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Harry Manx

## Tales of the Manx Cat

Under the guidance of India's Grammy Award-winning Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Harry Manx developed into one of the most distinctive musicians on board the good planet roots. His fusion of acoustic blues and Indian ragas has earned grudging respect from the likes of Taj Mahal and Ben Harper. Now, with the release of Manx's latest disc, *Mantra's For Madmen*, Roddy Campbell catches up with a colourful character who once earned a crust performing in Japanese shopping malls.

Harry Manx never quite knew what to say to John Lennon. For three months they met daily in the New York studio, The Record Plant. Manx worked for Kelly Jay and Crowbar at the time. They were recording an LP with the daftest title in Canadian rock history: *KE32746*. Lennon was making the fabulously dull *Mind Games*.

"He was in the lobby every day. I never knew what to say to him. I was a young guy. I just stared at him a lot. Once in a while I said, 'Hello', That was the extent of my ability," says Manx, from his Salt Spring Island, BC, home. "You're intimidated by a legend when you are kid. Maybe today I would be just as intimidated by such a legend. But I always used to phone my girlfriend, 'You won't believe

this, I spent the day with John Lennon'."

Colourful anecdotes! Harry Manx has a million of 'em. He mixed sound for some of the greatest legends ever to play the blues. He was a roadie for Rush. He has busked on the streets of Europe and Asia. And in the span of the past five years, he has emerged as one of the most celebrated performers on the Canadian folk and blues circuit.

While a bit of a late bloomer, first recording in his mid-forties, he has made five stellar discs since 2000, which have won two Penguin Eggs' Critics Awards, numerous Maple Blues honours and several Juno nominations. His latest release, *Mantras For Madmen*, offers a typical, rich assortment of playful titles wrapped up in a unique fusion of blues and classical Indian instrumentals played on the Mohan Veena – a 20-stringed sitar and slide guitar composite. Yes, we'll deal with it later.

Anyone that names his discs *Dog My Cat*, *Wise And Otherwise*, *West Eats Meet*, or for that matter, *Mantras For Madmen*, is either barking mad himself or possesses a wry sense of humour.

"Humor is the fragrance of something deeper," says a pensive Manx. "I always like to hint at truths but I like to give a little humour to it too. Truth is always a little bit more palatable with a joke."

Take the word play in a song title like *Nothing Fails Like Success*, from his latest album, for example. An oxymoron it may be, but when he reveals the logic behind the lyrics it uncovers telling aspects of this gentle, thoughtful, musician

"Whatever we achieve, there's always a certain element of failure lingering on the sideline. And that has to do with how we achieve [success]. What were the repercussions? If we get rich but lose our family? Succeed at home and be a failure in the outer world? I think for every step that we succeed there is a certain amount of failure. So in that case, nothing fails like success."

*Mantras For Madmen* offers a bit of departure from Manx's largely solo past recordings. While *West Eats Meet* did add keyboards, tablas and harmony singers, this time around he has also included bass, drums, harmonica and the amazing mandolin of John Reischman. These instruments appear at the suggestion of producer Jordy Sharp. He wanted a little added punch and Manx agreed as long as it kept his fans on the same track. Surprisingly, though, the acoustic blues content appears to diminish with each outing.

"Yeah, it's funny. It seems to me I started out with more blues on the first record. Each record since has gradually got less and less of it. *A Single Spark* is the only tune I consider a real blues tune on the new record. I don't write a lot of blues tunes now, but the ones I do I try to give it all to the one tune.

"I think they're different from what most people hear as blues. I let the style evolve. I think when I first came [back to Canada] I was so influenced by the Indian thing. Being in North America, and playing a lot of folk festivals, you start looking more and more like a folky. That's a really broad classification. I definitely have more elements of [folk] than I had in the past."

Harry Manx was born on the Isle of Man in 1955. His Scottish father was a merchant marine. His mother came from the Island, known internationally for its T.T. motorcycle races and its Manx cats that have no tails. Still, Mum and dad and five kids left for a better life in Sutton, ON, in 1962. Harry's dad got a job with a fledgling electronics company, Motorola. They had a staff of five at the time.

Neither his mother nor father had an interest in music. But Harry discovered rock 'n' roll and by the time he turned 15 he had enough of school and home life and left Sutton for Toronto and wound up driving a bus for the daintily-titled rockers, Tight Ass. Their bass player was Peter Cardinelli, who later played for Anne Murray and Gordon Lightfoot.

For a brief stint in 1972, Manx became a sound man at the now defunct but legendary Toronto night club El Mocambo. It would prove a pivotal experience.



"I did sound for Willie Dixon and Hounddog Taylor, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. I didn't even know who these people were. I was just learning guitar. Seeing these guys it was like, 'This stuff is rocking.'

"They would be like, 'Hi how ya doing. Good to meet you.' I hadn't a clue what was going on. I just knew how to set up gear. It was a big awakening. Willie Dixon, the guy with the great big bass, if he got any feedback – I remember him looking at me and scowling – I felt like going through the floor, man.

"I saw the whole culture around the blues. Then I really started to listen to the records and I'd go, 'Oh yeah, I can get that lick.' You feel the groove. They did so much with sort of so little technique, so little intellectual process, just these deep, deep, grooves."

Tight Ass eventually sold their bus to Kelly Jay and Crowbar. The driver went with the bus.

"We toured Canada and we toured the States and went to England. We did wonderful things for a couple of years."

And in 1973 he went to New York and met John Lennon. That same year Harry Manx also met Jordy Sharp. They lived on the same street in Kensington Market – the once cool coffee house district in Toronto. Sharp had a band and needed a guitar player. Manx took over. They did all right locally for awhile but parted ways and didn't see each other again for almost 27 years. Harry had one last kick at stadium rock.

"I worked for Rush. That was the last band I did. That was just a gig. I mixed the stage monitors. It was loud and proud. I wasn't really there anymore. It cured me of rock n' roll, basically. I went from there to Paris; I had just turned 20. I went to Paris just with an acoustic guitar and stood there on the street, strumming. That's as far as I could get from heavy rocking music. It was my own music for the first time. I was playing the songs I loved. I worked around Paris for awhile but I was around Europe for about 12 years."

He lived and busked in cities like Amsterdam, Zurich, Geneva, Heidelberg and Munich playing blues, Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, whatever. All a good learning process.

"If you could hold a crowd you could make a dollar. There was no contract. You could stand up there and be boring for an hour and make no wage. You really had to hold the guys and then you could eat that day."

Love took him to Japan in 1981 and he busked there, too, but also started working with an agent. He made a good living playing in shopping centres and cherry blossom festivals. On occasion, he would make the odd excursion to India – a country he had first visited in 1979, "bumming around as a

hippy." As fate would have it, one day in a Tokyo shopping mall he heard the sounds of instrumental Indian music coming from a small record store. It sounded like somebody playing a slide guitar and it stopped him dead in his tracks.

"I had heard there were slide guitars in India but I had never seen one before. The guy in the store told me it was Vishwa Mohan Bhatt. So when I went back [to India] I asked around for his number from a few musicians. I called him up and we had a talk. He told me to come on over. I became a good friend of his very quickly and his student."

Vishwa Mohan Bhatt is probably best known for his Grammy Award-winning disc *A Meeting By The River* with Ry Cooder, but he has also recorded with other North Americans such as Taj Mahal, Jerry Douglas and Bela Fleck. Bhatt invented the Mohan Veena and he gave one to Manx. It would become integral to his sound.

"I had actually recorded some of [Bhatt's] music from a CD onto an early DAT machine. I said, 'Listen to this.' He had never seen a DAT machine and I don't think he had ever heard his music like that. So he put it on and he was so amazed. I said, 'You know what, keep the machine. Keep the headphones.' I gave him everything. Every day he walked around listening to that recording of his. That was when he got this Veena and he came over to me and said, 'I'm giving you this, you should stay here and play.' So I stayed there.

"I had been playing slide for ten years or so. It's a whole other beast. The thing that's hard is the music. You really have to dig in deep to understand the music, the details and intricacy of the ragas. To learn one raga takes anywhere from three to six months. Each raga has its own structure, its own rules, its own texture. It's another style of music. That's the hard part. That's where I worked hard to understand those things."

He spent five years with Bhatt and twelve years in India all told. But Manx and his wife started longing for Western comforts. He was sick of eating dahl, rice and chapati three times a day, week in and week out. Besides, Bhatt told him it was time to go out in the world and use his musical skills.

Manx moved to Salt Spring Island off the coast of BC in 2000 and one of the first people he ran into there was Jordy Sharp. He owned a store where Manx wanted to rent a tape recorder to make a demo disc. They connected again immediately. Sharp insisted they make a record rather than a demo.

"He took me to Randy Bachman's [studio] and we made *Dog My Cat* in eleven hours. I didn't have a clue we were going to make a record. It turned out it has sold some 30,000 copies. Since then, I put myself in his hands. His sense of engineering is quite remarkable. He really put all my ideas into physical form, a CD. I'm very grateful for his work. He's very integral to my sound."

Having spent so much time abroad, Manx had no



Harry Manx



idea how to kick-start a career playing blues and ragas on a Mohan Veena. As luck would have it, the North American Folk Alliance held its annual conference in Vancouver in the spring of 2001. Sharp and Manx crossed their fingers and dropped in.

"I thought, 'Okay, I'll go there and people will see me play and I'll get some jobs. Yeah. That's how it works.' Don Bird, from Owen Sound Folk Festival, somebody pointed him out and I went, 'Okay, I'm going to take a step.' So I went over to him and said, 'I want to ask you for a favour.' I said, 'I want one minute of your time.' He said, 'No, I'm trying to check into the hotel.' I said, 'One minute.' And he said, 'Okay, you've got it – one minute. I'm literally going to watch my clock.' And I took out my Mohan Veena and he went, 'Whoa!' I sat down on the stairs and strummed it and he said, 'You're coming to the festival. And he took the details and that was one of the first shows I got."

The gods truly smiled on Harry Manx that weekend. An opening developed at the OCFE showcase scheduled for 2:30 am and he got it. A few people actually showed up at that ungodly hour, among them Fred Litwin from NorthernBlues Records. He offered Manx a deal on the spot.

"I said, 'Yeah, that's probably a good idea', because we had just put the *Dog My Cat* out ourselves and had no idea what we were doing."

*Wise And Otherwise* followed. It earned a Juno nomination for Best Blues Album and was voted Album of the Year by Penguin Eggs' Critics. And if you want the essence of Harry Manx, look no further than his brilliant East-West fusion of *The Gist of*

*Madhuvanti* and B.B. King's, *The Thrill Is Gone*, played on the resonating Mohan Veena.

The six-string banjo also makes its first appearance on that disc.

"You know, I have never been that fond of the sound of the banjo, but I started thinking about it after arriving in Canada. It sounds pretty close to some Indian instruments. I thought if I get a banjo I can play some ragas on it. I thought five strings isn't that good, maybe I'll get a six-string. So I found a six-string that wasn't that expensive but I had it souped up, fixed the neck and [got] a deep bass sound out of it. It became like another instrument but it still has that elemental sound – skin stretched over a frame"

Next came a bit of a departure: *Jubilee* – a collaboration with Toronto guitarist Kevin Breit, known for his playing with Norah Jones and Cassandra Wilson.

"Kevin Breit is a great player. He's the kind of guy that always ups the ante. That is so inspirational. I can understand why so many people want to have him on their records. He has an energy about his playing that is just brilliant. I think it was expressed best on the Norah Jones big hit. *Don't Know Why* is really defined by his beautiful guitar licks."

With the release of *Jubilee*, Manx and NorthernBlues parted ways. He started his own label, Dog My Cat Records with the live *Road Ragas* – a disc he initially wanted to sell off the stage, but relented to retail demands. He released *West Eats Meet* in 2004 and it too received a Juno nomination. All but two of the tracks are originals. And it clearly marks his development as a writer with such stand-



Harry Manx

outs as the *The Great Unknown*, *Make Way For The Living* and *Something of Your Grace*.

Which pretty much brings us back to *Mantras For Madmen*. But if there is one constant in all of his recordings, it's the unmistakable sense of spirituality frequently reflected in his lyrics.

"I have been a meditator for a long, long time now, about 30 years. I spent a lot of time in India meditating. One of the things I liked to do was go to different Ashrams, play music and sit and listen to the guru. I was never really drawn to one religion. The idea of consciousness has always been a common thread. It's not something I advertise but it is something that inspires my lyrics and music.

"It's not difficult to find enlightened beings in India. You'll think they are mad. That's what sort of inspired the title for the [new] album. They were wonderful people to hang out with. They really startle you, and sometimes they act a little bizarre, but they have some magic. They are definitely outside of our consciousness but they are actually above rather than below."

While Manx has enjoyed numerous musical highlights throughout the past five years, he singles out performing at The Chicago Blues Festival, The Edmonton Folk Music Festival, opening for Jackson Browne and playing in front of two of his heroes.

"I remember one show in Australia, I looked over to the side of the stage and Taj Mahal and Ben Harper were standing there with their arms crossed, staring at me with the meanest stares. I was so happy. Now there's two guys I really like watching me. They are great players. Any time you get to meet your heroes are great moments for me."



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