

NYC musician expands repertoire

Murgai has composed for "The Yes Men Fix the World" showing at the Human Rights Film Festival June 25

By ELA DUTT

Neel Murgai knew music was in his blood even as he pored over civil engineering texts at Georgia Tech. Today, he is a multi-instrument performer, composer, and teacher in New York City.

Several of his latest compositions are in the feature-length documentary "The Yes Men Fix the World," which premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, and will soon be released on HBO. It is scheduled to show June 25 at the Human Rights Film Festival going on in New York City.

His bombastic combination of Indian wedding bands, bhangra dhol, and sitar laced with New Orleans Big Band stirs emotions behind tragedies ranging from Bhopal to Hurricane Katrina and plays through the film. Snippets can be heard on Murgai's website www.neelmurgai.com.

His music has also been featured in the BBC series, "Holidays in the Danger Zone," and the TBS programs "Women of the Ink" and "Spotlights."

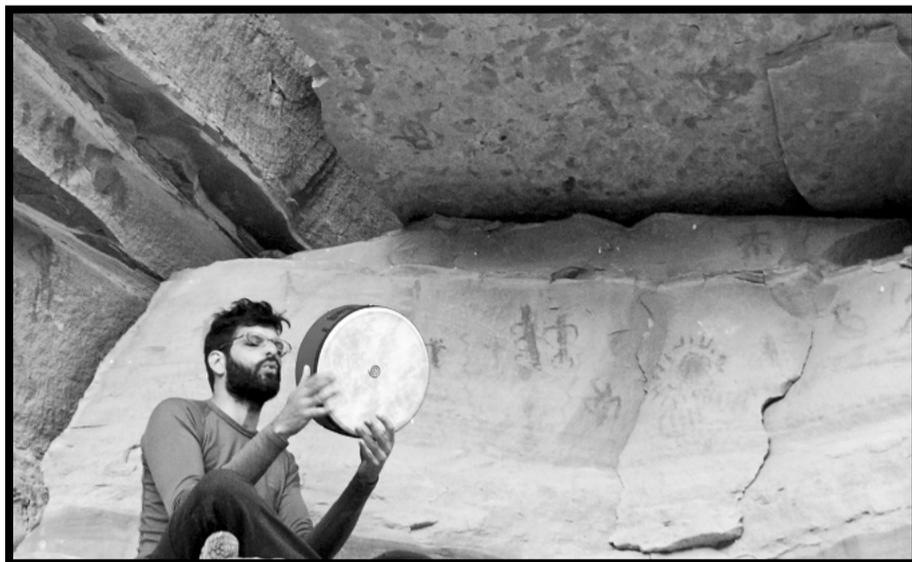
But "The Yes Men," directed by Andy Bichlbaum, Mike Bonanno, Kurt Engfehr, has gotten the most attention. The site for the documentary says it is a "screwball true story" that follows a couple of "gonzo political activists" as they infiltrate the world of big business and pull off outrageous pranks that highlight the ways corporate greed is destroying the planet.

The political activists create fake Web sites of big corporations and post stories that appear to be true in a bid to shame them. In 2004, on the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal gas leak disaster, they set up a fake Web site, www.dowethics.com, for The Dow Chemical Company, the owner of the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal.

The BBC invited them to speak as representatives of the company where they announced a \$12 billion compensation for Bhopal victims. The story was picked up as true by several media outlets, topping Google News and affecting the company's stock values, until in a few hours it was discovered to be fake. True to form, BBC then invited the directors back to talk about why they did it. They said they wanted to highlight what Dow could be doing.

"Yes Men will have a theatrical run in New York and Los Angeles soon which will qualify it for the Oscars," Murgai told Desi Talk in a recent interview.

He composed about half the music in the movie, about 30 minutes, he said. As for how he got to be involved, Murgai says, "It happened through friends of friends of Yes Men. They are



Left, Musician Neel Murgai, on a 25-day whitewater rafting trip in 2007, decides to take a break to commune with the Grand Canyon. Below, Still from the movie "The Yes Men Fix the World," portraying Bhopal victims jokingly strangling the Yes Men for their prank.



amazing and I am really happy to have worked with them. They have a strong political message."

"With instrumental music, sometimes it is hard to represent the political message," he concedes. "But when you are on this kind of project, it is really exciting. I was able to convey that message - the two places where tragedy happens, Bhopal and New Orleans."

He decided to bring the music of the legendary brass bands in New Orleans with the wedding bands of India. "There is something that combines the two." He knew of an Indian band in New York made up of Jazz musicians called Red Bharaat Festival.

"So I composed the theme which had dhol, sitar and horns. It references the New Orleans brass band music, Indian folk/Bollywood music and a bit of 'Mission Impossible' is in it," Murgai laughs.

The score is repeated several times during the movie and is also the one that plays with the credit roll. The movie won the Audience Award at the Berlin Music Festival in February 2009, he said.

In the past year, Murgai has put together the Neel Murgai Ensemble (NME) composed of the sitar, tabla, viola, and cello. "Its an instrumentation I have been thinking about for a number of years," he says. The cello

and tabla work really well together because the base of the tabla is just beneath the cello, he notes. And the viola and sitar go well. "What they produce could belong anywhere in the world." The ensemble has released a debut CD "Audionomic Stimulus Package." Recently it opened up for Pandit Krishna Bhatt accompanied by tabla maestro Anindo Chatterjee in New York City.

Being an earning musician can be tough, Murgai agrees, especially with the recession, which has dried up sources for extra earnings.

"But I do support myself with my music." Apart from performing, he has taught at after-school

programs in New York, focusing on percussion instruments. He says he uses mathematical elements in the tabla to play games with kids. He does workshops at the collegiate level.

A 1994 civil engineering graduate from Georgia Tech, Murgai knew he was not going to end up working in that field.

"While at Georgia Tech, I spent more time playing guitar and hosted an international music show on radio called "Continental Drift."

That set me on the path to music," he says. While in school, he saved up by working odd jobs and went to India, living there for a year-and-a-half between 1994-96, to learn the sitar.

Murgai has toured around the world with the Bill T. Jones Dance Company, performing and collaborating in their multimedia show, "Blind Date." Other artists he has worked with include Samir Chatterjee, Raz Mesinai, Thurston Moore, Mission on Mars, Akim Funk Buddha, Loren Conners, Louis Bellogenis, Ted Mason, Cosmo Vinyl.

He has performed at venues ranging from the Lincoln Center and Kennedy Center to jazz clubs such as the Blue Note and at festivals around the U.S., including Art Wallah and Toronto's Masala! Mehndi! Masti! according to his Web site, www.neelmurgai.com.

Yankee Stadium's first wedding

By ELA DUTT

The new and classier Yankee Stadium will host its first wedding - that of Mike Rajendran and Joanna Rothschild on Aug. 21.

The two avid baseball fans began planning the event as the stadium was going to have its grand opening this April, the New York Daily News reports.

They plan to have 300 guests and will say their vows on the concourse overlooking the homeplate the paper said. Rajendran is a technology specialist and Rothschild has a clothes design and manufacturing company. Both live in Hartsdale in Westchester County.

Founder of Our Love Yoga, Rothschild, who teaches yoga, says on her Web site, "What began as a hobby and evolved into a lifestyle ultimately became a new profession after a trip to India."

Rajendran and Rothschild met four years ago when she was a waitress at a club according to the Daily News.

Their sports interests vary: Rajendran is a fan of the Lakers and the Raiders while



Rothschild loves the Giants. The Yankees is the only team the two agree they loved.

"The Yankees are the obsession we share," Rothschild is quoted saying in the paper.

Their honeymoon night is also going to be at the stadium, in the Delta SKY360 Suite, before they go to Costa Rica for their real honeymoon.

Rajendran says his family is

made up of Yankee fanatics like him.

And for Rothschild, the place holds memories of watching numerous games with her father.

"It means our wedding finally makes sense," Rothschild told Daily News.

"We're getting married in a place that just really exemplifies our entire relationship."