

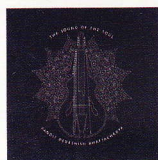


TOP  
OF THE  
WORLD  
TRACK 5

## Debashish Bhattacharya

### The Sound of the Soul

Abstract Logix



Debashish Bhattacharya is one of the world's great musical innovators. He's a composer and virtuoso guitarist, who transformed the Indian music scene by designing a guitar with the sound and microtonal range that he needed. As a

young man, he was a fan of Hawaiian steel guitar, while also sharing his family's love of Indian classical styles, so he created a lap steel capable of handling them both. The *chaturangui*, which he plays here, has three extra sets of strings – two drone strings and 14 resonating strings on the bass side and two rhythm strings on the treble side – making it ideally suited to the fusion projects for which Bhattacharya has become famed. He has played with everyone from *kora* star Ballaké Sissoko to that unique ukulele exponent Benny Chong and showed off more of his global influences on 2013's *Beyond the Ragasphere* album, alongside the celebrated dobro player Jerry Douglas and that remarkable guitarist John McLaughlin.

He has also recorded albums of *ragas*, and this latest set, dedicated to the *sarod* virtuoso Ali Akbar Khan, is largely influenced by his Indian roots. This time round, Bhattacharya is accompanied only by percussion – he is joined on the first track by Akhilesh Gundeckha on the double-headed *pakhawaj* drum and on the following three tracks by Swapan Chaudhuri on *tabla*. The opening 'Ever the Flame Burns' is a thrilling reminder of his guitar skills. It starts slowly, then builds up into a rapid-fire work-out that demonstrates not just the speed but the control and emotion in his exuberant, inventive playing. Next comes a real *tour de force*, 'To

His Lotus Feet', a hypnotic meditation that lasts for over 39 minutes. It starts out as a thoughtful, gently trance-inducing and meandering piece, with the *tabla* not making an appearance for the first 15 minutes, after which Bhattacharya slowly builds to a punchy finale, as he furiously improvises around the repeated phrases. The title-track continues in the same mood, with its sturdy melody and exuberant improvised flourishes, while the final 'Colors of Joy' shows a different side to his work. This is a cheerful, charming and melodic instrumental influenced by both Western and Hawaiian styles – though with the *tabla* still giving the music an Indian edge.

The fact that he is not joined by Western celebrities may mean that this is not quite such an obviously commercial, cross-over project as some of his earlier work, but you don't have to be an Indian classical aficionado to appreciate his playing. There's a real exhilaration and passion in his guitar work, whether he is improvising around a theme like some great jazz or blues musician, settling back for a more gentle but still intense passage, or being driven to ever more frantic playing as he spars with a percussionist. As John McLaughlin declared, "Debashish is the master of the slide guitar. He has no equal."

ROBIN DENSELOW  
TRACK TO TRY

## Q&A

### Debashish Bhattacharya

**The Sound of the Soul is another reminder that Debashish is one of the finest, most original guitarists on the planet. But why, I asked him, has he recorded a (largely) solo set influenced by Indian classical styles now?**

It's the middle of my career in which I have had lots of successful collaboration. My vision is to open the door to Hindustani classical music and world music through collaborations as well as recording traditional styles. My first five records since 1992 were in the top list of Indian classical music albums, and in 2008 I had a modern Indian band using my compositions and American musicians on guitar, bass and drums to tour the USA. I can say there was always a balance between solo classical Indian shows and collaborations.

**The album is a tribute to the late Ali Akbar Khan. What does his music mean to you?**

His life and music, and his father's life and music, [are] the main inspiration to my life and music.

**He was a sarod virtuoso – did he influence your playing?**

Yes of course. It's his pull of musical emotion, his improvisation, his style of thinking – he was my master.

**The album was recorded for John McLaughlin's label. Will you work with him again?**

It's a very loving moment as he took this project and released it on his label. I'm hoping to play and record with him again.

