

Profile of Neyveli S. Radhakrishna
Indian violinist who dreamed up a one-of-a-kind
instrument

By David Templeton



DREAM MACHINE: Radhakrishna.

It's a warm, humid night in Berkeley, California, and the barnlike interior of the legendary world-music club Ashkenaz is filled with adventurous music lovers, gathered for a performance by the Indo-European jazz-fusion ensemble Ahimsa. As the lights dim and the audience watches the entrance of the four ensemble members—South Indian violinist Neyveli S. Radhakrishna, jazz guitarist Matthias Müller, and percussionists Udai Mazumdar and R. Yogaraja—someone from the back row loudly stage-whispers the question “What kind of instrument is *that*?”

There's no doubt to which instrument the whisperer is referring.

As the musicians settle onto cushions—this is a band that plays while sitting on the floor—Radhakrishna cradles a strange futuristic device resembling a giant tuning fork, wired with what appear to be violin, cello, and double bass strings. Resembling a high-school science project more than a violin, the sleek, shiny thingamabob has captured the imagination of the crowd before Radhakrishna has played a note.

Once Ahimsa does begin to play—an intoxicating collision of Indian Carnatic music and experimental modern jazz—the oddness of Radhakrishna's electric double violin gives way to the realization that, no matter how many necks the thing has, it's clearly in the hands of a virtuoso.

Talking to Radhakrishna about his music is like having a conversation with a fortune cookie. His use of English is as creative and whimsical as his choice of instrument. Describing Ahimsa, which he and Müller formed eight years ago after a night of spontaneous guitar-violin jamming, Radhakrishna says, “Our music is not strictly Indian, and not strictly Western, but together always, not alone,” apparently meaning the music is a hybrid of influences performed, not by soloists, but by musicians committed to making something special as a tight, collaborative unit.

A classically trained violinist, Radhakrishna—Radha, as many call him—is a sought-after session player in India, where his day job is playing on various CD, movie, and TV projects. While he has played plenty of solo gigs, the kind of relationship he has with his fellow Ahimsa players appears to be the perfect environment for a player of the double violin.

“I enjoy playing solo, but, of course, I also *love* playing with Ahimsa,” he says, giggling wildly (something he does often when asked a question that amuses him). “Someday I would like to play my double violin with an orchestra. I could play one of Mozart’s double violin concertos—all by myself.

“I plan to do something like that someday.”

Radhakrishna is full of ideas, the boldest of which is the double violin itself. Inspired by a photo of an acoustic double violin he saw as a young man in a magazine article about famed musician Ravi Shankar, Radha launched a years-long search for a double violin of his own.

“The day I saw the picture, that instrument was in my mind, and it never went away,” he says. “Always somewhere in the corner of my brain was that picture of the double violin. I was very curious about it. Sometimes I dreamed about it.”

His search yielded a recommendation that he look up John Jordan, a maker of electric violins in Concord, California. Recalls Radha, “I e-mailed John and wrote, ‘Can you make me a double violin?’ and the next day I got the reply: ‘Yes.’”

The resulting violin took five years and hundreds of e-mails and phone calls, with Radha an active participant in the creation of the instrument. “I wanted something I could play while sitting down, not standing,” he says, “and that made the design more difficult.”

The completed violin has a treble neck and a bass neck, which he plays with a combination of violin and cello bows, trading back and forth as needed.

“I like to try out my own weird ideas,” he says with a giggle. “I record them to see what they sound like. Some of it has been very crazy. I always have new ideas of what to try.”

The cello and double bass strings on the bass neck are one such idea.

“To me, it sounded beautiful,” he says. “I used it on a soundtrack for a French movie being filmed in India, and they were shocked at how good it sounded. It was an experiment, and it was a good result. I like to challenge myself, but I know it is difficult, always taking risks all the time. Fortunately, my band members in Ahimsa are a little strange, too, so they like my crazy ideas.”

Radhakrishna promises there will be more “crazy ideas” in the future, but he is careful not to reveal too much too soon.

“I have dreams, but I am careful not to talk about my dreams,” he says, giggling again. “You see, every time I dream—my dreams come true.”
