

# relix

**Ben Harper**

BEACON  
OF  
LIGHT

**Wendell Brunious**

PRESERVATION  
HALL'S  
NEW  
MUSICAL  
DIRECTOR

**Duane Betts**

BRINGING  
IT  
ALL  
BACK  
HOME



**JOSEPH  
RUSTON KELLY  
TRACY NELSON**

**BARTEES  
STRANGE**

**BELLE  
& SEBASTIAN**

**GRATEFUL  
DEAD '73**



# The Revivalists

HIGH-ENERGY  
ROCK-AND-ROLL  
WITH A  
JAMBAND SOUL

Issue 329 | July\_August 2023  
\$6.99 www.relix.com



7 25274 25199 5



**▶ WHEN YOU THINK** about Indian classical music, it's likely the sitar that you visualize—Ravi Shankar, sitting cross-legged and mesmerizing the crowds at the Monterey Pop Festival or the Concert for Bangladesh. Debashish Bhattacharya has done much to expand that perception, however. The 60-year-old musician from Kolkata, West Bengal, in India, is the leading proponent of Hindustani slide guitar, a virtuoso whose flawless technique combines the traditions of Indian raga with contemporary elements to create something wholly new and exciting. For most of his life, Bhattacharya has been perfecting and refining his concepts—one listen to any of his recordings is all it takes to become convinced that the guitar is as viable within Indian music as any other instrument.

“[My] transposing of music to the guitar didn't start with any hint of sitar,” Bhattacharya says. “When my parents, who were classical singers, gave me a Hawaiian guitar at the age of three or four, I started mimicking their voices. That is how I started learning. You hear it and remember and play it accurately on your guitar. Then I found some more interesting soundscapes and I learned how to pluck the guitar to make it sound Indian. Sitar and sarod were always around me to inspire me to develop my style of guitar, but not to play the sitar.”

Despite his pedigree as one of the most honored modern Indian musicians, Bhattacharya has always kept an ear open to Western music. At various times, he's collaborated with bluegrass Dobro master Jerry Douglas, electric slide great Derek Trucks and fusion titan John McLaughlin. Bhattacharya was, for a time, even a member of the latter's band Remember Shakti, appearing on the group's 2001 album *Saturday Night in Bombay*.

“I had played with [Shakti's tabla drummer] Zakir Hussain in 1993 at Harvard University,”



## DEBASHISH BHATTACHARYA

On *The Sound of the Soul*, the Hindustani slide-guitar wiz seamlessly welds the essence of Ali Akbar Khan's sarod-based music to his own modern guitar style.

By  
JEFF TAMARKIN

Bhattacharya recalls, “and then, in 2001, I received a message from Zakir to be in Shakti. It was an eye-opening experience, a humbling experience. John collaborates with musicians from all over the world, including Indian musicians of our generation, and he is just amazing.”

On Bhattacharya's newest release, *The Sound of the Soul*, the focus takes a different turn altogether. This time, the guitarist pays tribute to another mentor, the late sarod genius Ali Akbar Khan. Over the course of four ragas—the longest of which, “To His Lotus Feet,” extends to nearly 40 minutes—Bhattacharya and his chosen collaborators, percussionists Padmashree Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri (who plays the tabla) and Pandit Akhilesh Gundecha (who plays the

pakhavaj, a barrel-shaped drum), honor the revered innovator. Bhattacharya performs on the chaturangui, a 24-stringed hollow-neck Indian slide guitar that he designed himself.

“It has two rhythm strings in the front and six open strings to tune in different tunings, and then two supporting drone strings and 14 resonating strings,” Bhattacharya says, describing the instrument's configuration. “You can say it's kind of an orchestra in one body. It has a lot of different soundscape mixtures, and each set of strings supports the other. It makes the music sound very easy and very busy.”

Bhattacharya has developed other variations on the standard guitar to suit his needs. “I learned Western-style playing, how to use the tuning and staccato, and a little bit of the

chords and harmonies,” he says, “but it didn't have the [Indian] sound; that majestic voice was always absent. So even when I was a little boy, I started going to concerts and trying to find the DNA of the sound, which I then mixed in my laboratory and brought into a bigger, stronger body.”

On *The Sound of the Soul*, Bhattacharya seamlessly welds the essence of Khan's sarod-based music to his own modern guitar style. The disciple feels that he owes the master at least that much. “He's my guru's guru, which means he's a musical grandfather of mine,” Bhattacharya says. “In India, he is one of the pioneering, legendary stalwart artists, but when he started living in the U.S. and teaching, five or six generations of students have learned from him. He was very humble and polite and simple. You can say he had a fashion without any fashion. That kind of personality probably doesn't attract media as much as other sparkling, vibrant artists attract. But his contributions in the West—teaching and collaborating with [violinist] Yehudi Menuhin, with George Harrison, with lots of other '60s star artists—brought a brotherhood of Indian classical music in the land of America.”

Bhattacharya, too, has devoted much of his time to teaching, to furthering the art of Indian guitar. “I come from a Bengali Brahman pandit's family,” he says. “Our ancestors used to teach for free. So teaching is in my blood. My life and my instrument, my way of playing, my approach to the music—everything is totally unique, even if it is traditional. It is something that people have never heard before. I want to share the uniqueness with my audience, with my students, through teaching. I want to convey a message that the acoustic sound still matters. It is not all about the gadgets. There is still a world of acoustic instruments, and the glory of the acoustic instrument is still there.”