

Trichy returns

Elliott Lefko

Trichy Sankaran is back. After a year absence following his controversial exit from York, the popular Indian music professor is once again coaxing rhythms through the halls and classrooms of York.

Sankaran originally came to York in 1971 at the invitation of former Fine Arts Dean Jules Heller, and Associate Dean David P. Silcox. Along with singer Jon Higgins, Sankaran was offered a visiting professorship to set up a South Indian music program.

Although only 29, Sankaran had already proved himself one of India's leading percussionists. His excellent work on the mridangam, a South Indian drum, and his university background, including a degree in economics, made him a valuable acquisition for the fledgling world music program at York.

The program was well received, and what is usually a two or three year stay for a visiting professorship stretched into eight years. During that period Higgins became the Assistant Dean of Fine Arts, and Sankaran took over as head of the South Indian music program, and was promoted to associate professor.

In June 1979 after a successful eight year period Sankaran's contractually limited appointment expired. Although pressed by the Music Department, the administration declined to offer

Time of happiness

Sankaran an 'on-line' professorship, guaranteeing his future at York.

A disappointed Sankaran took his case to the faculty union (YUFA). In July a grievance committee ruled 4-1 in his favour. However the administration ignored their decision citing budgetary cutbacks and a freeze on new appointments.

Undaunted, YUFA took Sankaran's case along with a number of others, and called for an arbitration board. The committee was formed and

finally, almost one year after they met, they ruled in favour of all YUFA's cases.

During the months that the arbitration board met, Sankaran went from a time of despair to one of happiness. At first it was difficult with no cheques coming in and two kids and a wife to support. He taught a number of students privately, and tried to give concerts more often. in

Arbitration victory

January, during one of these concerts at a conference in San Diego, he was spotted by the head of San Diego State's World Music Department. He knew Sankaran from India, knew of his plight at York, and offered him a job as a visiting professor.

Sankaran accepted and gave lectures and demonstration from January until June, when word of his arbitration victory came. Although San Diego offered a visiting professorship for a year or two more, and even though the weather was "intriguing", he

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bowed to his desire to complete what he had started and accepted an 'on-line' position at York.

Sankaran is proud of the program he has built. He had always hoped that it would become integrated into other programs and not stick out like an exotic sideline. He feels he has succeeded.

"The Indian program integrates with many other courses offered at York," offers Sankaran. "People who study with me come with different desires. They come to improve their rhythmic perception and skills. It is know that India has the most elaborate system on rhythms. In the West there is a lacking in the area of rhythm. Student studying with me will not become great players overnight, but the courses will have a great impact on their musical abilities. Whether it's a pianist who senses his rhythms improving, settling in his hands, his mind, his body, or a

dancer hoping to improve his rhythmic abilities, it is a chance for students to internalize rhythms, to study music mostly through perception and to develop their inner abilities without reading music. And it is also for people from other disciplines, jazz, electronic music. There are certain similarities. And then there is the music of India course, a cultural course. There are people who want to know about this culture, the tradition, the history. There are a lot of potential concerning my contribution to York's musicology program."

Packing his drums up for a concert at Wesleyan University this week, a happy energetic Sankaran spoke about how it felt to be back. "I like to both teach and perform. York gives me the opportunity to do both. It's been my sincere desire that having established this program, which is a kind of a rarity, in North America, I wanted to see that it be given a permanent status in the music program. People are really drawn to the program for its various interests. That makes me very happy when I see so many people having interests in this program. Many people ask me, 'You being such a fine performer,

Student speaks

why do you teach?' I tell them because it gives me as much pleasure as performing."

During the summer when it was announced that Sankaran would be back, both Alan lessem, Chairman of the Music Department and Sankaran, were worried that there wasn't enough time for students to enroll in Sankaran's course. However, the opposite has happened. Too many want to get into his courses and he has had to stretch the size of classes and turn down some.

Clara Henderson has been studying with Sankaran for 3 years. Along with many others she signed petitions and argued with the administration when Sankaran was let go. She speaks for a number of students when she recalls how happy she felt when Sankaran was returned to his classroom.



A smiling Sankaran and the sound of a different drum.

"When I came to York I didn't know what I wanted to do," says Henderson. "I had taken music when I was younger, but I didn't enjoy it. It wasn't exciting. I took a music course with Sankaran, just basic rhythmic exercises. I liked it. So then I signed for a drumming course and a signing course. I found music a lot more exciting that I had remember it to be. For me it was easier to learn because it was taught by rote — by imitation— rather than by

Very approachable

reading. I was able to conceptualize it more clearly. At first it was difficult, but it was challenging."

"Studying with Sankaran is a unique opportunity, because of the caliber of musician that he is. It's admirable for him to teach Westerners his music."

Sankaran is very approachable according to Henderson. "He's willing to help you figure things out. He's very patient. Studying with him I got a taste of Indian culture. He's very congenial in letting you experience his

culture and what it means to him. In our multi-cultural society, I believe that it is an experience in itself. It helps you learn more about yourself."

The next chance for the York community to catch Sankaran in action will be at the annual Tyagaraja Festival next month, in the McLaughlin Junior Common Room. Sankaran explains the significance of the Festival honouring one of the great composers of classical South Indian music.

"Tyagaraja composed thousands of songs in honour of Lord Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, whom he worshipped. In India, where music, philosophy and religion are intertwined, his songs were tremendously popular because of their simplicity, their easy-flowing nature and profound philosophy. He felt that music itself was a form of yoga and believed that when music is practised with devotion, it is the easiest path for realization," says Sankaran.

Trichy Sankaran is a man definitely on that path.

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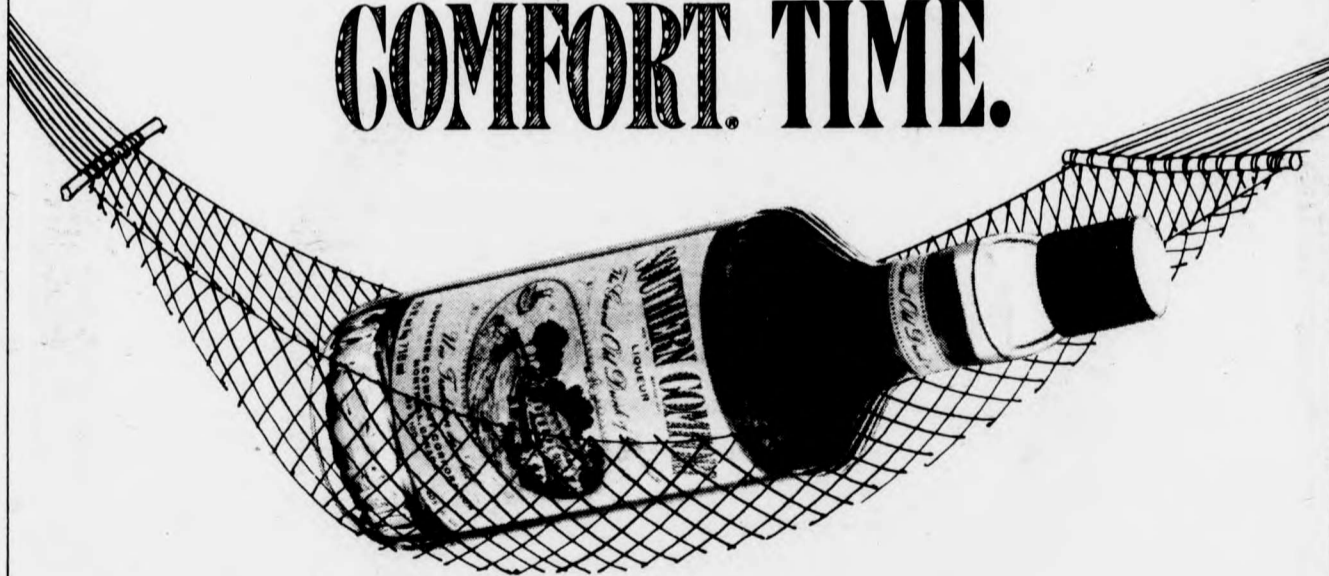
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