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One world, many sounds



THE HINDU

BRINGING HOME THE WORLD Moonarra at the concert. Photo: R. Shivaji Rao

World fusion band MoonArra draws its influence from many cultures to make a music all its own

A June rain showered the trees lining Le Royal Meridien. Below the graciously curving staircase, at the Grand Madras Ballroom, MoonArra, the world fusion band readied to take centre-stage as the opening act in Alliance Française's Fete de la Musique. MoonArra, meaning three streams, draws its inspiration from “sounds that have travelled from North India to Andalusian Spain to their collective upbringing in Carnatic and Hindustani classical.” The music by Madhuri (vocals), Jagadeesh (acoustic guitar, oud) Prakash Sontakke (Hindustani slide guitar, Indian classical vocals), Karthik Mani (South Indian percussion, drums and konnakol) and Wilson Kenneth (bass) was alchemical, a pause between wakefulness and dreams.

Their first two pieces — an invocation to Ganesha and ‘Lament of McCrimmon’, an 18th Century dirge were turbulent, much like the meeting place of the three streams that is their leitmotif. But the band honed their sound as their evening wore on, and when they peaked nine pieces later, it was truly a calm ‘sangam’ of cultures. However, only a few from the audience waited long enough to witness this.

Madhuri's strong contralto is quiet, dark and deep as if emerging from a haze with tender, forlorn lyrics that spoke of women, familiar stances of childhood, and love and longing. She sang nothing bombastic and glitzy, which is the voice of much of jazz; instead, she sang melodies without profound displays of vocal agility. ‘If I could sing your blues’, a Sarah K original, was performed with plenty of world elements, ‘Blue Fuse’ had a wonderful display of scat, while ‘Melody Man’, an original composition and ‘Don't conceal the way you feel’ were like a crackling fire in the hearth.

Jagadeesh, who first strummed the oud and later the guitar in slow, meditative minor keys played notes, that mused about lost love and uncertain journeys. Prakash, Wilson and Jagadeesh were proficient without being showy, and even the elaborate pieces such as the beautiful instrumental 'Eastern Song', the award-winning 'Heart's Guide', and the melodious 'Dance of Kalyani' with a Hindustani interlude by Prakash, were modest with military precision, impulsive zaps and solemn strings.

MoonArra's lush, soulful world music did not underline much innovation, but had a rich texture in which voice and instrument breathed together to create a harmony that gave the audience an air of being caught up in a musical spell. The notes emerged and faded determined only by the mood of the moment. The band, although influenced by Afro-Cuban rhythms, Arabic strains and Spanish ballads, dissolved them all into one sound with conventional notions of authenticity. Every influence was in its place and the many rudiments were not encouraged to go anywhere they ought not to have been. And, anchoring this tradition was the percussionist, Karthik Mani. With the drums, the kanjira and the konnakol, he secured the band's music with powerful beats and dramatic double time.

MoonArra's music was as chatty as the band, honest without hype and distilled over the evening. It was a bridge to music from across the world with a geography all its own.

It was a pity that most of the audience never ventured to cross it.