

PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Research and Writing From SAF 2017

commissioned by





About **Projects/Processes**

Projects / Processes is a new initiative to publish commissioned research essays, longform writing, and in-depth criticism that explore the ideas and processes behind select curatorial projects at Serendipity Arts Festival. Over two years, the Festival has accumulated a rich database of creative energies and partnerships. As an eight-day long event, the Festival is a platform for multidisciplinary collaboration and cultural innovation, and has commissioned over 70 new works across the visual arts and performance since its inception in 2016. The **Projects / Process** series offers an opportunity to give some of these works and the stories that they tell an afterlife, through a deeply engaged look at how they came together and their significance to the discourse of contemporary art in India moving forward. Each volume comprises essays covering distinct projects that stand in some dialogue with each other, through the questions they raise and the thematic landscape they cover.

About Serendipity Arts Festival

Serendipity Arts Festival is a multi-disciplinary arts event set over a period of eight days in December in the vibrant settings of Panaji, Goa. Curated by a panel of eminent artists and institutional figures, this festival is a long-term cultural project that hopes to affect positive change in the arts in India on a large scale.

Serendipity Arts Festival 2017 experimented with site, form, scale, and display, featuring over 70 projects including more than 40 projects commissioned specifically for the Festival, alongside a line-up of scintillating programmes spanning music, dance, theatre, visual arts and culinary arts. In addition to the curated events, we believe in collaborations that can give the Festival varied perspectives. As a result, SAF 2017 saw an exciting array of Special Projects which highlight our institutional collaborations.

The Festival also attempts to address pressing issues such as arts education, patronage culture, interdisciplinary discourse and accessibility to the arts. This intensive programme of exhibitions and performances is accompanied by spaces for social and educational engagement.

About Serendipity Arts Foundation

Serendipity Arts Foundation is an arts and cultural development Foundation created to encourage and support the arts as a significant contributor to civil society. It aims to promote new creative strategies, artistic interventions, and cultural partnerships that are responsive and seek to address the social, cultural and environmental milieu of South Asia. Committed to innovation, SAF intends to promote and create platforms creativity, providing the wider public with a unique source of contemporary art and culture. SAF programmes are designed and initiated through collaborations with partners across a multitude of fields, each intervention created using the arts to impact education, create social initiatives, foster community development, and explore both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary in the arts, with a special focus on South Asia.



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**The Music Stopped, But We
Were Still Dancing: Goan
musicians in the early Jazz &
Hot Dance Era**

First exhibited at Serendipity Arts
Festival 2017

Curated by Prashant Panjiar

Based on research by Naresh
Fernandes for his book *Taj Mahal
Foxtrot*



Curatorial Note

On Valentine's Day in 1919, the Times of India issued a dire warning about an American phenomenon that was sweeping the world. Jazz bands, the newspaper predicted, would "make life a nightmare" because they had only one objective: "to produce as much noise as possible". Months later, the commotion slammed into the subcontinent. Indians, to the horror of the snobs, sprang to their feet to dance.

The foxtrotting, jitterbugging and jiving continued for almost four decades. From around 1925 to 1965, jazz and its elder sibling, "hot" dance music, held the subcontinent in thrall. From hotel stages in Peshawar and public bandstands in Madras, from the podiums of gymkhanas in Rajkot and railway institutes in Jamalpur, immaculately dressed musicians belted out fascinating rhythms that instantly had their audiences hooked. Upon hearing a pioneering jazz band at the Taj in Bombay, one young man seemed to articulate India's reactions to the swinging tunes when he confessed: "The music went to my head."

As it turns out, Goan musicians played a vital role in conjuring up that magic. Coming from a territory with a long familiarity with Western music, many Goans heard in jazz an echo of the songs of their souls. Their vast talents soon attracted the attention of composers of Hindi film music. Goan musicians were hired as arrangers to notate tunes that merged influences from both East and West, and also formed the bulk of the orchestras that recorded these melodies.

This exhibition draws on the personal photograph albums of around a dozen families to recreate together a vivid portrait of the significant Goan band leaders of India's jazz age.

The exhibition contains an add-on section presented by the AIIS – Archive and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology that

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uses interactive computer screens to tell the larger story of jazz in India, with photographs from the famous Jazz Yatras and dozens of rare recordings by Indian musicians.

All texts Naresh Fernandes

Interactive kiosks AIIS – Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology

Photographs Christine Correa; Ursulla Fernandes, Philip & Irwin Vaz; Larissa & Elfin Fernand; Christopher Pereira; Xavier Furtado; Lydia & Manuel Gomes; Ana Raman; Joe & Bosco D’Souza; Jenny Blanche, Thelma Shah & Alvino Pacheco; Lorna Cordeiro; Diago D’Souza; Toni Pinto; Yvonne & Braz Gonzalves; Naresh Fernandes; Marco Pacci; Mark Beresford; Florian Pittner

Archival music tracks Marco Pacci

Videos Susheel J. Kurien, filmmaker Finding Carlton- Uncovering the Story of Jazz in India, for use of the film clip, The Basement Tapes; and Goa Folklore Productions for the preview of the movie Nachom-ia Kumpasar

Exhibition design Prashant Panjiar & Asmita Parelkar





Improvising History: Archival Negotiations and Memory in *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing*

Arnav Adhikari

In a striking moment of Susheel Kurien's 2012 documentary *Finding Carlton*, in which the filmmaker travels into the deep and quickly evaporating history of the little-known Indian jazz age between the 1920s and '60s, he finds himself in New York, speaking to Christine Correa, a jazz singer and the daughter of the prolific saxophonist and bandleader, Mickey Correa. Christine is seen singing beside the piano with her collaborator Frank Carlberg. She speaks with poise and wistfulness to the camera as she remembers what it was like to grow up in the glow of her father's music, as he studiously transcribed records at the table listening to the gramophone, or played into the corner of a room to hear himself with acute precision. She goes on to recall listening in on practice sessions, hearing the big sound of Mickey's band, which was, for a long time, a standard fixture at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay, setting a record by playing consistently between 1939 and 1961 (Fernandes 90). These scenes are interspersed with glimpses of an aged Mickey, who died in 2011, playing the piano and looking at old photographs almost diagrammatically, recalling the members of his outfit. Watching Christine talk about her father's rigorous practice routines or the way he held his instrument

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in front of the mirror is like observing memory assemble and reconfigure itself in real-time, moulding to fit a sometimes-imagined past in the reality of the present, as Christine poignantly rues the absence of any recordings of Mickey's band, consigning it to photographic and oral history. And then it happens.

The scene cuts to Christine seated on a couch, mouth ajar and eyes wide open in an almost paralytic wonder, as the soft, muffled sounds of a swaying horn section hang loosely in the air. "This is it ... that's my dad ... this is his sound" she says, almost to herself, in an ecstatic moment of recognition. It's as if her vivid memories of Mickey's music have been willed into reality after decades; a sound that survived only through the written word or the frozen frame, finally comes to life in front of her.

This brief moment from *Finding Carlton* punctuates a wall tracing Mickey Correa's colourful life and career in Prashant Panjiar's curatorial project, *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing*, on view at the 2017 edition of Serendipity Arts Festival, an annual multidisciplinary event held in December along the Mandovi River in the Goan capital of Panaji. Panjiar's curation, like Kurien's film to some extent, traces the deeply rooted history of jazz in the early decades of the 20th century, with a particular focus on the Goan musicians who helped shape the essence of its sound, politics, dispersion, and ultimately, its evolution. The exhibition offers a glimpse into a national cultural imagination of the swing and hot music eras of the late 1930s onwards, and weaves into its narrative the personal histories of its most prominent Goan characters,

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from Mickey Correa and Chic Chocolate to the Gomes brothers and Braz Gonsalves, from Chris Perry and Lorna Cordeiro to “Jazzy Joe” Pereira and Frank Fernand. The walls are palimpsests of a forgotten—and largely unknown—history, brimming with photographs, posters, letters, cutouts, musical notation, rare recordings, and sparse footage of the many manifestations of jazz as it grew out of a particular moment of transnational reckoning in India—Bombay, most of all—and the world. Specifically: the background of the world wars, the struggle for independence from the British, and the vibrant tessellations of cultural production across the globe, which swiftly ushered in the modernist age across mediums and modes of practice. All of this lingers between the lines of Panjiar’s exhibition, which is based on the writer Naresh Fernandes’s research for his sweeping, historical account of the early days of jazz in India in *Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay’s Jazz Age*, published by Roli Books in 2012. While familiar characters from Fernandes’s pages dance across the walls into Panjiar’s exhibit—Fernandes is a key collaborator and the author of the wall texts—there are plenty of unmined photographs, newly discovered personal histories, and of course, a primary emphasis on how Goan figures became both catalysts and markers for not only the hidden, sublinear narrative of jazz and cultural hybridization, but also an unlikely influence on what has become an almost synonymous aspect of popular Indian culture: Hindi film music. The brief clip of Christine Correa from Kurien’s film, playing on loop in low resolution on a small, mounted screen in the corner of the Adil Shah Palace, stood out to me on my first

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walk through the show because it seemed to distill many ideas latently probing the surface of *The Music Stopped*, and that in many ways inspired the terrain that this essay hopes to cover. There is, on a primary level, the palpable nostalgia that is a function of the exhibition's very design, and one that comments on the absence of a more visibly prominent jazz movement in contemporary India. More intriguing however is the way in which memory, as illustrated by Christine's onscreen recollections, plays a significant part beyond simply a sense of yearning. In talking with Panjiar and Fernandes about their own processes of collecting and collating material for this exhibition, what emerges is a practice and presentation of contemporary archiving that, in the absence of widely recorded resources, exists largely in personal and familial collections. How does this archive ultimately take shape? What does it articulate and, perhaps more importantly, what does it leave unsaid about the socio-economic and political contexts these musicians had to navigate? How does presenting this specific archive of Goan history in Panaji itself, approach ideas of private versus public lives, and the inner and outer world? The clip of Christine, who was born in Bombay but now lives in New York, to an ethnic-Goan father born in Mombasa and who lived in Karachi, further points to a history of migration and diaspora that was central to the development of jazz in India. Geographical movement, transnational identities, and geopolitical stakes played a significant role in the ways in which jazz music was disseminated and consumed, and therefore how it actually sounded and developed, from the Swing Era to post-Independence, from Indo-jazz and jazz-

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fusion to the formation of a contemporary discourse around Indian jazz as an ionized, independent movement.

This essay analyzes some of these considerations of the archive in light of global identities and the politics that run through the heart of, and often subliminally through, *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing*. Along with illuminating the process of assembling an archive, my conversations with Panjiar and Fernandes also speak to how this project stands in conversation with their own practices of photography and journalism.

Years before John Coltrane's thematic and tonal variations on North Indian Classical music in the 1950s (Pinckney, Jr. 14) earned him much acclaim, or Ravi Shankar's collaboration with saxophonist-flutist Bud Shank in 1961 made him the first Indian musician to record in the United States with an American jazz artist (14), and well before John McLaughlin's experiments with the band Shakti created the foundations for a Carnatic-jazz idiom, Bombay nightclubs and hotels were bouncing to the off-kilter rhythms of a new kind of music: swing. It was violinist Leon Abbey's iconic first performances at the Taj Mahal Hotel in 1935, frantic and fast-paced, that introduced a new type of "hot" jazz never before heard in India at the time, and exploded the ways in which dance and jazz music were consumed by (largely upper-class, westernized) audiences (Fernandes 21). His very presence as a resident musician brought an entire community of touring African American artists to the south-Bombay neighbourhood

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of Colaba, where they were treated with the luxury and admiration they could hardly expect in their home country, then at the peak of the Jim Crow Era.

Abbey's stint at the Taj was the spark that led to the formation of a new vocabulary and demand for dance music in a city that was flourishing economically. With the establishment of new industries, transportation, modes of communication, Bombay provided higher standards of living than almost any other part of the country. These connections, as Fernandes writes, "seemed to speed up the pace of life itself ... the frenetic rhythms of jazz were a perfect reflection of the hyperkinetic tempo of modernity" (21). With this new internationalism, Bombay became a busy pathway for cultural exchange—largely among a contained social stratum—between Europe, North America, and communities in and around Maharashtra itself, of which Goans formed the majority.

The movement of people from Goa to Bombay has been a long-established trajectory that, according to Fernandes, dates back to at least 1822, when Goans fled persecution at the hands of the Portuguese, and sought the shelter of British rule (55). Then in 1835, a rebellion that deposed Goa's first native-born governor general forced many of his supporters to seek protection in Bombay. A further lack of opportunities in the largely agrarian, feudal Goan economy, combined with Portuguese oppression, tremendous industrial growth in Bombay, and the opening of a new railway line, created an ever-thickening connection between the two regions over the years. While the primary forms of employment for most migrants were in service, as maids, cooks, or butlers to the elite, many

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Goans soon became fixtures in the music scene, playing in wedding bands, orchestras, and eventually big band groups. Their communal affinity for music was not a random cultural occurrence, but has its roots in a rich tradition of Konkani folk forms as well as in the influence of the Portuguese, who placed a significant emphasis on musical education for children, which ultimately equipped many Goans with the ability to read staff notation or interpret scores, a vital skill for versatile future jazz musicians who slotted into western bands, and later, into Hindi film music.

In *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing*, Panjiar makes a choice to leave much of this history unsaid, or articulates it briefly via Fernandes's wall texts, which hint at histories of migration and colonialism without bringing them to the fore. Panjiar is conscious of catering to a Goan audience above all else, and perhaps trusts their knowledge of a regional narrative without having to explain it to them. Or, he at least hopes to lead interested viewers to *Taj Mahal Foxtrot* for further contextual information—the exhibition indeed culminates in a broad platform with the book placed on it for viewers to look through. Panjiar's sensitivity to his audience here, which stems in part from his own relocation to Goa from Delhi, became clear in our conversation, as he seemed eager to avoid a simplification of Goan identity in any capacity. His hope was to showcase complexity and move away from a dominant, monolithic idea of Goa.

I'm not one to think that a festival in Goa should only have things about Goa, which as a region should have a

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national audience, and be international in its outlook. But for Serendipity Arts Festival, I was very conscious because [the curators and organizers] are all parachuting in for a week. I realized that through my living here, I wanted a greater engagement with the people.

This initial desire and focus for a kind of site-specific representation became the catalyst for Panjiar's archival process, which in itself is an illustration of the way the history of jazz is remembered in Goa and Bombay, and how its legacy has been preserved or forgotten.

From the outset, when I asked Panjiar about how his own successful career as a photojournalist and a curator of photography influenced his work here, he is quick to point out a distinction:

I didn't want this show to be labelled "photography" ... there are so many other elements to it. Coming from a photography background, when we talk about a photo exhibition, we expect to see photography that itself expresses something, but that's not the case here. We're culling from an archive, and it's telling you a lot of things. I wouldn't call it a photo exhibit.

Nomenclature becomes an important distinguishing factor in *The Music Stopped*, as Panjiar is eager to mark the significance of what is ultimately an archival display with museological

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ambitions, rather than a presentation of images. However, his own propensity for the photographic form doesn't completely preclude his work as a collector of material here. The journalistic and archival modes are actually in constant dialogue with each other throughout the exhibition: in the accumulation and sorting of raw information, the interviewing process, the negotiation of subject-source relationships, and the interpretation and narrativization of data.

It is interesting though to see a shift in subject matter here for Panjiar, whose photojournalistic work for magazines like *India Today* and *Outlook* among many others, focuses on stories of community displacement, economic inequity, environmental damage, and political conflict. Naresh Fernandes, currently the editor of the digital daily *Scroll.in*, has his own storied trajectory as a journalist with writing in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Hindustan Times*. For Panjiar, his process of collecting the material felt close to how he approached stories for a print publication.

Ultimately, it's storytelling. As a photographer in journalism, you go out, shoot, and collect material, you listen to stories and tell them through reportage. This is similar, only I was not the photographer. That process of immersing myself in a subject is very important for me; even earlier, when I did big photo essays, I always started with research. It takes me two to three months to learn the histories of people, and it's only after that immersion that I'm able to shoot.

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How does this journalistic process manifest itself in *The Music Stopped*? For Fernandes, during his work on *Taj Mahal Foxtrot*, he began largely by talking to friends and families of iconic jazz musicians of the era, unearthing a fascinating oral history of maverick performers in Bombay, who, by the time he began his project, were mostly long gone. These conversations consequently led him to more institutional sources and databases of access, at the University of Chicago or the Howard Thurman Collection at Boston University. After years of being steeped in his own research for the book, Fernandes chuckles with a newfound wonder when I ask him about what his process of collaboration with Panjiar was like. “It’s almost like he re-researched the pictures I had in my book,” he says, “He found glorious new ones that I had never seen before ... all this time after I had finished and almost forgotten some of this ... It was like a whole new project. It was lovely to look over his shoulder and see it take shape.”

Panjiar’s ability to bring “new” material to the project involved an activation of a global archival network from Goa to New York, an arduous process that had him navigating the tricky terrain of family relationships that are so fundamental to the practice of oral history, and jazz more generally. His process then began by setting certain parameters for his data, trying to streamline a set of characters in a fixed era to focus on.

He decided from the outset that the exhibition needed to be situated in the hot music and swing movement in the years before and around India’s independence, and was largely trying to stay away from the influence of progressive, free jazz, or bebop as it manifested itself in the ’60s and ’70s in jazz-fusion and Indo-jazz, thus placing his lens squarely on the big band sound.

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The propulsion of big bands in the Swing Era then naturally carved out spaces for certain protagonists (bandleaders, arrangers, outstanding instrumentalists) to shine. Most importantly, Panjiar was conscious not to bring the exhibition into an amorphous contemporary period, which would dilute the stories and influence of the people at the core of this period: the Goan musicians. With all this in mind, his final list included the following artists:

Micky Correa
Chick Chocolate
Frank Fernand
Johnny Baptist
Sonny Lobo
Jazzy Joe Pereira
Francis Furtado
Joe & Johnny Gomes
Sebastian D'Souza
Lucila & George Pacheco
Chris Perry & Lorna Cordeiro
Tony Pinto
Braz Gonsalves

With subjects, a timeline, and a sonic template in place, Panjiar began going through the material Naresh Fernandes culled for *Taj Mahal Foxtrot*, but quickly discovered some glaring inadequacies, in image quality and particularly, the ability to transfer some of what was used more illustratively to frame the text in Fernandes's book, to what a curator could harness

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in telling a more contained story or capturing a mood. These discursive incongruities forced Panjjar to consider the modes of his storytelling process at every step, and ultimately led him to the doors of families in Bombay and Goa, in search of a memory, a photograph, or a letter.

While the personal, interrelational family archive—photographic or oral in nature—can often be the most significant way into a psycho-biographical understanding of a subject, it also poses certain ethical risks, and can bring an attempt at distilling truth under the shadow of bias. If the material basis of the exhibition is sourced largely or in part by relatives, then the show might bend under the need to maintain a family-approved narrative. Panjjar highlights these precarious positions with the example of putting material together on the volatile multi-instrumentalist Chris Perry and his relationship with the vocalist Lorna Cordeiro.

Within families, there are often problems ... some people weren't speaking to others. I had to leave out some details. These musicians led colourful lives, had affairs. It's an important part of that history, but people were uncomfortable, and if that discomfort did not allow that material to come out, then you have to ask: is it so important? For example, the Chris Perry and Lorna story is very well-known and controversial, but Chris Perry's family is completely in denial. They just did not answer any of my messages or calls. Finally, I had to go to Lorna and I had to think: will she be angry because that video [from 2014 Konkani film *Nachom-ia*

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Kumpasar, which is loosely based on their relationship] is next to her picture?

Clearly Panjiar is dealing with an ethical conundrum here, where he puts himself at risk of using sensitive information at the expense of both the Perry family and Cordeiro herself, all while asking them for material to fill the exhibition to begin with. The particular story he's referring to is drawn out in vivid detail by Fernandes in a piece he wrote for his website, later adapted for the online publication *Quartz* in 2015. Chris and Lorna shared an incredible chemistry on stage, and played the Bombay circuit—at the Venice most notably—together to great public interest; Lorna had joined Perry's band as a teenager, a 16 year-old collaborating with an already-established performer some 20 years her senior. Chris soon left his family to be with Lorna and their colourful relationship on stage became marred by years of jealousy, alcoholism, and emotional abuse off it, until Lorna was finally able to tear herself away from Perry's band in 1971. The accounts in Fernandes's *Quartz* story suggest the persistent rawness of their explosive relationship, even all these years later. He writes,

Like the myths about the city in which they soared to fame, the tale of Chris and Lorna has gained so much in the re-telling it's sometimes difficult to thresh the apocrypha from the actual. Thirty years after the two stopped performing together, old-time musicians in the bylanes of Dhobi Talao and Bandra still beg anonymity as they reminisce in sad whispers.

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“He was shameless. He left his wife and three small children for that girl.”

“Chris and Lorna were in love. When they fought, they became mortal enemies. He destroyed her and he destroyed himself.”

Ultimately, the text for Chris and Lorna’s section in *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing* merely gestures at this complex history in a few words that read: “They made magic on stage, but their relationship was volatile.” Encountering these sort of problems of representation, and perhaps mediated intrusion to some degree, inadvertently becomes a fundamental part of Panjiar’s archive, its very formation a result of these negotiations. Further, we’re led to ask how these factors play into a larger question of a public-private dichotomy. When personal memory is consigned to collection in a public forum for a geographically-specific audience, what are the dynamics of power at play? In Benjamin Hutchens’s “Techniques of Forgetting? Hypo-Amnesic History and the An-Archive,” he uses Jacques Derrida’s 1995 neo-Freudian treatise *Archive Fever* to argue that the radical energy of lived memory is often neutralized by documentation, and relinquishes both authority and authorship to the archivist. Perhaps Panjiar’s selective methods of collection here does then transform, as Hutchens suggests, *memorabilia*, or memorable events in a span of time, into *memoranda*, which makes value judgements on things that are worth remembering (5). Hutchens draws out this discrepancy further when he explains, “What differentiates counter-memory from archival memory is that the former has

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a politically radical edge, wielded against the smooth surface of archival ‘memory’” (10).

Counter-memory runs parallel to the images and text that adorn the walls in this exhibition, and what is often left unsaid can also be read as being actively forgotten. The histories of Goan migration, Portuguese and British rule, and perhaps most glaringly, class politics, don’t find a direct way into the otherwise fascinating stories of these far-flung and idiosyncratic musicians pictured in iconic poses, leaning into a frenzied, imagined utopia with their instruments in hand. The question of what role a show like this, situated in Goa, might have to play beyond conjuring a nostalgia and wistfulness (which it achieves in phenomenal measure) for a moment gone, then remains. While there is undoubtedly a powerful joy in the experience of yearning for the ragtime stylings of Bombay nightclubs past, the erasure of counter-memory, that is, the reality of who actually had access to these cultural spaces to begin with, threatens to render an archive like this somewhat toothless.

This debate comes up in my conversations with both Fernandes and Panjiar, who is eager to emphasize that the nostalgic function of the archive in *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing* has its own political value, as a way of pointing something out by its absence, an apophatic gesturing towards the contemporary moment. The rich proliferation of swing and hot music in the ’30s, and the work of innovative Goans like Chic Chocolate—whose sleepy trumpet in 1945’s “I Couldn’t Sleep a Wink Last Night” filters through a little speaker, as if passing through time—is a reminder of a cultural

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hybridization that India may have lost but never replaced.

The number of clubs [in Goa and Bombay] has gone down and many have been gentrified into fine-dining restaurants. We're not being moralistic about the idea of the cabaret and the nightclub here. We're celebrating it rather than denigrating it, which is what is happening today, with cracking down on nightclubs and western culture. Yes, I would have preferred the show to be more political, but doing something which harks back to a memory which you can celebrate and telling people to lighten up also has a value to it.

Fernandes also feels that expressing a politics of what is lost is best done latently in this format, as compared to in his book, which unearths significant historical detail. He believes the title of the exhibition is itself a way to reintegrate Goans back into the narrative of jazz music in India, which they have largely been written out of. He suggests that there is an immediacy in the connection to a largely visual archive like this one, where the potential opportunity to identify a family member up on the wall becomes a way for local audiences to assert their constructive roles in a national cultural imagination of that time, and to also to revel in a sense of delight. I was actually struck as I took a walk through the exhibition to escape the hot Panaji sun one day, when a Goan family behind me suddenly cried out at spotting a distant uncle in a poster advertising a big band performance. One mother began dissecting the image for her 10-year-old son, recalling

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what it was like to grow up around that kind of music and to visit houses that were filled with the sound that became a distinct part of their Goan identities as children.

These moments of recognition and revelation bring us full circle to the role of the informal family archive, which, despite its potential dangers, is maybe the most authentic mode of representation for this particular exhibition. Unlike in the iconic jazz cities of New Orleans, New York, or Chicago, where archives of jazz in all its transmutations, through swing and ragtime to bebop and free, exist in institutional structures at an objective distance from the familial, in Bombay, or India more generally, these contemporary archives are still being mined, and families continue to be primary sources of vital information.

Coupled with this is the trend that jazz in Goa-Bombay has adopted a *gharana* model more commonly associated with Hindustani Classical music and dance, where the artform becomes a vital marker of family identity that transcends generations. The tragedy however lies in how many sons, daughters, or grandchildren have actually gone on to become respected professional musicians in their own right or end up making a living from it—Braz Gonsalves (who is Chic Chocolate's son-in-law) and Christine Correa seem to be the main exceptions here. Most of the musicians in the exhibition themselves lived as lower-middle class people, and were never really rich, unlike the consumers of their music, who were largely the westernized upper classes. As the colonial powers transitioned out of India between 1947 and '61, and swing music faded against the popularity of bebop in the US,

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it grew increasingly difficult to earn a livelihood from playing the Bombay clubs, and many Goan jazz artists were forced to find more lucrative modes of expression for their music, namely, Hindi film music. “This was to be the abiding tragedy of Indian jazz,” Fernandes writes. “Numerous Indian jazzmen would make their careers performing on stage to appreciative audiences, but rarely make any records in a country in which film soundtracks dominated the music industry.”

And so the Goan cats of the Bombay jazz age took their music to the movie studios, where accents of swing became a tool, either to symbolize a new modernity or to illustrate the dangers of forgetting an inherent national culture (Fernandes 108). Chic Chocolate, Anthony Gonsalves (of “My Name Is Anthony Gonsalves” fame), the Gomes brothers, and Frank Fernand, were some of the more successful Goans to make the transition to film music, further aided by a rich history of technical musical training, improvisation, and composition that made them such astute jazz performers to begin with. Multiple little screens showing video clips from old movies punctuate the archives on display in *The Music Stopped*, recontextualizing a rich history of music that perhaps would not exist without the innovative efforts of Goan jazz musicians. It is thrilling to watch these videos that have been so integral to the cultural imagination of film music, and almost discover anew the jazz-swing influences, while connecting them back to the lives of those we have come to know intimately through the show. From Chic Chocolate’s flamboyant cameo in “Deewana Parwana” from 1951’s *Albela*, to Frank Fernand’s arrangements for “Baar Baar Dekho”

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from *Chinatown* (1961), to Johnny Gomes' assistance on the eternally jubilant and propulsive "Eena Meena Deeka" from 1957's *Aasha*, it becomes clear that while Indian jazz may not have survived in its swing avatar, it continued to adapt and remained resilient, playing a founding part in the music that sustains and inspires popular culture in India to this day. The blending of jazz inflections and movie soundtracks—audible even in contemporary Bollywood—became a way to almost democratize a music that was otherwise for the consumption of the upper echelons of society. "Too many people think of jazz as art music," Fernandes tells me over the phone, "jazz was dance music to be enjoyed, and that's what Hindi film music made it. It took it back to the streets and got people to dance to it, like in New Orleans."

The larger ethnomusicological arcs that emerge from such a contained number of sources, for what is a brief period of modern Indian history, is a testament to the incredible transmutability of an archive that might still have more to give in the years to come. Fernandes's initial research for *Taj Mahal Foxtrot* has given rise to numerous rearchived forms, while also triggering global networks and inspiring multiple stage and film adaptations, a website with updated material and new stories, and even a chain of restaurants. The exhibition in Goa further unearths the possibility for more diverse stories like these to be told, and brings into question the variegated ways in which such archives might be treated, whether within informal structures, or consigning them to institutional ones where they may be

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narrativized and preserved. Or perhaps finding a balance in which it can exist in both these spaces simultaneously. The alternative formal and informal systems then provide the opportunity to meditate on how such archives may flourish in the future, and what their most authentic mode of presentation might look like. In “Speaking in the Groove: Oral History and Jazz,” author Burton W. Peretti believes that informal practices can indeed operate alongside the formal, and suggests that a greater emphasis on the former, can provide a more inclusive space for the narratives and people often erased from jazz history, like the Goan musicians here (12- 13).

The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing, which winds audiences through layered and zig-zagged walls that Panjiar envisioned would help take viewers on a phenomenological journey through time, culminates in a sunlit room with two interactive screens on loan from the American Institute of Indian Studies’ Archive and Research Center for Ethnomusicology. Here the modern and contemporary, the informal and formal modes converge in the digital, as fascinated viewers plough through pictures and recordings, timelines and histories of Indian jazz, from its nascent days to the aftermath of the era through which we have just passed. The screens open the exhibition up at what one would expect to be its terminal point, almost like a unexpected motif in a jazz tune, steering it in another direction, as if to assert that jazz is indeed a global music, one with a distinctly Indian form that continues to move and shake long after Bombay’s greatest clubs went quiet.



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Fig. 2



Fig. 3





1. The band is performing on a stage.
2. The band is performing on a stage.
3. The band is performing on a stage.
4. The band is performing on a stage.
5. The band is performing on a stage.





Jazz Pioneers

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Fig. 7



Fig. 8







Fig. 10



Fig. 11



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Captions

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Exhibition view of *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing: Goan musicians in the early Jazz & Hot Dance Era* at Adil Shah Palace, Goa, 2017.

Fig 1

Chic Chocolate with his first band at the Bristol Grill in Bombay, 1945-1946. The band featured vocalist Penny Willard, Mervyn Sequeira on piano, Cawas Lord on drums, Dennis Vaz on clarinet, Norman Mobsbey on clarinet, and Perry on double bass.

Fig 2

A clip from Sushil Kurien's *Finding Carlton* plays on loop alongside a photograph of Mickey Correa, pictured with the vocalist Pepita in Bombay, 1940.

Fig 3

A video for the song "Mera Naam Chin Chin Choo" from the Hindi movie *Howrah Bridge* (1958) plays next to an image of Sebastian D'Souza, who arranged the music for the film. Below are scores for the album *Raga Jazz Style* (1968), also arranged by D' Souza.

Fig 4

The Correa Optimists Band in Karachi, 1936.

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Fig 5

Images from the early days of Jazz in India. (Center) Dancers pictured in the ballroom of the Taj Mahal Hotel in the early 1940s, next to a photograph of Leon Abbey's band in 1935.

Fig 6

Lucila Pacheco during one of her first professional performances at Greens Hotel in Bombay, 1948.

Fig 7

The exhibition culminates in a sunlit room with screens from the American Institute of Indian Studies' Archive and Research Center for Ethnomusicology.

Fig 8, 10, 11 (Courtesy of Prashant Panjiar), 11

Installation view of *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing* at the Adil Shah Palace, Serendipity Arts Festival 2017.

Fig 9

Braz Gonzalves (left) and Chic Chocolate (right).

Fig 12

Images from a photo collage of Chris Perry and Lorna Cordeiro. (Courtesy of Lorna Cordeiro)



Biographies

Arnav Adhikari is a writer and editor based in New Delhi. As an Editorial Fellow at *The Atlantic* in Washington, DC between 2016 and 2017, he covered books, music, and popular culture for the website. His writing on the arts has also appeared in the *Asian American Writers' Workshop* and *Hyperallergic*.

Arnav is a consulting editor at Serendipity Arts Foundation/Festival, where he helps oversee content and research projects across various platforms. Most recently, he contributed writing for the artist Ratna Gupta's solo show *everything is precious* (2018) at Sakshi Gallery in Mumbai.

Prashant Panjiar is a photojournalist and photographer focusing on reportage, editorial, and documentary photography. He has served on the jury of the World Press Photo Awards, the China International Press Photo Competition, Indian Express Press Photo Awards, and the National Foundation of India's annual photography fellowship. He has worked with *The Patriot Newspaper*, *India Today*, and the Outlook Group of Publications. As co-founder of the Delhi Photo Festival, Prashant has curated all the three of its editions. In 2015, he conceived and curated the first edition of Sensorium, a festival of arts, literature, and ideas for Sunaparanta, the Goa Centre of Arts. Prashant also guides younger photographers through Nazar Foundation, which he co-founded.

Naresh Fernandes is the editor of *Scroll.in*, a digital news publication. He is the author of *Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay's Jazz Age* and *City Adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay*.

**A Cinematic Imagination:
Josef Wirsching and The
Bombay Talkies**

Curated by Debashree
Mukherjee and Rahaab Allana

Exhibition design/scenography
by Sudeep Chaudhuri



Curatorial Note

This exhibition tells a story of a world across worlds, a story of cultural convergence that brought together Berlin and Calcutta, Munich and Bombay. It draws from the photographic archive of Josef Wirsching, a German cinematographer who made India his workplace and home. Wirsching's archive comprises behind-the-scenes photographs of cast and crew, production and publicity stills that give us unprecedented access to the aesthetic decisions and creative communities that were vital to filmmaking in late colonial India. We presented this exhibition as a tribute to Josef Wirsching, a transnational itinerant and pioneer of Indian cinema. The exhibition broadly spans the period from 1925-1967 but the main focus is on the years from 1934-1939 when Josef Wirsching shot about 17 Hindi-Urdu feature films for Bombay Talkies studio. Our aim was to highlight Wirsching's pioneering contribution to Indian cinematography and situate him within a network of traveling artists and art movements. Pictures were selected with an eye on the historical significance of the subject matter as well as photographic value. To see Wirsching's photo archive come to life in Goa in December 2017 was an incredibly powerful, and gratifying experience. Not only was this the first time that, with the sterling support of Serendipity Arts Festival and the Alkazi Foundation, these photographs were being made available to the public, but this debut exhibition was also being held in *Goa*, a place that the Wirsching family has made their home.

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Josef Wirsching's artistic imagination infused Bombay cinema with the psychological depth and stylistic ethos of German Expressionism. At the same time, the term "Expressionist" is a formal-technical one and only represents one aspect of the exhibition and the Wirsching archive. It would be more apposite to use the word "expressive" to describe the sheer joy evident in these photographs, a joy in highlighting the dramatic, the emotional, and the *surface*. The expressive is a key principle in Expressionism as well as melodrama - the dominant aesthetic and narrative mode of all the early Bombay Talkies films. The expressive also indicates an unabashed embrace of the "popular" in cinema as opposed to everyday assumptions of what comprises "art." Wirsching's photographic archive collapses simple binaries between surface and depth, the popular and the artistic, or the everyday and the extraordinary. This capacity gestures towards another meaning of the "cinematic" - a term that is commonly used to describe moments in reality that seem elevated beyond the everyday. In these images we see the interaction of individuals, objects, and environments, framed by a vision that captures the beauty and drama beneath the surface of the laborious work of film production. To that end, Sudeep Chaudhuri's exhibition design, or as he prefers it, "scenography," brings to life the expressive power of that ineffable phenomenon we call the "cinematic." Sudeep applied a spatial and experiential lens to a photographic archive and through his use of texture, color, scale, and sound, the archive was transformed into a living space. Of special note were the raw wood panels, the splashes of leftover and accidental paint, and partitions of varying

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heights which highlighted the processual over the finished, a material translation of the fact that we were witnessing a group of individuals, places, and objects all captured by the camera in the moment of cinematic creation.



A Cinematic Imagination: Josef Wirsching and The Bombay Talkies

Debashree Mukherjee

Encounters, Exile, Belonging

The story of how Josef Wirsching came to work in Bombay is fascinating and full of meandering details. In brief, it's a story of creative confluence and, well, *serendipity* ... the right people with the right ideas getting together at the right time. Thus, the theme of encounters – cultural, personal, intermedial – is key to understanding Josef Wirsching's career and its significance. Born in Munich in 1903, Wirsching experienced all the cultural ferment of the interwar years. Cinema was still a fledgling art form at the time, and was radically influenced by Munich's robust theatre and photography scene. For example, the Ostermayr brothers (Franz, Peter, Ottmarr) ran a photography studio, studied acting, and worked at Max Reinhardt's Kammertheater before they turned wholeheartedly to filmmaking. Josef Wirsching himself was slated to take over his father's costume and set design studios, but had a career epiphany when he was gifted a still camera on his 16th birthday. Against initial family resistance, Josef enrolled in a prestigious industrial arts school¹ to study photography and subsequently joined Weiss-Blau-Film as an apprentice photographer. By the early 1920s, Peter Ostermayr's Emelka film company had

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become a greatly desired destination for young people wanting to make a name in cinema. Josef Wirsching joined Emelka at this time, as did another young man named Alfred Hitchcock. Back in India, at the turn of the century, Indian artists were actively trying to forge an aesthetic language that could be simultaneously nationalist as well as modern. Frustrated with European academic canons and colonialist stereotypes, they turned to local artistic genealogies and avant-garde movements outside the British empire. Germany, with its long history of Indological enquiry, became an ally in this endeavor. Thus it is that Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany in the 1920s, and in turn, the Austrian art historian, Stella Kramrisch, joined Shantiniketan and organized a landmark Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta (1922). This two-way cultural exchange was keenly felt in the world of cinema; the success of “Oriental” films such as *Sumurun* (1920), *The Tiger of Eschnapur* (1921) and *The Indian Tomb* (1921) was met with the ambition of Indian filmmakers who approached German studios for technical training. Raja Ravi Varma had already popularized German chromolithographic techniques and European approaches to the body through his mass-produced calendar art. In the 1920s, intrepid filmmakers such as V Shantaram, Mohan Bhavnani and Himansu Rai traveled to film studios in Germany to study cutting-edge cinematic techniques. In the surviving films of the 1930s, one can discern multiple aesthetic influences from German *Oberammergau* passion plays, Bengal School portraiture, *Heimatfilm* rural stories, Art Deco industrial design, to newly formalizing Hindustani classical music conventions.

In 1924, Himansu Rai approached Emelka with a proposal to collaborate on an epic on the life of Gautam Buddha. Rai was a lawyer-turned-actor who ran a theater company called the Indian Players in London. He was a dynamic media entrepreneur and was actively looking for producers to support silent film projects on Indian themes. *Light of Asia* (1925) was Rai's dream project but it also tapped into the neo-Buddhist revival in 1920s Germany, evidenced in the works of Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht and Herman Hesse. Thus, in 1925, a dream team comprising Franz Osten (director), Josef Wirsching (principal camera), Willi Kiermeier (assistant) and Bertl Schultes (as interpreter) sailed for India. Jointly produced by Emelka and Great Eastern Film Corporation (Delhi), *Light of Asia* (1925) was notable for being shot wholly on location (Calcutta, Benares, Agra, and Jaipur), with Indian actors, and with minimal use of artificial lights or make-up. For the Emelka Bavarians, India proved to be a land of great contradictions and extreme emotions. They were impressed with their Indian colleagues and awed by the generosity of the Maharaja of Jaipur who loaned elephants, jewels, and costumes for the shoot; but they also suffered heatstroke from the 50C temperatures and had to negotiate cultural stereotypes with lived experiences. Nevertheless, Franz Osten collaborated with Rai on two more silent films, *Shiraz* (1928) and *A Throw of Dice* (1929), which achieved varying degrees of success. In 1934, both Wirsching and Osten returned to India to help set up Bombay Talkies Ltd. They had known Himansu Rai and Devika Rani for a decade now and deep friendships had been forged. With Hitler's dramatic rise to power in interwar Germany,

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several Jewish and other minority communities that were targeted by the Nazi party fled the country, seeking refuge in various countries across the world. The story of German exiles in the US is well-known, and much of what we today call “film noir” was a result of the influence of German Expressionist cinematic techniques that these emigre filmmakers brought to Hollywood. The story of the eastward movement of German and east European exiles is less known. In fact, Bombay became a favored port of refuge for Jewish artists and cultural practitioners such as Willy Haas and Walter Kaufman, both of whom worked for the Bombay film industry in varying capacities. These connections were enabled by prior friendships, such as the director-producer Mohan Bhavnani’s association with Kaufmann and Haas whom he knew from his own days in Germany.

Josef Wirsching’s decision to move to Bombay in the 1930s seems mainly motivated by the fact that the biggest film studios in Germany, eg. UFA in Babelsberg, were being taken over by the Nazi party and non-Jewish filmmakers were being compelled to join the party and make propaganda films. This coercive atmosphere, where the state directly intervenes in creative decisions and financing, made artistic production very difficult for many independent-thinking filmmakers.

Bombay Talkies (1934-1954)

Bombay Talkies was set up by producer Himansu Rai and his actress wife, Devika Rani Chaudhuri in 1934². This Bengali couple met and married in London in the late 1920s, moved

to Germany to work at the UFA Studios, worked on a couple of international co-productions, and finally set up their own studio in Bombay in 1934.

In Germany, Rai and Rani had learned the ropes of filmmaking. Devika Rani assisted in various departments at UFA, even famously holding Marlene Dietrich's make-up tray on the sets of *The Blue Angel* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1930), thereby closely observing the techniques of directors and actors such as Fritz Lang, G. W. Pabst and Emil Jannings. Rai and Rani moved to Bombay as Hitler's rise to power became irreversible and brought some of their German colleagues with them.

In Europe, Himansu Rai and Devika Rani had positioned themselves as authentically Indian filmmakers who wanted to accurately narrate Indian stories to Western audiences. Their early co-productions showcase a spectacular, spiritual, and ahistorical India which might seem exotic, even self-orientalizing to viewers today. But Bombay Talkies' mission was different. Envisioned as an Indian studio producing films for an Indian market, Bombay Talkies sought to establish itself as a *swadeshi* business with a definite regional voice and location. Their idea was to set up a studio that would also serve as a training institute for young Indians. Devika Rani has said in an interview: "...we felt that this was *not* an indigenous industry. So Rai thought it was best, as far as possible, to get experts from abroad for each department. And we had a sort of undertaking from them...to select a number of first-rate students from all over India... It was our aim to attract the best element in Indian society, with an educated and cultured background, to produce the highest type of art."³

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Bombay Talkies self-consciously modeled itself as a national institution meant to train a creative workforce at par with international standards, it had clear policies about employing ‘respectable’ actresses and men with graduate degrees, and its team of European personnel headed the main departments at the studio. Joseph Wirsching was the head of the Camera Department, Franz Osten for Direction, Karl von Spreiti for Production Design, Hartley for Sound, and about 300 students were interviewed in the first year itself. Rai and Rani insisted that all salaried staff were housed in Malad and even ran an onsite medical facility, canteen and recreation room to create a sense of community and collegiality. With a state-of-the-art studio in Malad, a joint stock company with an authorized capital of Rs. 25 lakhs, and a Board of Directors comprising some of the most eminent businessmen and politicians in Bombay, the studio was destined for success.⁴ At its zenith, Bombay Talkies had about 400 employees on its rolls.

By 1934, when Bombay Talkies was founded, India already had several film production companies making silent films. Bombay Talkies was launched at a moment of technological transition, when India’s film producers realized that the future lay in the “talkie.” A mad race began to make the first Indian talkie film, and as you know, Ardeshir Irani’s *Alam Ara* (1931) won the talkie race in 1931. Companies like Prabhat, Ranjit, Sagar, Imperial, and Wadia Movietone were at the forefront of the transition to sound films, and started experimenting with dialogue and songs. So Bombay Talkies entered a lively field of experimentation and production but brought a distinctly different set of sensibilities to this field. Filmmaking is a fundamentally collaborative

practice and Bombay Talkies' early films really highlight this. The cosmopolitan crew at Bombay Talkies – the Germans (Osten, Wirsching), the well-traveled Bengalis (Rai, Rani, Niranjan Pal), the Parsi music director (Saraswati Devi), and choreographer Mumtaz Ali -- brought together influences from German Expressionist theatre and cinema, Bengal School portraiture, Orientalist adaptations of Sanskrit literature, British socialist plays, modern Bengali reformist novels, Art Deco industrial design, Bauhaus textile design, Hindustani classical music, and kathak dance conventions. Bombay Talkies played a foundational role in defining India's commercial film form, producing some of the most iconic musical films of the era which foregrounded urgent issues of social reform. These films borrowed freely from East and West to create a new aesthetic that might be called “swadeshi modernism” - a heady pastiche that begs us to question easy notions of Indian and foreign, traditional and experimental.

Bombay Talkies quickly established a reputation of making socially progressive films with strong female characters. The studio itself had top-notch equipment, multiple sound stages, a processing laboratory, and meticulously demarcated departments for costume, make-up, props, scenario and so on. This made Bombay Talkies a prime center for young film aspirants who wanted to learn the ropes of production. A whole generation of film industrywallahs “graduated” from Bombay Talkies, which was a veritable film school for acclaimed artists and practitioners such as Ashok Kumar, Leela Chitnis, KA Abbas, Gyan Mukherjee, Sashadhar Mukherjee, Najam Naqvi, Khurshid Mirza, and scores of technicians.

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Their songs were simple and catchy and their actors practiced naturalistic, understated acting which was still a rarity in the early 1930s because many Indian actors still performed in the exaggerated styles of Parsi theater and the silent cinema. The organizational structure and financial model of Bombay Talkies also introduced a corporate sensibility to filmmaking in Bombay, a fact that might seem surprising to us today. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the studio's German employees abruptly found themselves branded as "enemy aliens." Franz Osten was 63 years old, in ill health, and was repatriated to Germany, as was Karl von Spreti who had influential connections. Josef Wirsching spent the entire war period in internment camps and upon his release he made the momentous decision to stay on in the Bombay film industry. In the post-war years, Wirsching scaled greater artistic heights with *Mahal* (1949), *Dil Apna Preet Parai* (1960) and *Pakeezah* (1972) which was completed after his death in 1967.

Technique, Craft, Innovation

Stumbling out of the shadows of a bitter defeat in WW1, German artists felt the need for a new aesthetic language to deal with their collective experience of violence, isolation, and trauma. In painting, theater, architecture, and cinema, German Expressionism emerged as a new stylistic form that was opposed to naturalism and focused on the graphic exteriorization of repressed emotions. From the theatrical productions of Max Reinhardt to silent film classics such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Metropolis* (1927),

German Expressionism relied on dramatic low-key lighting and surreal set design as a means to highlight psychology. Bombay cinema from the 1930s-1950s reveals a strong influence of German Expressionism and Josef Wirsching played a pioneering role in popularizing this stylized film form. The expressionist vocabulary is strongly imprinted in Wirsching's lighting designs and compositions. German Expressionism, in the cinema of the 1920s (eg. *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), was a strongly non-naturalistic style that used *mise-en-scene* to exteriorize inner emotions. Thus, sets, costumes, acting, and lighting all took on the role of “expressing” complex and dark human psychology. You see this influence most strongly in Bombay Talkies’ debut feature film, *Jawani-ki-Hawa* (1935) which was a romantic thriller. In *JkH* Wirsching composed frames with huge pools of darkness, sharp highlights, eerie shadows, distorted angles, and sets which appear to overwhelm the humans. In his next few films for Bombay Talkies, Wirsching frequently framed characters through arches, doorways, and windows; favored eccentric camera angles; and masterfully molded light to create shadows and pools of darkness. These techniques lent themselves beautifully to Bombay Talkies’ melodramatic screenplays, where socially transgressive emotions found spectacular expression in song and *mise-en-scene*. The crisis of the alienated individual in post-war Europe was transferred, via melodramatic expressionism, to the crisis of the modernizing self in a colonized nation. This stylized mode is seen in full force again in *Mahal* (1949), a gothic thriller which brought back the full toolkit of German Expressionism. When we see the

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work of VK Murthy in *Pyasa*, for example, we must remember that such consummate play with light and shade would not be possible without Wirsching's influential work and his training of camera and lighting crews at Bombay Talkies. Wirsching was a versatile and highly adaptive artist and molded his cinematic craft to suit the script and the director's vision. His partnership with Kamal Amrohi in the 1950s and 1960s marks the zenith of Wirsching's artistic career, definitely supported by the epic scale of Amrohi's cinema and vision.

At the same time, Josef Wirsching's cinematic eye for drama allowed him to skillfully switch registers between expressionism and naturalism, realism and surrealism. Veering sharply away from the studio-based shooting conventions of Emelka and UFA, Wirsching proved adept at outdoor location shooting. In these production stills we see how Wirsching made full use of light-weight motion picture cameras such as the Éclair and the Debie to film the natural landscape of Maharashtra.

First Lady of the Indian Screen

A vital presence that animates the Wirsching archive is the face of Devika Rani. Born into a privileged upper-caste Bengali family, Devika Rani was famously the grandniece of poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore. She was educated from an early age in European boarding schools, and went on to study architecture, make-up, and textile design in London in the 1920s. Soon, her career path intersected with that of Himansu Rai, a charismatic lawyer-turned-film entrepreneur who was sixteen years her senior. The couple married and moved to

Germany to join the prestigious UFA Studios. Devika Rani assisted Marlene Dietrich on *The Blue Angel* (1930) and closely observed the techniques of directors and actors such as Fritz Lang and G. W. Pabst. In 1933 she starred in Himansu Rai's exotic English-language talkie, *Karma* (1933) and became a sensation in London's elite circles. Her emerging stardom and accumulated technical expertise were critical to the success of Bombay Talkies.

The 1930s were a time of intensified urgency to the Indian anti-colonial struggle, a time when young Indians were torn between the need to assert an indigenous authenticity and the desire to embrace international ideas. Devika Rani's star success stemmed from her ability to move fluidly between constructions of the "Indian" and the "cosmopolitan." While she consistently played subaltern, demure roles (eg. *Achhut Kanya* (1936)), her on-screen identity also gestured towards her transnational location via Bauhaus saree designs, Marcel-waved hair, and penciled eyebrows. Devika Rani's face, as the locus of her star attraction, thus became a polysemic site that spoke differently to different spectators.

Himansu Rai prematurely passed away in 1940, and Devika Rani took over as Controller of Productions. In 1945 she married the Russian artist Svetoslav Roerich permanently quit Bombay Talkies. Though honored with a Padma Shri (1958) and the Dadasaheb Phalke award (1969), Rani determinedly withdrew from the limelight. Always dignified in interviews, impeccable of make-up, and with her customary cigarette in hand, Devika Rani remained elusive till the end.

The Archive of Indian Cinema

It was during my PhD research that I first heard about the Wirschings and their photographic archive. Since 2010, I had been actively looking for archival sources, private or public, that could shed some light on the early decades of the Bombay film industry. Given my background in film production I was interested in histories of film practice, technology, and infrastructure. However, any historian of Indian cinema must confront head-on the problem of the absent archive. Of all the films made in the Indian subcontinent between 1920 and 1950, less than 5% are preserved at the National Film Archives of India (NFAI). Information about production practices is even more elusive than film prints themselves. The researcher is therefore compelled to look elsewhere, in alternative archives and at parallel objects to reconstruct a history of Indian cinema's material past.

I contacted Georg in 2013 and he graciously invited me to come take a look at their material in Goa. I was astonished by the historical significance of the material and the rigorous care that the family had taken to preserve Josef Wirsching's legacy. For film historians, the Wirsching archive is a rare treasure as it provides vital information about the techniques and conventions of pre-Independence Indian cinema. Be it artificial indoor rain sprinklers, two-camera set-ups for action sequences, painted backdrops, soundproofed walls, trolley shots, sync sound recording or continuity logs, Bombay Talkies defies popular myths about the supposedly incompetent and chaotic nature of early

film production in India. Instead, we see solid professionalism as well as a spirit of real collaborative bonhomie. The material is wonderfully preserved and adds a wealth of information to the fragmented archives of Indian cinema.

Interestingly, the films of Wirsching-Rai are among the most privileged in the official archives of Indian cinema in terms of representation. Most of the early Bombay Talkies films have been well preserved at the NFAI (India) and the Library of Congress (USA). The reasons for this range from Bombay Talkies' self-consciously social-reformist content and alliance with bourgeois nationalism, to its careful cultivation of a "respectable" workforce. Scores of other talkie studios were set up in Bombay between the two world wars, many of which were highly successful and some of which have survived till today. But little evidence can be found in the official film archive for the immense productivity of a studio like Ranjit Film Company, the fantasy adventures of Eastern Arts, Majestic Movietone and Everest Pictures, or the smart urban socials of Mohan Bhavnani and Sagar Film Company. Thus the archival visibility of Bombay Talkies highlights archival tensions and competing filmic modes that speak to us through their very absence.

For me, this exhibition was as much about situating a film pioneer back into the history of Bombay cinema, as it was about the cultural significance of his photographic archive. Film studies, especially recent film historical and media archaeological work, is moving away from single auteur-genius narratives to thinking about media as dispersed and multi-agentive. *A Cinematic Imagination* highlights the multiplicity of

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individual actors involved in collectively contributing to the success of Bombay talkies, from an anonymous light boy to the once-famous but now forgotten dancer, Madame Azurie. It is the generosity of Wirsching's documentary imagination, seen in this exhibition, that enables us to witness the unknown and the known, the little and the great, and to witness the making of that thing we call the "cinematic."



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Notes

1. Most likely, the Kunstgewerbeschule München
2. Two other long-term friends and collaborators who accompanied the couple on this mission were Rai Bahadur Chunilal (father of Madan Mohan) and Niranjan Pal.
3. Amita Malik, 'Padma Shri Devika Rani: An Interview with the First Lady of the Indian Screen,' *Filmfare*, March 14, 1958, 37.
4. Amrit Gangar, *Franz Osten and the Bombay Talkies: A Journey From Munich to Malad* (Bombay: Max Mueller Bhavan, 2001), 3.

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Filmography

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3. *The Indian Tomb* (1921). Dir. Joe May. May-Film GmbH. Germany.
4. *The Tiger of Eschnapur* (1921). Dir. Joe May. May-Film GmbH. Germany.
5. *Light of Asia* (1925). Also titled as *Prem Sanyas*, *Die Leuchte Asiens*. Dir. Franz Osten. Great Eastern Film, Emelka Film, The Indian Players. India and Germany.
6. *Metropolis* (1927). Dir. Fritz Lang. UFA Studios. Germany.
7. *Shiraz* (1928). Dir. Franz Osten. India, Germany, UK.
8. *A Throw of Dice* (1929). Dir. Franz Osten. India, Germany, UK.
9. *The Blue Angel* (1930). Dir. Josef von Sternberg. UFA Studios. Germany.
10. *Alam Ara* (1931). Dir. Ardeshir Irani. Imperial Film Company. India.
11. *Karma* (1933). Dir. JL Freer Hunt. India, Germany, UK.
12. *Jawani-ki-Hawa* (1935). Dir. Franz Osten. Bombay Talkies. India.
13. *Achhut Kanya* (1936). Dir. Franz Osten. Bombay Talkies. India.
14. *Mahal* (1949). Dir. Kamal Amrohi. Bombay Talkies. India.
15. *Dil Apna Preet Parai* (1960). Dir. Kishore Sahu. Mahal Pictures. India.
16. *Pakeezah* (1972). Dir. Kamal Amrohi. Kamal Pictures. India.

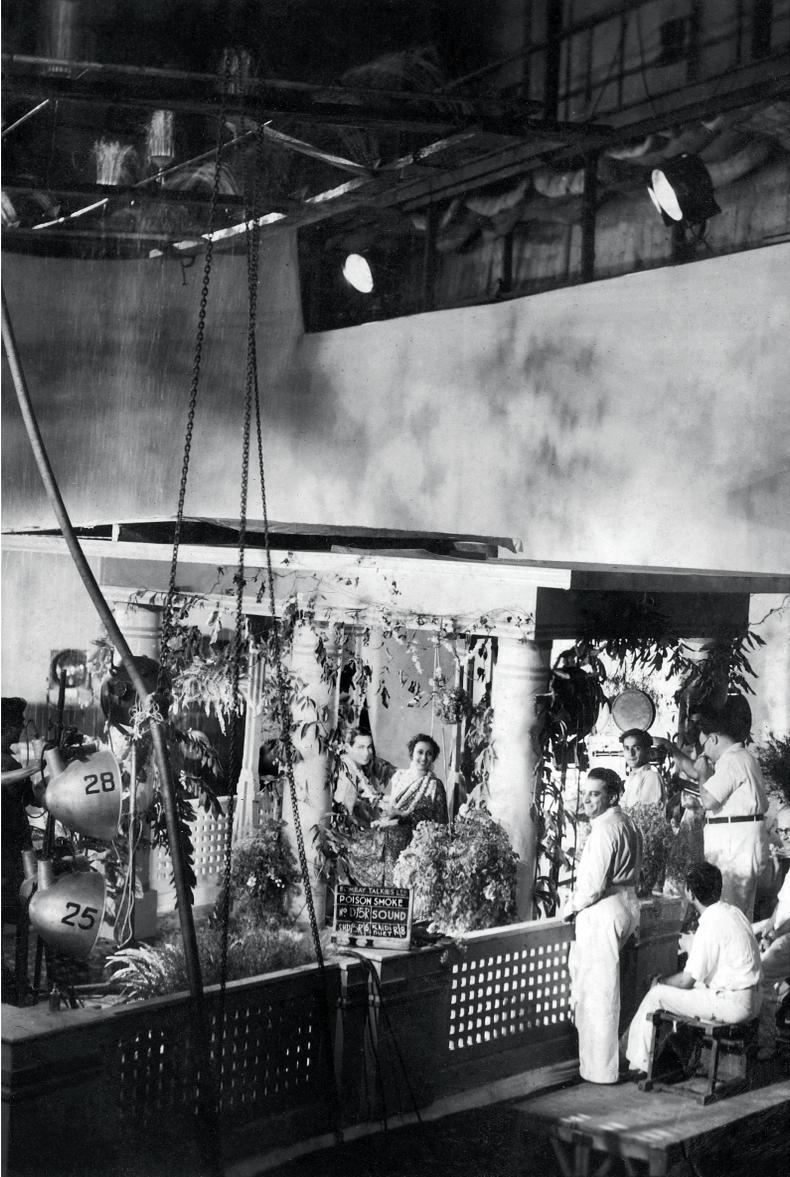




Fig. 2



Fig. 3

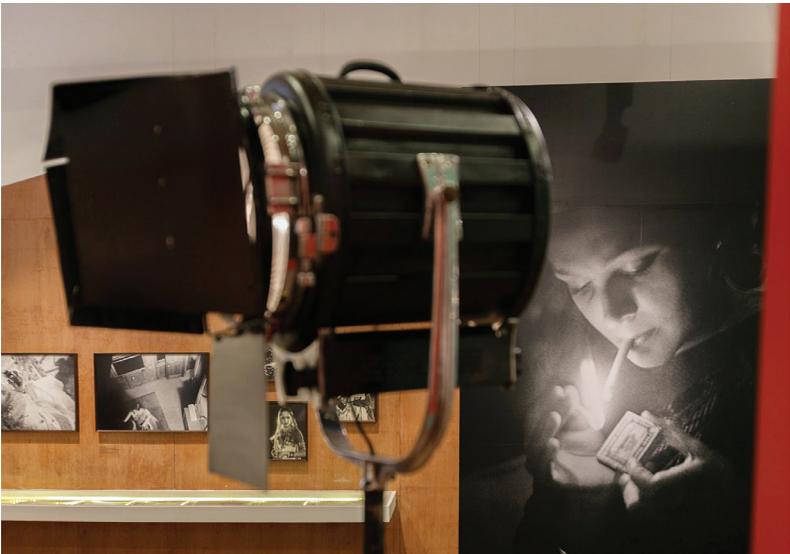
















Captions

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Mitchell Camera, courtesy Film Heritage Foundation Collection

Figure 1

Devika Rani and Najam-Ul-Hussain/*Jawani Ki Hawa*
1935, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten
Kamala (Devika Rani) and Ratanlal (Najam-ul-Hussain) share a moment of furtive intimacy on board a speeding train in Bombay Talkies' debut feature film. It is believed that Devika Rani and Najam-ul-Hussain really fell in love during the shooting of this film and eloped to Calcutta to try and sign a double contract with the already established and reputed New Theatres studio. Devika's husband and managing director of Bombay Talkies, Himansu Rai, managed to bring her back to Bombay but Najam-ul was fired. Devika Rani's star power and grace was crucial to the early success of Bombay Talkies.

Figure 2

Izzat

1937, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten
Franz Osten directs Devika Rani on bodily gestures and facial expressions.

Figure 3

Nirmala

1938, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten
Set-up for a tracking shot taken in the Bombay Talkies compound. The camera is mounted on a sturdy trolley as assistants operate the camera and pull focus during the take. A microphone can be seen suspended on a boom directly over the camera and just out of frame. Josef Wirsching and

Franz Osten monitor the action on either side of the trolley. Sashadhar Mukherjee, on the far right, holds what appears to be a continuity script. This scene is most likely shot inside the compound of the Bombay Talkies studio which was located in Malad. Remnants of the studio buildings can still be found today.

Figure 4

Bhabhi

1938, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten.

Original Size: 3.6 x 4.7 inches, Reproduced Size: 12 x 15.5 inches

Hahnemühle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth Paper

An exultant crew, all smiles while shooting the final song sequence of the film. The camera, on the right of the photograph, is trained on the romantic lead - P. Jairaj and Renuka Devi - while it rains outside the window behind them. Note the artificial rain produced by the sprinklers on the ceiling and the cityscape on the back wall, enlarged from a *recce* photograph of Colaba shot by Wirsching himself.

Figure 5

Josef Wirsching, c. 1939

An extremely rare photograph of Josef Wirsching at his desk drawing a storybook for his son Wolfgang Peter Wirsching while imprisoned during WW2 at the internment camp for enemy aliens at Dehradun. A portrait of his son, baby Peter, can be seen on the wall behind him.

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Exhibition views of *A Cinematic Imagination: Josef Wirsching and The Bombay Talkies* at Adil Shah Palace, Goa, 2017.

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

Biographies

Debashree Mukherjee is Assistant Professor of South Asian film and visual cultures at Columbia University in New York. Her current book project, “Parallel Action: Bombay Cinema and the Practice of Modernity,” presents a cultural history of early Bombay cinema (1920s-1940s) that privileges material practice, circuits of work, and technologies of production, and draws inspiration from her own experience of working in Mumbai’s film and television industries in the early 2000s. Debashree has published widely, has curated exhibitions on film ephemera, and is a core editor of the peer-reviewed journal *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*.

Rahaab Allana is the curator/publisher of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in New Delhi, and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society in London. He has curated several exhibits, edited and contributed to national and international publications, and worked closely in museums and galleries such as The Brunei Gallery (London), Rencontres d’Arles (Espace Van Gogh), and the Rubin Museum (NY), among others. He also teaches an annual diploma course on the history of photography at Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai. Rahaab is the Founding Editor of PIX, one of India’s first theme-based photography quarterlies, and is the author of *Filmi Jagat: Shared Universe of Early Hindi Cinema*.

Sudeep Chaudhuri is a graphic designer, scenographer, and educator. He graduated from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad and established the design studio OH! in 2002. Based in New Delhi, Sudeep likes to experiment and develop narratives across disciplines.

Georg Wirsching is an artist, photographer, and illustrator with a bachelor's degree in Visual Communications from Loyola College, Chennai. He is the current CEO and creative head of Wirsching Enterprises, a family-run firm managing the Wirsching Archive, which consists of photographic negatives and prints spanning his grandfather Josef Wirsching's life and work in German and Indian cinema between the mid 1920's and late 1960's.

Georg also teaches art and design to a growing group of young students at The Paradise School, a privately run Cambridge-affiliated institution based in Goa, India.

The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts (AFA) is a Registered Charitable Trust in New Delhi (India), dedicated to the preservation and study of the cultural history of India. Ebrahim Alkazi, the Foundation's Chairman and Director, has amassed a private collection of 19th-century photographs known as The Alkazi Collection of Photography (ACP). The Alkazi Collection of Photography is housed in the AFA, which carries out research on this extensive holding in preparation for a continuing series of scholarly publications and exhibitions.

Projects / Processes: Volume I

Improvising History: Archival Negotiations and Memory in Prashant Panjiar's *The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing*
by Arnav Adhikari

A Cinematic Imagination: Josef Wirsching and The Bombay Talkies
by Debashree Mukherjee

Project Head: Kanika Anand
Editors: Nandita Jaishankar & Arnav Adhikari
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