on tradition, we are also open to innovation. We are open to everything, we are open to rap, everything (audience clapped). Because I inform you if you learn and master Karnatic music... if you just master the melody and rhythm of Karnatic music you can really involve yourself in any type of music in the whole world (Sivaraman, Oxygen Release 2/10/07).

In Karnatic music, Sivaramen identified a comprehensive virtuosity that he believed was universally applicable. Even though Sivaramen was not alone in this opinion, this hyperbole shouldn't be taken to represent the Karnatic music establishment as a whole. But it does speak to a kind of insider pride of Karnatic tradition. During my undergraduate studies at Wesleyan University, I encountered this same opinion expressed by other college-aged jazz musicians. The widespread view in Chennai—that no other form of music was as complicated, varied, and theoretically deep as the systems of *raga* and *tala*—was exactly the same argument used by my jazz musician colleagues who believed that the harmonic and improvisational sophistication of jazz provided the same benefits. According to this shared perspective, the lifetime commitment to acquire musical proficiency in both of these musical practices eventually led to a kind of universal musical fluency.

But this perspective can also be seen as a way to justify musicians' desires to seek employment from performance markets that differ from their main genre of economic dependency and without compromising their allegiance to tradition. Musicians who invoked this idea of universal competence and who got hired by musicians outside of the practice of their training benefitted from a wider circulation of their names. This potentially could lead to more and better paid opportunities with Fusion. If successful, this could increase their earnings for performances in Karnatic music by attracting bigger audiences drawn by their international reputations for Fusion. Payments varied hugely, depending on the experience and reputation of the musician and the patron. But most Karnatic *kacceris* (concerts or recitals) paid much less than a corporate Fusion gig or a recording session with a Western music celebrity (see chapter four). "Universal competence" was one way to strategically avoid accusations of "selling out"

because it designated Fusion as the vehicle to demonstrate Karnatic sophistication and supremacy to the rest of the world, as well as to Chennai audiences. Since some regarded Fusion as a watered down version of Karnatic music, it was also a way of sharing the Karnatic tradition with the world. In this way, musicians used tradition as a kind of universally beneficial form of revenue: it established them as traditional musicians in India and abroad, which, ironically, made them more hireable for Fusion gigs. So in addition to the many meaningful and lived ways that the Karnatic music establishment maintained tradition as flexible and durable, as demonstrated by T. Sankaran and K. Subramaniam, musicians also used tradition as a kind of ideological smokescreen to obscure some of the present-day strategies of earning a living and becoming a better-known musician.

### Light and Heavy

Issues of prestige, reputation, and power emerged from other examples of the value judgments expressed by the Karnatic music establishment. Keyboardist Anil Srinivasan and vocalist Sikhil Gurucharan had a unique Fusion project during my fieldwork that became quite popular.<sup>20</sup> As a duo, they performed compositions from the Karnatic repertoire with keyboard accompaniment and called it “contemporary classical fusion.” During one interview, Srinivasan talked to me about how Gurucharan vetoed some choices of Karnatic compositions for their Fusion project.

AS: I can feel it [the criticism] because there are many times that he [Gurucharan] says “No I don’t want to do that piece because it’s too heavy.” Because he’s a little scared now of getting into...Of course there’s the whole political part of this that I’m not even getting into.

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<sup>20</sup> I describe Srinivasan, Gurucharan, and their project in more detail in Chapter Three when I analyze one of their performances during a cosmopolitan music festival in Chennai.

NH: Which is what?

AS: Which is he is getting criticized for becoming light. He's getting criticized...

NH: For doing this project?

AS: Yeah yeah yeah. Most of the Karnatic fraternity doesn't like this very much.

NH: Because?

AS: I'm perfectly aware of that.

NH: Because?

AS: Because...it doesn't stick to the Karnatic format which everybody—which is held as sacrosanct by many people.

NH: You're just not doing [a] Karnatic *kacceri*. Any way of tampering...I just want to hit this, nail this down. People always refer to the Karnatic establishment, the people that police this. But no one ever tells me who it is. Are these specific people or it this just sort of the imagined conservative...?

AS: I can put on record who's policing it. I think T. M. Krishna and Sanjay Subramaniam are these police for a lot of people. I think Umalayapuram (Sivaramen) does a lot of that...I mean I don't have axes to grind with any of these people. The first person I mentioned is my cousin.

NH: (nervous laughter) I know.

AS: But they all have taken this very literally. This is the *dharma*. This is the code, this sort of thing and you need to do this. At some level I don't think they even realize they are beginning to restrict the scope of what can actually happen. I don't know if it's coming out of a need to keep what you know as familiar and true sort of intact—I mean, let's not deal with unfamiliar things because let's at least focus on what we have and make that as good as possible—or is it just xenophobia to a large extent... There's a piece in [*raga*] *behag*: “Irukkam varaamai.” And I've heard Krishna sing it and I've heard Gurucharan sing it and I've heard (Bombay) Jayshri sing it, all in the space of the same day. And I like Gurucharan's version the best... Krishna dismissed Charan's voice as being too “light.” And so my question to him is, Who decides light? And who decides not light? Or heavy, or whatever?... And of course that whole concept of having one set of rules that work for anything is so weird. For anything (Srinivasan 11/30/07).



The descriptive terms “light” and “heavy” had particular uses in Chennai to map classical hierarchies onto vocal timbre, musical genres, and more general appraisals and criticisms.<sup>21</sup> The concept of “weight” functioned as a symbol of seriousness. The metaphorical gravity of musical sound was a way of describing its worth, endurance, and wealth—all essential components to perpetuating a classicized tradition. Calling Karnatic musicians “light” was therefore a criticism that distinguished them from more “traditional” musicians. “Light” could refer to a number of different factors, including the repertoire of light classical music in Karnatic music, or a light vocal timbre that was smoother and less harsh than the ideal vocal qualities for Karnatic musicians. One comparison was usually with film singers, who exemplified the light vocal timbre. As a younger singer, Gurucharan’s reputation was important and certain vocalists with heavier voices had much to gain by criticizing Gurucharan’s voice for lightness. Such a reputation can have an impact on a musician’s career, impacting which *sabhas* might hire him or her, and what recordings he or she might be asked to make. The criticism of “light” music or a “light” voice drew lines between classical and non-classical genres, and also delineated different styles within Karnatic music as less or more classical.

On the other hand, a “lighter” voice, because of its associations with a wider popular appeal, was a more appropriate choice for Fusion when it featured the voice at all. As much as this categorization was a tool used by the Karnatic music establishment to maintain aesthetic and economic control over what “classical tradition” should be, Gurucharan’s “lighter” voice was probably one of the main reasons for the success of his Fusion with Srinivasan. They performed their rhythmically restrained and romantic renditions of Karnatic music for many private parties and other venues that were mostly outside of the Karnatic music performance infrastructure

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<sup>21</sup> For thorough analyses of “high” and “low” culture see Levine (1988) for a study focusing on the U.S. and Bourdieu (1984) for one in Europe.

(discussed in greater detail in chapter three). Criticisms of “light” voices were also possibly jealous and self-interested responses resulting from changing demands of voice timbre that Fusion provoked.<sup>22</sup>

## Part I Summary

The concept of tradition formed an integral part of the tensions of Fusion. The examples above show the complex ways that musicians positioned Fusion in relation to Karnatic music. As seen through the Brhaddhvani interview, the discourse of universal competence, and the criticisms of “light” music, the practice of Fusion brought many of the debates about Karnatic music as purely and exclusively “Indian” into the open. As with any political agenda of preservation, the regulators of tradition—in this case the Karnatic music establishment, but also Indian scholars, music critics, and Western ethnomusicologists—distill, freeze, and then romanticize certain aspects of music history for contemporary leverage.<sup>23</sup> And yet as the preceding examples suggest, not only were these tactics of tradition sometimes unintentional, but they were also products of a colonial history complexly intertwined with the cultural politics of the West to which they were supposedly opposed. In other words, the self-conscious understanding of South Indian musical tradition as unique to South India and incommensurable with a Western orientation was actually co-constructed by Indian elites and colonial and ethnomusicological authors. The idea of tradition extended by the Karnatic music establishment was therefore actually made through the colonial encounter. This understanding of tradition has

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<sup>22</sup> Voice timbre in Karnatic music has been a subject of constant aesthetic debates in which the “crooner” is both reviled and heroized. See *Sruti* magazine for decades of this discussion in print.

<sup>23</sup> This idea also overlaps with literature that has focused on the cultural work of canonization (Goehr 1992, Weber 1999).

been passed down and inherited by today's Karnatic musicians and audiences, who have legitimately lived this understanding of tradition their whole lives. When the Karnatic music establishment placed Fusion outside of tradition, then, this move was as potently paradigmatic as it was tacitly contradictory, and it marked Fusion as contested.

Because the explicitly heterodox methods of Fusion could not be accommodated in the widespread notion of tradition, Fusion posed problems to the alliance between tradition, nationalism, and identity that was and has been a pillar of Indian classical music (Neuman 2004; Bakhle 2005; Subramaniam 2006, 2009; Weidman 2006). Fusion offered an example of how "Indian music" no longer could be determined by the nationalist implications of tradition in Chennai, but as a postcolonial transnationalism that complicated the time and place of when and where "Indian music" was made.

## **Part II: The Topic of History: Conferences, Patronage, and Historical References**

In the second part of this chapter, I show how the topic of history proved to be an important reason for the contestation of Fusion. A brief historical summary of Fusion helps to contextualize the contemporary practice of Fusion in Chennai.

Muttuswamy Dikshitar, one of a handful of the most celebrated Karnatic composers, incorporated the music of English colonial marching bands into his compositions in the early nineteenth century (Durga 2008). Another example of pre-independence Fusion, but outside of India, includes the Hindustani Airs of the nineteenth century (Farrell 1997). As I described in the introduction, post-independence Fusion drew from multiple musical practices including Hindustani, Karnatic, Western classical, jazz, and Western fusion. It spanned a vast number of projects encompassing a wide range of well-known musicians from India, Europe, and the U.S.

including Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Sri L. Subramaniam, Sri L. Shankar, Ustad Zakir Hussain, Sri Ramnad Raghavan, Sri T. A. S. Mani, Sri Kadri Gopalnath, Sri Karaikudi Mani, Sri Umalayapuram Sivaramen, Sri T. V. Gopalakrishnan, Yehudi Menuhin, Philip Glass, Stephane Grapelli, Bud Shank, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, John Handy, Don Ellis, Collin Walcott, Joe Harriott, John Mayer, John McLaughlin, Charlie Mariano, James Newton, Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, and the band Spiro Gyra. South Indian musicians have incorporated the violin, clarinet, mandolin, saxophone, and guitar into the Karnatic instrumental repertoire with varying degrees of acceptance.

Yet a genre history told as a teleological narrative of projects is forced to draw arbitrary lines around what is and is not considered Fusion. It also could imply a kind of interaction and mutual influence between these projects and misrepresent Fusion in Chennai, thereby distorting its relationship to South Indian musical life. Either way, such a genre history misses the potent meaning of Fusion in contemporary Chennai entirely and establishes Fusion as a “genre,” which leads to false assumptions about its sustainable maintenance, recognition, and boundaries.

Making sense of how musicians positioned themselves in relation to decades of post-independence Fusion, then, requires a different approach: the topic of history as it emerged in musicians’ discourse reveals another key facet to the tensions of Fusion. How did musicians explain their music in relation to historical precedents for their music?

As I showed in Part I through the examples of the Karnatic music establishment, some musicians emphasized a contrast between Fusion—as contemporary and distinctly not traditional—and Karnatic music—as a historically continuous Indian classical tradition. Some musicians didn’t just understand Fusion merely as comparatively new, but as an entirely recent musical practice contemporary with the national economic reforms from 1990s, and therefore a

direct result of the changes attributed to the “new India.” I describe Fusion as “always new” in order to intentionally direct attention to the contradictions between the omnipresence of musical mixing in South Indian history through the colonial encounter and the frequent declarations of Fusion as new in post-liberalized India. Fusion as “always new” also encapsulates the topic of history as part of the tensions of Fusion. I show how musicians casted Fusion as emergent and re-imagined in a way that complicated unilinear genre histories, such as the one above, that often imply causal effect and influence.

While the idea of Fusion as “always new” problematizes the relationship between the contemporary practice of Fusion and its history, this term does not mean that Fusion is without a history. Rather, the term is designed to draw attention to the problem that the topic of history posed for musicians with whom I spoke. “Always new” captures the predicament that musicians encountered when they talked about the history of a musical practice with (supposedly) no history. A close look at musicians’ historical references shows one way that musicians perpetuated Fusion as contested because their disparate references led to a range of tensions. By selecting and combining a wide range of historical references that they described for their Fusion, musicians participated in discussions about what was Indian and Western in the overlapping contexts of Fusion and South Indian classical music.

I first compare relevant themes that emerged from two music conferences, one from 1964 in New Delhi and the other from 2006 in Chennai, where musicians discussed both Fusion and Indian classical music. I temporarily leave the spatial-temporal boundaries of my ethnographic work in Chennai and highlight important themes discussed at a music conference from 1964 in New Delhi in order to compare it with a contemporary example of how musicians in Chennai negotiated the same issues. My intention is not to present any kind of comprehensive history of

musicians' discourse related to Fusion, but to juxtapose two public displays of this discourse from opposite ends of the roughly seven decades of post-independence India. Next, I look at prior generations of post-independence classical musicians who forged newer forms of patronage, thus changing the expectations for classical musicians in twenty-first century India and abroad with regard to Fusion. Lastly, I look at how musicians who performed Fusion historicized their music as “always new.” They asserted their originality as a necessary attribute of being professional, urban, cosmopolitan musicians in Chennai, while they extended the music and legacies of past Fusion projects.

At a T. V. Gopalakrishnan concert advertised as Fusion, I asked an audience member why he liked the music. He answered, “Because it’s new” (fieldnotes 11/30/07). His response does not just reference the tensions between an obvious set of historical precedents of Fusion and the willingness and need for contemporary musicians, audiences, and media institutions to cast Fusion as new—it is also intricately woven into the tensions of Fusion by expressing its “new” relationship between liberalized India and the world.

## Two Conferences

Music East and West, a music conference that took place in New Delhi in 1964, helps index some of the contentious issues facing the practices of Indian classical music in the 1960s that foreshadow the contemporary tensions of Fusion in Chennai. Roger Ashton collected and published the presentations from this conference, which gathered together prominent musicians, dancers, and scholars of North and South Indian classical music and Western scholars of Western and Indian classical music (Ashton 1966). The list of guests in attendance makes it clear that this was an event of significant prestige: Ustad Amir Khan, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Pandit

Ravi Shankar, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Prof. P. Sambamoorthy, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Palghat Mani Iyer, Smt. T. Balasaraswati, T. Viswanathan, Yehudi Menuhin, Dr. Alain Danielou, Dr. Mantle Hood, Dr. Robert Garfias, and various other Indian and European musicologists, festival directors, and politicians were present.<sup>24</sup>

There were four themes addressed over four days of presentations and concerts, the last of which was entitled “Traditional Music Facing Industrial Civilization.” This offered musicians and scholars a clear opportunity to express their anxieties about changes in musical patronage that were then affecting Indian musicians. It is not surprising that these presentations reveal a deep sadness and anxiety over changes in Indian culture, considering that the conference took place only seventeen years after India’s independence from Britain. Partly as a response to the recently formed independent state, Western and Indian participants were particularly unified in their unspoken agreements that Indian classical music represented the essence of the Indian nation even as they not surprisingly remained silent on the role that religious affiliation played in forging—or re-inventing—this connection (See Neuman 1980; Bakhle 2005; Neuman 2004). The subtext of the presentations is that the vitality and health of classical music was understood as the health and vitality of India. French ethnomusicologist Alain Danielou was particularly emphatic in expressing the mission of preservation to counter what he interpreted as the decline of Indian classical music.

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<sup>24</sup> In a conference on “Indian music,” the concentration of North Indian musicians is noteworthy. It is not clear why Karnatic music is so underrepresented, but it is possible to suggest this is an indication of 1960s views about Karnatic music’s comparative incommensurability with Western music and the resulting importance of the West’s validation that North Indian classical music tended to stand for Indian classical music as a whole. Despite Ravi Shankar’s overt qualifications at the conference that Indian classical music includes both Karnatic and Hindustani traditions, the vast majority of presentations show a different balance. This underrepresentation might also forecast the present-day construction of Karnatic music as potentially more traditional than Hindustani music, making this study of Fusion more controversial than a study of Fusion in North India.

Do not tell me the people of this land have been already so corrupted by the vulgarities of film music and commercial songs that nothing can be done to save an art which any nation would be proud to possess and that it may survive only if it is adapted to meet the requirements of modern mass media. This is not true and cannot be true. If mass media are used as a means to spread the lowest forms of a debased culture it is because they are too often in the hands of technicians and shopkeepers without any culture or any sense of their responsibility. The police interfere when they go too far toward degrading the moral standards of the people. Why do they not interfere with matters of artistic morality and standards?...What is needed is a consciously started counter-evolution, a guided evolution, that seeks the purity of types, of styles. It is only in that way that India may keep alive the source of musical inspiration for the future modernists of this and other lands” (Danielou 1966:15).

Danielou expressed an intense anxiety about the lack of relevance classical music had to Indian society in 1964. Indians must save Indian classical music, Danielou argued, which was threatened by an emerging national popular culture. The future vitality of classical music, and by extension, the Indian nation, must be wrested from the hands of cultureless “technicians and shopkeepers.” By championing elite classical audiences (and himself as a French ethnomusicologist) as guardians of the Indian nation and tradition, Danielou articulated one of the principle arguments against Fusion based on the false assumption of a pure tradition: Indians must strive to keep Indian classical music pure. He advocated for a program of restrictions and the scholarly endeavor of preservation. In doing so, his anxiety of loss and resulting mission of purification prevented any possibility of Fusion.

There were moments when Indian musicians supported his concerns with loss but with perspectives far less bounded by national borders, perhaps a subtle foreshadowing of more ambiguous relationships to Western musical, cultural, and political influence in the decades to come. T. Viswanathan’s presentation summarized technological changes that resemble present-day conflicted discourses of globalization. He included pronouncements of new musical relationships across national boundaries and expressed his position about such changes:



One noteworthy feature of mass production and consumption of music is growing tolerance of other musical systems. Hindustani music as also Western music is at a premium particularly in South India. Gramophone records and wireless have given us an idea of modern trends in other countries. The jet has made it possible for artists to move with ease from one hemisphere to another. Interchange of ideas is proceeding fast. A “white” bhagavatar elaborating the *raag* Sahana and that in the Tiruvadi Festival and a white danseuse maneuvering a *jatiswara* or a *tillana* (dance music) is an accomplished fact. The Mehtas in the world of Western music as performers and conductors, and Vanaraj Bhatia as a composer are celebrities. Under these circumstances is it possible for us to isolate ourselves? Today the slogan everywhere is “One World.” Here I am reminded of the anxious enquiries from abroad why harmony has not been interdicted in our system to enrich it. I should only like to say that my concept of One World is not an entity of monolithic unity but one with a rich vitality and variety of the many worlds that may, one day, be one independent diversity. The world has grown too small to permit the music of the East and the West to remain apart much longer. Unless we take necessary steps to educate our masses to appreciate our music, the suggestions of our friends from abroad, Indians and others, will sooner or later become a fait accompli (Viswanathan 1966: 189-190).

As did Danielou, Viswanathan argued that the Indian masses need to be educated about Indian classical music, but framed his point within a multidirectional model of cultural influence. The “one world” slogan touted a kind of global unity that preceded the “global village” trope of the 1990s and 2000s, but he made the differences in power dynamics clear: one world should not mean “harmonizing” Indian classical music. Even so, the first half of this excerpt could be read now as if he was mounting a defense of Fusion. Viswanathan seemed to acknowledge the increasing inevitability of Fusion while he also criticized certain Western perceptions of it. His statement concluded by expressing a fear of waning public support for the unique musical heritage of South India. Viswanathan called upon the conference guests to recognize and accept the changes associated with modernity and then followed this comment with an abrupt and ominous shift in tone—a direct call for music education to address the problems resulting from

these changes. Then, to accentuate this point even more, he spoke specifically to the Western scholars in attendance.

What can the West do for Indian music? In the first place, it has to create a confidence that scholars from the West would lead a crusade in the company of Indian scholars to prevent anything that would vitiate the individuality and the purity of Indian music (Viswanathan 1966: 190).

If Danielou located the responsibility of preservation with Indian cultural (and legislative) policy, Viswanathan located it in both Indian educational institutions and Western academia, and also provided a subtle advertisement for his abilities to carry this through. As the head of the music department at the Madras University from 1961-1966, Viswanathan was well-positioned for one of these jobs in a Western university. Thus, Danielou and Viswanathan's remarks must also be understood as political maneuvering towards the ideological positions that might play a role in helping their careers—with Danielou promoting himself to the Indian musicians as a Western elitist who supported the purification of Indian music and Viswanathan advertising himself as someone who could institute this mission in his pedagogy, both in India and in the West.<sup>25</sup>

But overall, Viswanathan's stance was radically different from Danielou's and these two examples offer a compelling contrast. Viswanathan as a significant musician and educator of traditional Indian music, had more unifying views in the 1960s than Danielou. At this conference, it was more "Western" than "Indian" to worry about the purity of tradition.

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<sup>25</sup> T. Viswanathan had already studied ethnomusicology at UCLA from 1958-1960 prior to his appointment as Head of the Music Department at the Madras University. After this position, he taught at UCLA, California Institute of the Arts, and Wesleyan University, where I studied with him and where he remained until his passing in 2002.

Ravi Shankar, whose musical collaborations later included George Harrison and Philip Glass, articulated the most relaxed position on the responsibilities of policing the boundaries between Indian and Western music. He even went so far as to suggest an Indian orchestra. “The time has come for us to take steps for the development of a first-rate classical orchestra which would be representative of our traditions and a credit to our country” (Shankar 1966: 164). Even though he would become more cautious during his work with the Beatles (Shankar 1968), the 1980 live recording that he composed, arranged, and conducted named *Jazz Mine: All that is Best from East and West* shows that this idea eventually resulted in a project of Indian classical and jazz musicians.

But Ravi Shankar also acknowledged the inevitable changes that awaited Indian music:

In the years to come, more and more will be demanded of the classical musician if he is to stay in the foreground. He must be careful to keep an open mind and yet not to sacrifice any of the vast store of wealth found within our music. Under the guise of creativity and experimentation many silly things will appear. Nevertheless, every iota of these experiences is a part of our learning processes. Let us hope that from these will emerge a musical product which will meet the needs of the modern world, improve our general standards of music and yet in no way encroach upon our glorious traditions (Shankar 1966: 165).

His idea that an “open mind” was not incompatible with Indian tradition cut sharply against the general tone of presentations on that day. In addition, he criticized the quality of projects formed in the name of creativity and experimentation and yet accepted them as necessary failures that would ultimately help move Indian classical music forward. His flexible approach encouraged creativity and experimentation with a cautious optimism and demonstrated an adaptability in Hindustani music (Neuman 1980) that folded Indian “tradition” into the larger experience of modernity. In this way, he opened up future possibilities of Fusion.

The conference theme that day—“industrial civilization”—was a way of both reifying and complicating national boundaries. On the one hand, Danielou, Viswanathan, and Shankar reinscribed Indian classical music as a symbol of the Indian nation, and highlighted what they understood as “national” music undergoing domestic transformations in the recently formed independent India. On the other, the Indian and Western musicians and scholars all debating how to purify Indian music was an example of the way in which the “classical purity” of music was actually an ideology that passed on from the period of colonial modernity intertwined with proto-nationalism (Bakhle 2005; Neuman 2004; Weidman 2006) and maintained in this 1964 conference. This conference therefore stands as an example of the transnational exchange of ideas about music and shows how discussions about Indian classical music hinged on the contested cultural and musical boundaries between India and the West. Through the theme of the vitality and longevity of Indian classical music, then, “Music East and West” provides a precedent for the tensions of Fusion in Chennai.

How did these themes play out in contemporary Chennai, and what was the contemporary imagination of that historical period? On November 20, 2006, prominent musicians from both North and South Indian classical music convened for a one-day symposium titled “Reaching Within: Music in an Age of Distraction” held at the Taj Connemara, a five star hotel in Chennai. The event was part of a week-long festival named “November Fest” that featured various forms of Fusion.<sup>26</sup> The symposium opened with a speech by N. Murali, then the President of the Music Academy and editor of the English language daily newspaper, *The Hindu*. He mentioned that during the previous year’s symposium musicians had discussed the globalization of Karnatic music and that experiments with Fusion were a natural corollary of that trend. Murali positioned

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<sup>26</sup> Chapter three provides a detailed analysis of November Fest—specifically the ways it brought together tensions in musical sound, India’s new middle class, and cosmopolitanism in Chennai.

the present gathering as “the other side” of that perspective and suggested that musicians should focus on themselves: “Imagination requires silence. Artists today: are they concert driven or art driven?” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). He also asked, “While a new challenge takes into account international audiences, how much time is there for learning new music?” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006).

Most significantly, Murali never specified what he meant by “distractions,” and left its meaning to be interpreted by the discussants. But he did position “distractions” as opposed to the globalization of Karnatic music and Fusion, and by doing so, he created a distinction between the world and the self that set up the individual “classical” musician as conflicted and challenged when dealing with the contemporary world. It was a subtle way of getting musicians to criticize modernity using the discourse of classical tradition.

Not surprisingly, Murali’s provocative questions evoked quite different reactions, not just from the discussants but from the audience as well. Ganesh, of the brother violin duo Ganesh and Kumaresh, an internationally well-known ensemble that performs Karnatic music as well as Fusion, responded with a balanced embrace of the kinds of distractions that he interpreted as examples of change. He began by lamenting the challenges of today’s economically driven world, and therefore posited the past as less dependent on economic necessities, before ending on a more positive tone. He differentiated between “growth because of distraction” and “growth in spite of distraction,” and mentioned the importance of the media for disseminating Karnatic music. He also described the Western influence in India, and in Indian music, as a “cultural bombardment,” and at the same time, said that it had been there for centuries. Here, he added: “We have to have the ability to assimilate and adapt...I was speaking to my father and asked him about the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). He described his father’s portrayal of

a “simpler time” and then said, “There is no silence here” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). Just as Ganesh paused for dramatic effect, an ear-splitting cell phone ring cut through the silence. Immediate groans and laughs rippled through the audience, expressing contrasting reactions of frustration and amusement.

Later, Ganesh appropriately asked, “Is art for art’s sake possible?...A successful musician can be a bridge between art and commerciality” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). He talked about how composing music for films gave him a different perspective—“to *see* emotion and work accordingly—helped me see music in a different sense” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). He said that he liked playing with all the different instruments available to film orchestration. About the distractions he also said, “These distractions help. They bring out a different character in me” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006).

Chitravina N. Ravikiran, a former child prodigy of the stringed *chitraveena*, renowned virtuoso, and also a performer and composer of Fusion, spoke after Ganesh. He suggested that distractions were always present and, citing examples of Buddha, Tyagaraja (Karnatic composer), Shakespeare, and Bill Gates, he explained how the greatest minds have always found a way to integrate them into their work. He said that often “what starts as attraction becomes a distraction. T. Brinda [invoked as a symbol of pure Karnatic tradition] had distractions too” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006).

At this point, it became clear that the discussants were interpreting “distractions” partly as a symptom of the media age, as a threat of becoming inundated by the phantasmagoric allure of the Internet and television. They also were using this theme to focus inwards on the limits of their own attention spans, something they apparently attributed to the digital age of technology but also to human nature. Ganesh mentioned that he worked with distractions because they

brought out different responses. Ravikiran used the examples of Buddha, Tyagaraja, Shakespeare and Bill Gates to show that great people have worked with distractions rather than against them. So while they seemed to take the bait that Murali offered them by using the concept of “distractions” to espouse a pure Indian tradition, they responded with a more nuanced and balanced perspective by mentioning the inevitability of distraction and its potential as a stimulus for new ideas and even greatness.

The vocal duo of Ranjani and Gayathri, sisters in their twenties at the time, responded more negatively to the distractions of this modern era and in a much different way. Rather than delving into the past, they mentioned how the contemporary pressures for women exceeded those for men. They spoke about the expectations of family and household responsibilities as constant challenges to finding good practice time and provided a valuable example of the unbalanced, gendered assumptions audiences had about professional musicians. As young, professional musicians with families, these women brought the discussion to the immediate present and used theme of “distractions” to highlight contemporary gendered expectations.

During the question period after the presentations, the tone became somewhat antagonistic and comments from the audience seemed to draw sides between concert audiences and the musicians. One audience member said that “musicians themselves are distracting” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006), referring to when musicians come late to their colleagues’ concerts, walk slowly down the aisles, and take their seats in the front row. Typically, this requires some acknowledgement by the musicians on stage, usually in the form of gesturing the *namastay* greeting. Vocalists will do this as they are singing because it is a necessary demonstration of respect, but it also interrupts the focus of the musicians and audience. Here, one audience

member interpreted the theme of “distractions” as it related to concert decorum in order to chastise the practices of musicians.

Perhaps the most striking remark was vocalist T. M. Krishna’s retort to this last comment. He countered by saying that “concerts are my biggest distraction” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). He said that being a musician involves a direct and personal relationship to the music and that concerts are merely the public face of this relationship and do not come close to defining the experience of being a musician. He continued by describing the differences between musicians and performers, saying that performers are presenters when they are on stage—“it’s basic supply and demand economics”—but that artistic growth means growing as a musician and not a performer (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006). Then he referenced the November Fest performance of the Signum Quartet, a German string quartet that had performed a few days before, and angrily chastised the symposium audience as if they were the Signum Quartet audience. “If you can be polite for a Mozart concert you can do the same for us” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 20, 2006).<sup>27</sup>

If “Music East and West” identified music as a symbol for anxieties about the nation in the face of transnational influence, the November Fest Symposium showed that transnational influence had in the intervening years become woven into the practices of Indian classical musicians in ways representative of the tensions of contemporary Chennai. Ganesh asserted the importance of assimilation and adaptation; he performed Karnatic music, Fusion, and composed film music. He also demonstrated his father’s reference to a previous era without such distractions, and by doing so, showed this to be a tendency of the older generation. Ravikiran’s example of great minds coping with distractions spanned multiple historical periods and regions

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<sup>27</sup> The Signum Quartet audience was curiously silent during the performance—even between movements—and in my memory, was extremely unusually stiff in comparison to Karnatic recitals.



and united American entrepreneurship (Bill Gates) with Indian tradition (T. Brinda). Ranjani and Gayathri were critical of the gender politics of musical performance in Chennai. During the question session, the audience tried to pull Indian classical musicians off of their exclusive pedestals when T. M. Krishna put them, and himself, back on. The tensions in the room were palpable when Krishna criticized the audience for showing more respect for German musicians than Indian musicians. But perhaps the most revealing tension that day emerged from the audience's reaction to the cell phone ring during Ganesh's dramatic pause after saying "there is no silence here." The theme of "distractions" provoked the audience's reaction of frustrated anger *and* amused tolerance. This reaction neatly captured contrasting perspectives of cultural and musical changes in Chennai, and revealed one of the central tensions for Fusion, both continuing and altering some of the concerns of Indian tradition more than forty years earlier in New Delhi.

#### Older Generations Forging Newer Forms of Patronage

The practice of Karnatic music has flourished due to in part to an increasing awareness of India's musical traditions on a global scale. Musical practices performed by diasporic Indians have both integrated local musical forms as they also have reaffirmed practices centered in India. During the December concert season in Chennai, a substantial number of non-residential Indians (NRIs) participate as musicians and audience members, thereby bolstering the number of concerts as well as demonstrating the wide geographical expanse of Karnatic music in the diaspora.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> As may be expected, the flourishing of Karnatic music is accompanied by competing views of the effects of such growth. The breadth of musicians around the world who converge in Chennai in December has the effect of producing the feeling of the global reach and relevance of Karnatic

This flourishing of Karnatic music has also been the result of changes afforded by technologies such as the radio, gramophone, microphone, long-playing record, and cassette, which have been well documented as having a significant impact on practices of Indian classical musicians (Bakhle 2005; Farrell 1997; Higgins 1975; Lelyveld 1995; Manuel 1993; Neuman 1980; Neuman 2004; Weidman 2006). The global encounter with Indian classical music was therefore mostly mediated through the mass circulation of recordings, in addition to landmark performances at the Monterey Jazz Festival and Woodstock. A few musicians catapulted Indian classical music onto a more global stage, musicians who, despite their interpretation by the West as Indian traditionalists, skillfully incorporated Fusion into their careers.

This encounter featured two generations of Indian musicians in particular. These musicians were instrumentalists and most of them came from North India. They forged a new role for the Indian classical musician who performed around the world and performed fusion. Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Alla Rakha, Zakir Hussain (son of Alla Rakha and therefore representative of the younger generation), and from the South L. Shankar, and L. Subramaniam, are the best known senior musicians who have redefined the role of the Indian classical musician as a global disseminator of Indian classical tradition—in the West, they have been synonymous with “Indian music.” And yet one substantial reason for their success in forging such pathways in the West was their openness, however measured and varied, to Fusion. Ironically, Westerners often held these musicians up as symbols of Indian tradition, but it was the openness of these musicians to Fusion that helped enable these encounters in the first place.

These musicians provided unique and important inspiration for the contemporary practice of Fusion in Chennai because of the models of successful musicianship they formed in

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music, while it is also accompanied by discourses of authenticity fueled by geographical center and periphery economics and politics.

both India and the West. As a result, they also forged a new patronage infrastructure that opened up performance opportunities for both classical music and Fusion. Stephen Slawek has predicted this condition in an article on Ravi Shankar when he concludes his discussion of Shankar's composition titled "Concerto No. 2, Raga Mala:"

...He is effectively proving that Indian music is able to share equal footing with Western music. The symphony orchestra and the concert hall are two of the most powerful symbols of Western music. By sharing the same stage with the Western orchestra, Shankar projects his own tradition (however severely modified it must be to enter that context) against a backdrop that automatically imprints legitimacy and authenticity. Beyond exploring new avenues for creativity, Shankar has also displayed his ingenuity in manipulating symbols for the benefit of his traditional music. By reaching into these unconventional areas of experimentation, he has opened himself to harsh criticism from purists at home and in the West. Yet, the prominence he has helped to secure for Indian music around the globe will continue to provide an expanded audience, and expanded patronage, for the tradition whose recent history he has shaped (Slawek 1991: 178).

Shankar helped redefine the role of the contemporary Indian classical musician as composer, disseminator of Indian tradition, *and* innovator of Indian and Western Fusion. As a result of Shankar's influence and other musicians from these two generations mentioned above, Fusion gradually became a part of audience expectations of touring Indian classical musicians and amended existing forms of patronage that, like Danielou, were more interested in showcasing a pure Indian tradition.

Violinist L. Subramaniam has given evidence of this new form of patronage in his textbook summarizing the theory and practice of Karnatic music (Subramaniam and Subramaniam 1995). Co-authored with his late wife Viji, the book focuses on making Karnatic music accessible to uninitiated listeners and contains a brief history, short biographies of composers, and descriptions of the concert format, Karnatic systems of *raga* and *tala*, and forms of composition and improvisation. The book contains two brief biographical summaries of L.

Subramaniam's career. Both celebrate his professional musicianship by mentioning his acceptance in the West and his accomplishments in Fusion. The longer one describes his Western classical music studies, numerous commissions, and collaborations with conductor Zubin Mehta and violinists Stephane Grappelli and Yehudi Menuhin. His extensive Karnatic background provides set of prerequisites for an even more extensive—and therefore remarkable—list of accomplishments in the West with Fusion. But the biographical summaries contrast with the content of the book and slightly undermine its purpose of celebrating Karnatic music. What is required to become a professional Karnatic musician? The book's gap between its exclusively Karnatic subject matter and the multi-genre careers of the authors has left this question unresolved, except for the following excerpt:

Due to mass media communication and increasing global travel, the public has a greater opportunity to be exposed to different cultures and performing arts. This is also due to advanced technology and the availability of music from different parts of the world in the form of cassettes, compact discs, videos, etc. Because of these factors, it is possible for an Indian performer to establish himself internationally, provided he understands the perceptions, expectations, and the understanding of the international audience and meets the resultant challenges with innovation, creativity and musicianship. He has to compete with several great international performers from other cultures" (Subramaniam and Subramaniam 1995: 17).

International acclaim for Subramaniam has doubtlessly resulted from his astonishing musicianship, but it has also hinged on his openness and desire to perform Fusion. Nestled in the first chapter and never developed or addressed again, this programmatic statement of what international musical success demands of Indian musicians has emphasized creative innovation, an openness to adjusting to uninitiated ways of listening to Indian music, and savvy entrepreneurship for staying competitive among a limited but exceptional field of musicians.

In June of 2007, near the end of my longest period of fieldwork, it occurred to me that the practice of Fusion might signal new forms of patronage in India and abroad. I pursued this idea with Karnatic vocalist T. M. Krishna, the musician who announced at the November Fest symposium that concerts were his greatest distraction. Since Krishna was part of a younger generation in Chennai that did not perform Fusion and was also extremely critical of it, I thought he might have a unique perspective on the matter.

In his living room, I mentioned the shifting patronage structure of Karnatic music around the turn of the twentieth century, when the center of Karnatic musical activity moved from the court and temple patronage system located in Thanjavur to the colonial administrative city of Madras.<sup>29</sup> Karnatic musicians who left Thanjavur moved to Madras for a capitalist market in which musicians needed to build their own audiences and find their own patrons. Thus, musicians were competing for concerts in different ways and also looking for individual patrons to finance them. I asked T. M. Krishna that if Karnatic musicians faced the capitalist model of finding work in Chennai, did musicians who perform Fusion rely on a global capitalist marketplace for their concerts? Had patronage shifted from being based exclusively in Chennai or South India to being more globally based? How might a Fusion gig with jazz musicians in Berlin affect the Western acceptance of Karnatic music and how could it impact the practice of Karnatic music in Chennai?

I think it's true that fusion does give you the opportunity to cater to audiences which normally would not attend, say, the Music Academy *sabha* (concert organization)... Yes, it's very true. Yes, and I think that that want is also there in artists today, because you're saturated by this audience [a typical Karnatic audience]. And after a point in time, you know, you've sung for all these guys. To be very honest, you're comforted by it because you know these audiences are going to be there. They're not going to disappear. Every

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<sup>29</sup> Madras was officially renamed Chennai in 1996 as part of a nationwide program of decolonization. See Subramaniam (2006) and Weidman (2006) for detailed histories of this patronage shift.

December you're going to have a full house and have that person saying, coming and saying "*sabash*" to you and go back... So I think we are seeking other audiences, audiences who may have never heard this music. And also, like I said, creating a new audience space for myself. I think your point is very very valid. This is definitely one of the reasons. If somebody in Germany will not listen to Karnatic music, if I can take what I know and present it differently and attract two thousand people there then I've got myself something else. Yeah, I think that want is definitely there (T. M. Krishna 6/19/07).

Krishna acknowledged that Fusion helped attract audiences outside of the loyal but small Karnatic audience and that the skills of Karnatic musicians and their openness to Fusion enabled an international expansion of their audience. During his description of these performance situations, he managed to switch from the second person to the first person, saying first that "you are saturated by this audience" and then "if I can take what I know... then I've got myself something else." This switch was somewhat surprising, given that Krishna was extremely critical of Fusion. But by using the first person, he included himself among a group of musicians that were "seeking other audiences," showing that expanding audiences abroad was something that he shared as a Karnatic musician. Later in our conversation he told me he had only attempted a concert of Fusion once, in Spain with N. Ravikiran and Western classical musicians, and perhaps his use of the first person foreshadowed his description of that concert. Or, switching to the first person could have been a way of speaking on behalf of the Karnatic music establishment in order to claim this strategy of expanding the international audience. This signified that the newer, more global form of patronage for Karnatic musicians that was forged by previous generations helped Fusion *and* Karnatic music, a form of patronage that he benefitted from even when he himself didn't make a habit of performing Fusion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In chapter two, I focus on the discourse of musicians who do and do not perform Fusion and highlight the debates and differences between these groups.

The Indian classical musicians in Chennai who performed Fusion were encouraged to do so not just from extensive international touring, meeting new musicians, and listening to recordings previously impossible to access, but also from the examples of older generations of Indian classical musicians. The extraordinary music and success of these older generations influenced the standard practices of musicians so that a practitioner of Indian classical music can only become globally recognized through Fusion. Although the tensions that resided between the construction of Karnatic music as a pure Indian tradition and the idea of Fusion as non-traditional and even non-Indian were still active and influential, the contemporary practice of Fusion was built upon the musical openness of older generations and observable through the tensions of history.

#### Musicians' Historical References

In this last section, I include musicians' historical references in order to provide further evidence for the ways their interpretations of history played an important role in the contestation of Fusion. Musicians referenced historical precedents for their music in selective ways that when compared, reveal broad ranges of influences. When musicians articulated their radically different versions of history for their Fusion, they also ended up speaking about the challenges of negotiating what was "Indian" and "Western" about their music. In addition, they asserted their agency as musicians who contributed to the diverse sprawl of sounds that widened the spectrum of musical practices they collectively named "Fusion," which further contributed further to Fusion's contestation. The central tension of history, then, involved the ways that musicians acknowledged previous Fusion projects as historical precedents and simultaneously asserted Fusion as "new."

Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman

During my research, the Fusion band Oxygen performed a few times in Chennai. Oxygen consisted of younger musicians, most of whom were recent college graduates and a few of whom were also professional Karnatic musicians. Their biggest break had come recently when they performed at a music festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. During my time in Chennai, the band played a few private corporate gigs, a Fusion festival named Fusic, and a CD release party for their latest album *Aura* (2007) at the Eldams Road location of Music World, a national retail chain. I attended the release party and when I arrived, I saw that a section in the front window of the store had been designated for the small stage. The store was crowded, filled mostly with friends and family who were uncomfortably packed between the rows of CDs that divided up the space. The release was a curious mix of professional formality and youthful excitement quite different from other release events I had attended in Chennai. The conventions of such a formal event demanded rituals of garlanding and presenting shawls to the few special guests, who then gave short speeches to honor the band and their new recording. At the same time, the band members, some of them in their teens and all of them students, strutted around the store with self-conscious expressions, wearing *kurtas* and jeans while they prepared the stage for their performance. As their families in the audience beamed with pride, it was clear that this event represented the amateur side of the spectrum of the professional musicians I encountered during my fieldwork. Featuring young musicians eager to make an impact with their music, Oxygen provided an opportunity to learn what kinds of historical precedents fueled this youngest generation's interest in Fusion. But it was actually the speech of one of their guests that first



alerted me to the importance of how historical precedents contributed to the contestation of Fusion.

The guests at this release party included sitarist Pandit Janardhanan, a guest soloist on the recording; the previously mentioned Karnatic and Fusion violinist Ganesh; and Umayalpuram Sivaraman, who I mentioned earlier in this chapter. Sivaraman is a senior Karnatic percussionist known for his virtuoso *mrdangam* playing, big personality, openness to Fusion, and also on that day as Oxygen's set drummer's guru.

When Sivaraman spoke, he celebrated Oxygen's recent achievement by using a strategy familiar to Karnatic musicians and audiences: he narrated a history of stylistic lineage. He celebrated Oxygen by listing projects that blurred the boundaries between Indian classical music and Fusion. He mentioned his involvement with a European band Akamoon and then connected his accomplishments to other revered musicians:

This group is really doing [a] very great service to particularly Indian music and...they belong to a very, very great musical lineage belonging to the great Sangita Kalanidhi Papa Venkataramaiah, with whom I have played long long back.

(applause)

So when I see Pandit Janardhanan here and also Ganesh—and it will be very interesting to know that when they were very young I accompanied them in Delhi and several places.

(applause)

So, when I was talking to Panditji [Janardhanan] we were remembering about the greatest concert that I did with Pandit Ravi Shankar about 40 years back in Centenary Hall. And then we were just remembering about the *jugalbandi*...when I played with Pandit Shanta Prasad in the Society College (Sivaraman 2/10/07).

These references did more than simply recall previous performances with nostalgia. He used the *jugalbandi*, a musical meeting between musicians from North and South India, as a marker of openness to Fusion. But his references to Papa Venkataramaiah, Ravi Shankar, and Shanta

Prasad narrated a music history with musicians representative of Indian classical music. In the context of this Fusion band's release party, his references left any distinction between Karnatic music and Fusion decidedly ambiguous. Honoring Oxygen's stylistic lineage therefore was honoring his own lineage, one that, as he presented it, was rooted in Indian classical music as well as Fusion. In other words, he was implicitly suggesting that generations of "classical" musicians have been doing for decades what younger musicians are now calling Fusion. While it is likely that Sivaramen didn't intend to explicitly establish a historical lineage for Fusion, he chose examples that were clearly intended to mark a deep classicism as they also indicated a generational continuation of Fusion, consciously or not. His reference to Ravi Shankar was also intended to celebrate and establish a reputable lineage of professional musicianship that, in his opinion, Oxygen was building upon with their Fusion.<sup>31</sup> Yet one of the founding members of Oxygen understood the band's relationship to Fusion quite differently.

### C. Girinandh and Oxygen

My conversation about Oxygen's songwriting methods with C. Girinandh, the group's bandleader and keyboardist, led to his narration of a history of Fusion. Girinandh mentioned Shakti as one of the clear precedents for Oxygen even though Oxygen's music had little to nothing in common with Shakti's sound.<sup>32</sup> Whereas Shakti was concerned with featuring the virtuoso improvisational skills of its members, Girinandh said that Oxygen was more interested

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<sup>31</sup> The choice of venue for this release party also shows Oxygen's savvy attention to marketing intended to leverage more visibility in the crowded global marketplace of world music and Fusion. I had never attended a release party in a music store in India before, and given the cramped layout of the space it didn't seem like it a very common occurrence. Nonetheless, a national retail chain was an apt choice as a commercial node for this young band's aspirations for the international circulation of their music.

<sup>32</sup> See the introduction for a description of Shakti, the 1970s band that featured John McLaughlin, L. Shankar, Zakir Hussain, Ramnad Ragavhan, and T. H. "Vikku" Vinayakram.

in accessibility attained through writing music that leaned more towards shorter pop songs, but not so popular as to be confused with film music. After Girinandh referred to Shakti, he delineated a history of Fusion by style and time period.

Before that [the 1990s] it was only Shakti which didn't take kirthanas and do [this kind of] fusion. But after that there was nothing called fusion. People had to go into films, or it's either films or Karnatic or Hindustani, that's it. In the 90's people were not ready to experiment with anything. That didn't happen in India though it happened worldwide. And in 2000, people started bringing this concept of fusion, as like, they used to remix the Karnatic songs. The lead will be only Karnatic, and the backing will be...a Westernized part. And people started believing that's fusion. They had this idea of fusion, and some appreciated and some didn't because it lead to criticism...There were Karnatic musicians saying that this is the divine view of music and you can't remix it or try to experiment with it, with the Western part. So among all these things I was in a dilemma as to which music should I choose (Girinandh 4/8/07).

At the time, Girinandh understood the history of Fusion as consisting of several different periods. According to him, Shakti started it all in the 1970s, followed by a period of world music in which Indian musicians didn't really participate. Then around 2000, musicians started remixing Karnatic kirthanas, which many called Fusion. At a different point in our conversation he mentioned the music of the Chennai-based violin duo Ganesh and Kumaresh and their Fusion that started in the late 1990s. He also cited Yanni and Prem Joshua as much more contemporary influences on Oxygen's music, invoking more world music, song based, light rock and lounge types of styles that indicated his interests in Western influenced popular music rather than more Indian classical forms that accentuated instrumental virtuosity.

The musical history of Oxygen invoked by the senior Sivaramen was quite different than the Fusion precedents Girinandh had referenced. Sivaramen's references established a musical lineage for Oxygen that was rooted in Karnatic music, while Girinandh cited Oxygen's precedents as distinctly non-classical, and even non-Indian.

R. Prasanna

R. Prasanna is a well-known guitarist in his early 40s who grew up in Chennai. At the time of our interview he was living permanently in Boston. Prasanna tours the world with his own projects that weave different music genres and guitar styles together. He had little to say about any historical precedents for Fusion, but his unique musical background and continued involvement with performance in Chennai provide an alternate version of Fusion's history and he offered a different perspective by showing how musicians who performed Fusion continued to draw from a wide array of musical precedents.

Prasanna's musical projects have spanned Heavy Metal, Karnatic music, Jazz, and Fusion. I heard him perform a Karnatic *kacceri* in Chennai, a Fusion concert at the Jazz Standard in New York City with pianist/composer Vijay Iyer and tabla player Nitin Mitta, and at the 2007 November Fest music festival with percussionists widely regarded as leaders in Fusion and World Music. This last concert included England-based percussionist Trilok Gurtu, Chennai-based kanjira player Selvaganesh, Chennai and Mumbai-based percussionist Sivamani, and guest soloist T. H. "Vikku" Vinayakram, an original member of Shakti as well as Selvaganesh's father. I met with Prasanna in his family's home in Chennai a couple weeks after the November Fest concert. He explained his musical background playing metal guitar as a boy in Chennai and later as a student at the city's prestigious Indian Institute of Technology campus:

I come from playing rock music. I was playing Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple way before I was playing Karnatic music...For me my formative years as a musician had a lot to do with being in a place which gave me that—particularly the music of Ilaiyaraaja ...So when I was a kid I was hearing all these things without knowing what it was. I was hearing harmony. I was hearing counterpoint, and I was hearing very traditional Karnatic ragas. I was hearing everything through Raja's music...And then my sister is learning this [Karnatic music], so this sound is there at home. And then I go outside and my friends like, you know, trust me to listening to whatever they thought is the hip pop of that period, which was like Boney M and ABBA, and Bee Gees and all that stuff. So I

listened to it...So all these things are co-existent. It was—none of it was forced (Prasanna 12/8/07).

Ilaiyaraaja is one of the most influential film composers in India and an icon of Tamil regional pride. Fascinated with Western harmony and counterpoint, Ilaiyaraaja wrote several Fusion compositions that invoked Baroque and Classical era harmonies, entitled *How to Name It?* (1986) and *Nothing But Wind* (1988). Prasanna learned Western harmony, in part, from Ilaiyaraaja's film music and Fusion recordings, as well as through several different stages of studying and playing in various other Western rock bands. During our conversation, he referenced a staggering number of Western influences for his music.<sup>33</sup> Prasanna's most recent recording was titled *Electric Ganesh Land* (2006) intended as an homage to Jimi Hendrix.

His assertion that “all these things are co-existent, none of these are forced” shows how his generation was able to access Karnatic music, the music of Ilaiyaraaja, and Western popular music all at once, even if any one person rarely did so all at once. His particular summary of music genres in Chennai, mainly dependent on youth culture in Chennai's colleges and universities, shows how the co-existence of multiple local musical practices set up a multi-genre history of music that would later set the stage for what Girinandh referred to as Fusion—in Girinandh's description, an emergent genre that had existed only since the late 1990s. Prasanna elaborated more on this musical heterogeneity and the politics of different groups performing different genres of music associated with certain identities:

And I was playing with a bunch of guys who swore by Iron Maiden and Metallica, and they had absolutely no inkling of curiosity about Karnatic music. They thought it was beneath them...A lot of people thought that to be in the Indian culture is beneath you.

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<sup>33</sup> He mentioned The Allman Brothers, The Scorpions, Santana, Dire Straits, Michael Jackson, Van Halen, Iron Maiden, Metallica, Pink Floyd, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Jefferson Airplane, Jethro Tull, Rush, Robert Johnson, Leadbelly, Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters, Weather Report, Chick Corea, Return to Forever, Spiro Gyra, Steely Dan, Thelonius Monk, John Coltrane, and Charlie Parker.

This is why I said these are the guys with the silver spoon, who thought they grow up like, you know, they're just like somebody in the West. Right? It's a misplaced sense of identity. And it's understandable because here you see like there are Anglo Indians, you know, who have English blood in them. They're Christians who are Tamilians... But there was also an alternate tradition—like the Muslim guys playing *nagaswaram*. So all these things were happening, right? But it was not the information explosion like now. You had to seek all these things out. So I had to hang out with that set of guys to get into that world of the Deep Purples and the Pink Floyds and stuff (Prasanna 12/8/07).

Prasanna's historical references spanned mostly a range of Western popular music bands and include a prominent South Indian example of Fusion with Ilaiyaraaja. His references for his music included the tensions of classical and popular music that Sivaramen mentioned, as well as the tensions between India and the West. It also expands Chennai's cultural heterogeneity even further and reveals more tensions that emerge from linking religious identity with musical performance.

#### Anil Srinivasan

Keyboardist Anil Srinivasan grew up in Chennai, studied Western classical piano as a child, and was surrounded by Karnatic music his entire life. After completing all his qualifying exams for a doctorate in business from Columbia University, he returned to Chennai and began business consulting and teaching business classes, as well as pursuing musical performance. Over the next few years, he spent more and more time with music. He began meeting with Karnatic vocalist Sikhil Gurucharan and they soon developed a way of performing Karnatic compositions with piano accompaniment. During my time in Chennai, Srinivasan and Gurucharan secured a few high profile performances and in doing so, provided some new stimulation for discussions about Fusion in Chennai.

During one of our many conversations about music, Srinivasan assembled a historical account of Fusion that was quite different from Sivaramen, Girinandh, and Prasanna.

AS: This whole Madurai Mani Iyer—time of the “English Note.” [He began singing one of his “English Note” compositions that sounded like what could have been a short melody from a nineteenth century European waltz, but sung with *svaras* or Karnatic solfege, and without *gamakas*, the ornamentation crucial to any raga.] He made all these kinds of compositions. He made all these sorts of compositions which were meant to go with a waltz. An orchestra played that, it was actually a string orchestra that played that, with the *nagaswaram* [double reed wind instrument] playing this: [continued singing].

NH: [As Srinivasan sang] This is a *nagaswaram* part that you’re singing? [Srinivasan nodded as he continued singing. Then started tapping a three beat meter, accenting the first and second beat, and then just the first.] You know it all?

AS: Yeah.

NH: How did you learn it?

AS: I mean I learned it at some point in my life.

NH: From where?

AS: I learned this from Lalgudi [Jayaraman, a senior violin *vidwan* known for his more conservative approach to tradition].

NH: Lalgudi.

AS: Yeah, when I was very very little.

NH: Lalgudi’s teaching this?!

AS: No no no. He taught this to me, because he wanted—interestingly I learned this from him when I was about seven or eight. And I was playing the piano and he heard me playing the piano and he said I’ve got a composition that I would like you to play because this goes with the piano. And I never understood what that meant, but this was the composition. And was singing it like I was singing right now and I just started playing it. [He recited a shorthand kind of *konnokkol* in the three beat meter: “Tak takataka Tak takatak Tak.”] And it’s very straight, it’s a major scale. It’s very easy to play. But this was done by Madurai Mani Iyer and composed in order to incorporate the Western orchestra. But it was a time where they thought if you want to write something that incorporated a Western instrument it necessarily has to be A. a major scale, B. it has to be (laughs) you know, all seven notes. (Laughs) It’s kind of very elementary sounding in its own way, I mean I think they disregarded subtlety and they could use different *ragams*, but it’s kind of cute in its own way.

NH: Yeah.

AS: And this is called an “English Note”...Actually people will sing this in *kacceris* as a *tookra* in the end.

NH: *Tookra* means?

AS: *Tookra* means (pauses)...It actually means a musical joke, literally. A fragment, a little thing. One of those *kuuti* (Tamil for small, with a connotation of cute) pieces you play in the end. After dinner mints...The concept of making Western orchestration work for Karnatic music is not new and I was just trying to illustrate that (Srinivasan 11/30/07).

Srinivasan here showed a fascinating combination of Karnatic and Western influenced ideas with these references. He described the English Note to me in much the same way it came to him: so casually that this piece felt as seamlessly woven into the Karnatic repertoire as one of the *gitams* (shorter strophic songs) taught in the early stages of Karnatic learning. He also performed it rather than explained it, and by doing so demonstrated how these compositions were heard and learned, but not necessarily discussed. In fact, no one I spoke with could provide any history of the English Note. These compositions were considered trite and simple, and when I mentioned them to my interlocutors they preferred to direct my attention towards Fusion that made more of an impact, such as Shakti or Ravi Shankar’s recording with Yehudi Menuhin. Srinivasan’s explanation was the most comprehensive and his ability to sing it from beginning to end is also a sign of its endurance as a catchy melody, even if it is treated as a *tookra* if performed at all.

His memory and rendition of this “English Note” then triggered another historical reference for Fusion:

AS: Brinda, T. Brinda—you should know this very importantly [T. Brinda was the cousin of my late teacher, Dr. T. Viswanathan]—T. Brinda’s actually sung *padams* to the accompaniment of a piano and there’s a private recording of it...She was staying with someone who was a pianist. So she’s actually sung an entire concert of *padams* to go with piano.

NH: Who’s the pianist, do you know?

AS: Nobody known, just somebody who’s house she stayed at who was a classical pianist. And it isn’t even very sophisticated playing...But...it works. She sang “Payada”



and she sang [he sings the opening line of “Bamagova Gopalu”] in *kedaragowlam*, which is so difficult for a pianist to play. And it made me weep, listening to the piano that went with that. It was so beautiful.

NH: Wow. So was this recording a kind of inspiration for this project [referring to his project with Karnatic vocalist Sikkhil Gurucharan]?

AS: No it was not. Actually someone pointed this out to me after we started and it just felt very good to listen to this. If somebody like Brinda had this idea, then at least I’m having the same good ideas as really great people before me.

NH: It’s a path well traveled. Or not well traveled but—

AS: At least a path that’s been thought about (Srinivasan 11/30/07).

This example is representative of the way I came to know about most historical precedents for Fusion. Srinivasan and Gurucharan’s project was quite well known and their version of Fusion unique. And yet, T. Brinda’s example was a potential precedent, one that also most likely privileged the Karnatic voice, an aesthetic that has been essential to the Dhannammal *pani* (the style of her family) and to Srinivasan and Gurucharan’s Fusion. But Srinivasan came to know about T. Brinda’s recording only after his project with Gurucharan was well under way. Its obscurity shows how little value it had for the owner of the recording and perhaps for T. Brinda as well. Such examples, disconnected from each other and brought up in an almost accidental, haphazard way, constituted a history of Fusion as a random assortment of almost unimportant oversights or as a series of accidents unearthed by a lucky, well-timed question. Because such examples were so often buried and forgotten, their absences helped to establish contemporary Fusion as new and without precedent. The fact that Srinivasan’s historical references to Fusion included both Madurai Mani Iyer and T. Brinda underscored the diverse interests of some of Karnatic music’s most iconic, canonical, and traditional musicians. And keeping in mind the constant chaffing with the Karnatic music establishment that Srinivasan and Gurucharan encountered as a result of their Fusion project, Srinivasan’s historical references also point

towards the tense intersections between Karnatic music and Fusion. Srinivasan also downplayed Fusion as a path not well-traveled but “thought about,” which also captured the way he asserted his project as new in the context of these historical precedents.

## Conclusion

At first, identifying Fusion as “new” might seem at odds with locating Fusion in South Indian music history. “New” connotes innovation and a break from the past, and had associations with the West as potentially threatening to Karnatic tradition. But Fusion was new for different reasons. The patronage structures of Indian classical music now support international musicians and touring circuits that include varieties of Fusion as well as Indian classical music. This patronage was forged by the last generation of Indian classical musicians, even if it was built on and expanded by the present generation.

The topic of history played a crucial role in the tensions of Fusion in Chennai. On the one hand, musicians were critically self aware of how their music extended the work of previous Fusion projects. On the other, they were also attuned to the importance of novelty to gain success for their music. Fusion, with its implicit promises of novel musical mixing, became a symbol of newness. Just as these musicians presented key historical antecedents for their music, they obscured them with a twenty-first century savvy that recognized the importance of their creativity. Through their discourse about navigating periods of “industrialization” and “distraction,” their realities of a more transnationally-based infrastructure of patronage, and the tensions embedded in their descriptions of Fusion as always new, musicians portrayed Fusion as a spectrum of disjointed, mostly independent projects. Focusing on the ways musicians invoked

the concept of history reveals additional ways that irresolution was a constant companion in discussions about Fusion.

The ways in which musicians placed Fusion outside of tradition but not outside of history show how their creative choices to perform Fusion revealed a complex set of relationships about music making in contemporary Chennai. Fusion portrayed contemporary Chennai as a network of politics and indexed local, global, classical, popular, traditional, and historical, “Indian,” and “Western” influences. With multiple and disjunctive histories, then, the multiple meanings and complex definitions of Fusion were partly determined by the interweaving of historical contexts, and as this chapter has shown, musicians’ intentions, definitions, and navigations through the contemporary cultural politics of discourse about Fusion in Chennai. The many different interpretations that emerged from discussions about Fusion led to the various examples that constituted the tensions of Fusion. One would be hard pressed to find another musical practice in South India with more varied precedents of Shakti, Deep Purple, and T. Brinda and this problem was not unnoticed by most of the musicians and scholars during my research.

The relationship of Fusion to Karnatic music and history can therefore be best understood through the many kinds of descriptions, stories, and histories that people tell themselves. These multiple perspectives show the overlapping relationship of Fusion to Karnatic tradition and South Indian music history.

## Chapter 2

### Hybridity and “Confusion”: Definitions and Opinions of Fusion

To what extent are keyboards and drum sets understood by musicians and audiences in Chennai as Western? How do electronic instruments in Fusion symbolize the technology of the “West” when Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) campuses all over India have some of the most prestigious programs in science and engineering in the world? If the violin has been naturalized as part of the instrumental repertoire of Karnatic music, can bass guitars and floor toms become accepted as Indian? These were some of the questions that the practice of Fusion posed for many musicians and audiences. When they came up, they led to much broader questions: is Fusion Indian? Western? Traditional? Classical? Popular? Modern?

What *is* Fusion?

At their foundations, these questions shared an uneasiness that expressed a nagging uncertainty and anxiety about defining Indian music, Indian musicians, and their relationships to contemporary urban India. In this chapter, I focus on definitions and opinions—in particular, the tensions that emerged from multiple and conflicting definitions and opinions of Fusion. A close analysis of the discourse about Fusion reveals affective and political meanings that are deeply embedded in music making in contemporary Chennai.

In his study of nationalism, Partha Chatterjee has provided a helpful methodological impetus: “...The object is to ask: ‘What does...discourse presuppose?...Where are the cracks on its surface, the points of tension in its structure, the contrary forces, the contradictions? What does it reveal and what does it suppress?’” (Chatterjee 1986: 42). This chapter shows that the contrary forces that distinguished the discourse about Fusion were not merely aberrant cracks on

the otherwise smooth surface of agreement. Instead, the tensions of definitions and opinions *were* the consensus of Fusion and constituted its shared meaning. Formulating a succinct genre definition would entirely miss the point of Fusion's affective, political, and sonic contestation. If Indian musicians' relationships to Western modes of power through discourse, politics, and musical sound in postcolonial India were not resolved, conclusive, bounded, and defined, the tensions that structure Fusion should not be either. The complex asymmetry in the discourse about Fusion shows the complex relationship between musicians, music, and modernity in India.

Negotiating cultural difference has been a central theme in postcolonial studies of modernity. Theories of cultural hybridity offer useful models to understand how the definitions and opinions of Fusion demonstrate a highly sophisticated level of theoretical engagement with their work. Prominent theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Partha Chatterjee (1993), and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) have highlighted the postcolonial tensions between Indian elites in relation to Western modes of power. By foregrounding the tensions of postcolonial power implicit in the mixing of traditions, places, ideologies, and sounds, Fusion was sounding (through discourse and music) the same complex, historical, and power-laden tensions with the West. The problem of the conflicting definitions and opinions then, became a problem of understanding contemporary Indian musicians and their continually changing relations to the deeply entrenched ideas of Indian culture and the Indian nation. This chapter shows that when musicians and I wondered out loud what Fusion actually fuses, if everything is a fusion, and how to define fusion, we revised theories of cultural hybridity with a theoretically *and* practically nuanced understanding of Fusion rooted in social interactions—and sounded postcolonial theory with a lived musical practice.

### The Pun of “Confusion”

I was alerted to the importance of discourse as a valuable source of information not just through interviews, but also from casual conversations. Three anecdotes help describe the potent meanings of Fusion.

During my fieldwork, I told a Karnatic musician friend of mine that I would have to miss her performance for another concert related to my research. She asked about my topic. When I told her that the subject of my research was Fusion she said, “Never tell a musician you are choosing confusion over their music.”<sup>34</sup> At a different time, I attended a symposium that gathered several Hindustani and Karnatic musicians to speak on the topic “Reaching Within: Musical Growth in an Age of Distraction.” After the presentations, the organizers invited questions from the audience. One middle-aged man commented that modern day distractions help discourage amateur musicians from pursuing Karnatic music. Before he finished, however, an elderly woman in the front row interrupted with obvious, pent-up irritation: “Fusion!” she blurted out. “Yes it is good to build an audience but we need to mark a line between straight classical music and fusion cum confusion.”<sup>35</sup> Months later I participated in a conference on Fusion organized by a well-respected local scholar of Karnatic music. Near the end of an entire day of short presentations, discussions, and a jam session, the scholar could no longer hold in her disappointment. She told us that she had wanted the conference to establish a set of rules for Fusion that could begin to provide the basis for a compositional canon. She said with exasperation, “We need a way to DEFINE what fusion is. Otherwise it is confusion.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Personal communication, 12/14/06.

<sup>35</sup> November Fest Symposium, Nov. 14, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Fusion Conference, May 22, 2007.

These anecdotes are a small sampling of the innumerable instances during my fieldwork when musicians, audience members, scholars—just about anyone involved with music in Chennai—invoked the word “confusion” to describe Fusion. They would sometimes pause briefly after saying “confusion” to allow time for the pun to get a quick laugh. Calling fusion “confusion” is an example of what I’ve observed as a relatively common practice of English-based punning among Chennai’s English-educated classes. Translations between Tamil, Hindi, and English supply seemingly inexhaustible fodder for humorous word play. But however witty and playful the pun of confusion may have been, it also invoked a serious critique of Fusion; a number of important tensions were deeply embedded within the pun.

#### “Confusion” Analysis

In the first example above (“never tell musicians you are choosing confusion over their music”), my friend invoked Fusion as confusion to set it apart from the activities of musicians. Implied by her usage of “confusion,” Fusion was unmusical and not practiced by “good” musicians. She even left open the possibility of whether she would consider Fusion to be music at all. “Confusion,” then, functioned as a metonym for Fusion. By using it, this musician excised a number of considerably more ambiguous meanings of Fusion. Instead, “confusion” simply and concisely referred to bad music.

In the second example (“Yes it is good to build an audience but we need to mark a line between straight classical music and fusion cum confusion”), the audience member communicated that Fusion was beneficial to Karnatic music because it helped expand the Karnatic audience. Then, she separated the practice of Fusion from Karnatic music along implied genre categories of classical, popular, Indian, and Western. This tension continued in the next

part, when she implied that the overlap between Karnatic music and Fusion was substantial and that in practice there was really no definite boundary between the genres. This was clearly a problem for her. “We must mark a line” was an assertion of her discomfort with an impinging West and the encroaching popularity of Fusion into the classical realm of Karnatic music. Also important was the phrase “fusion cum confusion,” which literally suggested that Fusion and confusion were combined—that they were actually the same.

Finally, the third example (“We need a way to DEFINE what fusion is. Otherwise it is confusion”), illustrated a commonly perceived obstacle for Fusion. For this music scholar, it was not the practices of musicians that legitimize and distinguish a music genre, but a theoretical prescriptive definition. She declared that a coherent and consensual definition of Fusion was the deciding factor that distilled it from confusion. Her strategy towards a wider acceptance of Fusion, then, required scholarly definition, or was sabotaged by the indefinable tensions of “confusion.”

“Confusion,” therefore, directly indexed problems of value judgments, overlapping and competing music genres, and the complications of definition. As a polysemic pun, “confusion” was a rich domain for Fusion’s multiple meanings and was successful because of its brevity and conclusiveness. When people invoked “confusion,” they accomplished two tasks: they swiftly and decisively ended conversations of Fusion and left a range of unexamined tensions in suspense. Linguistic anthropologist David Samuels has suggested that puns lead to productive zones of analysis:

In deliberately opening a single utterance onto multiple interpretive possibilities, punning invites us to engage the creativity of culture—as something that is always part of the production of everyday life in the community. It is not necessarily the case that an expressive form need remain consistent for its indexical properties to remain effective (Samuels 2004:11).



“Confusion” enabled multiple interpretive possibilities in the way it indexed a number of meanings of Fusion, and by association, a number of strategies that people consciously and unconsciously deployed when they invoked it. When south Indians called Fusion “confusion,” they communicated something about the music and themselves.

#### Tensions of Cultural Hybridity, Tensions of Fusion

To be clear, the word “hybridity” rarely, if ever, came up during my fieldwork. I include hybridity here because the idea immediately cross references the practice of Fusion in Chennai with a more comprehensive network of social and cultural processes by, as Garcia Canclini mentions, “accounting for particular forms of conflict generated in recent cross-cultural contact” (2005: xxiv). The concept of hybridity can illuminate the kinds of problems involved with the collisions of tradition, places, ideologies, and sounds.

Literature about cultural hybridity helps clarify the cultural work that the pun of “confusion” accomplishes by illuminating the relationship between the sounds of Fusion, the discourses of Fusion, and the broader condition of modernity in India. It is no accident that Homi Bhabha’s landmark work *The Location of Culture* (1994) coincided with the India’s period of economic growth known as “liberalization” and what one musician in Chennai referred to as the “beginning of fusion” (C. Girinandh 4/8/07).<sup>37</sup> Fusion is the sounding of hybridity that has existed in cultural contexts for centuries.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Although it focuses on Latin America, Nestor García Canclini’s *Hybrid Cultures* (1990) also falls within this time frame.

<sup>38</sup> See Stross (1999) for the relationship between biological and cultural hybridity; see also Kapchan and Strong (1999) and García Canclini’s new introduction (2005) for other ways that scholars have used cultural hybridity to explain various cultural practices.

As a practice of cultural mixing made aural, Fusion provoked problematic questions also articulated in theories of cultural hybridity: questions that searched for sources and origins, hypothesized about parentage and genealogies, and problematized the essentializations of music, identity, and place (Frith 2000; Hutnyk 2000; Holt 2007; Stokes 1994, 2004; Stross 1999). In this chapter, I show how the problems of defining Fusion were the problems of theorizing hybridity; Fusion compelled my interlocutors to theorize hybridity by grappling with abstract models of music making, cultural identity, and musical and cultural mixing.

I discovered that one risk of studying cultural hybridity with ethnomusicological fieldwork was that conversations about definitions inevitably led to attempts to catalogue the discrete structures being fused, which then led to theorizing the points of origin. I noticed that a distance emerged between musicians and the topic of Fusion; the conversations zoomed out from the musical object towards definitional abstractions so much so, that they often lost sight of any concrete description. In other words, when the problem of defining Fusion inevitably led to attempts at linking common sources, musicians and I became removed from describing actual Fusion projects and entered the vague, complex domain of genre descriptions. While this occurs with any genre descriptions to a certain extent, especially contested ones, conversations about Fusion seemed to spiral away from shared and concrete references even faster.

David Samuels researched hybrid utterances among Apache Indians in Arizona and has provided helpful methodological advice for this specific problem when analyzing hybridity:

Indeed, part of the political transformation at stake in hybrid utterances is to challenge and interrogate the naturalized authority of those indexical relations. To presuppose that the attribution of historical origins should take precedence in the analysis of hybrid utterances helps to create an alienating discourse, reinforcing the outside perspective of the researcher. For in order to objectively know that something belongs “historically” to either one group or another, it is necessary to place oneself outside both groups to observe the flow between them. What the concept of hybridity ought to do for us, I think, is force us closer to the ground (Samuels 1999: 466-467).

Getting closer to the ground necessitates analyses of discourse and sound, but also an approach that balances the processual nature of hybridization with interests in the hybrid object. Nestor Garcia Canclini has underscored the necessity of studying “processes of hybridization” (2005: xxvii) rather than hybrid objects. “I understand for hybridization sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices. In turn, it bears noting that the so-called discrete structures were a result of prior hybridizations and therefore cannot be considered pure points of origin” (Garcia Canclini 2005: xxv). Brian Stross (1999) has also focused on processes of hybridization, and moved past the de facto construction of pure points of origin by identifying “cycles of hybridity.” This shows formations of purity and hybridity as part of an ongoing process in which the old hybrids become the new forms of purity that are then hybridized again.

As the turn towards reflexive ethnography has demonstrated (Clifford and Marcus 1986), conversations with interlocutors about hybrid objects were also part of the processes of hybridization (Feld 1974; Feld and Fox 1994). That is, discursive formations (such as the pun of “confusion”) and dialogue about hybrid objects must be understood as part of the processes of hybridization because it was in and through these discussions of hybrid objects that practices of hybridization also took place and informed the practices of music making. Taking Samuels’s advice while keeping this in mind, the most complete depiction of the practice of Fusion demands a balance of interlocutors’ abstract theories with actual descriptions of my fieldwork performing, observing, and discussing Fusion. This assembly of fieldwork data best describes the many meanings of Fusion, but not to arrive at some widespread consensus. Rather, the range of perspectives on Fusion that I present in this chapter construct a portrait that is disparate, conflicted, and filled with tensions that constitute the lived meaning of Fusion in Chennai.

Musicians were occasionally wary of discussing the music of others during our interviews. Perhaps the crowded and highly competitive field made slander an unwise decision, since I would likely to be talking to those same musicians. Musicians avoided this potential impulse by expanding their descriptions to more abstract and theoretical levels and also by filtering out some of the more abrasive comments about others. For better and for worse, this helped feed discussions of abstraction, which sometimes led to conclusions of irresolution and dissatisfaction among my interlocutors. John Hutnyk has expressed a similar dissatisfaction with what he calls “hybridity-talk” (2000) and has criticized similar conclusions of hybridity but only cursorily suggested a possible solution.

The task is to name the shape and specificity of the current conjuncture and explore and extend the ways to intervene. Not to cower in the face of some rampant ‘complexity’ or ‘uncertainty’ (Hutnyk 2000:232-233).

Rather than cowering in the face of uncertainty that resulted from the contradictions in multiple conversations about Fusion, this complex uncertainty revealed important tensions that helped constitute the polysemic practice of Fusion and related music making to that particular social and historical period in Chennai. The resultant complexity from these tensions isn’t a copout—it’s the point.

Pursuing the tensions that arose from competing definitions of Fusion could seem self-serving because defining musical practices will most likely yield dissent among any group of musicians. But the multiple definitions are important: first, even though tensions that emerge from contrasting definitions of any musical practice are commonplace, the kinds of tensions will still be unique to any musical practice in question, as will the particular debates of definition. They are therefore still valuable resources for study. Second, the act of defining Fusion for musicians in Chennai was a source of real interest and pursued by my interlocutors well beyond

my initial questions. In other words, by devoting almost an entire chapter to them, I emphasize that definitions were a common topic of interest among my interlocutors precisely because they were so problematic.

### Definitions and Opinions

I organize the rest of this chapter in two parts. In the first, I focus on musicians who perform Fusion with five case studies that detail the theories and practices of a varied selection of musicians in order to best portray the diversity of definitions and judgments. In the second, I do the same with musicians who do not perform Fusion. I close both parts by summarizing the range of these positions and conclude the chapter by showing how Fusion, discourse, and cultural hybridity present a unique perspective on modernity in urban India.

#### Part I: Musicians who Perform Fusion: Rajhesh Vaidhya

Rajhesh Vaidhya, a *veena* player, became entangled in problems of definition during our conversation about his music. He recorded Fusion for Kosmic, the record label in Chennai that produces the most Fusion of any other label. At the time of our interview in early 2008, he estimated having recorded fifteen or sixteen Fusion albums since 2000, and over forty albums during his entire career—a considerable number given that he was only thirty-four years old. He explained that many of these were Karnatic recordings and instrumental versions of film songs. Noticing that he differentiated Fusion, Karnatic, and film, I asked him if Fusion included any film music and he answered decisively: “No. Fusion is totally Karnatic. Film songs are different, totally film songs” (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08). But he later observed a similarity between Fusion and film music. While discussing how people need musical change, he explained that one reason

for Fusion's popularity is its wide appeal. "Karnatic music—only a few can understand. But fusion—a layman, a farmer can understand. It reaches him more easily" (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08).

When describing Fusion in relation to Karnatic music, Rajhesh Vaidhya depicted Fusion as a bridge linking the masses to Karnatic music. But the local practice of Karnatic music was, for many, synonymous with a specifically Brahmin identity. Its classical ideology, esoteric reputation, and elitist associations often helped to exclude the masses rather than attract them:

Fusion means [to some people that] you take a classical instrument and take a Western instrument and play... That's not fusion. You have to know classical first, then you have to mix this thing. First you have to know the classical basic thing, then do fusion. It'll definitely sound good (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08).

According to him, classical fundamentals were a requirement for good Fusion. Fusion demanded training in Karnatic music, which includes a proficiency on your instrument and a thorough theoretical understanding and technical execution of Karnatic *ragas*, *talas*, and the compositional repertoire. He also criticized other Fusion musicians who merely combined instruments as "amateurs" (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08) without a solid Karnatic foundation. Because Karnatic music was at the top of the social status hierarchy among south Indian musicians, many Karnatic musicians frequently devalue non-Karnatic musicians by invoking their own classical training. In this example, Rajhesh Vaidhya, who is known in Chennai for Fusion more than Karnatic music, uses this criticism to portray other Fusion musicians as bad musicians with bad taste, thereby using the classical ideology to bolster his credentials even though his Fusion sets him apart from most Karnatic musicians.

This notion of requiring extensive training in one musical tradition as a prerequisite to venture out to others is hardly unique to Fusion. Examples of the Third Stream music of the

American composer and conductor Gunther Schuller (1986) and the more recently coined genre of “crossover,” in which Western classical musicians combine classical and popular music and access wider audiences, provide precedents involving the same kinds of discourse.<sup>39</sup> In each of these examples, projects are successful when the musicians are professionally trained in “their” genre that provides them with the musical skills to work with musicians associated with other genres. Similarly, one common reason given for the failure of some projects is that the musicians were not thoroughly trained enough in their own music genre to enable substantive interaction with other musicians. Although it was possible that Rajhesh Vaidhya was unfamiliar with Third Stream and crossover, he had definitely listened to Shakti, John McLaughlin’s Fusion band from the 1970s, and he was aware of Chennai violinists Ganesh and Kumaresh and their successful brand of Fusion since the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, he was familiar with the notion of being grounded in a particular music genre as a necessary prerequisite for Fusion. Also, because the force of Karnatic music’s influence was so strong, Karnatic music came to stand as a symbol for musical authenticity and authority. Rajhesh Vaidhya was a musician primarily known for performing Fusion and he invoked his Karnatic training to assert his authenticity and authority.

But the potentially uncomplicated definition of Fusion as “totally Karnatic” and popular didn’t last. Explaining Fusion through Karnatic music evaluative criteria established his own classical credibility, but soon limited, contradicted, and ultimately undermined what he

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<sup>39</sup> Some better known classical crossover projects include The Three Tenors and Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road. Crossover tends to refer to musicians whose music crosses over from a particular genre into mainstream popular culture without the conscious intention of fusing different musical forms. Crossover also leads to the naming of new genres. For example, the music of Ray Charles crossed over from R&B and gospel into the mass market and became known as soul.

<sup>40</sup> Ganesh and Kumaresh are brothers who formed a violin duo that performs Karnatic music and Fusion around the world. They are part of the younger generation of Karnatic musicians and their music is extremely well known in Chennai.

attempted with Fusion. The following excerpt of our interview shows the ways Rajhesh Vaidhya tangled Fusion up with different genres and musical processes, such as composition and improvisation:

RV: Nowadays great musicians—everybody likes fusion and everybody's into fusion now.

NH: Why, do you think? What's appealing about fusion?

RV: It's something new. (Pauses)

NH: Is that it? Is there anything else?

RV: See in *kirthana* tradition, in classical tradition if you play you are restricted—you have to sing like this, you have to play like this. But in fusion you have improvisation you can sing as much as you want.

NH: But there's improvisation also in Karnatic music.

RV: Yeah there is.

NH: So how is the improvisation in fusion different than in Karnatic music?

RV: See in fusion—you can do like...in classical you might be only having a *tamboura*, and a singer sings only with *tamboura*...and in fusion you have keyboard which will give you a backup and it will create more atmosphere to sing. Like that....Classical is something that is definitely first preference. Then comes fusion.

NH: First preference for you? Or for the audience?

RV: For the audience. But classical and fusion, everything is almost...nowadays it's [they're] coming [together], it's more popular (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08).

In this excerpt, Rajhesh Vaidhya made Fusion to be a more enjoyable form of music making than Karnatic music because of this comparative lack of restrictions. In doing so, he succinctly articulated some of the most pervasive complexities of defining Fusion. Its popularity included “great musicians,” a term that in Chennai implies Karnatic *vidwans*, or master musicians. After mentioning that “everyone likes fusion,” he said Fusion is second in popularity



to Karnatic music. He discussed how Fusion was a new genre that featured less restricted improvisation as opposed to the more restricted improvisational parameters in Karnatic music, but despite these differences, they were becoming increasingly similar. By replacing the *tamboura* with the keyboard, he also drew my attention towards the instrumentation that he later referred to as a “modern backup” (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08).

Also, as a non-Brahmin *veena* player and therefore potentially excluded from many concerts because of his caste and a waning interest in his instrument, Rajhesh Vaidhya discovered that his Fusion could reach a wider audience than his Karnatic music and bring him more performance opportunities:

RV: You see, in *sabhas* [music organizations that host Karnatic performances], in the music season, there was only classical [allowed] maybe ten years before. Only classical. Nobody plays fusion. But now everybody encourages fusion. And I’m doing fusion. And in music season 10-12 years before I was trying to play in the music season but nobody gave me a chance. I don’t know why.

NH: You don’t know why?

RV: I start...after 2000, from 2003 onwards only I’m playing only in music season. And they call me for fusion. Cause they liked it, sounded good (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08).

Performing Fusion was a noticeable shift in his music career and he began to hear his recordings played everywhere from gas stations to international airport lounges. As the top selling Fusion artist for his recording label, he benefitted from the word “fusion,” and, because of the sheer number of his available recordings, he came to exemplify it.

Rajhesh told me he first became interested in the possibilities of Fusion during a trip to Canada, when he came across a friend’s computer software for recording music. He and I spent the majority of an afternoon in his studio in front of his recently purchased Macintosh desktop computer. He walked me through his composition process, which involved recording and then

layering a combination of his sounds—a keyboard, bass, sitar, voice effects, and percussion—all generated from his midi keyboard connected to the computer. From this demonstration, it seemed that his idea of Fusion was to come up with a groove that made him want to improvise. Just when I started to wonder if this was too convenient a response to our conversation about improvisation in Fusion, he began to improvise a vocal line and later *konnokkol* (rhythm vocables) over his recently composed groove. It was clear that he was more comfortable showing me his compositional process than he was discussing Fusion. He was well aware of the many contradictions in his definitions and descriptions of Fusion and seemed relieved to play rather than to talk. He made up catchy grooves and with one hand on the mouse, he bounced lightly in his desk chair as he improvised vocal melodies and *konnokkol*. He described his composition process with levity and said it occurred naturally and spontaneously—while he’s in his car or “in the loo”—and he said that he sings his composed melodies until he returns to his computer.

Technology and Fusion went together for Rajhesh. His description of his Fusion ensemble as having a “modern backup” meant the inclusion of instruments such as a keyboard, guitar, bass guitar, and drum kit—instruments understood as Western and technological because of their non-native status and dependence on non-Indian companies. “And my *veena* tone is unique. I don’t use regular string. I use electric wire” (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08). When I asked him how he would describe his sound, he said, “Not like a *veena*. Sometimes like a bass guitar, sometimes like a sitar, sometimes like a mandolin. I can process it with my gadgets” (Rajhesh Vaidhya 1/3/08).

Rajhesh Vaidhya was clearly applying his Karnatic skills towards the creation of music that for him, signaled a modern popularity. Yet his uncertainty about Fusion also became clear. Throughout our conversations, his use of Fusion continuously alternated between remixes of

Karnatic compositions and original compositions, emphatically saying that Fusion was one or the other. He helped pioneer the Karnatic *kirthana* remix,<sup>41</sup> and yet even he seemed uncertain about describing it as Fusion.

Interestingly, Rajhesh Vaidhya never articulated to me what he was actually fusing. For him, Fusion was almost like a predetermined end point, something he had a clear sense of as a destination. It wasn't contested at all. Fusion was simply a musical practice that he enjoyed and performed successfully.

#### Oxygen and C. Girinandh

Because of the sheer number of Rajhesh Vaidhya's Fusion recordings, many musicians who performed Fusion reacted to his music with strong opinions. Keyboardist C. Girinandh thought Karnatic remixes, such as some of Rajhesh's music, were giving instrumental experiments with Karnatic music a bad name. He started a Fusion group in college named Oxygen to counter what he considered bad Fusion. The musicians in Oxygen wanted to reclaim the genre of Fusion for instrumental music that would experiment with combinations of Karnatic music, Western music, and other forms of world music.

In doing so, Girinandh told me his band wanted to invent a new generation of music. He described Oxygen's compositional process as feeling free to include any musical style from anywhere in the world in order to make a song and jam. Oxygen released their third CD in February 2007, which includes a version of a bossa nova, a Chinese folk-like song with a

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<sup>41</sup> Remixes of Karnatic *kirthanas* put an electronic dance beat behind a more traditional rendering of the most common Karnatic composed song form, the *kirthana* (now used interchangeably with the *kriti*, even though historically these were understood as separate song forms).

Karnatic flutist simulating a Chinese flute, and a vocal track that could be prominently featured in a Tamil film:

My personal definition of Fusion is not only Karnatic and Western. It can be of anything. It can be Latin, Arabian. It can be jazz, jazz with rock, synthesizers with Karnatic, Hindustani with acoustics [acoustic instruments]. That way, I look into Fusion. Fusion can be called world music. The amalgamation of different kinds of music onto one thing is, I would say, Fusion or world music. And we don't set anything, like you [do not] have to go by the books (C. Girinandh 4/8/07).

When I told Girinandh that Oxygen's approach to Fusion reminded me of film composer A. R. Rahman's approach to composition, he showered Rahman with praise, calling him a definite inspiration but then said, "You don't have complications in film music. In fusion, you can" (C. Girinandh 4/8/07). He was referring to the particular expectations of the Indian mass music industry concerning film music. He was also referring to the restrictions placed on film music as an allegiance to the visual story. According to him, Oxygen intended their music to be based more on the will of the band than the audience.

Girinandh told me the musicians in Oxygen feel united as a band. Even though they have a more song-based approach to their music, they enjoy jamming with each other and want the audience to enjoy that as well. His description of their compositional process downplayed any single individual, even though other musicians in the band seemed to subtly defer to him as the leader.

Girinandh grew up listening to Karnatic music but never formally studied it. As a keyboardist, his choice of instrument signaled more of an interest in film music than Karnatic music and so his leadership lent more non-Karnatic credibility to the band. Most of the other band members were musicians who had studied some Karnatic music and a few considered themselves aspiring Karnatic musicians.

One of their live concerts took place in a college auditorium as part of a one-day Fusion Festival named “Fusic.” The audience of almost all college students supported their performance with hoots and hollers, even though a few members of the more Karnatic-trained musicians in the band seemed slightly uncomfortable in their adopted popular music stage presence. Most of the band stood, which looked and also must have felt odd for the Karnatic musicians who were more accustomed to sitting cross-legged for Karnatic performances. Their song arrangements were tightly executed and they were obviously well rehearsed, yet their presentation was self-conscious and lacked the ease and comfort so crucial to performances of popular music.

The difference between Girinandh’s and Rajhesh Vaidhya’s descriptions of Fusion highlights their varying approaches to navigating the politics of the Karnatic music establishment. Recognizing the tensions that Karnatic remixes created in classically dominated Chennai, Girinandh and other musicians wanted to clearly separate the inevitable overlap between classical and popular music genres in their version of Fusion. Their choice to preemptively distinguish Fusion from Karnatic music was a political strategy designed to avoid challenging and offending the Karnatic music establishment. The less obviously their Fusion overlapped with Karnatic music, the fewer chances Oxygen had to discourage Karnatic audiences from attending their performances and buying their CDs. They explicitly distanced themselves from “Karnatic Fusion” and invoked world music as their source of inspiration, which also avoided the political complications of such a challenge to Karnatic-based authority. Invoking Fusion as world music was an attempt to elide local musical politics and it was also a marketing strategy, which for them, intentionally expressed the global aspirations they had for their music.

But the presence of classical music was still present in Oxygen's music and in Girinandh's descriptions of their Fusion. Even though Girinandh thought of Fusion as perhaps having more in common with popular music than classical music, he nonetheless asserted Fusion as a kind of serious popular music "with complications." With the eclectic world music direction of Rahman's film music, the stylistic direction of the band was aligned with the global trend of world music, but with a Karnatic distinctiveness. The college age musicians of Oxygen were essentially adopting the transnational popular model of world music, influenced by the film composer A. R. Rahman and world music bands, to include and assert the beauty, depth, and importance of Karnatic music.

As for Girinandh's definition of Fusion, he did not see any differences between world music and Fusion and suggested that they are the same. The only difference, he said, is that "Fusion is a word that's gotten into people. Once you start propagating the term world music, that's what people will say" (C. Girinandh 4/8/07).

### Lalitha and Nandini

The violin duo of sisters Dr. M. Lalitha and M. Nandini provided an example of Fusion quite different from Rajhesh Vaidhya and Oxygen. The duo primarily performed Karnatic music and preferred to describe their other music as Fusion. They come from a well known musical family: their uncles are the famous violinists L. Subramaniam and L. Shankar, who have been pivotal to the international awareness of both Karnatic music and Fusion. During my time in Chennai, Lalitha and Nandini were more closely acquainted with their other uncle, L. Vaidyanathan, an esteemed film composer who has since passed away. Lalitha and Nandini had therefore inherited an understanding of Fusion that was naturalized by familial involvement.

When we spoke, Dr. M. Lalitha described her non-Karnatic music as Fusion even though she believed that Fusion in India lacked coherence and order:

Fusion music in India doesn't have a proper structure and methodology so I wanted to bring in that. I mean, compositions form fusion music. So I, so we both wrote compositions for fusion music and then brought in some elements from the different systems (M. Lalitha 4/7/07).

Lalitha has a doctorate from the Chennai University where she wrote her dissertation on cross cultural violin techniques. Funded by a Fulbright Fellowship, she later spent a year studying Fusion composition at the University of Pittsburgh. With her sister, she has toured all over Asia, Europe, Africa, and the U.S. During one of our interviews, she described one of their Fusion compositions:

And the third movement moved on to the Indian style and went back to the Chinese. The first two...had the Chinese flavor with the Chinese ornamentation and everything. And the third movement had some Indian elements in it and came back to the Chinese. So we write compositions exclusively for fusion and we don't play compositions taking, compositions of the great masters like [Karnatic composers] Tyagaraja or Dikshitar...using a keyboard or a drum. I'm sorry, I'm much against that. I don't do it (M. Lalitha 4/7/07).

Her explicit reverence for Karnatic music foregrounded her authenticity as a classical musician who also performed Fusion. As if responding directly to the symposium audience member at the beginning of this chapter, Lalitha was marking a clear line between classical music and Fusion. As long as she maintained this separation she could switch musical practices relatively unproblematically, without attracting criticism from more conservative Karnatic critics.

Lalitha's use of the word "fusion" was intended to foreground her and her sister's compositional skills and by doing so highlighted their musical education and mobility through fusing Karnatic music with the world's other "great" musical traditions. Lalitha also drew my attention to her classical roots by mentioning the "keyboard and drum element" in the negative context of accompanying Karnatic music. Although she never mentioned keyboards and Western

drums when she described her compositional method for Fusion, I discovered their presence was essential.

On December 22, 2006, I performed Fusion with Lalitha and Nandini at the Kamaraj Memorial Hall in Chennai. The event was called the Chennai Tiruvayaru, which was a reference to the annual Tyagaraja festival in Tiruvayaru, a small village in Tamil Nadu south of Chennai. The event is a complex staging of Karnatic music authenticity and tradition with a unique history (see Weidman 2006: 104-106). The event in Chennai was a loose simulation of the Tyagaraja festival without some of the central features. Perhaps the main contrast was that rather than being in a scenic, idyllic, south Indian village where three rivers become joined, it took place in probably the largest auditorium in Chennai, with a concrete interior that undermined acoustic clarity. But just like the Tiruvayaru festival, this one in Chennai had back-to-back performances running all day long.

I had been looking forward to this gig because the rehearsals had been fun and productive. For the first rehearsal, M. Lalitha and I met to go over some of the melodies, *ragas*, and compositions she and her sister wanted to perform. She taught them to me by ear and then supplemented our rehearsal with her CD, *Revelations*, which had all the compositions already recorded on it. On the CD, several of their tracks were anthem-like and powerful, with some added reverb that heightened the music's cinematic, dramatic qualities. On the title track, audience roars were mixed in to create the semblance of a live concert recording.

The next and last rehearsal included the entire band, but without the set drummer. I'm not sure if he couldn't come, or if he wasn't invited because they lived in a modest flat in a very large apartment building and were concerned about noise complaints. The band—with the keyboardist, the Karnatic percussionists including *kanjira*, *morsing*, and *tavil*, myself on alto



saxophone, and the two violinists—took on an acoustic realism with all of us seated on the floor in their living room. It reminded me of familiar Fusion precedents: L. Shankar and Zakir Hussain playing their classical fusion duo at Wesleyan University and videos of Shakti from the 1970s. Lalitha repeatedly said that during the improvisations, we should feel free to go outside the scale of the *raga* and everyone gestured in various ways to show they understood. But no one ever left the *raga*. The few times that I did, using chromatic passing tones to move to more stable steps of the scale of the *raga*, I felt the wincing of the other musicians. I decided not to do it again.

By the end of the rehearsal, I felt we had really come together as a group. The arrangements—including how many times we repeated certain sections and the general order of soloists—were familiar. While I was pretty satisfied with our progress and a good dynamic balance, it was difficult to tell how interested the Karnatic percussionists were because they were almost entirely unexpressive. They could have just had personalities that were more stoic and respectful, but I thought that perhaps the gender dynamic of male accompanists working for two women bandleaders might have additionally influenced their compliant behavior.

On the day of the performance, I arrived at the hall a little before Lalitha and Nandini. When they walked into the green room in the back of the cavernous and entirely concrete rooms behind the stage, they greeted me with a warm welcome and then looked down at my attire and were disappointed. We had disagreed a couple times about what I should wear for the performance. They wanted me to wear a white veshti, the thin cotton fabric that men wrap around their legs and waist, a symbol of southern male (and mostly Brahmin) tradition. I was diplomatic at first, hoping they would read my ambivalence as a polite refusal, but they persisted strongly a couple more times and I finally I had to say no. It forced me into a surprisingly awkward position: during the few performances of Karnatic vocal music that I gave several years

ago I wore a veshti with an accompanying kurtha, or collarless long cotton shirt. This is the concert attire for Karnatic music, after all. But this wasn't a Karnatic music concert, so I wore a Western button down dress shirt with cotton dress pants.

The other musicians in the band then started to show up. The keyboardist was young, probably around nineteen or twenty and he set up his keyboard on a stand in the greenroom to warm up. Like the rest of the band playing "Western" instruments, he was wearing "Western" clothes—a button down shirt and pants. The Karnatic percussionists, kanjira, ghatam, and mrdangam musicians, were wearing Karnatic concert attire.

This issue of concert attire, while maybe seemingly insignificant, presented a curious and unresolved puzzle. I would have felt ridiculous dressed up as a Karnatic musician to play jazz-influenced improvisations on my saxophone. Lalitha and Nandini's obvious interest in wanting me to dress as a Karnatic musician, when they hired me to provide an obviously "Western" presence in the band was particularly baffling. They wanted me to sound Western and try to look Indian—maybe as a counterbalance to the other men in the band who sounded Indian and were dressed with some Western clothes. None of this really mattered in that exact moment, however, because the drummer was late. About forty-five minutes after our scheduled starting time, when we were all set up on stage behind the curtain, he ran in carrying his drum set.

The performance was absolutely nothing like the rehearsal. Immediately the sound of the drum set muffled everything else except for the ear splitting, over-amplified electric violins and a few keyboard sounds that managed to sneak through. I heard the sound of my saxophone not from the monitors on stage but only from the resonant vibration in my head. For the rest of the set, the music was not the more dynamic interplay of violin, saxophone, keyboard, and Indian percussion from the rehearsal. The drums and the violins took over and we heard the echo of

their amplification bounce off the concrete interior of the massive auditorium that was, for the Remember Shakti concert two weeks later, packed to fire code violation capacity. For us it was less than twenty percent filled.

Lalitha and Nandini dressed informally wearing *salwar chemises* rather than *saris*, and stood for the whole performance, sometimes walking around on stage and smiling at the other musicians while improvising. This is a distinct contrast from the seated, more restrained performance etiquette of a typical Karnatic performance. But the sheer force of the sound levels on stage and in the audience was the most obvious difference. I stood next to the keyboardist and saw him repeatedly turn up his amplifier. Compared to the sound levels of the Karnatic vocalist who preceded us in that day-long music festival, our levels were easily twice as loud and the meager audience seemed unaffected by this huge contrast in volume.

We played their original compositions that were short with easily recognizable rhythmic motives. The melodies consisted of short, scalar phrases that corresponded to Karnatic *ragas*. But their previously explicit aims of contributing “structure” and “methodology” of Fusion through their compositions seemed to be just about the least important part of the performance. The over-amplified violin solos; Lalitha and Nandini’s mobility around the stage; the aural and visual presence of the drummer and keyboardist; and the less aural but perhaps more visual presence of me as a white, American saxophonist, loaded the Fusion with its popular appeal. No one there, including me, heard the three Karnatic percussionists in the band, who were there for an inaudible Karnatic presence.

The gap between discourse and practice was wide. From our conversations, Fusion was a compositional challenge that drew from several of the world’s “great” musical traditions. But from this performance, it became clear that for Lalitha and Nandini, Fusion was actually a kind

of popular music show, a letting loose of Karnatic restrictions for jamming, having fun, and being very loud.

“Ghatam” Karthick, Embar Kannan, and the Heartbeat Ensemble

Percussionist “Ghatam” Karthick started an ensemble of what many people in Chennai considered Fusion, but he rejected Fusion as a label for his music. He and his co-composer, violinist Embar Kannan, described their music as “contemporary classical” and constantly discouraged others from calling it Fusion. Kannan described it to me one day:

It’s [the Heartbeat Ensemble’s music] basically classical. But it’s given in a different format. That is the thing. We don’t deviate from the raga. Ever. Whatever is the scale, we will improvise only within the limits. So it is not a fusion. Many people think it’s fusion, but it is not fusion. It is just an instrumental ensemble (Embar Kannan 4/5/07).

Kannan clearly defined classical music with a fidelity to Karnatic *ragas*. This opened up room for alternate ways of modifying their classical musical practice while still working within the confines of Karnatic music. Whatever variable “formats” may have changed in their approach to composition and performance—which included instrumentation, the use of canonical or new compositions, and styles of improvised rhythmic accompaniment—the music remained classical as long as performers retained the melodic system of *raga*. This definition of Karnatic music became a strategic way of creating a politically safe space for their contemporary Karnatic music.

Heartbeat Ensemble leader “Ghatam” Karthick articulated this same idea, first by describing what the musical practice of fusing should be, and then by contrasting it with their version of contemporary Karnatic music:

If you are making a blend or a fusion, the first criteria is it should not be visible as blended or as fused. It should be as a whole, one component unit, so that it’s a one, new kind of music. You call it by whatever name. You call it Niko Higgins or “Ghatam”

Karthick...But if you have a frame of mind, which can accommodate or gel with any system, I think any artist can play fusion music to a maximum, optimum, best level.

But when it comes to my own group, we are not trying any fusion. Because what we want to explore or project is there is much more to Karnatic music and percussion music in the Karnatic system that you can project in a new beautiful way, without compromising the traditional or classical values. When I'm playing *saalagam* [raga], we are not taking or playing small *anuswaras*. We are playing the same raga. If you are taking *bhujaangini* [raga],<sup>42</sup> I'm not occasionally touching the *panchamam* [fifth step of the raga's scale]. I'm not touching the *panchamam* at all...I'm playing absolute chaste *bhujaangini*, but with a lot of contemporary touch, like what you could call 2007 Karnatic music. If Tyagaraja's music was 1890 Karnatic music, or GNB [vocalist G. N. Balasubramaniam] was 1940 Karnatic music, and Jon Higgins was 1960 Karnatic music, I want to play 2007 Karnatic music, maybe 2010 Karnatic music. Because any form of music, any form of art, if it is lost in time, it will be junk by the audience. It has to go with times. Of course I don't want to say it should be made cheap or diluted. Basically I'm a very very hardcore Karnatic classical musician. But it's how you project it (Ghatam Karthick 5/19/07).

With his definition of Fusion, Karthick takes the opposite approach to previous attempts to define Fusion. What is also striking about his definition and Heartbeat's music is how he uses individual agency more often attached to Fusion to argue for Heartbeat's classicism by staying away from "cheap or diluted" music, which are keywords to maintain the elitist value of Karnatic music and ease concerns of would-be critics. Similarly, using a familiar adjective for this function, he described *bhujaangini* raga as "chaste," connecting "traditional" performance practices of Karnatic ragas with virginal purity. He also followed this with a defense of his identity as a "classical" Karnatic musician as well: "Basically I'm a very very hardcore Karnatic classical musician," and then finished this idea by reasserting himself and his creative agency: "But it's how you project it."

Karthick also invoked the innovative newness associated with Fusion to describe his ensemble. Whereas explicit newness and change were shunned among the Karnatic music

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<sup>42</sup>*Bhujaangini* is a variation of the raga *chakravakram* and therefore omits the fifth step named *panchamam* or "pa."

establishment, he highlighted them by saying that he wanted to explore music in a new beautiful way, without compromising traditional or classical values. This idea of innovation in the Heartbeat Ensemble created an implicit tension, making his ensemble potentially more threatening to Karnatic music than the Fusion practiced by other Karnatic musicians. After all, they were attempting nothing less than a kind of redefinition of Karnatic music, a way of steering Karnatic music to contemporary relevance for uninitiated audience members. They wanted to perform “their” music, and therefore strategically and openly interpreted the rules of Karnatic music to innovate within the Karnatic system, negotiating their creative paths with the structures of musical politics in Chennai.

Both Karthick and Kannan described numerous projects of Fusion and film music that they had participated in and made it clear that as multi-genre freelance musicians trained in Karnatic music, they were interested in a range of musical projects. I listened to them each perform in different Fusion projects, including some extremely high profile ones such as the “Mozart Meets India” performance at the state sponsored Chennai Sangamam and the Saarang annual festival on Chennai’s renowned Indian Institute of Technology campus. Like other Karnatic musicians who performed Fusion, they were comfortable working with foreign musicians in many different formats, as well as recording for the local film industry. The music of Heartbeat Ensemble therefore synthesized years of their multi-genre performance careers in South India and expressed what these two musicians were more interested in performing themselves.

Perhaps what is most striking about Karthick’s description Heartbeat’s music is how he understood it as slightly updated Karnatic music with no mixing, fusing, or Western influences. Since Fusion draws attention to the processes of musical and cultural mixing, Karthick and

Kannan de-emphasized any fusing in the Heartbeat Ensemble. Yet their performances feature electronic instruments, a few vocal parts sung by Karthick, and their improvisations and arrangements both draw and depart from Karnatic practice. In the following excerpt from our interview, he contrasted Karnatic *kacceris* from Heartbeat concerts and by doing so, described the band's preparation, rehearsals, and compositional methods. Just before the following excerpt began, he had been describing the casual way he was often hired for a Karnatic *kacceri*, which sometimes occurred an hour or two before the concert and rarely involved any rehearsals.

GK: But in Heartbeat, it cannot be done like that. Because in each and every piece has to be rehearsed. And if Kannan is playing an f flash [a pre-programmed drum machine that they sometimes performed with] there, where we have programmed where there should be no percussion fill there, all—the *mrdangam*, *kanjira*, *ghatam*, *morsing* [percussion instruments common to Karnatic music]—should know where to keep quiet... You have to rehearse that. And every *swara* [in this usage, note], every notation has to be rehearsed. Actually it's more serious than Karnatic music.

NH: Yeah, more time is involved.

GK: More time is involved... If the main artist [in a Karnatic *kacceri*] is Unnikrishnan, it's enough that each one of us [accompanists] concentrate on what Unni is singing and try to do our part. That's it, when I accompany. But in Heartbeat, whatever I do I have to be very careful, and what the other five people are doing I have to be very very watchful that I don't goof up in the middle by doing something new or crazy. Suddenly everything will come to a stop and it will be a mockery of the situation. So everybody has to be on their heels.

Actually we played a concert last year... where we had five new pieces on that day. Six fifteen was the concert and at six everyone was so tense. Nobody was willing to smile because everybody was like:<sup>43</sup>

“Hey, enna song—*anupallavi* second line yenna?” [Karthick as a musician in the band:  
“Hey, in this song—what is the second line of the song's middle section?”]

“Hey, adu, ANDA piece ya. INDA piece *karnaranjani*. [Karthick answers: “Hey, that's THAT piece. THIS piece is in raga *karnaranjani*.”]

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<sup>43</sup> The following quotes are a transcription of Karthick using reported speech to reenact the backstage conversation.

“Fourth charanam yenna? Fourth line ta DA?” [Karthick as a different musician in the band: “What is the fourth line of the last section? Is the fourth line (sings) ta DA?”]

“No no. Ta TOM. Oh no no. TA TOM.” [Karthick responds and sings the phrase, first incorrectly and then correctly.]

Everybody was so tense and we were planning a *pallavi* [abbreviation for *ragam tanam pallavi*] also.<sup>44</sup> And I was more tense because I was planning to sing a new song in a new *raga*. We created one new *raga*. *Aroham* [ascending scale] is *saraswati* and *avaroham* [descending scale] is *chandrajoti* and I had named it *sarasajoti*. . . . And I was so tense because I’m not a full time vocalist and I’m singing in front of a seasoned audience. And I can’t make a fool of myself. The AC [air conditioner] was full but I was sweating.

What I want to convey is the situation is so serious when we play as an ensemble. Because Kumar [name changed], who has given over a thousand concerts by himself, was so tense. “Rumba tension irrukku sir.” [Reported speech of Kumar: “I am really tense, sir.”] He went to toilet three or four times before that concert (Ghatam Karthick 5/19/07).

Karthick clearly countered the negative criticism of Fusion as lazy, unrehearsed

“confusion.” The hard work that these musicians put into their concerts was apparent in this story, as were their personal investments. His description made Karnatic music seem prescribed and predictable, when musicians are so comfortable with the format and audience’s expectations that the stakes of their musicianship are much lower.

A few days after one interview with Embar Kannan, I met with him again to film him playing the differences between Karnatic music and his improvisations for the Heartbeat Ensemble. Despite his assertion that Heartbeat’s music was classical because it retained the Karnatic *raga* system, it was clear that a Heartbeat Ensemble performance of a *raga* was different than a Karnatic performance of that same *raga*. Tempos were faster, *gamakas* (ornamentation) were significantly reduced and simplified, and he played his electric—instead of acoustic—violin.

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<sup>44</sup> *Pallavi* here is short for *ragam tanam pallavi*, a song format in Karnatic music that requires complicated pre-arranged rhythmic organization composed and arranged by the musicians.



Kannan then revealed another contradiction when defining Fusion. For him, Fusion allowed musicians to take liberties with *ragas* that do not adhere to the Karnatic classical rules of *raga*. But instrumentalists in the Heartbeat Ensemble improvised with less *gamaka* and also occasionally at higher speeds to attract non-Karnatic listeners, which would be inappropriate for a Karnatic performance. Kannan also associated the contemporary classical music of the Heartbeat ensemble as a platform to showcase technological advances in the violin. He played his electric violin and during one of many Heartbeat Ensemble concerts I attended, the band's vina player had a Radel electronic vina.<sup>45</sup>

#### Mandolin U. Srinivas

The last example is a musician whose career has been so successful that his name was a kind of genre itself. Mandolin U. Srinivas mostly wasn't bothered with genre names because his reputation was so firmly established in Chennai, as well as throughout India and the Indian diaspora. Words like "Fusion" and "classical" only complicated descriptions of his music because the Chennai audience knew him so well as their local prodigy who brought Karnatic music and Fusion abroad.<sup>46</sup> He has extensively toured and collaborated with Western musicians such as Michael Nyman, Michael Brook, and Nigel Kennedy, and was a full time member of Remember Shakti for over a decade. Perhaps because of his international experience, Srinivas preferred the term "world music" instead of Fusion. "Everyone here calls it Fusion, Fusion, Fusion. They say Fusion. I like calling it world music" (Srinivas 1/15/08). Preferring "world

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<sup>45</sup> Radel is a specific Indian company best known for manufacturing electronic *sruti* boxes, or drone instruments that accompany soloists as substitutes for the acoustic drone instrument named the *tamboura*.

<sup>46</sup> In chapter 3, I focus specifically on one of his Fusion projects that was part of a cosmopolitan music festival.

music” to “fusion” also indicated his strategy as a freelance musician who understood the wider applicability of “world music” to get hired for more international gigs.

Srinivas began his performance career as a child prodigy of Karnatic music, notoriously identifying *ragas* in a few phrases when he was six years old, performing full Karnatic recitals by the age of nine, and then playing in a German jazz festival when he was only thirteen. His musical education was strictly in Karnatic music and he was celebrated for his classical music as well as for his unique contribution of domesticating the mandolin as a Karnatic instrument. During my fieldwork in Chennai, many mentioned Srinivas as an example of how Fusion, perhaps unconsciously, became a part of a musician’s sound. They suggested that Srinivas’s music had changed over time from being very traditional to more individualized and, as more than a few musicians told me, forever altered by his work in Fusion. As one might expect, these observations had critical overtones and usually voiced a resistance to his changes as a musician, arguing that his childhood years were his more authentic Karnatic years. I asked Srinivas if he ever received criticism for performing music other than Karnatic music and he responded with a poignant integration of his music and identity.

I cannot—when you like something...you cannot live for others. They won’t do things for us. They do what they like. We don’t want to be like that. So for example, ‘Srinivas, I don’t like your name you’ve got to change your name.’ No. That’s my name. I want to do what I am. I you don’t like then I can’t help, but this is what I know a little bit. I’ll be doing whatever I know. If I am successful today, it means that everything is God’s grace. That’s why. It’s not me...I believe in that (Srinivas 1/15/08).

Srinivas, a devout Hindu Brahmin, asserted his individual identity and then embellished and tempered it by ultimately deferring his agency to the will of God. He is a very soft spoken and humble person and with these words, he made it clear that he had navigated some real hardship and sorted through his process of self-definition in the face of difficult criticism. But overall, whatever criticism had come from the Karnatic music establishment over the years had not been

enough to effect the attendance at his concerts. Srinivas's musicianship and virtuosity were widely acknowledged as extraordinary, and he remains Chennai's prodigy with both his Fusion and Karnatic concerts. Because of this, "Fusion" was simply a word he tolerated, but anyone in Chennai would have described a performance of Srinivas with his name instead of any label such as "Fusion" or "Karnatic."

### Summary

Looking closely at musicians' definitions of their music will always yield a generous amount of dissent and disagreement, but the unique constellation of issues that emerged shows how these conflicting definitions helped constitute the tensions of Fusion. When Rajhesh Vaidhya described Fusion as an independent musical genre and then was unable to describe it as such, he gave voice to the conflicting and overlapping nature of a musical politics of genre in Chennai. He described his music as Fusion and as a bounded music genre, but also described it with a host of contradictions that revealed issues of identity, caste, nationality, and technology. An important source of much recorded Fusion, he forged a music career based on his "classical" training but not performing Karnatic music.

Similarly, C. Girinandh was dubious of music labeled as "Fusion" because of his dislike for Karnatic remixes, which represented most of the Fusion at the time he helped start Oxygen. But rather than steering clear of the name, he sought to reclaim it for a more international and original sound that avoided conflict with the Karnatic music establishment. As a college aged band with a healthy work ethic and serious ambition, Oxygen seemed relatively united in its goals for Fusion. It was clear that they believed a more globally influenced sound was the key to their success, both in south India and abroad, knowing that the international musical influences

would attract their Indian audiences and when abroad, the Karnatic music influences would set them apart. When Girinandh used the word “Fusion,” he intended it to provide access to India and the rest of the world by floating over local politics of Indian tradition while capitalizing on Indian distinctiveness.

When M. Lalitha said that compositions were the most important part of Fusion and then put on an ear splitting performance of electrified jamming, in which compositions were the least important feature of the concert, she demonstrated some dimensions of the conflicted zones in the overlapping realms of “classical” and popular musical politics. Yet she also skillfully embodied three forms of musical identity: she was a regionally Southern, nationally Indian, and internationally cosmopolitan musician. Part of a family lineage that exemplifies this overlapping relationship, M. Lalitha used the term Fusion proudly, but with a qualification. She distanced herself from Chennai Fusion in order to better align herself with what she understood as the more international trends of musical mixing. With Lalitha and Nandini, Fusion was a form of popular music that helped present them as Karnatic musicians in close dialogue with the global world music industry.

The Heartbeat Ensemble and Mandolin Srinivas rejected Fusion but for different reasons. Karthick and Kannan pursued original music by arguing for their creative license within the Karnatic system of musical structures. Rather than strictly separating Fusion and Karnatic music, or wearing different music genre “hats” as Lalitha and Nandini did, they positioned themselves as musicians who perform Karnatic music from previous and contemporary eras. By locating the boundaries of Karnatic and Fusion at a *raga*’s scale—which is just one of many components that comprise a Karnatic *raga*—and by disassociating themselves from Fusion, they oriented themselves as a new generation of Karnatic musicians who are renovating Karnatic music for a

new generation of listeners. As a result, their reasons for rejecting Fusion reveal a different dimension of the politics of music in Chennai. As does the reason for Mandolin Srinivas, whose example shows how the virtuoso celebrity can, for the most part, rise above the messy contradictions and complications of Fusion. Srinivas, even as one of Chennai's beloved virtuosos, was not immune to criticism but his unique musical skills minimized the contestation of Fusion. His celebrity status enabled him to apply his classical virtuosity to a range of Fusion projects.

Fusion enabled all of these musicians to assert themselves as professionals who were competent beyond the more prescribed roles available to them as Karnatic instrumentalists, projecting themselves not just as professional musicians, but composers and bandleaders as well. Yet they all straddled competing musical politics in Chennai very differently and through their conflicting definitions and opinions about Fusion, revealed Fusion to be independent from Karnatic music, Western music, film music, and world music. The very existence of Fusion as understood from these definitions is caught in the central tension between opposing forces of classical and popular ideologies to the extent that no actual consensus of Fusion is even possible. The polysemic sprawl of Fusion's definitions became condensed and unified only by the problematic word "fusion," and more negatively, "confusion."

At the same time, the tensions that were built into the discourse about Fusion created the possibilities that were as problematic as they were agentive: musicians also thrived from contestation. When their music evoked descriptive tensions, this irresolution perpetuated the unresolved debate about what Fusion was, which allowed their music to exist in multiple musical practices at once. This contestation was actually a generative sphere precisely because there was opportunity in dissent. Musicians offered ambiguous and conflicting definitions because it was in

their interests to be multi-genre musicians, to not get too pegged by genre names, and to accentuate some aspect of what they were doing that projected them as even better musicians. Building up a multi-genre reputation as a freelance musician also had obvious economic benefits. Versatility always leads to more phone calls, more gigs, and ultimately more money.

Musicians who performed Fusion negotiated the Karnatic music establishment in Chennai and fended off critics for whom the pun of confusion endured. So why, how, and for who was Fusion bad music?

## Definitions and Opinions

### Part II: Musicians Who Do Not Perform Fusion

This section focuses on musicians who do not perform Fusion and react to it with a negative evaluative judgment. Previously, I showed how one use of “confusion” was intended to mean bad music.<sup>47</sup> As Washburne and Derno (2004) have pointed out in their collection of essays, the most productive area of inquiry for bad music should be pursued in “the complex dynamics and dialogical interaction which underpin and perpetually redefine the relationship between ‘good’ and the ‘bad’” (5-6). In this same collection, Simon Frith has articulated the same point:

...There is no point in labeling something as bad music except in a context in which someone else thinks it’s good, for whatever reason. The label “bad music,” that is to say, is only interesting as part of an argument (Frith 2004: 17).

Negative judgments of Fusion were partly generated as a reaction to the positive experience of other musicians, but also as a reaction against the hype of newness discussed in the last chapter.

In the next chapter I analyze how the appeal of Fusion as new was enhanced by the local

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<sup>47</sup> “Never tell a musician you are choosing ‘confusion’ over their music” (Personal communication 12/14/06).

newspaper media, but first, a close look at judgments of Fusion as bad music supplements the tensions previously identified by musicians who perform Fusion.

Finding critics of Fusion in Chennai was not difficult. Some reacted kindly by condescendingly tolerating Fusion and excusing it as a comparatively “new” genre in a nascent stage of evolution. Others had their disparaging criticisms sharply honed. When I began interviews with critics of Fusion, they sometimes misinterpreted my interest as celebratory and wanted to counter my potential enthusiasm with their criticisms.

T. M. Krishna

During my research, T. M. Krishna was perhaps the most widely respected Karnatic vocalist of the younger generation. He and rival vocalist Sanjay Subramaniam led an extensive field of younger male vocalists and their concerts throughout the year were some of the best attended. They toured all over India and the world, and represented a bright future for Karnatic music. Krishna was also known for his dynamic, outspoken personality, articulate opinions, and progressive traditionalism. He publicly advocated against the tendency of accompanists to refuse performing with women soloists and recently co-authored a glossy coffee-table picture book that honors seven highly influential Karnatic musicians of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Krishna did not perform music that could be mistaken for Fusion. Another musician suggested I speak with him because of his firm views against Fusion.

During our conversation, his description of Fusion used abstract comparisons and practical musical descriptions like other musicians. As a prominent naysayer of Fusion, Krishna echoed a kind of evaluation and classification of Fusion that I had heard from other Karnatic

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<sup>48</sup> Jayashri and Krishna (2007).

musicians. Just before the following excerpt from our conversation, he had been describing Fusion projects that included Western musicians.

TMK: Don't tell a jazz musician, "you know, this is the scale. Now play around with it." I mean, what are you DOING over here. You're not bringing a sense of your music there. So, these kinds of things [musical elements like scales] get highlighted, which are completely on the fringe. I mean, scales are there, there are *ragas* which are just mere scales and not evolved to a *raga*, and some are not evolved... Now you take that as a concept and put it at the center of a point of connection then you're sending the wrong message of the system. If, say, someone who has never heard Karnatic music or Indian classical music comes for fusion, then the good thing of fusion is people get exposed to other systems. That's a good aspect. But they can't get exposed to the wrong things.

NH: Yeah. Well they're getting exposed to something... derivative of...

TMK: Absolutely. Exactly... which is not the heart and soul of what the system is, but that is what is essentially happening and this is not true of only the Karnatic system, it's true of Western classical musicians who try to play around with other systems too. So I'm not saying [only that] Karnatic musicians are the people who are dabbling or doing [this]. It's a world over phenomenon that most people are taking the easy way out because the tough way to handle fusion is to say "I'm going take"... You and I meet and say, "we're going to sit and work on this and CRACK it. And crack a way of presenting a system, an idiom, which is very different from both yet has essential aspects of both." It's a very hard thing to do. I mean I don't know whether anyone can do it but I think it's possible to crack it, but it involves a lot of work, which is not necessarily what most people would like to do.

NH: And what are you cracking exactly?

TMK: Okay, I think if you can crack that, I think what we are cracking is the perceived boundary between the two systems. If I can crack a way by which I could sit with a Western classical musician and perform and create a form that has the essentials of mine and your form, then I've created a new form. I don't know whether I'm coming out clearly.

NH: Yeah, yeah...

TMK: Then you have created a new form. THAT'S fusion. You have actually metamorphasized two systems to something new. Or at least tried to do it. You may not do it the first time, but it's a step. Then you're taking fusion music—I think then you're doing a service to fusion music because you're giving it an identity. Today fusion music does not have identity. It is basically whatever I want to do on stage (T. M. Krishna 6/19/07).



Krishna's critique acknowledged a world-wide practice of fusion and he understood this as a global trend in which Indian musicians have their own contributions and roles. His prescriptive definition of Fusion was a theoretical description of what it should be: metamorphasizing two systems. This emerged from his criticism of Fusion as merely "playing around with a scale" and "whatever musicians want to do on stage." If musicians didn't attempt to crack the boundaries between musical systems, he didn't take them seriously.

Interestingly, in the midst of his description, Krishna described the theoretical boundaries of the Karnatic system as "perceived." Intentionally or not, this posed the question of whether these musical boundaries were real and actually experienced by musicians or if they were culturally constructed. If the latter, this could be interpreted to mean that these musical boundaries are influenced by broader differences perpetuated as incommensurable by both India and the West. By suggesting they were perceived, he minimized the chasm between these incommensurable monolithic systems. This temporarily undermined his definition of Fusion as an innovative metamorphosis because if the boundaries are not real, there are no problems of incommensurability to crack. But Krishna's main intention in this excerpt was to define what the practice of Fusion should be by describing what he clearly believes to be the essence of Karnatic music and a solid boundary between India and the West: *raga*.

Krishna said that Fusion showcased scales rather than *ragas*—or more specifically, *ragas* that were less "evolved" by being more scalar, with less scope for improvisation and not what he described as "the heart and soul of Karnatic music." Here, *raga* became the symbol of India and the scale became symbolically non-Indian—a distinctively audible boundary. For him, Fusion's success depended on musicians rendering more distinctively Karnatic, or "evolved" *ragas*. And yet he claimed that the mission of Fusion depended upon the metamorphosis of musical systems.

Krishna argued that musicians should feature a distinctive Karnatic *raga* and metamorphasize the system of melody at the same time—an inherent contradiction.

Krishna defined and criticized Fusion with a description of musical structures—a privileging of musical form by disembodiment of sound from its authorial source. For him, Fusion was therefore about the potential for new structures and systems. As a Karnatic musician, it is not surprising that Krishna’s critique of Fusion was based on concepts that were important to classical music. But his extremely high expectations for Fusion, predicated on a kind of innovation marked Fusion as completely distinct and different from Karnatic music. By doing this, he endowed Fusion with the potent possibility of innovation and divorced it even further from the realm of authentic Indian tradition. If Fusion didn’t at least attempt to metamorphasize musical systems then, for Krishna, it is bad music, or “whatever I want to do on stage.”

Krishna’s description of the innovative potential of musical mixing was an example of what I frequently encountered as a hypothetical paragon of fusion, a kind of Weberian “ideal type.” As clarified by Anthony Giddens, Max Weber’s concept is useful to explain many musicians’ responses to theories of fusing in the interviews I conducted.

An ideal type is constructed by the abstraction and combination of an indefinite number of elements which, although found in reality, are rarely or never discovered in this specific form...[It] is neither a ‘description’ of any definite aspect of reality, nor... is it a hypothesis; but it can aid in both description and explanation (Giddens 1971:141-2).

Krishna defined Fusion by invoking this ideal type that also indirectly, subtly, and safely criticized Fusion. Throughout our conversation, he shifted back and forth between theorizing about fusion and criticizing Fusion.

Ramesh Vinayakram

I met Ramesh Vinayakram through violinist V. S. Narasimhan, who led an ensemble named the Madras String Quartet that performed his arrangements of Karnatic *kirthanas* with chordal progressions based on Western harmony. At the time of my fieldwork, Ramesh composed film music, lived in Chennai, and had also occasionally worked with the Madras String Quartet. His perspective on Fusion was unique because his criticism of Fusion came from both the Karnatic perspective, by invoking the ideal type criticism, and from the perspective of a film music composer.

What is fusion? Fusion is an attitude. Only when somebody knows two different genres of music, only when he can understand and think that he can fuse it to make it more aesthetic, more beautiful in a search for the extraordinarily beautiful things in music, then probably you will get some gems out of it. It doesn't come from a careless amalgamation of sounds or minds. I don't think it makes any sense to me. It's a matter of attitude. You don't want to do something just to prove that you are better or that classical music or western music is better. No it doesn't make any sense. It's a matter of understanding the other music, having some sensitivity, and then trying to see what you can relate and see that it happens [so that] it has a purpose in fusion... Then composition comes out of this whole exercise. Then that probably will be good fusion. And also, the best fusion is that which satisfies both *rasika* [music aficionado] from Western and *rasika* from Hindustani and Karnatic music. They both come and go satisfied because they have heard something that they can relate to and they have also heard something that they cannot relate to, which is new. So this is probably the ideal situation. At least people should strive for this. Have this as the goal." (Ramesh Vinayakram 11/23/06).

For Ramesh, Fusion was an attitude that should demonstrate curiosity and an openness to learning. The attitude should reveal a sensitivity to other music genres and lead to a greater understanding of all forms of music. He revealed his version of the ideal type when he distinguished between the virtuous path of learning and the more selfish path of competition. Theoretically, the practice of fusing represented innovation, purity, and virtue in musicians' noble pursuits of musical mixing. Practically, the practice of Fusion in Chennai represented the depravities of competitive self-interest, sell-out commercialism, and a lack of creativity. Even

though his ideal type was more socially grounded in audience reception than Krishna's, it still rendered the ideal type of Fusion as impossible to achieve.

By comparing Fusion to film music, Ramesh pointed out some of the implicit and disparaging meanings of Fusion.

Obviously singing [raga] *pantuvrali* against drums or chords or something, that's fine. That has been done all the time in the film music without calling it fusion... There the fusion has already come in. Nobody called it fusion though. And you had all these things and then the Western influence has come into the film industry, into the film music. A lot of people have used a lot of chords, a lot of things. And obligatos were there and they used Western instruments and Western arrangements with Indian ragas. I'm telling you, if you don't call something fusion, you'll really land up with some good fusion (Ramesh Vinayakram 11/23/06).

Ramesh eloquently pointed out that the strategy of naming music "fusion" was a kind of contract between musicians and listeners that promised musical mixing and innovation. For him, the word "fusion" contained an implicit expectation of the ideal type. But the innovation that he expected was based on a musical education that was partly made possible by the same class privilege as T. M. Krishna. Fusion did promise a kind of newness to all audience members, but it is only the Karnatic music establishment and the highly musically educated that translated newness into musical and formal features, and from there into innovative expectation. According to this negative critique, the word "fusion" endowed musicians and listeners with an idealized anticipation that the performance could ultimately never satisfy. For the Karnatic music establishment, calling something "fusion" was therefore dooming it to failure.<sup>49</sup>

RV: Again, there's another one: (Sings and parodies a fusion composition...) Okay I can make a hundred thousand tunes like that in five minutes.

NH: (Laughter)

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<sup>49</sup> Writer/musician Amit Chaudhury expressed this in his recording titled *This is Not Fusion* (2007).

RV: Probably...it may not be in five minutes. Maybe three minutes. (Joint laughter, then long pause.)

No, I'm not demeaning it. We have to come out of that shell. It's a hard shell in which people are stuck. But people are quite happy, to be frank with you. These people, who don't know much of music, they come there and just as an experience they come.

NH: I think that's very nice.

RV: That's the most interesting part, people not the usual Karnatic music listeners, they are from all walks of life, different age groups, and the old and the youngest, everyone (Ramesh Vinayakram 11/23/06).

With his improvised parody of Fusion, he described Fusion's inauthenticity, inability to communicate, unoriginality, and general stupidity. By invoking "these people" from "all walks of life," he clearly endowed Fusion with divisive attributes concerning middle class politics in contemporary Chennai. To be clear, he used "all walks of life" to mean a less musically educated middle class—not the *chaiwallahs* selling tea outside the auditorium. He expressed interest in the ability of Fusion to attract a new audience, but the Fusion audiences he described did not resemble a cross section of Chennai society as he suggested.<sup>50</sup>

Our laughter in this excerpt is also revealing. I laughed sympathetically because I could tell he intended this to be humorous for me. At this point in our conversation, we had developed a comfortable rapport and I felt obliged to offer laughter that kept our rapport intact. But also, I found it genuinely funny that he had improvised a parody of Fusion so easily. He was communicating that Fusion had a predictable template, a kind of prefigured model. In this case, the symbol of bad Fusion was a simple *mora* or *korvai* (rhythmic cadences in Karnatic music). I remember wanting to remain silent after the laughter to see how he would break it. It turned out

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<sup>50</sup> I examine the relationship between Fusion and Chennai's middle classes in detail in the next chapter.

that our critical laughter was perhaps too severe for him and he backtracked, but it is clear he *was* demeaning Fusion.

### Summary

Almost unanimously, the critique of Fusion as confusion and bad music came from the Karnatic music establishment. Social categories of caste and class were observable in the subtle ways musicians used the power attributed to Brahmins and the more musically educated middle class. T. M. Krishna and Ramesh Vinayakram endowed Fusion with classical music ideals and expectations, and defined the one true path to Fusion as virtually impossible. Their use of the ideal type stripped Fusion of any potential to actualize musical innovation that might not metamorphasize musical systems but still could represent a thoughtful and intentional musical integration. These criticisms slapped down projects of Fusion by disparaging them as motivated by personal gain.

Clearly, musicians who performed Fusion did not understand their music with such stark extremes of the ideal type and bad music. Rajhesh Vaidhya, C. Girinandh, M. Lalitha, “Ghatam” Karthick, Embar Kannan, and Mandolin Srinivas each defined Fusion with remarkable differences according to their experiences. Together, these differences helped create the tensions that contributed to the contestation of Fusion. Musicians who performed Fusion had to negotiate this contestation even as they helped create it with their varying definitions and opinions. Yet, the contestations were also generative and created uncertainties that opened up opportunities for multi-genre careers.

The Karnatic music establishment used this contestation against musicians who performed Fusion by criticizing it as confusion, which worked so effectively because of its initial

impression as a pun, or seemingly harmless play on words. But it hosted a range of negative critiques of Fusion and was most successful because its brevity and negativity served to shut conversations about Fusion down. There were no follow-up comments or questions, no other possible directions to pursue after someone invoked “confusion.” The tensions that emerged from conversations about Fusion continued to hover unresolved.

The tensions in the various definitions and opinions of Fusion show the latent force of Fusion’s contestation. The definitions and opinions of musicians as inextricably linked to the politics of musical performance in Chennai allow for a more pointed articulation of musicians’ discursive meanings of Fusion than their responses communicate alone.

Musicians were compelled to assert themselves in a crowded field of dozens of competitive virtuoso musicians. As a result, they defined Fusion with unresolved theoretical explorations partly as strategies of self-definition. When they tacked back and forth between defining fusion—the theoretical practice of cultural mixing—and Fusion—the musical practice in Chennai—they asserted the importance of a series of tensions that were necessary for successful multi-genre musical careers in contemporary Chennai. Unlike my interlocutors however, I push past these inevitably inconclusive definitions of Fusion and show that they loaded Fusion with the irresolutions and tensions that comprised the varied and complex subjectivities of Chennai musicians themselves: invoking contested notions of caste, gender, region, and nation.

### Conclusion: Fusion and Hybridity

How can literature about cultural and musical hybridity expand the contestation of Fusion into broader conclusions about musicians, music, and modernity in India? Much of the music literature on hybridity explores the relationship between hybrid identity and hybrid music (Feld

2000; Hutnyk 2000; Taylor 1997) and under the descriptor of “world music,” focuses on the political relationship of the dominant European and North American music industry that sells the hybrid music of marginalized, hybrid non-Western subjects. Concerned with transnational circulation determined by the mass music industry and individuals scattered around the globe, these writers have missed the ways that a local musical practice can be a different form of hybrid world music—one that is defined by its locally conflicted ontological status, which still has everything to do with the same phenomena of the global music industry and individual musicians. The discourse of hybridity, or in the case of Chennai the discourse of Fusion, provided a helpful object of inquiry in the way it demanded a “closer to the ground” analysis of how the tensions of Fusion structured its social life. The discourse showed the conflicted ways that hybrid world music exists locally.

Scholars have overlooked the importance of this conflicted irresolution. Hutnyk (2000) and Mazzarella (2003b) have critiqued the reluctant acceptance of studies of hybridity to conclude with an assertion of a dynamic, varied, and irresolvable complexity. But as I’ve shown, complexity was not a dead end conclusion. Drawing out multiple tensions within and between these individual musicians shows that the tensions were lived—that they inhabited the daily lives of musicians who performed and did not perform Fusion. Musicians reproduced these tensions themselves in discourse and, as I show in the next chapter, through musical performance.

Were these tensions a necessity? Was there a kind of need, or an opening that Fusion fulfilled? Brian Stross has discussed the potential functions that cultural hybridity serves:

It is my proposition that hybrids, particularly in the cultural domain, are often created to fulfill environmentally sanctioned functions, to fill contextual needs, or to take advantage of opportunities created by new situations. If the environment changes, introducing new parameters, humans seem to devise new forms and formats, and with every introduction of something new to the environment, the environment is somehow changed, with new parameters, new needs, and new opportunities. The hybrid forms that fill new niches in



the environment are usually designed, and certainly selected for or against, on the basis of their exhibited characteristics, which are usually advantageous over, in this sense superior to, characteristics of either “parent.” Otherwise one or the other “parent” would probably have served the purpose. That is why hybrid vigor, a topic as relevant to this focus as it is to the focus on the hybrid itself, can be seen to fit both literally in the biological domain and metaphorically in the cultural domain (Stross 1999: 261).

The greater proliferation of Fusion in the last couple decades fits into an increasing need for musicians to expand their performance opportunities in a competitive field of “world musicians.” But Stross’s position of hybrids filling “contextual needs” doesn’t explain why Fusion has been present all along—as I showed in the last chapter, only the patronage and the name are new. Fusion is definitely a response to the West, to the West in India, to musicians’ travels in the West, to invoking the complications of the West in India and in Chennai, but since musicians are also classical musicians, are also film musicians, and elide all these categories, this complexity is too varied to fit into Stross’s notion of hybridity as a “new” response to “contextual needs.” Actually, there’s not a whole lot “new” about Fusion (apart also from the cosmopolitan production of fusion discussed in the next chapter)—but musicians knew that Fusion was discursively and musically reorganized, reformatted material in which classical ideologies and technical skills were directed towards a sounding of postcolonial modernity.

So how can Fusion illuminate Garcia Canclini’s “processes of hybridization” (2005) in the context of postcolonial modernity in India? Focusing exclusively on these processes reveals the ways hybridization was imbricated in broader processes of modernity and that Fusion was an important piece of a larger puzzle. Fusion was part of a dialectical relationship in Chennai: it provided the hybridity to maintain Karnatic music’s classical purity. In other words, the explicit intentions of calling music “fusion” highlighted the supposed fusing of musicians, while discourses of purified traditions obscured instances of fusing within Karnatic music.

Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier (2006) has argued to abandon the concept of musical hybridity, which she believes fails to account for its ubiquity in the digital technology age of circulation. Favoring “sonic transculturation,” she frees up the term hybridity to refer to the bringing together of different domains of experience related to three overlapping processes of modernity, drawing from anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (2003) and sociologist Bruno Latour (1993). First there is the construction of two autonomous realms: man made and “natural.” Humans make society while other realms such as science, language, and tradition are constructed as naturally reoccurring. Second, there is the creation of mediations and hybrids linking these separate domains and third, there is the epistemological work of naturalizing this separation and making it invisible. “A feature of modernity, then, is the cyclic relation between hybridity and purity embraced through the work of invisibilization in which tradition appears as ‘natural’ and hybridity as constructed” (Ochoa Gautier 2006:810).

The tensions I have described—in the pun of “confusion” and the multiple and conflicting definitions of Fusion—give voice to the work of invisibilization in which tradition appears as natural and Fusion as constructed. When we listen to the many tensions of Fusion, its contestation, we hear a sonic mediation of contemporary Indian musicians asserting themselves by, as William Mazzarella wrote, “reconciling Indianness with globality” (2003a: 35).

## Chapter 3

### Sound, Audience, and Institution:

#### The Tensions of Cosmopolitanism and India's New Middle Class

Cosmopolitanism is what we praise in those who read novelists from every continent, or in the audiences and performers of world music. It is the aspiration of advocates for global justice, and the claim of managers of multinational businesses. Campaigners on behalf of migrants urge “cosmopolitan” legal reforms out of both concern for immigrants and belief that openness to people from other cultures enriches their countries.

“Cosmopolitan” is the first category in the advertisements posted by would-be husbands seeking brides (and vice versa) in the *Sunday Times of India*. The many different usages reinforce the fashion for the concept but they muddy its meaning (Calhoun 2008: 431).

Middle class behavior is figured as symptomatic of the social contradictions that beset Indian modernity (Mazzarella 2005: 5).

By now, the important ways that Fusion was contested in local discourse—the ways people related it to tradition, discussed its newness, defined it, and judged it—should be clear. In this chapter, I describe and analyze certain tensions of Fusion that unite musical sound and urban Indian society. By doing so, I extend questions that have been central to the social science of music that has explored the relationship between sound structures and social structures (Feld 1984, extending Lomax 1962; 1976). How can the example of Fusion yield insight into recent changes in contemporary Chennai? What was the relationship between the tensions in musical sound and the tensions present in the cultural domains that helped produce Fusion? Specifically, I argue that the tensions I observed in musical performance were intertwined with the tensions that comprised two central facets of modernity in India: cosmopolitanism and the new middle class. I identify tensions in musical performance that sounded the tensions that resulted from Calhoun's muddled meanings of cosmopolitanism and Mazzarella's social contradictions of India middle-class behavior. Fusion made the tensions of modernity in India audible and real.

A recently formed, annual music festival in Chennai named November Fest offered a unique site to explore these tensions. It demonstrated how various levels of participation—musicians, audiences, and institutional patronage—were implicated in producing and perpetuating the tensions of Fusion. The case of November Fest illustrates how the tensions of Fusion radiated outwards and linked musical sound to modernity in India. In order to show different ways that the many tensions of Fusion were manifested, I focus on two concerts during the 2007 festival that offered of Fusion. I conclude by showing how tensions located in different sounds, audiences, and institutional agendas contributed to how Fusion was endowed with a cosmopolitan identity intertwined with contested notions of the Indian new middle class.

### Cosmopolitanism

The cosmopolitanism enacted during November Fest provided a way for audiences to be citizens of the world; those who bought the admission tickets represented a certain portion of the population who were a local incarnation of a translocal habitus that was linked by mobility and access to technology (Turino 2000). This group was also linked through their interest and curiosity in all non-local manifestations of this same translocal habitus. Audiences participated in this performance of cosmopolitanism because the professional musicians presented a fused music “of the world” that presumably resulted from their cosmopolitan intentions and, in many cases, their travels as well. But the gathering of multiple segments of the middle class audience as well as local and translocal musicians in this festival yielded some friction: “Local branches of a given cosmopolitan formation will have their own distance features and unique slants because of specific conditions and histories in particular locales” (Turino 2000: 8). I observed a range of tensions that emerged from the unique simultaneity of being local and translocal in Chennai. I

show how professional musicians sounded the tensions that were intertwined with the festival's institutional patron and audience members.

### Two Contrasting Festivals

During my research, the English word “fusion” had a presence in India that extended far beyond the musical realm. As a trope in contemporary Indian culture that drew from the idea of cultural mixing, “fusion” popped up in media and advertising industries to attract and showcase a cosmopolitan worldview by capturing this idea of cultural mixing. The word “fusion” was used to sell products like clothes, cuisine, furniture, and cars, as well as music and however criticized it was in musical circles in Chennai, it was a word with a trendy and hopeful newness that many mapped easily onto India's economic liberalization. As I showed in Chapter One, the musical practice of Fusion predated this period, but musicians and audience members drew from this notion of cultural mixing that was amplified by the recent period of India's economic and cultural growth, what Ritty Lukose has mentioned (citing Zakaria 2006 in *Newsweek*) as “India Rising” (Lukose 2009: 2).

The experience of November Fest drew from and extended this cosmopolitan association with the word “fusion,” but the festival's patrons also succeeded in creating a cosmopolitan event because of its juxtaposition to Chennai's December Concert Season, the internationally known, annual festival that celebrates Indian classical music and dance. Therefore, understanding how November Fest activated a cosmopolitan set of local meanings and issues related to the new middle class first requires an explanation of the December concert season in order to compare it to November Fest. This comparison is not just helpful for contextualizing November Fest for this chapter, but was actually a significant part of the how the festival started.

The producer of November Fest, Mukund Padmanathan, made this comparison during our interview, and by doing so demonstrated additional evidence for the unique dialectical relationship between Fusion and Karnatic music in Chennai.

#### The December Concert Season and Karnatic Audience Behavior

The December Concert Season is actually a series of overlapping smaller festivals, in which organizations named *sabhas* each host a series of concerts. *Sabhas* are privately run institutions and *rasikas*—Karnatic music enthusiasts or “connoisseurs” (Allen 1998: 26)—pay small dues to keep the organization running. Through a mostly Brahmin network of *sabha* members and their corresponding social contacts, the series of concerts are also sponsored by local businesses and corporations like banks or local information technology businesses. The *sabha* is the primary form of patronage for Karnatic music in Chennai and some of the older and more established *sabhas* also own concert halls, though not all of them. The Music Academy is the most prestigious *sabha* and it owns the best concert hall in the city. Concert halls range from a few thousand-seat auditoriums to makeshift outdoor stages with thatched roofs above the stage. Most of these performance spaces are decorated, for example, with ribbons strung on the ceiling and a corner of the stage dedicated to the inauguration *puja* with images of deities and celebrated saints.<sup>51</sup> Often on the wall at the back of the stage hang three framed illustrated portraits of the musical trinity of Karnatic composers: Muttuswamy Dikshitar, Tyagaraja, and Syama Sashtri.

Proper audience behavior at these Karnatic *kacceris* during the December Concert Season has been consistently debated because of a wide range of opinions about acceptable forms of listening. Generally, a Karnatic audience’s applause is minimal and scripted, occurring briefly

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<sup>51</sup> A *puja* is a short Hindu religious ceremony. In this case, the *puja* provides an auspicious beginning to the festival.

after pieces conclude, after longer improvisational sections, and between sections of the main piece of the concert. But it can be spontaneous, for example during the exposition of new *sangatis* (variations of the initial composed phrases of a *kriti* or *kirthana*, the most common song form in the Karnatic repertoire) or after particularly clever or flashy improvised phrases. During a *kacceri*, audiences perform a varied range of controversial but tolerated bourgeois subjectivities. Cell phones ring and some actually take the call during the performance. Although it is not encouraged, audience members casually walk in and out of the concert hall during a performance, leaving for a quick bite at the makeshift canteen, a favorite perk of the Concert Season among *rasikas*. *Rasikas* also perform their authenticity through certain listening practices. They produce a range of non-verbal appreciative sounds when they hear something they like. Seated, their embodied participation of moving their torsos, arms, hands, and heads in stylized ways to the music communicates their enjoyment. Some keep *tala*, another form of embodied listening that uses a system of handclaps, waves, and finger counting to illustrate the rhythmic cycle in actual musical time. Since many *rasikas* have studied Karnatic music at some point in their lives, or at least have experienced a family member's practicing at home, they also listen extremely closely to musical qualities that attract them, such as intonation, diction, improvisational ideas, accompaniment, and lyrical meaning.

The contrasts between what has been acceptable and tolerated illustrate a particular kind of audience subjectivity that has demonstrated the chaffing of 20th century Indian modernity (Weidman 2006). Audience behavior in Karnatic *kacceris* has been debated for several decades and is still fraught with interesting contradictions: a performance of classical Indian tradition—occasionally called “chaste classical” by some of my interlocutors—is punctuated with the latest ringtones, audible conversations, and walking through the venue during the performance. While

these forms of behavior are debated, they are not so rude as to be at all uncommon, especially during the concert season when the number of *kacceris* is so high. Overall, Chennai is internationally known for the December Concert Season, which is a very particular celebration of Indian tradition, and its audiences are notoriously discerning and opinionated.

#### November Fest: Introduction

If the December Concert Season celebrates the history, tradition, and prosperity of Karnatic music,<sup>52</sup> *The Hindu* Friday Review November Fest was designed to “bring novel and refreshing genres of music which the city has never been exposed to before” (Padmanathan 1/2/08). Not wanting to compete with the December concert season, the festival’s organizers wanted to provide something different and started November Fest as a week-long concert series in 2005. The festivals I attended in 2006 and 2007 featured Hindustani music, rock bands from India and other Asian countries, Western classical music, and various forms of Fusion. One example of Fusion during the 2006 Festival was a band named Mrigya that, according to the festival brochure, promised “a fusion of Blues, Funk, folk, Latin, Rock, Jazz and Indian Classical Music.” It also included a symposium that featured musicians speaking about a given topic (“Reaching Within Music in an Age of Distraction” discussed in previous chapters), a film presentation, and daytime concerts of younger performers. In 2010 the festival expanded to other cities in south India including Coimbatore, Bangalore, and Hyderabad.

In 2007, Mukund Padmanathan was the director of November Fest and an employee of *The Hindu*, which has been the main sponsor of the festival and the primary English daily

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<sup>52</sup> And also its breadth: December is the tourist season in south India when the weather is the coolest and many non-resident Indians (NRIs) return to Chennai at this time to visit family, relax, shop, and if they are musicians, perform. As a result, this time period is a reminder to resident citizens in Chennai of the wide international reach of NRI’s and Karnatic music.



newspaper in Chennai. In our interview, his most concise description of November Fest was “not Karnatic” (Padmanathan 1/2/08). He said it was designed as an alternative to the Chennai December concert season.

Achieving a diversity of music genres for the festival programming was a challenge for Padmanathan, but not the central problem that N. Ram, *The Hindu*'s editor-in-chief, identified at the 2007 November Fest launch party. Ram said, “It is easy to string a series of concerts together. The challenge lies in creating a platform that is attractive and well packaged.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Hindu*'s response to this central challenge of marketing summarized the unique experience of November Fest. An attractive, well-packaged festival was exactly what greeted me when I walked through the pedestrian gate about an hour before a concert on November 15, 2007. The parking lot surrounding the auditorium was already full and buzzed with excitement. I could see and smell a heightened formality: men's' kurtas and business suits were freshly pressed, groups of women in colorful silk saris wore fresh jasmine in their hair and imported perfumes, and several towering poster-board reproductions of newspaper concert reviews propped on stands were dispersed among the crowd outside. With the glossy photos and super-sized text, these poster-boards made the festival's main corporate sponsor exceedingly clear and published a hype that trumped even the most high profile Karnatic music concerts I had attended.

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<sup>53</sup> N. Ram 11/09/07. Thanks to Mukund Padmanathan for providing the speech transcripts of these events.



Photo 1: Tall poster boards outside of the Music Academy show The Hindu as the main sponsor for November Fest.

### November Fest's Patron

The main sponsor, *The Hindu*, was the most widely read English daily newspaper in south India. Although the venue was the T.T.K. Auditorium owned by the Music Academy, *The Hindu* rented the concert hall from the Music Academy for this festival. The Music Academy existed, in the words of its president N. Murali, “to exclusively preserve and promote Karnatic music and dance” (Murali 1/11/08). According to Murali, many people erroneously linked non-Karnatic concerts at the auditorium with the Music Academy *sabha*. He explained that renting

out one of the largest and best sounding concert halls in the city was a way for the *sabha* to earn money for its own programs. If this relationship wasn't clear, the poster boards and corporate branding made sure it was.

The weekly Friday Review insert of *The Hindu* covered entertainment and the arts, but in Chennai, it mostly consisted of music and dance performances. It included feature articles on select artists, opinion editorials by musicians and audience members, but most importantly for musicians, it included concert reviews. In a city where concert music is a nationally and internationally recognized phenomenon, the Friday Review was the chosen source for reviews. Therefore, *The Hindu's* sponsorship created additional excitement since, as a documenter and arbiter of taste, they would presumably select some of the best musicians to perform.

### English Language Politics

The omnipresence of English in this festival was also noteworthy. In postcolonial Chennai, English remains pervasive. While Tamil is the main language in Chennai and in the state of Tamil Nadu, English is on most Chennai street signs and in many movie theaters, and most high school educated people, particularly in south India, speak and understand basic conversational English. It has also inevitably crept into what many refer to as “Chennai Tamil” as opposed to “*sen*” Tamil, or “pure” Tamil. Because of years of contentious pre- and post-independence language politics, English has also served as the lingua franca of India, a communicative bridge between the dominant languages associated with particular states and regions, though this has diminished in North India in the past few decades. Since 1965, however, English has nationally been the “subsidiary official language,”<sup>54</sup> meaning subsidiary to Hindi.

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<sup>54</sup> Notification No. 2/8/60-O.L. Ministry of Home Affairs, dated 27th April, 1960.

However, any perceived potential irony of an English language media corporation sponsoring an Indian music festival was not understood as ironic because of how English has persevered in Chennai as a local “Indian” language through consecutive periods of colonial rule and independence. It is this last period that allied English, *The Hindu*, and November Fest most directly since English was then, and still is for many around the world, the language of cosmopolitanism. In Chennai, the English language also provided one of the most recognizable attributes of a particular segment of India’s middle class—the same segment that read *The Hindu* and attended November Fest:

The term *middle class* itself does not have a precise indigenous linguistic equivalence; there is thus an in-built linguistic connotation to middle class identity that privileges English-educated segments of the middle class as the elite tier that defines middle class identity (Fernandes 2006: 226).

Connections between the English language and Chennai Brahmins were also noteworthy because of the alignment between the institutions behind November Fest. *The Hindu* was run by two Brahmin brothers who adamantly supported Karnatic music: one of them was N. Murali, the President of the Music Academy *sabha*. Karnatic music remains a predominantly Brahmin cultural practice and Brahmins control the main English media as well as the most influential music institution. They therefore still determined, for the most part, what was and was not “Karnatic.” Yet the case of November Fest demonstrated how Brahmin interest in spectacle, the challenge of “creating a platform that is attractive and well packaged,” temporarily superseded the maintenance of Indian tradition.

The organizers’ choice to hire an English-speaking Master of Ceremonies was perhaps the most obvious sign of this elite tier of the middle class. The MC began the concerts with festival acknowledgments, introductions of the musicians, and he signaled the beginnings and ends of intermissions, making sure to tell the audience to drink the coffee of one of the corporate

sponsors. The MC during the 2007 festival spoke English with an overtly dramatic and exaggerated British accent—not Indian English. The extremely formal performance of the MC was effective since it was presumably intended to transition the audience’s participation from a more social one to a more respectful, quiet, and attentive one. But it also came across as humorous to a couple audience members seated near me, who repeated some of the MC’s phrases with parodied theatrical diction.

#### November Fest and *Kacceri* Audiences

A comparison between a November Fest concert and a December Concert Season *kacceri* makes the spectacle of November Fest even clearer. Corporate involvement in November Fest was even more visible inside the auditorium. Subsidiary sponsors crammed their booths next to each other in the foyer advertising their products that included paint, coffee, stereo speakers, and financial investment advice. This was present at some of the better-known *sabhas* for the December Concert Season, but not on this scale. Also, before each performance, a massive film screen automatically descended from the ceiling in front of the stage. A series of commercial advertisements for products of the subsidiary corporate sponsors played for almost fifteen minutes. From my seat, I observed a few people roll their eyes or gesture irritably at the advertisements while they watched them. The number of advertisements at November Fest was a striking contrast to the number of advertisements during most music performances in that venue and so was the cost of admission.



Photo 2: Ticket prices for the 2007 November Fest.

If they charged at all, most Karnatic concerts at the time were under 100 rupees, about two dollars at the time. Festival producers raised the 2009 November Fest season tickets to 3000 rupees, roughly sixty-four dollars that was prohibitive for the vast majority of Chennai residents.



Photo 3: Vocalist Rama Ravi (center) performs at the Music Academy on December 21, 2007.

When the curtains opened for the performance, the set design was another contrast. Photo 3 is from a Music Academy concert during the December Concert Season. While considerable expenses were invested in the backdrop and presentation for the stage, the overall aesthetic was attractive but tranquil. Besides the letters in “Music Academy” designed as musical instruments, the set design focused audience attention on the performers. Photos 4-7 are from November Fest Concerts during the 2007 festival.



Photo 4: Vocalists Rajan and Sajan Mishra perform at the 2007 November Fest.

The November Fest designs used a variety of colored lighting and set designers projected lit patterns across the stage. For the concert that featured the Korean band named The Forest, the designers projected the band's name in English and Korean in white light on the Music Academy's ceiling (photo 5). Serious attention and substantial funding was allotted to the Festival's visual presentation.





Photo 5: The Forest, a Korean band that brought together Korean music and rock, performed at the 2007 November Fest.



Photo 6: From left to right, percussionists Trilok Gurtu, V. Selvaganesh, T. H. “Vikku” Vinayakram, and guitarist R. Prasanna performed at the 2007 November Fest.



Photo 7: The “ghazalbandi” during the 2007 November Fest featured Hariharan (left of center) and “Mandolin” U. Srinivas (right of center).

*The Hindu* wielded considerable power as *the* news source for the English speaking educated classes. Mukund Padmanathan connected *The Hindu* with November Fest in tangible ways by discussing some of the conditions for starting the festival:

When we decided to do this we had taken two or three decisions, and these decisions became possible because of the strength of the newspaper. It’s not the strength of those organizing it, or whatever. It’s because the newspaper has a great readership and we can leverage the strength of the newspaper to make this event possible. One is, we are going to package this event quite differently. And I don’t want to make any comparisons but I think it’s evident to anybody who comes to the November Fest that some effort has gone into packaging the entire festival. By this I mean we have a brochure, on the first day we actually gave free CD’s to everyone... We do make an effort to see that the lights and the

stage look, you know, somewhat different than average *kacceri* [Karnatic music concert] that you might find in Chennai” (Padmanathan 1/2/08).

This was an honest assessment of *The Hindu*'s influence on its readership. While individual blogs and websites like [www.kutcheri.com](http://www.kutcheri.com) were an increasingly important part of the reviews, concert announcements, musician profiles, and general banter and gossip that constituted discourse about music in Chennai, *The Hindu* was still undoubtedly the primary source that generated many of the online discussions. In this excerpt from our interview, Mukund Padmanathan initially avoided a direct comparison of November Fest with December Season *kacceris*, perhaps as an attempt to be more diplomatic. But he made it later, showing that the comparison was obvious and inevitable. The guiding principle of “not Karnatic,” then, was consistent with the festival's “packaging” as well as its musical programming.

Another fundamental difference between November Fest and the December Concert Season was that audience members were an additional part of the spectacle. Given the ticket prices, the targeted audience was clear. Mukund Padmanathan said, “Somebody told me, a Karnatic musician told me, that this is the kind of place you should be seen at. It's a kind of social event. Certainly people do want that experience” (Padmanathan 1/2/08). A music concert as a “place you should be seen at” clearly set up another opposition to a *kacceri* where, comparatively, an enactment of the Brahmin middle class Indian tradition did not have the same cosmopolitan reach. It also implied that the meaning of the festival was as much the excitement of the spectacle as the content of what was performed.

#### Case Study: *Ghazalbandi*

One performance during November Fest featured two Indian musical celebrities: a vocalist named Hariharan who was best known for his band Colonial Cousins and a famous

Karnatic musician named “Mandolin” U. Srinivas (see his background description in the last chapter). Hariharan studied Karnatic vocal music as a child, but soon pursued the genre known as *ghazal*, in which Urdu poetry is sung within the Hindustani systems of *rag* and *tal*, but with slightly different rules. He then began recording music for film and television, and his Colonial Cousins recording with Lezz Lewis became extremely popular.

Srinivas was a child prodigy, and after he recorded with Michael Brook and Nigel Kennedy for a RealWorld recording in 1992 titled *Dream*, his opportunities to perform Fusion increased. He was known for his extraordinary musicianship and humility; Srinivas explained to me that when British guitarist John McLaughlin emailed him to be in the new Shakti ensemble in 1998, he thought it was a prank. McLaughlin had to call him several days later to offer him the job.

Their concert that night was billed as a “*ghazalbandi*,” a name coined by Srinivas and Hariharan when they first played together several years prior to November Fest. *Ghazalbandi* alters the word *jugalbandi*, which in Sanskrit literally means “entwined twins” and typically involves a performance of two soloists of equal seniority, usually from different regional traditions. In Chennai, a *jugalbandi* usually means that Karnatic musicians perform along with Hindustani musicians. Musicians decide on *ragas*, *talas*, (and *rags* and *tals* from the North) and compositions from their respective repertoires to prepare for the concert. This *ghazalbandi* paired a (primarily) Karnatic musician with a *ghazal* and film singer trained in Karnatic music—a particularly novel Fusion combination. This unique genre mixing and Hariharan and Srinivas’s virtuoso reputations attracted listeners, and the concert easily sold out.

In order to draw out some examples of the tensions in musical sound, I describe two short portions from the concert, each from a different piece. The following analyses demonstrate

examples of the socially constructed ways that I heard the tensions of Fusion in relation to the performers, audience, venue, festival, and institutional patron. Analyses of other examples would yield different combinations of tensions including many of the themes of this dissertation, but this analysis brings together the tensions of November Fest in order to show the ways musical sound, cosmopolitanism, and the Indian middle class intersect.

### *Ghazalbandi* Transcription

The following transcription and analysis calls attention to a few of the improvisational choices that Hariharan and Srinivas made in approximately the first three minutes of their *alapana*.<sup>55</sup> I show how this excerpt contains prominent features that situated this example of Fusion between and among Karnatic and ghazal musical practices. In my analysis, I highlight the musicians' unintentionally overlapping improvisational phrases, the tones they chose outside of *rag patdeep*, their uses of *gamak/a* (Northern and Southern versions), their instruments, and the expectations of audience members based on the reputations and celebrity status of the musicians. My use of transcription is intended to supplement the textual description.

I use a combination of *swara* groupings and Western staff notation to represent musical sound in this transcription. The Karnatic *swara* system of sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, and ni corresponds to the tonic, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh steps of the given *raga*'s scale. In Karnatic *raga* theory, the sa and pa are fixed so that their pitch cannot be altered, though they can be sounded as part of *gamakas*, the highly structured slides, oscillations, turns or

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<sup>55</sup> *Alapana* is a form of melodic, meter-less improvisation without rhythm accompaniment in which the soloist improvises within the parameters of the chosen *raga*. These parameters are scale, *gamaka* (ornamentation), phrases, and fundamental tones (see Allen and Viswanathan 2003) of which each *raga* has a unique combination. If performed, the *alapana* always precedes the rendering of a composition.

mordents, and grace notes that are unique to each *raga*. The ri, ga, dha, and ni can theoretically be one of three tones, and in certain *ragas* more than one tone. The ma can only be one of two tones. Also, the melodic range does not typically span more than roughly two octaves for soloists, who rarely play *swaras* below ma or ga in the low octave and pa in the high octave. To distinguish between different octaves of the same *swara*, I name octaves “low” and “high,” and when there is no description the octave is the middle, or most common one. In this transcription, sa is C.

This improvisation was the *alap* or *alapana*, or the meterless, free rhythm improvisational form that precedes the composition. The rhythmic placement of their phrases was less important than the other features that demonstrated the tensions in musical performance, and so I represent durational values as approximate and relative to each other.

For the first two pieces, both Hariharan and Srinivas were warming up, a common practice for musical performances of Indian classical music. They were exchanging improvisational turns and feeling each other out for the appropriate timing of their phrases. After a shared *alapana*, in which they each took a few turns, Hariharan sang a kind of *viruttam*-like invocation without rhythmic accompaniment.<sup>56</sup> Afterwards in the same *raga*, Srinivas performed a solo *kriti*, the most common song form in the Karnatic *kacceri*. Hariharan then added *ghazal* lyrics to the same *raga* setting, and his harmonium playing and the *pakwaj* (drum that accompanies *ghazal* performances) accompanist provided more of a *ghazal*-like context. Apart from the brief improvisational exchanges during the shared *alapana*, the concert up until this point had featured either Hariharan or Srinivas. They remained stylistically, compositionally, and improvisationally independent entities with their own percussionists, without any overlap.

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<sup>56</sup> The *viruttam* is a poem sung by improvising the melodic setting of the Hindu devotional text. One or many *ragas* can be chosen and it is sung in free-rhythm, without *tala*.

This didn't last long. Before the third piece, Hariharan spoke to the audience for the first time and spoke in English.

This composition is a ghazal "Tahifamas" and the basic scale is called *patdeep*. But of course in ghazals we do... a lot of *mishram* [Sanskrit: "blending" or "mixing"]. We're allowed to do that. And we do it according to the words and according to the mood. We can go off a scale and come into a scale, but the only thing is that it has to add value. It has to take you somewhere and bring it back to base. That's what we're trying to do now" (Hariharan Ghazalbandi Concert, 11/15/07)

Srinivas started the *alapana* by playing short phrases without any *gamaka*, perhaps to show the audience some of the tones of *patdeep* he would be working with (section 1 of the transcription). He played sa (low) ni sa, using a lowered ni (Bb). Then again, un-ornamented, he played (low) pa (low) ni ga sa, using a lowered ga (Eb). Then he played sa ga ga ga sa ga sa (low) ni, all unornamented except for the last sa, which was plucked on ga and quickly moved to sa, and the ni, which he played as a fast sa ni dha ni, a kind of mordent that landed on low ni, using sa and (low) dha (A) just below it. This is a common type of *gamaka* in Karnatic music. His next phrase continued with this minor pentatonic scale phrase using more *gamakas* on ni and ga, and then ended with the phrase all in the lower octave: ma pa ga, ma pa ga, ma pa ga, with an accent and *gamaka* emphasis on the ga that was a clear reference to a Hindustani and *ghazal gamak*, not a Karnatic *gamaka*. So in his first improvisational turn, Srinivas utilized both *gamaka* and *gamak* and showed his ability to include different examples of India's regional and classical traditions.

At this point (section 2 of the transcription) Hariharan came in with a short introductory phrase ending on sa, but Srinivas wasn't quite yet finished with his turn and they both started their next phrases at the same time (section 3 of the transcription). Hariharan sang a phrase that quickly ascended to high sa and then moved down a half step to ni (B natural), a different ni than Srinivas had mostly been playing. Because Srinivas had been playing a lowered ni (Bb), I



remember wondering if this was the *mishram* Hariharan had mentioned, or if *rag patdeep* allowed both a lowered and raised ni (Bb and B). Hariharan's next phrase moved down to sa and then he sang chromatic unornamented notes: ni (B), lower ni (Bb), raised ni (B), and sa (end of section 3 of the transcription).

After the overlapped phrases, Srinivas quickly dropped out and then resumed (section 4 of the transcription) after Hariharan finished. In this phrase, Srinivas introduced a new tone in the alapana, a raised ma (F#), as well as both the raised and lowered ni's (B and Bb). He played sa pa ma (F#) pa ga ma (F#) ga sa ga (low) ni (Bb) sa pa ma (F#) pa ma (F) pa ga pa (low) ni (B) pa ni (Bb) pa pa (low) ni (Bb) pa and then ended on mid octave ga. Hariharan continued with another scalar ascent, and then descended using both ni's (B and Bb) and ended on ga (end of section 4 of the transcription). Following this, the two musicians overlapped again (section 5 of the transcription). Srinivas dropped out to let Hariharan sing another ascending phrase.

Srinivas ended his next turn by playing a long phrase completely without *gamaka* in which he played both ni's (B and Bb) and both ma's (F and F#, section 6 of the transcription): ga ma pa ni (B) sa ni (B) ni (Bb) pa ma (F#) ma (F) ga ma (F) ma (F#) ma (F) ga ma (F) ma (F#) ma (F) ga ma (F) ga ma (F#) ma (F) ga ma (F) ga sa. This phrase earned a grunt of approval from Hariharan and both musicians continued by building phrases around this idea, playing more unornamented phrases that included the two ni's and the two ma's. Afterwards, Srinivas played an even more unique phrase that spanned the three octaves with wide intervallic playing (section 7 of the transcription): (high) sa ni (B), (high) pa (high) ma (F#), pa ma (F), (high) sa ni (Bb), ma (low) dha, sa ga ma (F) dha (high) sa (high) ga (high) ma (F) (high) ga (high) sa dha sa and finished it with an ornamented flourish that spanned more than an octave and ended on sa.

After Hariharan's next turn, in which his dynamics increased and he came out with a fast upwards scalar flourish, Srinivas followed with a ornamented three note pattern (section 8 of the transcription) that he used to descend through the scale they had been using but landing on the following swaras: (high) sa, raised ni (B), lowered ni (Bb), pa, ma (F), raised ga (E), lowered ga (Eb), sa, (low) raised ni (B), (low) lowered ni (Bb), (low) pa, (low) ma (F), and (low) raised ga (E). Ending on this ga in the lower register was a clear indication of his intentional decision to draw attention to this new ga, specifically designed to sound different from the established rag-like melodic environment they had established. I remember that at this point of the performance I wondered what a Hindustani or *ghazal* performance of *patdeep* would sound like, and had a feeling it would be nothing like what I was hearing. Just then, Hariharan immediately sang a phrase that continued the ga (E) just played by Srinivas and then ended that same phrase with the lowered ga (Eb). In order to draw attention to the inclusion of both ga's and make them more obvious, he also sang the *sargam* (the *swara* names, such as "ga ma pa sa...") instead of the vocables that he had been singing during his *alap* (the end of section 8 of the transcription).

Hariharan's response to this phrase of Srinivas with increased dynamics and speed perhaps shows how Hariharan was inspired by the phrase. The *alapana* gained momentum after this moment and soon changed into exchanges of *briga*, or fast, virtuosic phrases and patterns that often come near the ends of *alapanas*. The intervallic and atypical phrase that Srinivas played seemed to have motivated Hariharan to transition the *alapana* out of the slower phrases into the concluding *briga* section.

Analysis: Entrances

Negotiating entrances to avoid overlapping soloists is a part of any *jugalbandi*. Because there are two main soloists from different classical traditions, they cannot rely on the established hierarchical order of turn-taking in Indian classical music. Instead, they must work this out respectfully on stage in real performance time. The soloists must anticipate when each other's phrase is finishing and leave enough time between phrases to make sure the other soloist is finished before starting. At the same time, the soloist cannot leave too much unfilled space or they both risk losing the momentum and excitement of the improvisation. This aspect of negotiation is mostly amiable and a matter of logistics, but it can occasionally result in tense moments of accidental disagreement because it is important to the momentum of the improvisation. This *alapana* excerpt and the previous two pieces in the concert show that this negotiation was not yet worked out. While they would greatly improve the timing of their entrances in the remainder of the concert, there was still a palpable degree of tension during this *alapana*. The audience members accustomed to the more scripted turn taking in Karnatic music in particular might have felt this tension even more, however common to the *jugalbandi* context it was.

Analysis: *Patdeep*

Choosing tones outside of a raga is not permitted in the practice of Karnatic music.<sup>57</sup> When Hariharan wisely warned the Chennai audience about the *mishram* and explained it as part of a different Indian tradition, he gave it precedence and made it acceptable for the audience members more familiar with Karnatic music. He also explained it as “adding value” to express

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<sup>57</sup> There are exceptions such as *ragamalika* compositions and improvisations, in which musicians render multiple ragas in succession. *Ragamlika* can be a part of the concert format, but it is not always performed.

the mood of the text and performance (“We do it according to the words and according to the mood. We can go off a scale and come into a scale, but the only thing is that it has to add value.” Hariharan Ghazalbandi Concert, 11/15/07). This aspect could also be understood as their attempt to represent the *ghazal* side of this *ghazalbandi*. However, the *alap* or *alapana* is the improvisational exposition of the rag or raga, usually performed before any text has been sung. The “mood” of this piece was therefore entirely determined by the improvisational choices of the soloists and so Hariharan and Srinivas were “adding value” not based on the mood of the text or even the relationship between the text and the composition, but on their improvisational strategies and desires. Hariharan anticipated tensions in the Chennai audience—his explanation of *mishram* was a preemptive attempt to neutralize these tensions.

Nazir Jairazbhoy (1971) mentioned *patdeep* in passing in a chapter titled “Alternative Notes” that discussed inevitable change in the note choices during performance. But the scale he provided was not the scale Srinivas and Hariharan performed. Jairazbhoy provided only the ascending scale: C D Eb F G A B C (Jairazbhoy 1971: 115) and said that *patdeep* was an example of a *rag* in which the raised ni (B) “is frequently used in descent” and that the lowered ni (Bb) is completely excluded (Jairazbhoy 1971: 136). In a footnote he wrote that during the early twentieth century the *rag* was named *patdipki* and had a raised ni in the ascent and a lowered ni in the descent, but that the contemporary practice had changed. Interestingly for this *ghazalbandi*, Jairazbhoy used *patdeep* as an example of a *rag* that changed over time.

Nikhil Banerjee’s recording *Raga Patdeep* (1996 [1983]) features *patdeep* but differs so substantially from this *ghazalbandi* rendition that it could easily be mistaken for a different *raga*. Like Jairazbhoy’s description, Banerjee plays swaras from the same scale: C D Eb F G A B C. He emphasized the raised ni (B) and used Bb only occasionally as a *gamak* to dha (A). Even less

frequently, he played a raised ma (F#) only as brief *gamak* from and to ma (F). This is clearly not the mostly pentatonic raga, which two ni's and two ma's, that Srinivas and Hariharan were playing. In other words, rag *patdeep* uses a raised ni (B), but from the very beginning of his improvisation, Srinivas played a lowered ni (Bb). While I was listening to this performance of rag *patdeep*, I had assumed that both ni's and both ma's were permitted because they were so frequently played.

#### Analysis: *Gamak/Gamakas*

The juxtaposition of different *gamaks* and *gamakas* as a sonic marker of region is also familiar to Indian audiences through the *jugalbandi*. The different sounds that comprised *gamak/gamakas* became representative of Hindustani and Karnatic music, which immediately distinguished northern and southern regions of India. Hariharan and Srinivas intended this *ghazalbandi* to alter the expectations of different music traditions when they performed them together, and the *gamak/gamaka* played an essential role. I was distinctly aware of these differences between the *gamak* and *gamakas* throughout the performance. As a listener more accustomed to Karnatic music than ghazal, I noticed moments of slight variations when they played a melody in unison. As a result, the unison playing was not minutely synchronized as it is with Karnatic renditions of compositions, but rather simultaneous versions of slightly varying monophonies. While this is a tension that is part of all *jugalbandis*, it still made the regional differences audible.

#### Analysis: Instruments and Expectations

By name, the *ghazalbandi* was intentionally designed to be an exclusively Indian form of musical Fusion. But the presence of the West managed to sneak through with the mandolin, however overlooked this may have been because of Srinivas's celebrity status. As I discussed in the last chapter, Srinivas had endured heavy scrutiny by the Karnatic music establishment for his instrument choice. In this performance, Srinivas demonstrated the wide range of his musical experiences by showing his fluent ability to use his Karnatic training for other musical contexts. His example of what a professional south Indian Karnatic musician performed, then, depended on Fusion. It was therefore significant that in this excerpt it was Srinivas—who was not the *ghazal* representative of this *ghazalbandi* supposedly accustomed to “*mishram*”—introduced the new tones for *patdeep* [first the lowered ni (Bb), then the sharp ma (F#), and finally the natural ga (E)]. Hariharan immediately heard and responded to these new tones of the scale by including them, even focusing on them in his subsequent phrases. But in this piece, the *mishram* he mentioned to the audience was initiated entirely by Srinivas.

#### Analysis: The “Blues”

Perhaps one of the most significant tensions of the performances came from the interpretative ambiguity of the one of Srinivas's phrases during this *alapana* (section 6 of the transcription). Playing phrases with large intervals without *gamaka* is not, strictly speaking, part of the Karnatic aesthetic, though it is done in performance particularly by instrumentalists who can more easily span three or more octaves in three or four tones. The fact that these phrases, that outlined a minor pentatonic blues scale with a sharp fourth, were played unornamented could have just been part of Srinivas's rendering of the *rag patdeep*. While I was listening to this *alapana*, I wondered if I was the only one in the audience who associated those phrases with the

blues. Then I remembered some of the musical projects Srinivas had participated in over the last twenty years. Was I hearing evidence of Srinivas touring the world with John McLaughlin? If so, wouldn't others in the audience hear this as well? This multi-layered reference of the blues remained ambiguous since it problematized the local "hearing" of these tones and phrases. Whether he intentionally referenced the Western blues in these phrases isn't as important as the interpretive ambiguity that the phrases raised. The interpretative ambiguity that I experienced leads me to suspect that other audience members could have drawn similar responses—perhaps if not heard as "blues" than maybe heard as "Western" or "non-Indian." This was not a *ghazalbandi* with just any Karnatic instrumentalist; Srinivas was a kind of genre unto himself.

The tensions involved with interpreting the "blues" phrase help clarify the relationship between the sound and social structures in play during this performance. The *potential* of hearing this sound as "Western influenced" was inseparable from the unique, Fusion-laden career of one of Karnatic music establishment's celebrities. The tensions in the sound were also experienced as tensions in the audience's celebration and wariness of who Srinivas was as a south Indian Karnatic musician who performed Fusion.

But most importantly, what made this combination and juxtaposition possible? Looking back to journalist Lalithaa Krishnan's prescriptive assessment that Fusion is better left to senior musicians (in chapter one) helps us contextualize this *ghazalbandi* in larger debates about Fusion. These are not musicians who were unaccustomed to musical performances with musicians outside of their respective traditions. What made this Fusion legitimate—what contributed to the sold out hall and the already glitzy spectacle of the festival—was the celebrity power of Srinivas and Hariharan who both span classical, semi-classical, and popular genres. These musicians were a particular caliber of professional musician defined by an openness to

Fusion.<sup>58</sup> The focus of the concert was the *musicians* as much as it was their music: with personal narratives of successful multi-genre careers, they and their music reciprocally created the *mishram* that night. The audience listened to their multi-genre careers in the *mishram* because who they were and what they played were inseparable.

### *Ghazalbandi* Audience

As I previously hinted at, the audience that night was far from a singular entity. While some in the audience probably connected Srinivas's "blues" phrase to his resumé of Fusion, some did not. So who was the November Fest audience that night?

One of the more memorable parts from that concert occurred in the next piece and involved another departure from a typical Karnatic *kacceri*. As I mentioned, musicians typically take turns improvising fast, virtuoso melodic phrases named *briga* near the end of an *alapana*. The *briga* is the virtuosic culmination of the *alapana* and also signals that the composition will begin afterwards. After particularly impressive *briga* phrases, Karnatic audiences sometimes applaud, though only for a couple seconds. At this point in their *alapanas*, Hariharan and Srinivas had already been developing their improvisations for a significant amount of time, about ten minutes.

During this portion of the concert, tensions were audible and observable in the audience. While Karnatic music audiences are rather finicky with their applause, the *ghazalbandi* audience was noisy and spirited. During the *briga* phrases near the very end of this particular *alapana* in raga *mayamalavagoula*, they erupted in loud applause. It was also punctuated with some

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<sup>58</sup> This is the same idea as the example of L. Subramaniam's bio in his book about Karnatic music that I discussed in chapter one. His bio described him almost entirely with accolades based on his Fusion and not Karnatic music.



verbalized “wows” and “ohs,” especially at the end of Srinivas’s phrases. Finally, after a particularly long and intricate virtuosic phrase of Srinivas, Hariharan spoke to the audience in Tamil: “*Itai ennala panna mudiyatu.*” “I can’t do this.” Hariharan admitted being out-played and the audience burst with laughter. His comment was literal because a vocalist could never have enough air for such a long and continuous phrase. Hariharan’s comment and the audience’s loud applause and laughter also revealed the competitive tension between musicians during the *briga* exchanges because of how successfully they broke it. The audience’s audible appreciation not only recognized the musicians as extraordinarily skillful, but also identified this performance as an event rooted in, but different from, the practice of Karnatic music. It also showed that this audience was not uniformly a Karnatic audience. Their applause was often so loud near the end of Srinivas’s improvisations that he seemed to even shorten some of his phrases instead of playing over the audience’s applause. This happened several times during the concert.

The audience participation was also occasionally boisterous. Some audience members in the balcony whistled and yelled out to the performers during and between songs. The whistling was noteworthy because of its associations with sexualized male participation at the cinema, where men sometimes whistle in a loud, steady rhythm at scantily dressed women on screen.<sup>59</sup> Whistling is not acceptable behavior for the bourgeois concert hall and neither is shouting at the performers. But interestingly, because of a distinct contrast to Karnatic audience behavior, cell phones rings were few and far between, no one talked audibly on their phones, and people rarely moved around during the performance. So while the minor annoyances at *kacceris* were nonexistent, others emerged and created almost an inverse experience of audience transgressions.

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<sup>59</sup> There are other meanings as well, including various folk music contexts, but most of the non-whistlers in the Music Academy that night would have associated the whistling with cinema behavior and not folk music practices.

This audience, attracted by November Fest's novelty, revealed an etiquette and behavior that displayed a host of tensions uncommon to those in Karnatic *kacceris*.

It is also possible to read Hariharan's English explanation of *mishram* as the appropriate language to communicate with a Karnatic-educated audience at the Music Academy. This was juxtaposed with his choice of Tamil to describe and joke about both of their virtuosity, which was more appropriate to address those audience members who were whistling and yelling out to the performers.

#### Analysis: Summary

Merely breaking down the sound elements into constituent parts according to region or tradition, Karnatic music or *ghazal*, would miss the numerous facets of musical meaning that result from a performance of Fusion. The tensions that the musicians sounded and that the audience felt from overlapping entrances, foreign raga tones, regional mixing of *gamak/as*, Western and Indian musical instruments, "blues phrases," and conflicting audience etiquette, demonstrated the co-construction and mutually reinforcing relationship between sound and society. These sonic features only had a meaningful resonance as tensions because of the "production" of the event: the histories of the virtuoso musicians, the engineered spectacle of the festival, and the Chennai context of oppositional classical and cosmopolitan politics. Consequently, these tensions were responses that built, reflected, and perpetuated the social life of Fusion that struggled to accommodate older visions of Indian tradition with cosmopolitan change. This performance played out this struggle simultaneously on stage and in the audience—and in the newspaper later that week.

### *Ghazalbandi* Institutional Response

The festival's patron, *The Hindu*, was responsible for producing and hyping the festival. As the most important source of printed discourse about music, how did it review it? Gowri Ramnarayan, the head music critic for *The Hindu* at the time, began her review with the primary criticism that Fusion was fun and not to be taken seriously: "It was not a concert for critiques. It was for popular enjoyment... What did Hariharan and Mandolin Srinivas do to work this magic? They brewed neither ghazal nor Carnatic potions, but an easy-to-digest, populist blend of both" (Ramnarayan 2007a). She also minimized the audience disruptions by singularizing the whistling into "the whistler" and ignoring the other rude behavior. "Rapt listeners punctuated the music with aah-wahs and tso-tso, clamouring for more, and more, finally rising with tireless hands and beaming smiles to offer a standing ovation. Of course, the persistent whistler marked his presence, though thankfully faint in the applause thunder" (Ramnarayan 2007a).

In other words, no matter how "traditional" and "Indian" the sources for Fusion were, Fusion could never be evaluated on the same terms as classical music: critiques were for established traditions, not diluted ones that pandered to the masses. For Gowri Ramnarayan, *The Hindu's* support for a novel and refreshing genre served her justification for safeguarding Karnatic music. As the festival's patron, *The Hindu* then attracted an audience with well-packaged promises of novel and refreshing genres only to belittle the novelty in its review using classical evaluative criteria. The *ghazalbandi* then created another tension because *The Hindu* both supported and opposed Fusion. According to Ramnarayan, Fusion existed for populist entertainment and to keep Karnatic music serious and "classical," an opinion that festival director Mukund Padmanathan did not likely share. The varying attitudes within the patron

institution pointed towards some of the tensions that defined the heterogeneous middle class audience, which I address later in this chapter.

#### Case Study: Anil Srinivasan and Sikhil Gurucharan

A few nights before the *ghazalbandi*, November Fest featured a different form of Fusion described as “contemporary classical fusion” in the concert program. The duo featuring keyboardist Anil Srinivasan and Karnatic vocalist Sikhil Gurucharan offered a unique example of Fusion during my research. Unlike the Fusion of other musicians, their music did not foreground their desires to fuse different musical systems in order to showcase generic flexibility, compositional creativity, or instrumental virtuosity. Instead, Srinivasan and Gurucharan rearranged compositions from the Karnatic repertoire, including *kirthanas* and *padams*, for only keyboard and voice. They performed these compositions with slower tempos and frequent rubato. Gurucharan performed what was essentially the role of Karnatic vocalist—for the most part, his renditions adhered to the conventional aesthetic practices of Karnatic music. Srinivasan relied on functional harmony and occasional ostinato patterns to support Gurucharan’s voice. He decorated Gurucharan’s voice with a mostly arpeggiated accompaniment that was designed to frame his voice with a Western harmonic progression. Occasionally Gurucharan was influenced by the piano accompaniment and yielded to Srinivasan’s rhythmic and tempo shifts, but the voice in this duo was unmistakably Karnatic and also unambiguously the focal point.

Their aesthetic motivation for this project became clear after listening to it for just a short while: they were most attracted to the emotional sentiment of Karnatic compositions and chose to represent this element of Karnatic music with exaggerated slow tempos, rubato, and sparse,

arpeggiated keyboard accompaniment that emphasized the voice as the sonic foreground. The *bhava*, or emotion, in this duo's music was expressed entirely from the lyrics and vocal melody of the Karnatic repertoire, while the piano accompaniment set a Western, "contemporary," serene, and extremely romantic setting through slowly developing arpeggios that outlined basic harmonic progressions. The arpeggios helped to mark the time and show how crucial tempo rubato was to their overall aesthetic.

Their project had been a duo, but festival producer Mukund Padmanathan persuaded them to include more instruments for the 2007 November Fest concert. The addition of Murad Ali's *sarangi*, Vedanth Bhardwaj's guitar, and B. S. Purushotham's *kanjira* were necessary to give the project some textural and timbral variety. Yet the performances of each of these musicians were notable for their restraint and for their textural compliments, challenging these accompanists to find their contributions through subtlety. The guitarist performed an unchanging ostinato combination of chords with minimal melodic movement to provide a textural base for one composition. Murad Ali performed a brief *alap* in one piece to set a distinctively north Indian mood but did not perform simultaneously with the vocalist and pianist duo. Purushotham was more present, but kept very sparse, basic time to slightly thicken the background texture. In the Chennai concert music soundscape that was dominated by Karnatic and Fusion virtuosity, and in a festival selling packaged spectacles, the overarching aesthetic of this concert was understatement.

### Analysis

Srinivasan and Gurucharan's Fusion left a number of unique tensions unresolved. The label of "contemporary classical fusion" effectively brought high art expectation together with

the potential for innovative novelty, while remaining ambiguous about how their music was classical and Fusion. Srinivasan's arpeggiated rubato accompaniment seemed based on a Western classical crossover aesthetic and not Western classical music; it was more the New Age consonance of George Winston than Arthur Rubenstein's interpretations of the canonical repertoire. Since New Age classical music is already a kind of Western classical music designed to be packaged for mass consumption, their project drew from the high art implication of the Western classical piano but really utilized the New Age keyboard accompaniment to support Gurucharan's Karnatic voice. While this was my hearing of this project, the audience seemed not at all interested in what kind of Western music was presented. The audience was enamored by the romanticized Indian classicism. Even though Ramnarayan criticized the lack of dynamic contrast in her review of the concert (Ramnarayan 2007b), it was just that static lull that seemed to hypnotize their fans into a uniquely romanticized Karnatic classicism that depended on New Age accompaniment.

The relationship between Gurucharan's Karnatic voice and Srinivasan's keyboard demonstrated a kind of self-orientalizing strategy of attracting their audience. Framing Karnatic music with a Western New Age ambiance exoticized the Karnatic voice for the cosmopolitan audience that night. During my research, I noticed a similar strategy that appeared on restaurant signs in the wealthier neighborhoods of Chennai that advertised certain Indian dishes as "exotic." The audience that night, and at other concerts of theirs I attended during my fieldwork, seemed to be neither the Karnatic music establishment nor the whistlers at the *ghazalbandi*, but a segment of the new middle class interested in accessible Indian tradition. Srinivasan and Gurucharan's project offered an alternative set of circumstances for what Amanda Weidman has called "staging the voice":

The violin in Karnatic music stages the voice in a particular way so that it becomes available as a metaphor for a tradition and a self that have survived colonialism while remaining uncolonized. This staging is a repetitive act, borne through generations of musical practice that have made the violin in Karnatic music not an unnatural peculiarity but second nature (Weidman 2006: 57).

Like the violin, the keyboard staged the voice by unambiguously presenting and foregrounding the voice as classically Indian. But the keyboard also staged a different voice, one that was a metaphor for a tradition that was perhaps no longer so concerned with sounding uncolonized. The keyboard was, after all, a definitely unnatural peculiarity in the soundscape of Karnatic music. The voice didn't need to exist apart or be independent from the West to be distinctively Indian. Rather, the distinction of being Indian was sounded through a Karnatic classicism that relied on a specifically Western and romantic staging. The tension that was unique to this project was the way they invoked the West. The keyboard was unambiguously submissive to the voice while it also framed it with a Western accessibility that made their aesthetic so distinctive. In contrast to the violin in Karnatic music, the keyboard changed the stage dramatically, while the Karnatic voice was still in spotlight.

### New Middle Class

Middle class critiques of globalization are thus as much a battle over the identity of the middle class as they are over the effect of globalization (Fernandes 2006: 226).

November Fest is best understood in the context of larger demographic changes associated with the “India Rising” (Lukose 2009: 2-7) that very often focus on the new Indian middle class. Public discourse about the middle class has been inextricable from reports of India’s expanding economy—newspaper articles have linked the middle class with economic growth most often measured by the consumption of products like cell phones, cars, and air conditioners (Prabhakar 2010; Rai 2004, 2005; Sachdeva 2005; Waldman 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

The growing visibility of this new Indian middle class embodies the emergence of a wider national political culture, one that has shifted from older ideologies of a state-managed economy to a middle class-based culture of consumption. While in the early years of independence, large dams and mass-based factories were the national symbols of progress and development, cell phones, washing machines, and color televisions—goods that were not easily available during earlier decades of state-controlled markets—now seem to serve as the symbols of the liberalizing Indian nation. While earlier state socialist ideologies tended to depict workers or rural villagers as the archetypical objects of development, such ideologies now compete with mainstream national political discourses that increasingly portray urban middle class consumers as the representative citizens of liberalizing India” (Fernandes 2006: xv)

Mazzerella and Fernandes show how the discourse of the middle class as representative of a national aspirational dream with which most people identify—while previously not a feature of Indian society—has become more commonplace.<sup>60</sup> India’s economic “liberalization” (1991-) has been the period in which these changes have become more obvious. Prior to 1991, Nehruvian socialist nationalism (named after India’s first prime minister Jawarharlal Nehru) arguably created a middle class of government workers devoted to a more Gandhian model of restraint and local productivity. Mazzerella has argued that this older Indian middle class sharply contrasts with the post-1991 new middle class of entrepreneurs, cosmopolitans, and consumers, who “might be brash and vulgar” and that they “have transcended both ‘traditional scruples’ and ‘colonial hang-ups’” (Mazzarella 2005: 7).

Even though scholars have focused on the Indian middle class as a nexus for some of the changes that are symbolic of India’s economic and cultural liberalization in the last two decades (Fernandes 2006; Mazzarella 2003a, 2003b; and in Pakistan, Laura Ring 2006), a shared

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<sup>60</sup> See Mazzarella (2005) and Fernandez (2006) for a more in depth description and discussion of India’s middle class history and present manifestations. Generally, the model of the middle class in India has not been understood as the center of an hourglass bulge as it has in the U.S. (however problematically) where the vast majority of Americans identify as middle class. In India, the model of a pyramid is more accurate, in which the upper classes are comparatively much smaller and the lower classes are comparatively larger.



challenge has arisen in the problem of who actually comprises the Indian middle class. In this chapter, this is the very same challenge of identifying the November Fest audience.

At this festival, ticket prices were high and audience behavior was varied and contradictory, as were the agendas of *The Hindu* as patron and critic. Together, the tensions that arose from these intersections fueled the contestation of Fusion in discourse and musical sound, and are also an entry point into understanding what is at stake when invoking the social category of India's new middle class: identifying this segment of Chennai's population is a sociological problem filled with the contradictions and tensions of contemporary Chennai life. Like Mazarella (2005), I find it essential to distinguish between the sociological reality of the Indian middle class and the meanings and associations projected onto the Indian middle class as an imagined entity.

The Indian middle class may be a questionable empirical entity. But the "Indian Middle Class," taken as both a performative and a discursive space, is most decidedly a reality to be reckoned with... What is... interesting is to attempt to understand how the concept structures and enables a certain set of "imagined Indias"—both utopian and dystopian—to be articulated (Mazarella 2005: 3).

The particular combination of tensions in the musical sound, among audiences members, and between employees of *The Hindu* brought the reality of the "Indian Middle Class" as a performative and discursive space into focus—but these tensions also made it an empirical entity. In the Music Academy that night, Fusion sounded those tensions that complicated the middle class with its chaffing of "old" and "new:" the older middle class was the Karnatic music establishment coming to hear Srinivas perform in a different context, the ones who snickered at the fifteen minutes of commercial advertisements that preceded the performance and who were distracted and offended by the whistling. The newer middle class audience members were the whistlers, the ones shouting comments and requests at the performers, and applauding

boisterously during displays of virtuosity. The tensions between them were observable in the ways that the older middle class ascribed the new middle class with immaturity and inappropriateness. These tensions were a defining feature of contemporary India:

Here, then, we see a characteristic symptom of postcolonial modernity: the very principles of universality and inclusion that are supposed to be inherent to middle class social practice instead become marks of an elite identification with a cosmopolitan ideal and, by the same token, a device of social distinction and aesthetic distaste for domestic others who conspicuously (and in fact often deliberately) fail to manifest these principles (Mazzarella 2005: 12-13).

The cosmopolitan allure of the glitzy and glamorous presentation attracted both old *and* new middle classes, and the idea of competing segments within Chennai's burgeoning middle class was in this concert. Although many audience members that night who maintained a more respectful and less demonstrative presence were more ambiguously "new" and "old," the tensions between the anti-commercial complaints and the whistlers certainly reenacted this type of division. The context of a Fusion concert allowed the Karnatic music establishment to assert its exclusive social distinction as it allowed the "new" middle class to assert its deliberate subversive response. Also, when the Music Academy rented its space to *The Hindu*, the presence of Fusion in the Music Academy was not just an economic and logistical arrangement of convenience in which the Music Academy rented out its space. The overlapping positions of power between the Music Academy and *The Hindu* were apparent in N. Murali, who ran the newspaper and was also president of the Music Academy. The power arrangement brought together the transitional, multiply constituted middle classes as it provided the fodder for the tensions that resulted: Fusion aggravated as it aggregated. It showed tensions in sound and tensions among a growing, changing Indian middle class that demonstrated some of the tensions of modernity in contemporary India.

## November Fest and Cosmopolitanism

A Chennai resident attending November Fest could feel part of the translocal habitus of cosmopolitanism because of a shared curiosity in musical difference that brought the music of Korea, north India, a “*ghazalbandi*,” and “contemporary classical fusion” together. N. Ram, the editor-in-chief of *The Hindu*, used the idea of musical taste to conflate the cosmopolitan middle class with “the Chennai audience.” When he spoke at the 2007 November Fest launch, he collapsed the middle class elite into a representation of the city.

But the most important reason the people have bought into the concept of the November Fest lies in the city itself. We now know that the Chennai audience is not just discerning; belying its reputation for conservatism, it has liberal musical tastes. The success of the November Fest is testimony to our people’s readiness to traverse musical genres, experiment with new forms, and listen with an open and unprejudiced ear” (N. Ram 2007; speech at NF launch).

By flattering the audience for their aesthetic openness, Ram linked the patronage and consumption of November Fest's music with a specialized taste and class distinction. Craig Calhoun has identified how the elite tier of the middle class uses cosmopolitanism to distinguish its elite status from the rest of the middle class, as well as establish a cosmopolitanism in their own image: “Contemporary cosmopolitanism commonly reflects the experience and perspective of elites and obscures the social foundations on which that experience and perspective rests...Cosmopolitanism alone commonly focuses attention away from...political, economic, and social questions and towards apparently free-floating ethics and culture” (Calhoun 2008: 441).

Ram’s idea of open-minded musical taste obscured some of the more central questions about cosmopolitanism in Chennai. On the surface, the glitzy spectacle of November Fest enacted a new vision of urban India. This was a vision in which music was a way of being locally and nationally distinctive while also relevant and contemporary to other musical trends in

the world. The multiple genres of music that were featured and the elaborate design and presentation of the festival—even the distribution of free CDs—all asserted this segment of Chennai's middle-class as part of a translocally cosmopolitan elite and therefore into a more global network of belonging. But in this chapter, I showed that beneath the surface of the spectacle were underlying conflicted intentions and interpretations of November Fest that captured the dissent and incongruity—the tensions—of Fusion in Chennai:

Thinking about cosmopolitanism as taste or even intellectual orientation reinforces its association with elites and makes it harder to understand the actually existing cosmopolitanism of multicultural cities... If we look more at the material and institutional underpinnings of actual cosmopolitanism we will see less rational planning and more historical production of varied practical ways of organizing life across, not only in, communities (Calhoun 2008: 441).

Calhoun's "underpinnings of actual cosmopolitanism" were the many tensions that shot through musical sound, institutional patronage, and the broadening new middle-class audience. The tensions of cosmopolitanism in November Fest showed the transitory state of urban South India by grounding the free-floating ethics and culture of taste in the interpersonal relations between multiple segments of the middle class.

The example of November Fest helps to show how Fusion's wide polysemic range was more complicated than the series of conservative/liberal and traditional/modern oppositions that N. Ram suggested. Instead, November Fest reveals the burgeoning middle class and ideas of cosmopolitanism as further tensions for the practice of Fusion. This festival performed a contestation that resulted from the many tensions of modernity in India. The tensions in sound, in the audience, and within the institutional patron all revealed ways that sound and society continually remade each other.

## Chapter 4

### **In Search of Compatible Virtuositities: *Floating Point* and the Circulation of Fusion and Jazz**

“You guys were born for fusion!”

(John McLaughlin shouting praise to musicians in a recording studio in Chennai after the third take of “Five Peace Band”)

In the last chapter, I showed how the producers of November Fest brought musicians from around India and the world to Chennai, which helped establish Chennai as a notable stop for musicians on a translocal cosmopolitan touring circuit. The Fusion of November Fest, therefore, was intended to be Fusion for Chennai. In this chapter, I describe and analyze a recording session that also brought together musicians from around India and the world, but instead to make Fusion that would *leave* Chennai. This chapter compliments this study of Fusion by detailing an example of the inner workings of professional music making that created a recording of Fusion that was intended to be Indian and Western in not just its musical content, but also its circulation. In particular, I identify additional tensions that established Fusion as a contested musical practice. I also show how this session linked Fusion to non-local musical sources—mainly jazz and Western fusion—and demonstrated the fluidity, instability, and interplay between musical practices in India.

#### *Floating Point*

During the last five days of April 2007, nine professional musicians from various geographical, linguistic, and musical backgrounds in India arrived at a newly built, state-of-the-art recording studio in Chennai to help make a documentary film and recording with a European

jazz musician that was guaranteed to be marketed around the world.<sup>61</sup> The CD and DVD released by guitarist and bandleader John McLaughlin in 2008, named *Floating Point* and *Meeting of the Minds*, and the five-day recording session that produced them situated Fusion as a contested musical practice in Chennai and linked Fusion to jazz in both apparent and less obvious ways.<sup>62</sup>

*Floating Point* connected Fusion in Chennai to the Western fusion of musicians like Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, and Tony Williams because guitarist and bandleader John McLaughlin is the most important musician who links these different manifestations of fusion music.<sup>63</sup> McLaughlin's participation in Miles Davis' band and the music of his group Shakti were the two most important precedents for *Floating Point*, and his polyglot musical career stands as a synthesis of many musical practices including jazz, Western fusion, and Fusion in India. Each track on *Floating Point* features a Western fusion composition with an Indian guest soloist—making this recording an example of Western fusion and (Indian) Fusion simultaneously. The recording presents virtuoso improvisational exchanges between the Indian guest soloists and McLaughlin, as well as improvisations of the Indian musicians that constituted the Western fusion rhythm section. Even though McLaughlin was the most obvious reason for

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<sup>61</sup> My friend Sarangan hired me to work as a part of the film crew to interview each musician alone on camera for the DVD that supplements the CD. I was initially introduced to the band members and studio employees as an ethnomusicologist and over the course of the five-day session briefly explained my research topic of Fusion to most of the musicians. For this chapter, I draw from my observations from the sessions, informal conversations with participants, full footage of the interviews, and the released CD and DVD recordings.

<sup>62</sup> By “jazz,” I mean an interrelated network of mostly improvisation-based musical practices rooted in, but not exclusive to, 20th Century African American expressive culture.

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Nicholson (1998) has called the fusion of rock and jazz from this era “jazz-rock fusion” and Kevin Fellezs (2011) has included funk as an influence and has preferred just “fusion.” I choose “Western fusion” because it clarifies how musicians who performed Fusion in Chennai identified it as non-Indian.

this combination of Western fusion and Fusion, as was evident to all of those in the studio over those five days, I argue in this chapter that the more important influence was musical virtuosity.

Virtuosity, for most musicians in Chennai, was a key dimension of Fusion because it linked a prerequisite virtuosity in Karnatic music with an emphasis on virtuosity in jazz and Western fusion.<sup>64</sup> Musicians endowed virtuosity with a transnational importance not just because of their unique displays of extraordinary musicianship, but also because of a social consensus that gave relevance to virtuosity: one cannot simply declare him or herself a virtuoso. Floating Point showed that this social consensus, however locally distinctive in Chennai, Mumbai, New York, and in other urban centers of jazz related practices, was also transnational. In this chapter, I focus on virtuosity as a socio-musical domain of interaction and exchange in order to reveal as much about how Fusion was contested in Chennai as how jazz circulated the globe. But first, it is necessary to understand how scholars have written about the circulation of jazz in order to contrast their approaches with my own.

### *Jazz Circulation and the Importance of Place*

How does jazz circulate around the world? As musicians, recordings, and ideas about jazz continue to traverse the globe, this question has become increasingly important to understanding the phenomena that constitute the myriad social and musical practices of jazz. Much of the literature about global practices of jazz has addressed international and local

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<sup>64</sup> The two most notable exceptions to this statement during my research were two projects that I previously mentioned in detail: the teenage band Oxygen and the contemporary classical Fusion of Anil Srinivasan and Sikhil Gurucharan. While musicians in both of these projects downplayed the importance of virtuosity—even defined themselves in opposition to it—they acknowledged the widespread importance of virtuoso improvisation as a main feature of most of the Fusion in Chennai and created their Fusion to counter these existing forms.

meanings of jazz. Many writers have acknowledged jazz's originally hybrid character, have discussed its American origin, and then have shown how musicians far from the U.S. adopt jazz for local meaning. The movement of jazz has therefore often been configured as place-based—radiating outward from the American centers of activity in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans to other international centers of music around the world: Havana (Acosta 2003), Berlin (Heffley 2005), London (McKay 2005; Moore 2007), Paris (Edwards 2003), Denmark (Washburne 2010), cities in Japan (Atkins 2001), Hong Kong (Jones 2001), Mumbai (Pinckney 1989-90), satellites like South Africa (Muller 2004; 2008) and Senegal (Mangin 2004), and additional cities around the world (Atkins 2003). Much of this literature on jazz also has looked at the different aspects of musical adoption, mainly issues of authenticity and how jazz has been made meaningful. Focusing on jazz “scenes” in international locales has shown how jazz musicians have interacted with, produced, and activated racial, national, cultural, and historical forms of identity that have compelled scholars to redraw the boundaries of the jazz canon to include loci of jazz practices all around the world.

Conceptions of jazz understood through a language of place-based configuration have necessarily brought with them a politicization of place: musicians' countries, cultures, histories, and music—all categories that are emplaced—come into contact with different countries, cultures, histories, and musics and continue to be understood as place-based. If scholars privilege place in their narrations of jazz's origins and authenticity (such as jazz as “American” music), or conflate place with jazz as a historically dominant category (such as jazz as “Western” music), then place becomes a limited paradigm to make sense of jazz when musicians confront what is non-American and non-Western, or for example, when a celebrity European jazz musician records a Fusion CD with entirely Indian musicians. Taken to a logical extreme, the world jazz



literature, as a whole, has projected jazz as growing in almost biological ways, filling the world's vast jazz-less space with specific combinations and manifestations of jazz places inferred in terms like "Japanese jazz" and "British jazz." Issues of authenticity and ownership inevitably emerge and ultimately obscure what else might be happening.

Part of the solution necessitates a more nuanced understanding of place. Edward Casey (1996) has argued that place should not be conceived of as a subservient local manifestation of the universalized, ideal form of space. He has written against the tendency of Enlightenment philosophers to posit an absolute idea of space. Instead, Casey links ancient philosophers with postmodernists in order to show why the specificity of place, and our cultured, experiential perceptions of it, must come before an abstracted notion of blank space. Asking questions as to how locally specific places are intertwined with experiential perceptions, even when confronting the transnational circulation of music, is an approach that has been central to the anthropological and ethnomusicological methods of ethnography. But most significantly, Casey has argued that the ways we understand place greatly impact how we conceive of knowledge and, more importantly, local knowledge:

There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it. Knowledge of place is not, then, subsequent to perception—as Kant dogmatically assumed—but is ingredient in perception itself. Such knowledge, genuinely local knowledge, is itself experiential in the manner of *Erlebnis*, 'lived experience,' rather than of *Erfahrung*, the already elapsed experience that is the object of analytical or abstract knowledge. (Kant, significantly, speaks only on *Erfahrung*.) Local knowledge is at one with lived experience if it is indeed true that this knowledge is of the localities in which the knowing subject lives. To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in" (Casey 1996: 18).

Casey, Keith Basso, Steven Feld, and the other contributors to this collection of essays (Feld and Basso 1996) have shown that focusing attention on place forges a model of interpersonal interactivity that demands ethnographically specific ways of knowing and how "modes of

dwelling might enrich our sense of why places, however vague, are lived out in deeply meaningful ways” (Feld and Basso 1996: 11). Literature on jazz in its many international locales has previously, and perhaps unintentionally, privileged place as a way of solidifying the connections between the identities of jazz musicians (and jazz itself) and a given city or nation-state. This tendency repeatedly has resulted in an oversimplified association between jazz and “the West” through internationally acknowledged manifestations, such as jazz as (American) democracy and jazz as exclusively synonymous with African American culture.

But what happens when the transnational place of jazz is a recording studio in South India and the “thing” in circulation among musicians is not jazz itself but virtuosity? While place in the form of national affiliation was certainly a dominant factor that influenced the music of the *Floating Point* recording session (particularly given the postcolonial, interpersonal dynamics of the session that I later describe), I understand the recording studio to be a more important determinant of place for this musical event, and focus on these interpersonal dynamics without eschewing other, more familiar ways the notion of place was important. By doing so, I show how this session revealed the various ways that jazz moved to, around, and from India.

### Studios, Virtuosity, and Personnel

Recording studios have proven to be rich sites for analysis because they are foci where creative desire meets the marketplace—the interpersonal and dynamic behavior of music making confronts the production, intended distribution, and consumption of a musical object. The world is blocked out by soundproofed studio walls, yet is omnipresent in the experiences, histories, and imaginations of all inside. As a contained example of soundly organized humanity (Blacking 1973), the recording process yields complex interconnected systems of expressive, social, and

commodified practices of music. Ethnographic writing can attempt to unravel these practices to understand how they form combinations that articulate certain histories and expressive modes (Bates 2008; Greene and Porcello 2005; Meintjes 2003; Washburne 2008). For an ethnographer, recording can permit observation, participation, and analysis of musical and social interaction that is often sealed off and sequestered from the public. Mediated by technology, cultural and personal difference, recording is a form of social and musical interaction that generates historically and culturally situated relationships, the impact of which can extend far outside of the studio. As music circulates all over the world, it often originates in recording studios, but ethnographic accounts of both jazz and Fusion in recording studios remain scarce at best. The *Floating Point* recording sessions showed how the promise rather than the hopes of circulation affected the recording process: one common understanding among the diverse group of musicians in the studio over those five days was the *expectation* of transnational circulation, which was also evident because of the exceptional skills of the musicians.

As I mentioned, the concept of virtuosity is useful for understanding how jazz circulates, and upon further examination, how musicians are reciprocally engaged with the social world. As Jim Samson has pointed out, if the idea of virtuosity begins with a technical mastery, only a social consensus can give it personal form (2003). In the case of *Floating Point*, I use the concept of virtuosity to highlight the primary motive for the circulation of jazz and as a defining attribute for professional Fusion. Virtuosity revealed the many different layers of difference that infuse the transnational movement of jazz with affective meaning. As a term originating in Western music, virtuosity can draw out the presence of a complicated Western concept in India while it also identifies the very same concept in Indian classical music. I therefore intentionally load virtuosity with its Western connotative history in order to underscore the way jazz and

Indian musicians came together for *Floating Point*: as a Western project of Western music performed by almost entirely Indian musicians.

*Floating Point* features a core rhythm section of Indian musicians that provided the Western fusion element for McLaughlin’s compositions: Louiz Banks, piano; Ranjit Barot, drums; and Sivamani, percussion.<sup>65</sup>



Photo 8: From left to right, Louiz Banks, Sivamani, Ranjit Barot (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

Seven of the eight tracks feature a different guest soloist, all of whom were professional Indian musicians.<sup>66</sup> The guest musicians specialized mostly in either Hindustani or Karnatic “classical”

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<sup>65</sup> Bassist Hadrien Feraud recorded his ensemble parts and solos at a different time in Europe.

traditions and they represented a significant cross-section of young, male, professional musicianship in contemporary India. They included Debashish Bhattacharya, Hindustani slide guitar; Shashank, bamboo flute; Shankar Mahadevan, voice; U. Rajesh, electric mandolin; Naveen Kumar, bamboo flute; and Niladri Kumar, sitar.



Photo 9: Vocalist Shankar Mahadevan sings during a take in the soloist booth with one of the documentary cameramen filming his performance (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

The DVD portrays the sessions as jovial and relaxed, but as freelance musicians hired as sidemen for a recording to be sold to mostly non-Indian audiences, they understood that the

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<sup>66</sup> An exception is American saxophonist George Brooks who is featured on the first track.

stakes were high because performing well involved the potential for more work abroad. The benefits for the Indian musicians were different: the classical musicians, who already had self-sufficient careers as performing musicians in classical music (and for some, Fusion as well), were already autonomous freelance musicians with a performance infrastructure in place in India and abroad. The Indian musicians who made their careers performing Fusion, jazz, and film music relied on projects like *Floating Point* for opportunities to perform, and were more involved in the recording industry. As musicians who depended more on Western influenced music to make their livings, these musicians had fewer but often better-paid performance opportunities. For them, a recording with an internationally known European celebrity such as McLaughlin was an extremely valuable asset as Indian musicians who play Western music.



Photo 10: Between takes, John McLaughlin (center) talked with Louiz Banks (far right) while filmmaker Sarangan filmed documentary footage (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

From the perspective of the contested local practice of Fusion in Chennai, *Floating Point* was one pinnacle of what virtuosity could yield for Indian musicians. A Fusion recording such as this one enabled musicians to become internationally recognized and gain better name circulation, and the recording became a kind of success fantasy for other aspiring Fusion, classical, and film musicians in India. “Some might find virtuosity inherently distancing or elitist, since it is a sensational display of exceptional individual power. But for many others, virtuosi are the most effective articulators of a variety of social fantasies and musical pleasures” (Walser 1993:76). Compared to Walser’s context of heavy metal guitarists, this statement takes on a different meaning in twenty first century India. The social fantasies activated by the virtuosity of musicians in *Floating Point* were about the potential benefits from the guaranteed global reach of their music. The elation of these social fantasies echoed the excitement of the “new India” and its increasingly prominent position as a competitive economic world power; the global reach and promising future of one articulated the same kinds of reach and power of the other.

#### “They’re Really Young Monsters”: John McLaughlin and the *Floating Point* Sessions

McLaughlin’s interest in recording *Floating Point* was encouraged by his exposure to particular Indian musicians. During a several-month trip to Chennai with his family, he decided to make *Floating Point* when he unexpectedly began writing a number of new compositions: “I like to write for people specifically, but this was not the case. I had all this music and I had to figure out, who is the music for? *And it’s Western music*. And right away I wanted to have Ranjit [Barot] and Louiz [Banks]” (McLaughlin 4/28/07). Even more forcefully, he also said to me, “You heard the music that we’ve been playing over the last few days. I would be hard put to find

musicians who could play this kind of jazz fusion better than the way they're doing it here” (McLaughlin 4/28/07).

While *Floating Point* includes McLaughlin's Western fusion compositions, it is not just Western music:

Then I had the idea because the younger generation of Indian musicians is very strong. And this is part of the same phenomenon and the globalization of music and access to music... the level of the young musicians everywhere is phenomenal, is really very very high. They put the fear into me —they're really young monsters. And I had this idea about, well, let me get all the young lions of India and each one will play one piece. Also I want to help these young players become known, and if through me they get to become known more, than more power to them. Because we all need help. I had tremendous help in my life from so many different players. And you have to put back what you get out. That's the way of music (McLaughlin 4/28/07).

McLaughlin's use of the expressions “young monsters” and “young lions” was common to jazz discourse and foregrounded the long history of a strong emphasis on technical and creative skills in jazz. He also used these expressions specifically for Indian musicians. As a result, this recording session revealed how musicians activated locally constructed and globally compatible forms of virtuosity through the improvisation-based musical practices of jazz and Indian classical music. These virtuosities operated as indices of traditional, regional, and national distinctiveness, but were not necessarily heard this way. Rather, McLaughlin identified musical virtuosity as a global form of currency with the expressions “young monsters” and “young lions,” showing that even though this “Western music” or “jazz fusion” also featured Indian musicians, it was their virtuosity that got them hired. Interestingly, he used these expressions that have been most often associated with jazz musicians like Wynton Marsalis who, in the 1980s and 90s, forged a conservative turn in jazz that he later brought to institutional fruition at Jazz at Lincoln Center. McLaughlin's expressions leveled the cultural difference between the varied backgrounds of all the Indian musicians in the session in the name of virtuosity and curiously associated himself



with a conservative jazz movement with which he was never involved. But while he never was a part of that conservative jazz movement, he clearly related to the idea of young lions because as he said, “I had tremendous help in my life.” Being a virtuoso young lion was exactly how he ended up in Miles Davis’ fusion band in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

So what does McLaughlin’s background reveal about the dynamics of this session and of Fusion in Chennai? Currently, he is the single most important musician who shows the links between jazz, Western fusion, and Fusion in Chennai. As Kevin Fellezs has pointed out (2011: 123-147), McLaughlin is a mostly self-taught musician who consistently made career-defining decisions that forged new combinations of music. His work with drummer Tony Williams’s band Lifetime with Larry Young (1968-1970) and Miles Davis’s fusion band (1968-1970), and his Spanish flamenco, Indian classical music, and African American jazz and blues influences constantly established him as a musician who followed his own creative desires outside of any pressures of the marketplace or discourses of jazz purity. His band Mahavishnu combined loud rock with intricate compositions and odd time signatures in the 1970s and 80s. His work with Zakir Hussain and L. Shankar in Shakti featured virtuoso improvisations with South and North Indian influenced musical compositions. *Que Alegria*, his album featuring percussionist Trilok Gurtu and bassists Kai Eckhardt and Dominique DiPiazza, combines jazz, Western fusion, and Spanish flamenco. In recent years, his genre bending career has even led to inclusion into the canonizing halls of Lincoln Center: I heard McLaughlin and Chick Corea’s Five Peace Band perform at the Rose Theater in 2009 with Kenny Garrett, Christian McBride, and Brian Blade. This was perhaps the most straight-ahead jazz ensemble that McLaughlin had worked with in years, playing with musicians who have continued to establish jazz as “America’s classical music” (Taylor 1986), with the exception of Corea’s own exceptional genre mixing career.

McLaughlin's lifelong choice of heavily electrified and midi-guitar sounds have also drastically contrasted the more canonical guitar sounds in jazz, exemplified by the sound of guitarist Wes Montgomery. Fellezs (2011: 123-147) has also suggested how both McLaughlin's drug use early in his career and his spiritual path influenced his creative choices.

This brief background of McLaughlin helps contextualize his presence during the session. So when he shouted "You guys were born for fusion" to the Indian musicians after a particularly good take in the studio, he succinctly tied together multiple themes that I describe further in this chapter. Because of his unique background, his comment left some ambiguity about what he intended "fusion" to mean. He likely was referring to Western fusion, but the context of the session (in India, with Indian Fusion and classical musicians who most likely knew about him because of Shakti) made this less clear. This ambiguity also led to how this statement positioned himself in the studio, intentionally or not, as a progenitor of Western fusion *and* Fusion. But considering that he was the only non-Indian in the studio (besides me), there was also a tense subtext, that the Indian musicians weren't Western but were skilled enough to play Western music. Taken even further with the word "born," his statement also could have implied that they were somehow *supposed* to play Western music, which asserted the power display of a Western celebrity to define Indian musicianship. As a result, the recording studio was a place that enabled the forging of identities like "Indian," "Western," and as I later show, also "classical," "Fusion," and "film," while it also helped meld them together. In addition, this statement also cemented the concept of virtuosity as a transnationally durable commodity: all the musicians that played on that take were hired for their exceptional musicianship and McLaughlin's complement reaffirmed the universal value of their extreme musical skills. I continue to unravel these themes

by describing and analyzing the ways this session established Fusion in Chennai as a contested musical practice and linked Fusion to non-local musical sources.

### Studio Stories

Many people were involved with the production of this five-day session: studio assistants who provided coffee, tea, and snacks for the musicians; the cook downstairs in the small eating room; studio employees who set the microphones, cables, lighting, and air conditioning; the musicians' assistants who helped set up and break down equipment and instruments; the three-person film crew; the musicians (some of whom brought their wives); and two studio engineers, a former engineer of A. R. Rahman, and H. Shridhar, one of the best engineers in India and a huge fan of McLaughlin's music. Apart from the musicians' wives, everyone was male. Hindi was occasionally spoken among a few musicians and their assistants while the studio employees, one of the musicians, and the film crew mostly spoke Tamil to each other. But English was the functional language throughout the sessions, between the engineers and the musicians, and across the regional differences as well: the Mumbai musicians mostly didn't understand Tamil, so they spoke to the studio employees in English, which the employees understood with some difficulty. Speaking English, McLaughlin commanded complete respect and attention because of his musicianship and role as bandleader. He skillfully used humor to bring the band together, and was also the charismatic leader of the group.

The downtime banter among musicians included mostly humor, anecdotes about recording and performing, and gripes about the frigid air conditioning and when the equipment didn't work. In the hallway between the main studio and the control room was a lounge area with two leather couches facing each other.



Photo 11: The lounge area just outside the main studio was a place where musicians discussed their gear. Here, Sivamani prepared his handheld video recorder for use.

This was a place where musicians, their assistants, and their wives would gather during downtime. A few of the musicians brought their laptops and would shop on the internet during breaks, downloading music and buying electronic equipment for their studios at home.

Discussions about recording equipment, computer hardware, and software were frequent, everyone comparing their set up to each other and learning about new products.

On the second day, Louiz Banks' wife Lorraine wanted to get out of the studio and asked where she should go shopping. She was directed to Citicenter, the new mall on Dr. Radhakrishnan Road not too far from the beach. Citicenter was not the first shopping mall in Chennai, but at the time it was the only one in the city that could have existed anywhere in Asia, Europe, and the U.S. because of its appearance and design. Its exterior façade is a several story high neoclassical replication of a Roman arch, much like the Arch d'Triumph in Paris. The conversations and Internet shopping in the lounge area marked this group of musicians and their wives as a cosmopolitan elite, particularly in contrast to their assistants and the other employees in the studio. These were the families who would have sat in the expensive seats at November Fest, the cosmopolitan music festival that I discussed in the last chapter, and later that year I even spoke with Sivamani (one of the Floating Point percussionists) while he was sitting in the front row of the Music Academy before a November Fest concert.

The social moods in the studio were almost entirely determined by McLaughlin. He had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of Miles Davis stories, which he always told with an alarmingly accurate impression. He teased the musicians for not having seen the film *Spinal Tap*, and then recited a couple of his favorite lines while mentioning that the character Nigel was based on his friend, guitarist Jeff Beck. These references showed limitations with any potentially universal references for the musicians and revealed at least one way these musicians did not have a shared experience. Most musicians obviously knew who Miles Davis was, but the kind of lore attached to him and the ways that McLaughlin was a pivotal member of his group on some of his canonical fusion recordings didn't have the allure that it would have had in a recording studio in Europe or the U.S.

McLaughlin showed the more playful side of his personality when he returned repeatedly to a kind of role playing, when he would act out his impression of different characters, which included an idiotic American heavy metal guitarist, and also an Indian man, who said “Rockin!” and “Totally Mental!” in a thick Indian accent to add expletives to a take. It was difficult to know what the musicians thought of this, but their laughter did not wane after every rendition. On the last day of recording after such an impression, one of the musicians’ wives asked everyone why they have to laugh every time, and no one answered her. McLaughlin’s mimicry of the Indian accent was clearly not meant to be insulting, but these instances obviously drew attention to the particular power dynamic in the studio between the senior European band leader (as perceived by the musicians) and the younger Indian musicians. The wife’s objection to these imitations was significant not just because she actually voiced her dissent in earshot of McLaughlin, but also because it could have only come from her and not one of the hired musicians.

The musicians also referred to each other with the North Indian suffix of respect, but with a playfulness that both underscored the deference of the term as it had fun with it: they addressed McLaughlin as “Johnji” and “ji” and he addressed them by adding “ji” to their names and also just as “ji.” The tangible sense of McLaughlin’s control over the sessions, and the deference of these musicians to McLaughlin, the same deference that the Indian musicians were accustomed to receiving themselves, was not lost on the studio employees and musicians’ assistants. During one break near the end of the sessions, I was having a snack with the employees and assistants outside in the stairwell, seated at the perimeter of their gathering. Because they consisted of both Hindi and Tamil speakers, but mostly Tamil, they spoke in simple Tamil with exaggerated gestures and started their own role playing. A drummer’s assistant, while gesturing the namastay,

started bowing excessively and saying “Johnji” over and over again. Then, while laughing loudly, a couple of them started falling over themselves to pay mock respect to another assistant playing the role of McLaughlin. The significance of this mockery—the musicians’ employees making fun of their bosses’ elaborate deference to a non-Indian with Indian gestures of respect—was a subversive reaction to their own positions of relatively limited power and it neatly captured the exaggerated behavior of all there. This brief performance of subaltern dissent played out the ways that the presence of a Western celebrity changed the power structures that constituted the musicians’ relationships to their assistants. Ultimately ineffectual for any real change, it offered a necessary respite of full-bodied laughter and brought a larger picture of social class in the “new India” into temporary focus.

When it was time to record, every track was made in basically the same way. They talked through arrangements, fine tuned the tempos and unison cadences, and discussed percussion layering between the two drummers. This was followed by a headphone check, rehearsals while adjusting headphone and recording levels, then three or four takes in a row. After the takes, they came into the control room to listen, discuss, and decide on a take.

#### Common Ground—and Differences

Because of the large number of musicians that participated in *Floating Point*, I single out two of the guest musicians in order to more fully develop their individual involvement in this project. Shashank, who was 28 years old at the time of the recording, is one of the best-known Karnatic flutists in south India. He has received numerous awards for his Karnatic music, released dozens of recordings, and has performed with some of the most celebrated Indian musicians outside of the Karnatic music tradition, including Zakir Hussain, Pandit Vishwa

Mohan Bhatt, and Ustad Sultan Khan. He lives in Chennai, but spends most of his time touring frequently in India, Europe, and North America. His experience and interest in Fusion was measured, but a few months prior to the *Floating Point* session, he played with Remember Shakti for a concert in nearby Bangalore.<sup>67</sup> Niladri Kumar, another young lion, makes his living performing Hindustani music and Fusion on his sitar. In addition to performing classical concerts around the world, he also has recorded numerous CD's of both Hindustani music and Fusion. His ensemble, Asia Electric, features two other *Floating Point* musicians, Louiz Banks and Sivamani.

The musicians in *Floating Point* encountered many familiar similarities and differences that have permeated musical and social interactions between jazz and Indian musicians for years. As the interviewer for the DVD, I was instructed to ask the musicians on camera what the “common ground” was between Western and Indian music, and Shashank and Niladri Kumar gave nuanced responses that included incompatibilities as well:

In my experience, it's more the improvisation, the ability to improvise that is the common ground... The problem is Indian musicians are not used to the chord progressions, harmonies, so much. So to the best of one's ability, either the Western musician has to accommodate, or work with the Indian musicians and say, 'okay there are so many bars of this and so many bars of these notes, if you can incorporate them.' If they work like that it works out very well. But it's certainly difficult for Indian musicians to learn the chord progressions quite instantly unless they have formal training behind them (Shashank 4/26/07).

Niladri Kumar expressed the same idea with a kind of fable:

“Well... you know there was a guy. He was supposed to write an essay so he had studied the subject of river. So this guy who knew this essay of river went for the exam. Now when a person like John approaches you to play music it's like giving an exam. And then the essay that he tells you to write is of an elephant, which is the Western harmonic tradition. So what do I do? So I try to understand the elephant, see what are the aspects of the

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<sup>67</sup> Remember Shakti is a resurgence of Shakti that still features Zakir Hussain and McLaughlin, but with otherwise new personnel.



elephant, and then I try to put that elephant in the river. I walk the elephant to the river and then I write the essay about the river” (Niladri Kumar 4/27/07).

Niladri Kumar resolved the tension of difference by asserting his confidence in his musical training, which allows him to play his music while simultaneously remaining open and responsive to other musical ideas—preparing for un-preparable circumstances.



Photo 12: Niladri Kumar plays his electric sitar in the soloist booth (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

In the end, he still played what he knew, but it was influenced and slightly altered by the co-presence of the Western harmonic tradition. The metaphor of an exam revealed the pressured background of real-time improvisation and recording in which this activity took place as well as the high stakes involved in this project.

In addition to the shared practices of musical improvisation and the ways in which musicians look to resolve harmonic and modal structural approaches, the confrontation of similarities and differences took place in another lesser-known arena. All the musicians were expected to be able to learn complicated and sometimes long rhythmic cadences, named *ti-hais* or *moras* in the Hindustani and Karnatic traditions respectively, during a short rehearsal and then record it at the usually fast speed. Since these *ti-hais* constituted the bulk of the unison playing in the project, they were key parts of the arrangements and the rehearsals. Therefore *konnakkol*, the language of drum syllables that organizes the rhythmic logic of Indian classical music, became the language to organize and understand the arrangements. *Konnakkol* is woven into Indian classical music pedagogy, so the classical musicians and the Fusion percussionists were at ease, especially since these percussionists had some classical training, but also because the practice of *konnakkol* is used outside an exclusively classical music domain. Drummer Ranjit Barot said, “I break everything down to *konnakkol*. That’s how I learned all of John’s music. We have to!”

*Konnakkol* is a pan regional, musico-linguistic practice with many varieties but shared enough to enable North and South Indian musicians to communicate.<sup>68</sup> In the musical pedagogy of Karnatic music, *konnakkol* is often taught to beginning percussion students long before they pick up an instrument. They learn the sequences and patterns of the language in which every syllable, like “ta,” “ka,” “di” and “mi” for example, correspond to different strokes on the drums.

This widespread practice is not without regional bias and interpersonal tension. During the rehearsal of one track, a percussionist was struggling to comprehend the whole structure of a

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<sup>68</sup> At the time McLaughlin was writing compositions for *Floating Point*, he was also co-authoring an instructional DVD about *konnakkol* with percussionist V. Selvaganesh titled “The Gateway to Rhythm.”

*ti-hai*, or a rhythmic cadence.<sup>69</sup> He and a guest musician were using *konnakkol* to come to an agreement on the *ti-hai*'s form and both were using their respective, regionally appropriate methods of "keeping tala" to mark the *ti-hai*'s structure in relation to the tala cycle. The percussionist was using the method common to Hindustani music. He was counting the joints of his fingers by touching his thumb to first his pinky finger low joint and then successively up the joints of that finger before moving to his fourth finger. The thumb returned to the low joint of the pinky finger only after all the beats had been counted on other joints. The south Indian guest musician was using the Karnatic system of handclaps, waves, and finger counts by bringing his right hand down to his upturned left palm.

There was a moment when one of them explicitly showed the place in the tala cycle with their own system of keeping tala. This was intended to be helpful but it was received as condescending. The other musician said defiantly, "No, no. I don't do it that way," and then kept the tala cycle with his own regionally appropriate method. After the percussionist learned the structure and contour of this complicated *ti-hai*, he had difficulty maneuvering around his drums fast enough to articulate the complete cadence because of its fast subdivisions. He solved the problem by choosing to focus on the accents of the cadence and not playing it in its entirety. Because it took a while for everyone to learn the *ti-hai* and then reach a consensus on how best to play it, the feeling among musicians was tense until they resolved the problem. In midst of the *ti-hai* rehearsal the guest musician said to me privately, "If everyone can just learn this then we can do a take," expressing some annoyance that he was ready but others were not.

This incident revealed some tension between the Indian classical musician and the Indian percussionist about classical musicians' regard of the fundamentals of musical structure,

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<sup>69</sup> In certain examples, I have chosen not to mention musicians' names to protect their identities.

composition, and execution as prerequisite mastery. The main problem came from hearing and understanding the form of the *ti-hai*, aurally learning its compositional logic. This is something that Indian classical percussionists do on stage during live performances, usually in the midst of the first of three repetitions of a *ti-hai*. Here, they were in a studio with no audience except the other musicians, not pressured by live performance time, but pressured by musicians' expectations, perhaps significantly more intense. This incident showed the persistent value judgment of Karnatic music as more structurally complex and therefore superior to other forms, and showed a hierarchy felt by many classical musicians for the superiority of their music in the context of other musical traditions around the world. Such an incident articulated real divisions in understandings of musical and regional difference among this heterogeneous group of Indian musicians.

This example was made more complicated because McLaughlin, a Western jazz musician who has studied Hindustani and Karnatic music, composed the *ti-hai*. The *ti-hai* brought out fundamental differences of musical training and genre among Indian musicians but also showed how an Indian compositional strategy employed by McLaughlin, a kind of inside outsider, brought out an interpersonal friction that re-drew lines of insider and outsider politics among the Indian musicians.

Tensions relating to musical differences and technical professionalism also flowed in the other direction: from Fusion to classical musicians. On a different day, I was talking to Louiz Banks about Fusion in India and he, like so many musicians, was critical of the music made in the name of Fusion. He said, "A lot of musicians say they are doing fusion, but have no Western instruments. They are classically trained Indian musicians." Here, Banks briefly articulated his own form of authenticity for Fusion. He said that it must incorporate Western instruments to

include Western music, not by merely using the word “fusion” to superficially dress up Indian classical music.



Photo 13: Keyboardist Louiz Banks in the studio (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

The compatibilities and incompatibilities that showed musical and regional differences mentioned above were a contributing factor for the more widespread contestation of Fusion in Chennai. Musicians activated tensions between classical and more popular musical practices, reaffirming the very boundaries that they were all accustomed to (and hired to) blur. While they were all in the studio to collectively make a Fusion recording, these incidents showed that when

confronted with a potential disagreement, they retreated to their respective corners that they defined by the differences between musical practices.

### Indian Music Genres

*Floating Point* was a relatively recent and high profile example of a long line of Fusion projects, but it was also unique because the musicians hired to play Western fusion were Indian. McLaughlin explained how he envisioned this project: “It would have been impossible to make this recording twenty years ago... It’s part of this whole earth shrinking process that we can all access each other’s music. And this is maybe the real fusion of the cultures: [it] is happening in the virtual world and we’re all bringing it together physically” (McLaughlin DVD interview). Digital technology and the resulting circulation of recordings through the Internet have been transformative for musicians all over the world. Yet the way musicians interact with this technology and the way this technology is not the catalyst, but a tool through which these changes are mediated helps temper the inflated influence of technology. As a statement of how Fusion circulated, *Floating Point* is a persuasive example for the recent growth and flexibility of Indian musicians’ abilities as it is for the worldwide expansion of jazz.

The next section describes how *Floating Point* included Indian film, classical, and Fusion musical practices. My intention is to show how *Floating Point*, as an example of Fusion in Chennai, addressed the increasing fluidity, instability, and interplay between these practices in contemporary India. In this project, the Indian musicians contested McLaughlin’s seemingly resolved statement of a “real fusion of the cultures” through a decidedly unresolved musical mixing and their various displays of musical virtuosity.

## The Presence of Film Music

The session took place in the recently built recording studio of A. R. Rahman, probably the most famous Indian film music composer in the world. Rahman is perhaps best known in the U.S. for his original score for the Broadway show, *Bombay Dreams*, and more recently for his performance at the 2009 Academy Awards ceremony when he won two Oscar awards for his music from the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. His extensive resume is implicit in the state of the art recording studio located in Chennai's film industry neighborhood of Kodambakkam. Although film music seems to be the least represented Indian musical practice in *Floating Point*, the studio itself is in some ways a metaphor for a certain manifestation of contemporary India. It combined cutting edge sound technology, a new cosmopolitan sheen and local roots reaching out to global connections with Chennai's semi-frequent power outages and labor economy, the latter visible by the seemingly disproportionately high number of assistants. Although isolated from the outside, Rahman's recording studio was the origin of so much music heard around the world, and was therefore inseparable from it. At the time of the *Floating Point* session, newspapers were running articles updating Rahman's progress on the soundtrack for the much anticipated Tamil film *Sivaji*, starring the celebrity actor Rajinikanth.

Indian film music is a globally circulated and consumed popular music that has become an international marker for Indian culture (Booth 2008; Gopal and Moorti 2008; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008). As a mass mediated recording industry it is increasingly diasporic and transnational: communities all over the world identify Bollywood as a main Indian cultural export. As India has become more economically competitive with the U.S., Canada, U.K., Japan, and China, and has seemed less phased by the recent economic crisis than most of these countries, the soundtrack to how India films itself—for itself and the world—increasingly

involves a sound track embracing “world music.” It is fitting then, that McLaughlin rented out Rahman’s recording studio in Chennai to record *Floating Point*. This studio was so technologically advanced, and possibly more affordable compared to other studios in Europe and North America, that it attracted a Western celebrity musician. It was the locus for transnational music circulation and this was a tangible feeling among musicians and participants. Also, many of the musicians were well known in the film music industry: Louiz Banks, Ranjit Barot, Sivamani, and Naveen Kumar were a few who had made substantial contributions to the film music recordings.

#### Classical as Fusion, Fusion as Classical

As I’ve shown in previous chapters, the relationship between Fusion and Indian classical music was the most generative source for Fusion’s contestation. Despite the project of Indian elites that nationalized northern and southern musical practices as Indian tradition, Indian classical musicians have long been understood as more open to outside influence than the elites who re-invented those practices as “classical.” McLaughlin selected “young lions” that were leaders in their respective traditions and also already skilled at performing with musicians outside of their traditions. This showed how a previous tendency to describe musicians with accolades based on their Fusion as much as their Karnatic music (such as the brief bio of L. Subramaniam that I discussed in chapter one) has made a significant impact on this younger generation of Indian classical musicians. Niladri Kumar discussed his willingness to perform Fusion in the following way: “But I think because of the boundaries opened up now with people coming in and going and playing all over and this mixture of music that is happening eventually



we need to know a lot of the other tradition to actually imbibe and try to put good music together” (Niladri Kumar Interview 4/27/07).

Shashank also addressed an increased tendency of classical musicians to perform Fusion: “[Indian] musicians now seem to be a little more versatile, try to be versatile. They try to assimilate a lot of different forms of music. That’s more because we also get to interact with a lot of different musicians from around the world. And we also try to keep up with what’s happening around the world” (Shashank 4/26/07). He quickly followed this with a disclaimer indicating that this form of versatility is not for everyone: “But not everyone does it, though. Some people stick to traditional classical music” (Shashank 4/26/07). Shashank, expressing the contestation Fusion in Chennai, balanced his assertion of musicians’ assimilation with different forms of music with a fair assessment of the still potent reach of purity discourses about Karnatic tradition. In the sealed off studio of A. R. Rahman during a recording session led by John McLaughlin, the influence of the Karnatic music establishment found a way in.

#### Fusion: Contested and “New,” Indian and Western

As I argued in chapter two, musicians constructed Fusion as contested in part when they defined and judged Fusion. Shashank and Niladri Kumar reacted to the term “fusion” as a description for a lot of contemporary Indian music. Shashank said: “Fusion is a very gross term. A lot of what is happening in Indian classical music today: duo, trios... anything that has good elements that we’re trying to fuse, something very academic as well as entertaining. It shouldn’t be any kind of instrument... Good fusion should mean good artistry, good music, good elements of each music” (Shashank 4/26/07). Like many musicians I interviewed, during *Floating Point* and throughout my research, Shashank responded by being dismissive and also programmatic.

He believed much Fusion failed to reach a potential that seemed mostly based on the construction of an ideal type.

Niladri Kumar was also critical when he invoked the pun of confusion, but he was also slightly more positive about Fusion's potential:

A lot of people including me have an aversion to that word fusion. Because sometimes when you say fusion, it's [a] kind of confusion—it's a confused state of mind, a lot of people think, people who are hardcore traditionalists. And a lot of crappy work has also happened, you know. I think the word fusion, to make the umbrella even broader... we call it world music. The problem is that there are no set guidelines. Like in the Indian classical tradition you have guidelines, in jazz you have standards. There are no guidelines as to fusion music. So it's still happening. The boundaries are still open. *It needs a person to have lot of virtuoso [virtuosity] in one form of music*, one genre of music, and have a great liking for the other genre. And that's the person who can do good fusion music or world music. I would really like to be established one of the genres where people can exchange ideas, exchange skills. No boundaries. It's cross culture. And it reaches a lot of young people, the younger generation, you know (Niladri Kumar 4/27/07, italics added).

In his explanation, Niladri Kumar stated the importance of virtuosity for Fusion. He also inadvertently articulated one of the central tensions of Fusion: the problems *and* possibilities of having no guidelines. He started by describing this as a problem and ended by praising Fusion as “cross culture,” emphasizing how the younger generations were attracted to it. Like other musicians in Chennai, he also equated Fusion with world music. But unlike other projects of Fusion, *Floating Point* was unique because it combined two fusions: Fusion in Chennai and the Western fusion forged by Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, and John McLaughlin.

As I previously mentioned, many of the musical influences for the rhythm section in *Floating Point* came from the Miles Davis's fusion of the late 1960's and '70's, to which McLaughlin substantially contributed. Driven by a need to reconnect with a younger audience in ways that jazz had become too esoteric as a form of high art and specialist listening, Miles Davis included electric guitars, basses, rock rhythms, ostinato grooves, and modal jams to express a

kind of sound that defied generic convention while disrupting and challenging his audience base (Fellez 2011; Holt 2007; Nicholson 1998). This mixture of rock, jazz, and funk was *Floating Point*'s most obvious predecessor, and the electric component also occasionally mingled with some of McLaughlin's aesthetic choices, such as midi guitar and selected grooves, that also leaned towards smooth jazz. As I previously mentioned, Western fusion was the form of jazz that was most recognized in India. The contemporary jazz most musicians knew about in India was not the jazz canonized by American educational and cultural institutions, but Western fusion with a decidedly more world music dimension. There were exceptions, but more musicians I spoke with knew the music of Weather Report, Return to Forever, and Mahavishnu more than Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane.

Much like McLaughlin sought foreign musicians to fuel new energy for his music by starting Shakti and putting the band together for *Floating Point*, Davis arguably hired McLaughlin in part because he was British, perhaps due to Davis' intention to connect with a younger audience that may have been influenced by Beatlemania.<sup>70</sup> But the more obvious reason Davis hired McLaughlin was his virtuosity, even if Davis continued to test him after he was hired. On the last day of the *Floating Point* session, McLaughlin took out the band, recording engineers, and film crew to dinner at a nearby hotel. There he told the story about how Herbie Hancock and Tony Williams were waiting to see what Davis would do to the "new white bandmember" during the first rehearsal. According to McLaughlin, Davis apparently said, "You play" to McLaughlin, and then came up right in front of him, propped himself right on McLaughlin's amplifier, and rested his head in his hand: "And he just stared at me. For minutes.

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<sup>70</sup> Thanks to Prof. Chris Washburne for pointing this out.

For the entire solo.” McLaughlin continued: “You’re a changed person after that. That totally changed who I was.”

This test of virtuosity may have also been for Hancock and Williams to see what McLaughlin could do under pressure, but this experience undoubtedly played a role in the *Floating Point* session. Niladri Kumar’s description of the session as “an exam” showed that while McLaughlin may have been a far more benevolent dictator in the studio than Davis, the level of pressure was significant and that McLaughlin’s previous experiences changed him by, at the very least, influencing his expectations as a bandleader. McLaughlin’s experience also demonstrated the importance of the anecdote as a significant part of maintaining and asserting the value of virtuosity. Such stories he told throughout the session were a way of establishing his resume and authority in casual and lighthearted conversation, a familiar discursive tendency for jazz musicians of older generations, and it is likely that the *Floating Point* session provided those same benefits to the Indian musicians, particularly those who performed Fusion more regularly. Just as McLaughlin used these stories, it was likely that the Indian musicians would leverage this session to improve their reputations and help get them better gigs. Thus, when McLaughlin said he wanted to help the younger musicians (“I want to help these young players become known, and if through me they get to become known more, than more power to them”), a substantial part of this help included not just the finished recording product but just as important, a handful of stories about virtuosity.

## Virtuosity

The changes and intersections of music genres in 21st Century India and the ways that musicians inhabited, reaffirmed, and complicated these genres in *Floating Point* showed how

Fusion occupied a contested status that fit between and among multiple musical practices. But as Niladri Kumar mentioned in passing, the crucial factor that linked all of these practices and that constituted the possibility for this project was the concept of virtuosity. I use the term virtuosity to show how musicians' professional skills were a primary impetus for how Fusion was made meaningful in Chennai and how jazz circulates—indeed, virtuosity was the transnational link between these different and related geographical manifestations of fusion. Like Nicholas Gebhardt, I am interested in the cultural work that virtuosity accomplishes as a sonically based, socially constructed category:

Virtuosity refers to several dimensions of the musical act at once and is, in fact, constitutive of the act's social existence. To define a musical act as virtuosic is to point to particular historical conditions for human action that rely upon a musician's directing his or her imaginative, technical, physical, and musical capacities into a particular way or manner of musical making. In these terms, a distinction can be made between a musical virtuosity — that is, his or her skilled musical ways — and the virtuosic dimension to the musical act —that is, the social basis of the act. Neither aspect can be understood, however, without reference to the other (Gebhardt 2001: 16-17).

Marking this distinction is useful to identify these aspects, but virtuosity accomplishes both aspects simultaneously since Gebhardt's "musical ways" and the "musical act" (Gebhardt 2001:16-18) reciprocally produce each other, both socially and musically. Therefore, I understand virtuosity as a nexus between musical sound, the musicians that produce them, and the social worlds musicians inhabit, reflect, and remake. Though Gebhardt was concerned with jazz in the American context, his understanding of virtuosity as shaped by "particular historical conditions for human action" invites an understanding of how virtuosity works in transnational contexts.

Derived from the Italian *virtù*, *virtuoso* dates to fifteenth century Italian aristocratic courts (Walser 1993:75). Although the concept of virtuosity is used in many different contexts, it could seem an odd fit for a session of almost entirely Indian musicians since it emerges from

decidedly different historical conditions. Yet its application to this musical event captures many of the socio-musical elements, dynamics, and relationships that enabled a project like *Floating Point* to take place. This recording session intentionally brought together these musicians in order to highlight their different virtuosities because of the novel ways their virtuosities referenced and signified an “India” and a “West” in both predictable and complicated ways. In other words, the concept of virtuosity works in this context because of *and* despite these different historical conditions, and my use of it captures the tensions already inherent to Fusion.

Virtuosity tends to evoke extreme reactions since it marks “extreme occasions” (Said 1991). Discursively, it works similarly in jazz and Indian classical music in the way it marks the crossroads of an ongoing debate. For many, virtuosity signifies a range of disparaged musical practices that foreground technique over imagination. Virtuosos can be soul-less, dryly intellectual, and technically dazzling on the surface while lacking what can be considered creativity, insight, and wisdom. On this side of the debate, virtuosity is opposite artistry: it is all superficial excess and without meaningful content. On the other side, it is a means of transcendence and is allied with the concept of the genius. Here technique and artistry are united, and virtuoso musicians are so adept and gifted that they become shrouded in mystery, separated from the non-virtuoso folk, and endowed with almost extra-human qualities and characteristics. I have exaggerated this debate only to mark its extreme points on a continuum that is more nuanced and complex in practice, but in my experience, this continuum is equally common to aesthetic evaluations among jazz and Indian classical audiences. Even though the term “virtuosity” is not used in India, the concept, with its resulting debates, is a familiar one.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> Walser (1993) identifies the intersections of gender and power in visual, sonic, and discursive representations of virtuosity in heavy metal guitarists from the 1980s and brings out themes of

musicians' extraordinary technical skills are immediately apparent to any listener of *Floating Point* and encompass a wide range, from individual mastery of their instruments to a mastery of accompaniment.

### Liveness

The virtuosity I witnessed in the studio came across in many forms and among the entire spectrum of musicians with very different musical roles. One example involved musicians' different approaches to the recording process. The issue of live recording arose as a point of difference, in this case between the film/Fusion musicians and McLaughlin. The model for many jazz recordings — a live recording with the entire band playing simultaneously — is not the model of film music recording, in which individual musicians can “punch” their parts in, or record separately while the engineers add their part into the complete mix. Most of *Floating Point* was recorded using the live model and only a few ensemble parts and improvisations were punched in later. Most of these portions were unavoidable, and McLaughlin preferred that the improvised solos were recorded live. When one of the rhythm section musicians asked, “Can I dub my solo?” McLaughlin responded, “No.” Then after a pause, “sure, but then what's the point of doing it live?” On a different day when this same musician was learning the arrangement for a different track he said, “If I stop, keep playing. Don't stop.” McLaughlin replied, “We'll punch you in.” Then jokingly, he said, “And we'll punch you out!” Everyone laughed with a tinge of nervousness. While McLaughlin devalued punching in, other musicians earned part of their income from it. The privileging of liveness in the recording process drew out some of the constraints of a transnationally compatible virtuosity.

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“competitive individualism” (78) and an assertion of power and freedom (76) as central to the making of virtuosity.

## Speed

The most obvious sonic form of virtuosity was speed. The guest musicians were hired because of their ability to perform exciting, high intensity improvisations in extremely fast speeds. They recorded in a small room adjacent to the main recording studio separated by a glass wall. After they arrived and said their greetings, they had a few minutes to warm up as the studio assistants and engineers arranged the equipment and set the recording levels. For almost the entire time they were in their recording room, R. Samuel, one of the cameramen, was also in the room filming them. The warm-up time was limited, so there was little time to ease into the setting, especially with a video camera following their every move. Scarce warm-up time is common for musicians of this caliber, but the constant filming combined with the level of playing that McLaughlin expected through his compositions was not.

As Louiz Banks told me between takes while both sighing and chuckling: “Like all of John’s tunes, the tempo isn’t fast but there’s *so* much speed happening.” Many of the tempos in *Floating Point* are medium tempos, but the rhythm section and soloists do not linger very long in this tempo range. The soloists had to play short improvisations so most of the solos last for only about two minutes. From the perspective of the classical guest soloists, this differs greatly from Hindustani and Karnatic music where standard concerts last at least two hours without an intermission and any short, fast pieces that demand fast improvisations are usually not played until musicians warm up with at least one slower tempo piece.

Analyses of the two tracks on *Floating Point* that feature Shashank and Niladri Kumar help describe how the sounds of virtuoso musicianship were at the center of the lived experience of virtuosity.



“Off the One”

Shashank’s formidable technique and improvisational approach throughout the track named “Off the One,” while clearly rooted in Karnatic music, differs greatly from his playing in Karnatic concerts. “Off the One” is a 4/4 composition with 32-bar form that alternates 8 and 16-bar sections of melody with 8-bar solo improvisations. In addition, a 4-bar *ti-hai*, played in unison by the entire band, launches Shashank and McLaughlin into their one-chorus solos. During Shashank’s solo, he employs a limited use of *gamaka*, or the Karnatic music ornamentation characterized by the slides, oscillations, approach tones, and other melodic gestures that are essential to Karnatic music. He also plays *ragas* that correspond to the chord changes of McLaughlin’s composition: “And everything that we hear we try to convert the scales into which ragas it corresponds to and so on. But... John has given me a few bars, which can incorporate these notes. There’s a generic scale that is constantly in the background. So there’s a lot of freedom but there’s also a good interesting part wherein you try to bring in these, to play ragas which incorporate these chords” (Shashank 4/26/07).

He also rhythmically builds his solo with increasing rhythmic density and the faster he plays the less room there is for *gamaka*. The tempo in “Off the One” is about 164 beats per minute. His playing quickly speeds up from predominantly 8th notes to 16th notes, and using Karnatic phrasing he punctuates these lines with accents on odd numbers of beats. To achieve even more speed, he uses successive stages of rapid articulation. First, his rapid tonguing articulates each individual note, and then he ends the solo with a flourish of flutter tonguing, which sprays a dense cluster of still individually discernable notes. This rapid increase of rhythmic density foregrounds Shashank’s virtuosity of speed, which is quite apparent in his Karnatic concerts but never actualized this quickly and compacted into only a fifty second solo.

### “Five Peace Band”

“Five Peace Band” is a blues with a tempo of about 148 beats per minute. It features Niladri Kumar playing his electric sitar and includes a 5/4 meter and a four-measure tag at the end, making it a 16-measure form. His solo begins with larger intervals, rather than a stepwise motion, and he chose to play each note straight, or without *gamak*. The second and subsequent choruses invoke a kind of electric sitar shredding akin to heavy metal guitar solos, except this time with intricate stepwise phrases that accent odd numbers of beats. Speed is again one of the dominant features of this solo.

The concept of this recording necessitated extremely developed technical skills for each musician, by intentionally juxtaposing different forms of virtuosity. Among the small but heterogeneous group of Indian guest musicians, virtuosity cut across region, genre, and instrument, and through these categories drew upon vastly different pedagogical systems, religious and spiritual practices, oral traditions, and practices of improvisation. Virtuosity was therefore observable in each musician’s actions, yet connected to the vast social networks of cultural production. The musicians navigated their way through this aggregate of virtuosities in different ways, and always conducted themselves with a professional respect for the hierarchical structure of the band.

This respect was most observable during the decision processes in the control room after the last take of a track, easily the most emotionally expressive times during the sessions. This was a crucial period when opinions, personalities, and thoughts about each other’s musicianship



Photo 14: A lighter moment in the control room after a take. From left to right, Louiz Banks, Sivamani, Shankar Mahadevan, John McLaughlin, H. Shridhar (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

all came out in some form or another, and the musicians negotiated these factors during the process of choosing a take. While listening, they enjoyed themselves and frequently shouted with joy, clapped, and slapped each other's backs—all heightened male affection and a love for music making. But an underlying feeling of tension also emerged from the transparent desires of the musicians to play well for themselves, the band, and McLaughlin, which were all potentially conflicting if McLaughlin chose the take that did not showcase a particular musician's strengths. As the bandleader, McLaughlin's vote was the only one that really mattered. Some of the more

aggressive personalities would offer commentaries by characterizing the takes, potentially steering the overall opinions in the room. But with any sideman arrangement, they knew that the decision wasn't theirs to make.



Photo 15: From left to right, McLaughlin, the author, Sarangan (filming McLaughlin while under the soundboard), and H. Shridhar during a take in the control booth (photo by Ina McLaughlin, used with permission).

## Conclusion

Identifying virtuosity as a central theme in this recording session helps direct attention to the musical and social dynamics involved in the musicians' particular histories, which in this example included multiple Indian subjectivities that were defined in part by a postcolonial

relationship with the West. What were the implications for the Indian musicians told they were born for fusion? How can *Floating Point* be, in McLaughlin's words, a "fusion of the cultures" and "Western music?"

Literature on world music has shown how careful attention to music quickly unveils the politics of difference, hybridity, representation and appropriation in an era of late capitalism (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Erlmann 1998, 1999; Feld 2000; Frith 2000; Meintjes 1990, 2003; Stokes 2004; Taylor 1997). A world music of "classical" non-Western music changes these dynamics, if only slightly. Is it possible to understand the Indian musicians in *Floating Point* as "Third World musicians being treated as raw materials to be processed into commodities for the West" (Frith 2000: 308)? *Floating Point* does draw from a familiar trend in world music by being a Western star's project that included non-Western musicians. What was different here was that unlike the canonical examples of Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel, Ry Cooder, and David Byrne, McLaughlin hired Indian musicians who grew up listening to his music, as well as Indian classical musicians who held a considerably powerful position as respected artists in India and throughout India's diaspora. The unequal power structure between McLaughlin and the Indian musicians was present but of a different character. As problematic as it was, the shared acceptance of classical music as authentic Indian tradition has been global. Therefore, the risk of the misrepresentation and exploitation of Indian classical music was present but minimized, maybe even understood, since virtuosity as one of Frith's "raw materials [...] processed into commodities" was far from raw and already commodified.

With the many layers of its multiple meanings of musical skills, musical training, and regional and national affiliation, virtuosity was the impetus for this project as a transnational commodity. Rather than a fusion of the cultures, it was really virtuosities that were fused, but if

McLaughlin made it clear that *Floating Point* was “Western music” then it seemed to be determined by Western terms. McLaughlin’s music, experience, name recognition, and connections guaranteed an international circulation of the recording, and this project was an opportunity for the Indian musicians to demonstrate their virtuosity to their Indian peers, as well as to introduce and advertise their virtuosity to European and North American audiences.

*Floating Point* was nominated for a 2009 Grammy Award in the category of Best Contemporary Jazz Album. Since three of the five nominees could be considered “world jazz,” it might feel that the canon-expansion agenda of jazz scholarship to engage the influences of international practices of jazz has reached the awards ceremony.<sup>72</sup> *Floating Point* was also one of two nominees that showcased jazz and Indian musicians, which shows that virtuosity, as a transnational impetus for music making that involves India, has certainly not been unique to *Floating Point*. It also could foreshadow an increased expansion of Indian and diasporic Indian involvement in jazz projects to come. And yet it is also easy to feel that this trend shows how Indian musicians might also be serving jazz—that their role is to amplify the greatness of jazz by showing its transnational relevance, or the greatness of American music abroad.

During this session, McLaughlin occupied a complicated role as the center of this project. He was the charismatic, dynamic, economic, and musical hub of this session and as the bandleader and respected musician, he was benignly absolute in his authority. It was clear to all the musicians at the session that McLaughlin tied a history of Fusion in India to a history of fusion in jazz, as does this recording. Yet *Floating Point* is significant for reasons far beyond him because it provided a node for the meeting of Fusion in India and Western fusion, as well as

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<sup>72</sup> The other nominees were Randy Brecker’s *Randy in Brazil* (the winner), *Lifecycle* by The Yellowjackets featuring Mike Stern, and two recordings with a variety of musicians named *Miles from India* and *Cannon Re-Loaded: All-Star Celebration of Cannonball Adderley*.

an example of how jazz moves in the world in familiar and more complex ways. Categories of “India” and “the West” were re-inscribed politically as much as they were complicated.

McLaughlin embodied the West as an all-encompassing category of power, influence, and mobility even as his interest in Indian music has proven to be genuine, sincere, and lasting, while using his reputation to help younger Indian musicians. As misrepresentative as one person can embody the entity of “the West,” McLaughlin was this entity and this was driven by the possibilities of where this recording would circulate.

When considering its transnational reach, I have argued that jazz shows affinities and differences that question a place-based authenticity. As John Szwed has written, “For me, at least, jazz begins as a world music. But even if American chauvinism will never allow for world origins, surely the role of other countries in shaping jazz must be recognized” (in Friedwald [et al] 2002: 157). While McLaughlin unhesitatingly praised the musicians on this project, calling this project “Western music” simultaneously as a “real fusion of the cultures” revealed a larger tendency of the West to use music to level difference, while it also acknowledged the ways Indian music has transformed McLaughlin’s playing and influenced generations of musicians.

Virtuosity led to this break that many Indian musicians aspired to: working hard at your music—whether it’s jazz, film, rock, or classical music—gets you access to a music market interested in Fusion as well as an international market less interested in India. The crucial and sadly predictable criteria, in this example, required a Western star like McLaughlin to enable this access.

## Conclusion

Ethnography's stories of place and places are increasingly about contestation (Feld and Basso 1996: 5).

### Five Star Fusion

After recording a Tamil rock video in Madurai during the summer of 2006, I heard from the guitarist about a drummer in Chennai that I should meet. When I contacted the drummer after I moved to Chennai, he had been hired to put together a fusion band for a corporate gig. We played together one afternoon and he hired me.

The drummer was excited about the performance and wanted to come up with some original material. After he hired a guitarist from Kolkatta who was living in Chennai, we came up with a few songs based on scales of ragas in meters that we all agreed on, and prepared a few jazz standards to play as well, including Gershwin's *Summertime*.

The gig was at a five star hotel on the way to the airport, just past the city's border. Just outside, there was significant construction where three major roads intersected and the air was filled with dust, bus and car exhaust, and honking horns from the delays. The hotel was a pristine new building surrounded by carefully manicured trees and gardens—a luxurious oasis in contrast to the other side of the hotel's property walls. I learned when I arrived that a German construction company was funding the party for their workers, who were mostly lower middle class administrators and lower class laborers. I was directed to the hotel's grand ballroom, a wide-open lavish space that easily fit several hundred people. A stage had been set up with a colorful floor to ceiling poster-board backdrop that featured the company's name, logo, and giant



pictures of a few of their products, one of which was a concrete mixer. Rows of chairs stretched almost to the back of the space, and by the time the welcome speeches and company announcements had ended and we took the stage, every seat was claimed by a dressed-up employee.

The lights on stage were so bright that I could only see about half the room, but everyone sat silently listening. We played a song or two, and then the drummer called *Summertime*. At our arranged solo break, I closed my eyes and crafted the best sax solo I could. As I finished my last chorus feeling satisfied, I slowly opened my eyes and saw that the several hundred employees who had been sitting in front of me had vanished. When I peered into the back part of the ballroom, I saw that they were all clustered into an almost impossibly dense crowd. The bar had opened.

The company's choice to have their party at this venue was clearly popular with their employees; the strict liquor laws of Chennai didn't apply to this hotel, lying just outside the city limit. The vast majority stayed close to the bar during our set, but after few minutes a handful of employees sat in chairs closer to the stage and listened. After another song or two, a couple of them started requesting Tamil film songs. They called them out by name, and when the drummer heard the third or fourth request, he huffily announced that we were playing Fusion and not film songs.

This corporate gig enhances my portrayal of Fusion in the preceding chapters because it clarifies the boundaries of Fusion's contestation. The party planners chose Fusion to compliment the character of their company: Western *and* Indian. The working class employees, however, buoyed that night by the announced success of their company and its clear attempt to please them, were more interested in the party's elaborate amenities—which also included a huge

dinner buffet—than music that attempted to combine Indian classical music with Western popular music. In other words, they were not the cosmopolitan, new middle class. Despite this lack of interest, corporate gigs were usually important for the success of musicians who performed Fusion, especially outside of Chennai. During the Floating Point recording session, keyboardist Louiz Banks told me that he made most of his living performing lucrative corporate Fusion events, so clearly the company that hired us wasn't alone in their assumption that the celebratory sounds of Indian corporate success should be Fusion. Yet for this particular company—one that was obviously more working class than the IT companies in cities such as Pune, Hyderabad, and Bangalore that hired Banks—the choice of Fusion fell flat.

The location of this event puts an interesting spin on Feld and Basso's assertion above about the links between ethnography, place, and contestation. The event's venue was symbolic of important features of Fusion. This concert featured Fusion that was geographically and demographically outside the Karnatic dominated politics of live music in Chennai. Without any of the necessary conditions for the contestation described in previous chapters, Fusion was irrelevant. In addition, the expanding growth of the Indian economy in tandem with foreign investment usually provided the obvious answer for the proliferation of Fusion since the early 1990s. After all, Fusion was “new,” “not Karnatic,” and supposedly part of the new India. But in a five star hotel, often a global symbol of successful transnational commerce, Fusion demonstrated its limits with these employees in how it was unable to ride on the back of a “trickle down” effect of global capital associated with the new India. The mixture of India and the West in terms of music stopped short of trickling down to this party, even if the same mixture in terms of capital did reach everyone there, however temporarily.

## Recent Changes, Future Directions

This event poses the important question in the coming years of Fusion's potential to expand its audience and reach those audience members disinterested in the explicit mixing of Indian and Western music. It remains to be seen how musicians who perform Fusion will continue to attempt to negotiate the changes of the new India. In the meantime, there have been a few notable developments since the period of my fieldwork. A few musicians who I include in the preceding chapters have since taken their Fusion further, particularly by attempting to institutionalize Fusion. Violinist M. Lalitha has started a school named the M.S. Academy of Global Music that teaches Karnatic, Western classical, and world music. Although the school does not have a website yet, it has a Facebook page that lists Dr. J. S. Kofi Gbolonyo from Canada and Ghana, ethnomusicologist Dr. Yoshitaka Terada from Japan, Pandit Viswa Mohan Bhatt, and American saxophonist George Brooks, bassist Kai Echardt, and Dr Nathan Davis, and Roger Zahab. The page claims that the school offers in-person and online instruction.

Guitarist R. Prasanna started a school named Swarnaboomi Academy of Music, which is located a short distance south of Chennai. The faculty includes Ghatam Karthick, and the curriculum seeks to prepare musicians for a variety of professional performing situations. Keyboardist Anil Srinivasan took over as the executive director of Brhaddhvani, the institution led by *vina vidwan* Karaikkudi Subramaniam who initiated the group interview I featured in chapter one. In addition, film composer A. R. Rahman also started a school named the KM Conservatory that teaches Western and Indian music, as well as audio technology. It will be especially fruitful in the coming years to learn how an increasing institutionalization of Fusion in a handful of educational curriculums in Chennai might effect the contestation of Fusion.

## Thematic Continua

Before concluding, I describe three themes that run throughout the preceding chapters as continua in order to underscore some of the broader relationships between the chapters: discourse and musical sound; amateur versus professional musicians; and the positioning of Fusion in terms of place. In chapters one and two, I focused on the contestation of Fusion from the perspective of discourse in order to present the tensions of Fusion in language. In chapters three and four, I brought musical sound and performance into my analyses of Fusion to show how discourse and music jointly provided an observable domain in which to analyze the contestation of Fusion. As I mentioned in the introduction, my methodology of locating the tensions of Fusion in discourse and musical sound follows that of Paja Faudree (2012), who has argued for a unified field of semiotic meaning and has written that a persistent separation of music and language “divides a communicative whole” (520). While I differentiate between discourse and musical sound in the preceding chapters, I consider them to be interrelated and both vehicles for the sonic tensions of modernity in Chennai.

Many of the musicians I discuss in chapters one and two were well-respected professional musicians who were better known in Chennai than in other parts of India and the world. Chapters three and four more generally feature musicians who were more widely known professional musicians with more international careers. This amateur/professional continuum is in no way meant to evaluate the proficiency or expertise of those musicians—apart from the teenage band Oxygen, there were only a handful of musicians with whom I worked that I would consider amateur. I mention this continuum because it shows that Fusion permeated the practices of musicians at all levels of skill and professionalization; Fusion was an important musical practice for those who performed frequently abroad, and was also an important part of musicians’

practices within Chennai. The professional range of Fusion during my fieldwork essentially extends from the musicians in Oxygen to those in the *Floating Point* recording session because it encompasses the widest possible span of musicianship. However, this range of professionalism did not include age. While older musicians certainly tended to be more professional, their age did not indicate their interest in Fusion; any proclivity for Fusion could not easily mapped onto generation. *Mrdangam vidwan* Sivaramen, *vina vidwan* Karaikkudi Subramaniam, and *mrdangam vidwan* Trichy Sankaran are all senior musicians who show that Fusion could not be simply labeled the younger music of the new India. Rather, Fusion was supposed to be new but evidence of older musicians' gurus playing Fusion contradicted this immediately, and led to one of the most central tensions for Fusion that I described in chapter one.

Related to the theme of professionalism is the last continuum: place. The professionalism I mentioned relies on the extent of musicians' reputations. I use this not to suggest in any way that musicians better known abroad are more professional, but as a tool to further probe the uses of place in terms of Fusion. Edward Casey and Martin Stokes together provide the framework for my understanding of how the practice of Fusion relates to place. Casey has pointed out that people culturally produce the specificity of place, and that it reflects subjectivities and local knowledge (1996). Even as Karnatic music is an increasingly diasporic musical practice, Chennai remains the locus of authenticity and political relevance—musicians haven't really "made it" in Karnatic music until they've proven themselves at multiple December concert seasons and have secured some of the more prestigious performance slots at the best known *sabhas*. Fusion complicated any potential distinction between the home city as the center of Karnatic music and the diaspora as the source for Fusion. Fusion was entangled with Chennai live music politics that were dominated by Karnatic music, and at once highlighted the

uniqueness of Chennai and the more global aspirations of Chennai musicians for their music, even if their music would never leave Chennai. In this way, the practice of Fusion produced a local knowledge about Chennai that was representative of the tensions of modernity. Capturing these tensions effectively, Stokes (drawing from Anna Tsing) has understood “‘global’ and ‘local’ not as places or processes, but as key discursive elements in world-making projects, around which intensifying self-consciousness and anxiety hovers” (Stokes 2004: 51). It was precisely this tension between Karnatic music as supposedly local and Fusion as supposedly global that also endowed the practice of Fusion with contestation. The continuum of place, therefore, involves the key discursive elements involved with keeping Karnatic music “traditional” and Fusion contested.

In chapters one and two, I look closely at locally constructed dimensions of Fusion that were unique to Chennai (Karnatic tradition, the topic of history and Fusion as “new,” and definitions and opinions of Fusion) while in chapters three and four I focus on the more non-local, or even less local, influences on Fusion. While the themes of hybridity, cosmopolitanism, world music, and post-colonialism run throughout the dissertation, the first half focuses more on the locally based discursive results of these themes while this second half focuses more on the musical ways that musicians helped produce Chennai as a local and global Indian city, and in turn, themselves as local and global musicians who perform Fusion. In addition, chapters three and four offer different perspectives of how the Chennai-based practice of Fusion moved in and out of Chennai. With November Fest in chapter three, I feature musicians who came from other cities in India and the world to make themselves, other Chennai-based musicians and audiences, and Chennai itself cosmopolitan. Apart from the Chennai-based duo of Anil Srinivasan and Sikhil Gurucharan, November Fest drew musicians from outside of Chennai to the diversified

middle class audience, bringing Fusion and other music genres associated with musical difference to Chennai. Chapter four reverses this directional flow and demonstrates how a Western musician and Indian musicians from around India came to Chennai to make music that would allow the Indian musicians and their music to leave Chennai. Chapter three features the arrival of Fusion, and chapter four focuses on its production for the sake of launching it out of Chennai and India.

#### Conclusion: Fusion and World Jazz

After all, the United Nations flag is kind of blue, and we will be assembling on 30 April to get in the mood to sing, sing, sing (United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon quoted in Samtani 2012).

Earlier in 2012, the United Nations officially named April 30 “international jazz day” (Samtani 2012). As jazz circulates around the world, what are the stakes for “jazz” being “jazz,” and not something else? Fusion is an example of *not* jazz and *not* Karnatic music, but it has been dependent upon the movement of jazz and jazz/rock fusion musicians and recordings. The case of Fusion in Chennai complicates such simplistic notions of international jazz, since Fusion has been dependent on jazz and yet is nothing like it. The way that Fusion was related to but ultimately distinct from international practices of jazz reveals as much about the expectations of the word “jazz” as the confluence of musical ideas between Indian classical and jazz musicians. While there is no doubt evidence of jazz in India that closely corresponds to the cultural and historical practice in the West, it is the differences, the discrepancies, the slippage between them that offers the richest domain for understanding Indian culture. Specifically in Chennai, where jazz musicians from previous eras never lived, the need to question the relevance of jazz and Western music is more prevalent. The study of world jazz, then, should remain more attuned to

the translocal indications of what “jazz” might mean, while focusing on the local instances of musical practices that might not have any allegiance to Western notions of jazz at all. Scholars should approach the topic of international or world jazz with ethnographic incite into the lives, experiences, and practices of musicians in order to best find the links between jazz and the world (see Bohlman and Plastino, forthcoming in 2013, for continuing developments in this subfield of jazz and ethnomusicology.)

However I may have organized, prioritized, and ordered the tensions of Fusion in this dissertation to argue that these tensions were the tensions of modernity, one goal of this ethnographic project has been to keep the fragmented and disjointed state of fusion intact because the polysemic nature of Fusion was the point—the friction left over from the tensions of Fusion was the sonic, discursive, and lived residue that made Fusion an appropriate, self sufficient vehicle for the weight of the problems of modernity. It’s what made it meaningful among the various musical and cultural practices in contemporary south India and around the world.



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**Slumdog Millionaire.** Produced by Christian Colson. Written by Simon Beaufoy and Vikas Swarup. Directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tanden. DVD, 120 minutes, 2008. English and Hindi with English subtitles.

**Sivaji.** Produced by Saravanan M. and Guhan M. S. Written by S. Shankar and Sujata. Directed by S. Shankar. DVD, 185 minutes, 2007. Tamil with English subtitles.

**This is a Music: Reclaiming an Untouchable Drum.** Directed by Zoe Sherinian. DVD, 75 minutes, 2011. English and Tamil with English subtitles.

Appendix A: Transcription from a Concert featuring Hariharan and Mandolin U. Srinivas on Nov. 15, 2007

- Note values do not correspond to duration.
- ↗ ↘ indicate slides up and down.
- Stems show an articulated note that is plucked on the mandolin or sung with a syllable.
- Accidentals carry throughout phrase unless changed.
- Bar lines separate phrases.
- Double bar lines indicate excerpts from the piece. They show breaks in continuous music.
- The *swara* notation identifies *swaras* and notates *gamaks* and *gamakas* underneath.
- The dots above and below the *swara* names indicate the higher and lower octaves respectively. The absence of a dot indicates the middle octave.
- Lines above *gamaka* notation indicate faster speeds.

**1**

Srinivas

S.

H.

Hariharan: "yay"

**3**

S.

H.


"ma"

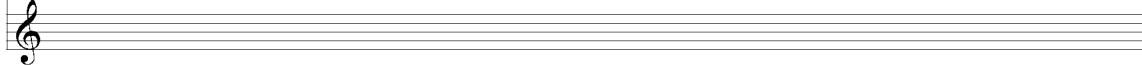
"yay"


**4**


S.

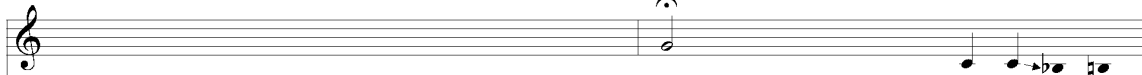
H.


S.    
 s p m p m p g p ṅ p ṅ p p


H. 

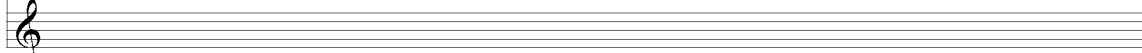
S.    
 (Swaras unclear because of gamakas)


H.    
 "de" "na"   
 s g m p n p   
 m p

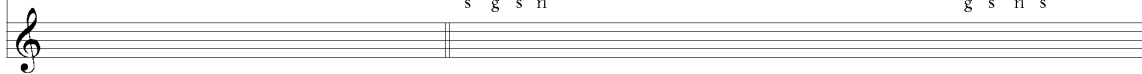
S.    
 5   
 p s s ṅ ṅ

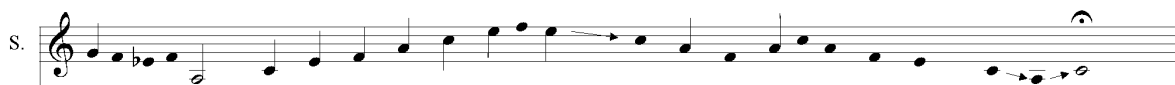
H.    
 "ah" "de" "de" "na" "na" "na"   
 ś n n p g m p g g m ś n n   
 m̄ g m̄ p m̄ p̄ n̄ p m̄ → g

S.    
 6   
 g m p n ś n n p m m g m m m g m m m g

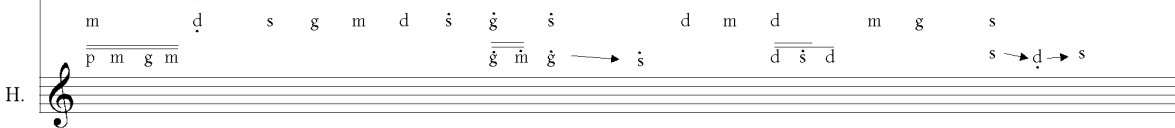
H. 

S.    
 7   
 m g m m g m g s ś ś n p̄ m̄ p m ś n

H.    
 ś ś ś n ḡ ś n ś


S. 

m d s g m d ś ġ ś d m d m g s

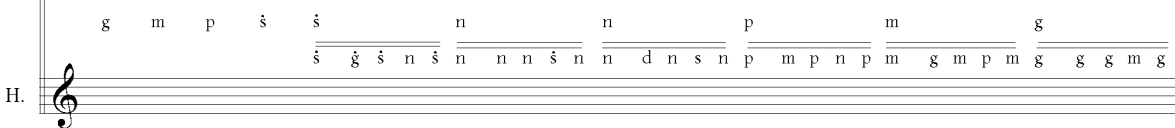
H. 

p m g m ġ m ġ ś d d ś d s d s

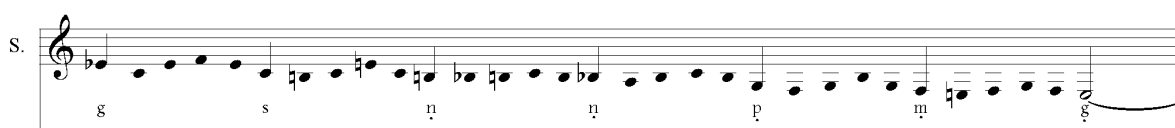
**8**

S. 


g m p ś ś n n p m g

H. 

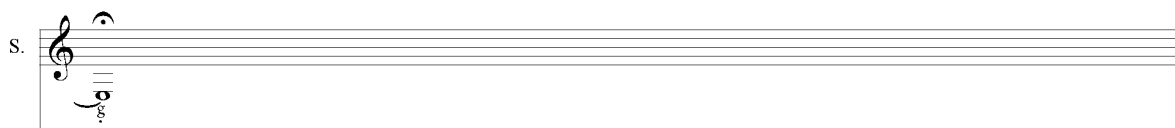
ś ġ ś n ś n n n ś n n d n s n p m p n p m g m p m g g m g

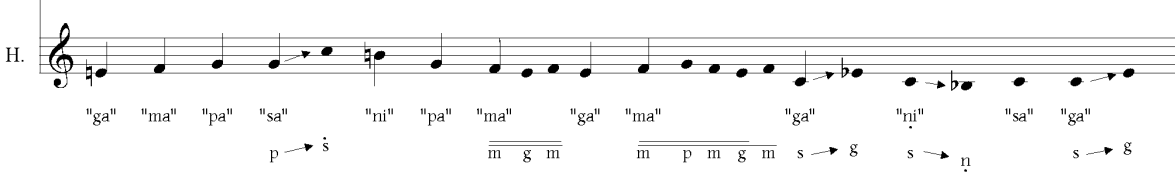
S. 

g s n n p m

H. 

g s g m s s n s g s n n n s n n d n s n p m p n p m g m p m

S. 

H. 

"ga" "ma" "pa" "sa" "ni" "pa" "ma" "ga" "ma" "ga" "ni" "sa" "ga"

p → ś m g m m p m g m s → g s → n s → g