

COMBUSTIBLES

“Classic Rock and India – Many Connections”

A Commentary by Nissim Ezekiel (The Combustibles)

As classic rock became the defining sound of the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the fascination of bands such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones with India is part of music history. From the sitar of maestro Ravi Shankar, to the mysticism of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Meher Baba, a range of diverse musicians from George Harrison to Brian Jones to Pete Townshend found themselves attracted to the mysterious vibes of a famous culture. Far less is known about the thriving local rock scene (in large cities such as Bombay and Calcutta) into which Robert Plant and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin stumbled onto in the early 1970s. Their impromptu live jam in 1972 with local musicians at the Slip Disc club in south Bombay is now part of rock legend.

It was this surprisingly active live music scene that The Combustibles were an integral part of and well-known as the Bombay (now called Mumbai) representatives at the first and second editions of the national Simla Beat Contest (sponsored by Imperial Tobacco Company-ITC) in December 1968 & 1969. During that time many Indian bands thrived on playing covers of classic hits, but The Combustibles were unique in also featuring multiple original compositions in their live performances. Driven by the creativity of songwriter/vocalist Everett Perry, songs such as *Watch Her*, *Some Peace of Mind*, *There's A Love*, *Hey Doc*, *Cold December* and *She Says* (their first original) became a staple of the band's set-list.

The music of The Combustibles is now seeing the light of day again after four decades due to the perseverance of the CEO and Founder of Harkit Records (UK), Michael Fishberg. Having heard the music of the band in a record store in Stockholm in early 2012, Mr. Fishberg – a long time visitor to India - located members of the band after a year-long search and accessed the best available vinyl copies of the original 1971 releases available with them (as the master recordings had long since become unavailable even to the band). Re-mastering of the original recordings of *Watch Her & Some Peace of Mind* by Classical Record Productions in London resulted in acceptance of the reissue as part of the Record Store Day (UK) 2013 list and its eventual release as a 45 rpm special edition vinyl single on July 5, 2013.

In a feature on The Combustibles in the August 2013 issue of *Shindig! Magazine* (UK), editor Jon 'Mojo' Mills points out that in the case of *Watch Her* "...There's some rave-up Pretty Things bass and definite Jagger/May vocals, but the careening beat is pure US garage..." while "...Some Peace of Mind...rides on a delightfully inept surf-meets-12-bar riff with further angst ridden anti-authority vocals."

The depth and diversity of the live rock scene in Bombay and Calcutta is the focus of journalist Sidharth Bhatia's forthcoming book on the subject – an excerpt of which is being made public for the first time during India Music Week. The web-site of The Combustibles (<http://www.thecombustiblesband.com>) - which just went "live" two months ago - provides an in-depth look and rare images of the band going back to 1966 but also provides insights into the numerous active live bands of the time and the extensive network of clubs, social occasions and concerts at which they regularly performed. Links in the website to a set of late 1960s-early 1970s articles from the Statesman Group's *JS Magazine* – which catered to the country's modern young generation of the time – provide a fascinating look at this active rock music scene and its main stars.

Readers may be intrigued by some of the band names from that era, e.g. Human Bondage, Lovegrove Purification Plant, Velvette Fogg, Riot Squad, Unit 4+1, Beat 4, The Pentagon, The Innerlite, The Mystiks, The Savages, Twilight Zone and Atomic Forest! And these bands performed at clubs such as Trinca's, Blue Fox and Moulin Rouge in Calcutta and Bombay venues including Blow-Up, Blue Nile, The Other Room, Bullock Cart, Talk of The Town and Venice. In fact, for six nights a week for months on end in 1971-72 The Combustibles went to HELL (the club!) to perform past the midnight hour!

But for the bands and musicians of that era, limited access to good imported equipment and the absence of even basic tools such as soundboards and stage monitors meant that every night was often a grind. To this day, I truly don't recall exactly how The Combustibles actually sounded on stage and what the audience heard. George Taylor, our bass guitarist and brother of Lionel who played lead, summed it up best in a feature story on The Combustibles in the September 2013 issue of *Rolling Stone (India)*. "Our band was always a labor of love. The shows we played were just for the fun of it, so once we grew older we realized that there was not enough in it for everyone and that it wasn't a sustainable profession."

But from this scene emerged talented musicians who still managed to make an impact on the international music scene. Louis (aka Louiz) Banks, the famous jazz pianist and composer – who played alongside The Combustibles in Calcutta and Kathmandu in 1968 - became a 2009 Grammy-nominated musician who has performed and collaborated with global greats such as John McLaughlin and Dizzy Gillespie. Biddu, the famous England-based music producer, composer, songwriter and singer began his career in the mid-1960s in Bombay as a member of one of India's first live rock bands, The Trojans and performed solo later as The Lone Trojan. As is widely known, his international breakthrough came in 1974 with "Kung-Fu Fighting" performed by Carl Douglas; the song became one of the best-selling singles of all time with over eleven million records sold. Finally, Reynold D'Silva – founder and MD of Silva Screen Music Group - is a London based independent record company which is home to one of the world's leading film and television specialist soundtrack labels, Silva Screen Records. Founded in 1986, the group retains a catalogue of over 500 titles and over 10,000 master recordings and has offices in New York and Paris. Reynold originally played bass guitar in 1972 with Brief Encounter in Bombay at the Blow Up – a Taj Mahal Hotel club where The Combustibles played regularly in 1970-71.

Its nostalgic to imagine what might have been if the rock musicians from that era in India – more than four decades ago – had better access to the tools of the trade and were able to earn enough to keep them involved in the music they loved. The Combustibles have been fortunate that two of their original songs have been rediscovered and are accessible again on the global music stage – yes, including on Amazon.com in Japan! But is there more? Could Mick and the Stones be tempted to put a new interpretation and swagger to *Watch Her* and *Some Peace of Mind*, bringing them into the 21st Century? Or perhaps John Fogerty might consider covering an original song by a Bombay band that itself featured numerous CCR covers in its live set – and whose lead singer was repeatedly *Born on the Bayou*? Would Crosby, Stills and Nash consider lending their heavenly harmonies to a new version of *There's A Love*? Can Rod Stewart sing about the failed seduction in *Cold December*? And will Joe Cocker still have the heart to sing Everett Perry's blues in *Hey Doc*?

Only time will tell where this journey is headed.