



# A Different Beat

The sound of music was at its best, the artistes in their element and the setting was enchanting no less—this was the Rajasthan International Folk Festival held in Jodhpur.

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Officially sick of our well-worn playlists on iTunes, we arrived at the conclusion that finding new music from different genres is an insurmountable challenge. As teens of the '90s, we still pay regular homage to AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and other rock legends, offer devoted ears to early and new swing bands, and turn to jazz on evenings that feature wine. Anything beyond these genres requires the rigour of vetting Google's top suggestions, trying to make it to Indie gigs in town and inheriting music from charitable friends. A visit to Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF) this year opened the doors to a *Narnia*-esque world of folk fusion. We are hooked!

Started in 2007, as a not-for-profit partnership between the Mehrangarh Museum Trust and Jaipur Virasat Foundation, RIFF is held over five days in October, when the moon is at its fullest and roundest best. As a stupendous patron of arts and culture, the scion of the Jodhpur royal family, His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh, backs the festival with extraordinary support. For starters, the remarkable Mehrangarh Fort is the main venue of the festival, and the close-by Rao Jodha Park and Jaswant Thada offer a stage for the late night and morning performances, respectively. A friend of the Jodhpur royals, Sir Mick Jagger is another celebrated patron who has previously made his way to the festival. While RIFF was started as a platform to promote the rich traditional folk music of Rajasthan, over the years it has evolved to an event that attracts artistes from all over the world.

The sounds created by the fusion of international and Rajasthani instruments and singers are truly remarkable.

This year was no different. True to the unstinting spirit of RIFF, musicians from Spain, Portugal, USA, Reunion Islands, Iran and other countries came together with stalwarts of Rajasthan folk music to create nothing short of magic. The last evening of 'rustle', curated by the award-winning percussionist, Gene Peterson, aptly underlined the essence of the festival. Together with world-famous beat boxer Tom Thum and Rajasthanian musicians Feroze Khan, Khete Khan and their troupe, he left the audience with an unforgettable experience. The Old Zenana courtyard, where the main stage was set up, reverberated with unheard symphonies—the *khartal* players in a back and forth duet with Thum and Peterson—eventually bringing together everyone in the group, including vocalists, and sounds of the *bhapang*, flute and other instruments. Other musicians like Tiloun Ramoune (Reunion Islands), Tanxuguerias (Spain) and Makan Ashgvari (Iran) came back on the stage with Peterson and others to give the audience another flavour of their genius, showing that musical boundaries are rather impermanent.

Speaking on collaborating to make never-heard-before music, Peterson was enthralled during a practice session with the Rajasthanian *khartal* players. "I was watching Khete Khan's fingers closely when he was playing the *khartal*. His fingers flew with such dexterity, denying any sense of human ability. That's the thrilling part of making music with new people."

Photography: JODHPUR RIFF/LOJ



Celebrate music from around the globe at RIFF in the picturesque setting of culturally rich Jodhpur

Music apart, it is the fort that lends itself to transporting the listener to another world. The mammoth wall lit in subtle hues of reds, blues and yellows to create the right mood, and venues ranging from *chhatris*, gardens to courtyards, the experience of RIFF was only complete because of its address. The performances and the grand backdrop were not exciting only for the audience. Artistes who had stepped into India for the first time were left speechless—especially by the large sand coloured fort rising from a craggy hilltop, over 400 feet from the ground. Peterson called it a 'humbling' experience. "One feels like walking around with reverence and speaking in hushed tones. But instead we are told to be loud, experiment and have fun. To me, this is the biggest joy. It's so new, and yet it feels like home," said the award-winning percussionist. Not new to Rajasthan's forts and Mehrangarh, folk singer Sumitra Devi felt 'respected and honoured' playing here.

It was the fort and the experience of India that truly fascinated the artistes. Born from the gold rush in Australia, gritty crimes and formidable jails, Jenny M. Thomas and her group, Bush Gothic, brought the soulful bush songs to the Chokelau Gardens of Jodhpur. When asked what was the best part of playing in Mehrangarh, Thomas said, "Since the music here comes from times of the gold rush and British immigration, there is a strange resonance and understanding in this audience as we have similar backgrounds." The resonance was indeed mutual.

A week after coming back from RIFF, still reeling from having watched heart altering music, we were reminiscing about the favourite performances. Bush Gothic, Sumitra Devi and Tom Thum's entertaining beat boxing jostled to be on top. It eventually didn't matter, as all musicians from this year were already part of the playlist.

## NAVIGATOR

### Getting In and Around Jodhpur

Jodhpur is well connected by air, rail and road. The airport is serviced by multiple domestic airlines that connect to major cities in India. The closest international airport is Jaipur or for better connectivity, New Delhi. Jodhpur also has robust rail connections to different parts of the country. Road travel is recommended from other cities in Rajasthan or the nearby Gujarat nodes.

### Stay

True to its reputation of excellent Rajasthanian hospitality, Jodhpur has a number of high-end and budget accommodation that is close to the Mehrangarh Fort and nearby venues. Raas Jodhpur, the luxury heritage hotel, lies at the foot of the hill on which Mehrangarh stands. Close access and a taste of royal living to unwind are reasons to pick the hotel ([www.raasjodhpur.com](http://www.raasjodhpur.com)). Immersed in the world of polo, the sport of the royals of Jodhpur, is the Polo Heritage. The hotel's spacious rooms, distinct polo theme and warm hospitality make up for the short drive that one needs to take to reach Mehrangarh ([www.poloheritage.com](http://www.poloheritage.com)).

### Book tickets to RIFF

RIFF will be held over October 10 to 14 in 2019. Book in advance on [www.jodhpurriff.org](http://www.jodhpurriff.org); approximate price, ₹12,500 for festival pass; ₹5,000 for day pass.