

## **Instrument of the Gods: Chandrika Tandon's Soul Call**

"The story here is NOT about me or the Grammy...it is about the music and the impact it is having on thousands of people, all over the world," Chandrika Tandon says in mild reproach to interviewers. "People who know Indian music, and people who have never heard it in their lives; people from over 20 countries and from all demographics – they talk of singing, weeping, meditating, and reaching the grace inside themselves...that's what it is all about...I was simply an instrument..."

On the Facebook fan page of Soul Call, more than 15,000 fans are raving about the magical, mystical trip they are experiencing after hearing the album, lately nominated for 2011 Grammy for Best Contemporary World Music Album. John Wilson calls it "medicine for the soul." Bill Herman, who heard Chandrika sing in Hartford, saying he is moved by the "depth of your voice and what it evoked inside of me." A woman from a Police Department writes to Chandrika to say she was hearing the CD non-stop at her desk -- and how other people in her department kept stopping by to ask where they could get the album. Another person talks of how "my father spent the last ten days of his life listening to your CD," and yet another thanks her for "making my mom, who has stage 4 cancer, so happy."

"Ma'am, you made me cry," writes a Facebooker calling himself Indian Monk. "Grammy or no Grammy, your voice is like soothing balm on the soul."

Chandrika replies to each message, thanking them for the warm words and wishes, offering little insights into the making of the music, and signing off with "love, light and laughter." And in the same rich, resonant voice that is driving fans to raptures, wonders about how music can cross all boundaries, and "pierce into the deepest part of ourselves and reach into our grace."

Indian spiritual and religious music has been undergoing both renaissance and resurgence in recent times, thanks in no small measure to technological advances that has made it accessible worldwide through avenues like iPod and You Tube. Chart-busting albums such as Chants of India and Sacred Chants of Shiva are the spiritual flock's morning call in an age of stress and strife, as more and more research points to the calming and healing properties of such music. Soul Call is the newest offering in this genre, but the bhakti and resonance Chandrika Tandon brings to it elevates it beyond the seasonal. Like the Ravi Shankar-George Harrison's Chants of India, this is an album for all times, work that could drive even atheists to a spiritual experience.

In the clammy environs of Chennai where she grew up with her sister Indra, thoughts of a Grammy must have been farthest from Chandrika's mind. Although she says "I was singing before I was speaking," and performed in school music choirs winning awards as a child, it was not "proper" in her family to pursue a career in music. Besides, the musical proclivities of the Sisters Krishnamurthy (she got 'Tandonized' after her marriage; Indra became a Nooyi), were eclectic, but distinctly western those days.

Their mother surrounded their home with music from the time All India Radio would open, filling their lives with traditional Carnatic devotionals and MS Subbalakshmi's bhajans and "tukdas." But "I sang French songs and of course classic pop and rock songs growing up, in

addition to Carnatic devotionals and Tamil film songs...I loved all kinds of music and sang all the time," Chandrika recalls.

In business school in India, she would finish her coursework and go into a music room stocked with just a few albums. Her yearbook says 'She killed us softly with her song,' because "I would listen to Roberta Flack's Quiet Fire, Neil Young's Harvest, or Sergio Mendes's Brazil 66 ten times in a night, until three or four in the morning." Her early years were consumed by French musicians like Enrico Macias and Françoise Hardy; then all the Euro and American pop artists -- from Dean Martin, Seekers, Cliff Richard, The Beatles, and hundreds of others. The working years in the 80s, it was the Brazilian greats -- Joao Gilberto and Gal Costa; then Middle Eastern music and Western Jazz.

How do you define eclectic?

But as with so many peripatetic NRIs -- present company included -- the time and passage away from home is what stirs the deepest recognition and longing for India's rich and fabled culture and heritage. An 11-year stint with McKinsey burnished her professional career and also polished her ardor for Indian classical music. Living in New York with her husband, finance maven Ranjan Tandon, she began seeking out extraordinary music teachers and performers; anyone that resonated, that could give her a rigorous grounding in classical Indian music. One year, she'd wake up at 4 am every weekend to drive from New York to Wesleyan University in Connecticut for master classes with Carnatic music professor the late T Vishwanathan, and be back by 10 am when her young daughter awoke. "I was a music seeker. I found ways to learn from the greats, whenever and wherever they would teach me," she recalls.

The journeys got longer as the quest got deeper. The muse called all the time, but allowed only intensive bursts of learning and composing. She traveled to India once or twice a year just to learn from her Guru Shri Girish Wazalwarji, who lives in Allahabad, working with him for seven/eight hours a day for a week, and losing herself "in the beauty and power of our incredibly uplifting, soulful Hindustani classical traditions." Other teachers and influences range from the fine thumri singer Shubra Guha to Veena Sahasrabudhe ("simply one of the most beautiful voices I have heard,") to Pandit Vijay Kichlu -- the sagely 80-year old founder of SRA (Sangeet Research Academy) and a font of knowledge about the subtleties of Hindustani music. With each of them, she grabs precious moments, either when they visit the U.S or when she travels to India.

But it's hard to sustain such intensity and put in consistent riyaz, given her business commitments -- she is the chairman of the financial advisory firm Tandon Capital and serves on several non-profit boards including New York University and the American-Indian Foundation -- and she recognizes it. "I wish I had two of me to do both well!" she says ruefully.

So how did Soul Call happen? Chandrika says she has spent a lot of time over the last few years memorizing major Sanskrit stotras, slokas, and prayers like the Vishnu Sahasranamam, works of Adi Sankara and other great verses from Vedic history, working on their meaning and translation, to bring it into her music. Although she has a rigorous grounding in Hindustani classical music and Carnatic music, she says her heart was always drawn to simple songs based

on classical Indian scales; "songs that made the joy of music reachable to more people." She started composing; hundreds of joyous compositions in classical scales, but suffused with "all the global music that is part of my spirit." Her soul, she says, is uplifted when she can sing with others. For her first compositions, she chose the Sanskrit chants by using verses of invocation drawn from several Vedic texts like the Vishnu Sahasranama and the Ranganatha Ashtakam. Five years ago, she cut her first album, Om Namoh Shivaya, as a gift on her father-in-law's 90th birthday.

The chant for Soul Call is the simple eight-syllable ashtakshara mantra...Om Na Mo Na Ra Ya Na, better known as the Narayana Kavacham. The eight syllables are said to correspond to the eight vital centers of the body...and the Narayana armor is said to form a protection for the body as the cell regeneration occurs. "I wanted to share the mantra Om Na Mo Na Ra Ya Na Ya in a way that all can sing it...and sing it joyfully; whether they know music or not...that is why I composed it in eight ragas...( eight syllables, eight ragas)," she explains.

Soul Call was recorded both in India and the US, and it incorporates world-class musicianship and production. The album combines traditional Indian sounds such as sarod, sitar, and esraj with Western instruments such as piano, electric bass, and classical guitar. The music was been arranged by the sarod master Tejendra Narayan Majumdar with assistance from Snehasish Mojumder, the gifted mandolin player – both with many albums to their credit. Rakesh Chaurasia, the fabled flutist, has provided accompaniment on multiple tracks. Ablu Chakraborty and Soumen Sarkar provided the keyboard accompaniment.

Soul Call has been a silent hit among the spiritual fraternity for some months now, but its nomination for Grammy is what has set the aficionados aflutter. But Chandrika is unfazed by the attention, marveling only at what the album is doing to ordinary people. The only Grammy-related excitement for her is that she is in the mix with several artists whose works she has admired for years. She is pitted against 13-time Grammy-winning composer and banjo player Bela Fleck, Brazilian singer Bebel Gilberto, iconic singer-songwriter Angelique Kidjo from Africa and classical pianist Sergeo Tempo in her category.

In fact, she is not even the only India-origin musician in the race for a Grammy this year, nor will she be the first if she wins. Music composer A R Rahman, sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar and tabla genius Zakir Hussain are among the Indians that have won a Grammy. In February this year, Rahman won two Grammys -- for 'Best Film Song' and 'Best Soundtrack' -- for composing the soundtrack of multiple Oscar-winning movie, 'Slumdog Millionaire'. Among others, India-origin composer Vijay Iyer has also been nominated for a Grammy this year under the 'Best Jazz Instrumental Album' category for his album "Historicity" and Delhi-based table player Sandeep Das is in the mix in the classical crossover category. She has never met fellow New Yorker Iyer, but heard his album after the Grammy nomination and sent him a note of congratulation. For Chandrika Krishnamurthy Tandon, pride and honor is just being part of the Indian spiritual heritage.