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Whispers in the wind



The Hindu

It was the unwrapping of a birthday gift from his beloved grandmother that set Joachim on the road to music. Photo: R. Ragu

Sengen Joachim on what drew him to the saxophone and why he is still playing it at 66

It's a sun-dappled afternoon at the YWCA and geese cackle loudly about the pond. Sengen Joachim lovingly caresses his Yamaha saxophone and coaxes out a torrent of sound. Rough-hewn ballads, fuzzily soulful blues, voracious up-tempo bebop rounds and stirring low notes — Joachim has been at it for nearly half a century and continues to be a draw at some popular gigs in town.

Tonight, the U.S.-based Joachim is slated to perform with Second Coming, the much sought-after band he started with singer-lead guitarist Reggie Verghese in Yercaud, at a private concert for Rotary Club of Madras. The popular band that has invented a whole new genre of music, with a heady combination of jazz, rock and poetry, first started off as a bunch of experienced musicians jamming for fun.

But much before Second Coming, Joachim was the band leader of the iconic Avengers in the 1970s—a throwback to a decade when “people loved and recognised good music”. “We played

mostly covers — Elton John, The Who, Pink Floyd and Earth, Wind and Fire,” says Joachim, “in clubs for audiences that came to listen to classic rock and jazz.”

It was the unwrapping of a birthday gift from his beloved grandmother that set Joachim on the road to music. “As a child I learnt to play the keyboard. Then, my grandmother gifted me a Conn saxophone. It has a very rounded sound when compared to the Yamaha I now use, which has a sharper, more brilliant pitch. When I first started performing with bands I used to play the tenor saxophone, but that often tends to get lost in the jumble of sounds. The alto sax, which is what I play now, gets heard better.”

Just when the music was going great for Joachim, he left at 29 to settle down in the U.S. “I qualified as an engineer and moved abroad to give my son a better education,” he says. And for the years that he built his life in Sacramento, California, his saxophone lay forgotten in its box. “But I carried the music in my heart,” says Joachim who picked up the saxophone again when he was 55, nearly 22 years after he had last played.

“Sacramento has a very lively music scene. It helped me find myself again. I went on to form Two’s Company with singer Diva D. I play the backing tracks and we are releasing a CD next month. We’ve recorded 70 songs together.”

Joachim’s eyesight has been failing over the past year but that hasn’t kept him from performing. “My blindness has enhanced my musical abilities,” he says. Having stayed in touch with India — he runs a business from Yercaud — it was only a matter of time before he got back on stage here. “I want to use my business space in Yercaud as an artiste’s retreat. A place people can come to enhance their artistic abilities,” says Joachim.

Somewhere in the clamour of business and finding new tonal possibilities, Joachim takes time to listen to his favourite saxophonist, the American David Sanborn. “His music is simple and easy. It’s the key to enjoyment for both audience and player.”

But the man, who has embraced the rough edges of rock and jazz, says composing a piece titled ‘Just Friends’ for his granddaughter Courtney for her prom sums up the highlight of his musical career. “It all comes back to grandparents and grandchildren,” he says as he walks back, guided by wife Irene and the power of his music.