

THE REAL SECOND COMING

Photograph By HARSH MAN RAI

With its fresh and youthful sound, Indus Creed's appropriately titled new album *Evolve*, due out in the coming weeks, completes the band's remarkable transformation By BOBIN JAMES

STILL ON TOP OF THE ROCK
Tinaikar, Benegal, Balaporia, Kavi and Mistry (from left)

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UDAY BENEGAL MESSAGES ME AHEAD OF time to confirm our meeting and to ask if I would like some *chai*, since he's "going to be making some anyway." When I land up at his tastefully done-up apartment in Bandra, Mumbai for the interview, he is pottering around the kitchen in his flip-flops. Nothing about him – except perhaps the ear-piercings, and a new tattoo on the neck – gives the impression that he is the frontman for one of the most important bands in contemporary Indian rock.

Before he heads off to make the *chai*, Benegal leads me into his music room to listen to a few songs from Indus Creed's new album that releases in the coming weeks – their first, second or fourth, depending on how you look at it, and 16 years after the last studio album. And by the time the second song, "Come Around," blasts out of the speakers, it is pretty clear that the album name is rather appropriate – *Evolve*. This is a new band, despite the three original members – Benegal, guitarist Maresh Tinaikar and keyboardist Zubin Balaporia – and this most certainly is a new sound.

"The name comes from a wider sense of the world at large – the changing world, the changing band, the changing ideas, the changing sounds," explains Benegal. "Lyrically, it's introspective, but it's not navel-gazing. It's thinking, I've always imagined that to be the evolution of human beings. We have the power to think, which is what separates us from other species in nature."

The five tracks that Benegal played for me that evening, are a world apart from the swashbuckling guitar rock of the Rock Machine, the earliest avatar of the band. The new Indus Creed, with younger additions Jai Row Kavi on drums and Rushad Mistry on bass guitar, is more alt-rock or prog-rock than stadium-rock. "Come Around," for example, is an 8-minute space-y tune that doesn't adhere to the traditional verse/chorus/bridge structure. Incredibly layered, this track is in the same sonic space

as anything by, say, Porcupine Tree. And that is no surprise, nor an accident.

"Porcupine Tree's *In Absentia* is one of our favorite-sounding albums," says Benegal. "It's an album you wish you had created. And as much as the songs, I love the sound of the album." *In Absentia* is the album that the band wanted *Evolve* to sound like – "not sound like stylistically, but in terms of its sonic quality, its mixing and mastering," he says. And it is that very album that led Benegal to get in touch with Tim Palmer, the mixing engineer on *In Absentia*, and get him to work his magic on *Evolve*. Based out of Austin, Texas, Palmer has, over the years, worked with the likes of U2, Robert Plant, Mark Knopfler, Pearl Jam and Goo Goo Dolls. And as Indus Creed is ready to admit, he has made a world of difference to their sound. Palmer on his part is also very appreciative of the

favorites, but "Come Around" is certainly one of my favorites," he says. The lyrics – "Every time you kiss your child goodbye/ Are you reminded of the lullaby/ You used to sing to soothe the heart you'd chosen to deny" – were inspired by a conversation he had with an acquaintance who was estranged from his father.

Another sure-fire winner is the elegantly melodic and folksy "Fireflies." Since it was originally written for Whirling Kalapas, an acoustic side-project that Benegal and Tinaikar formed in September 2009, Benegal was reluctant to record it as Indus Creed. "The Whirling Kalapas version is very different – it's slower, mellower, all-acoustic. And in my head, I thought if Indus Creed did it, it would only sound like a rock version of a song written for a folk acoustic band, because that's how it was written," he says. But Balaporia had faith



Rock Machine at Mumbai's Rang Bhavan, ca. 1987

album. "The songs on this album have tremendous depth, both lyrically and melodically," he says. "The songs are hooky, but take you on a journey through some wonderful twists and turns."

Of the tracks, the exuberant and high-tempo "Dissolve," is the closest the new Indus Creed comes to its stadium-rock heritage, while "Bulletproof" is a 3-minute scorcher whose origins lay in a lyrical line that had been lingering in Benegal's head. "I was in a pissed-off mood and I had this line running through my head: 'Riddle my body with bullets of guilt.' It has a rhythmic cadence to it. So I picked up the guitar, worked at it and it became a song," he says. A compulsive reader, traveler and a devotee of the Vipassana form of meditation, Benegal is the "brains" in the band and the author of all the songs on the album. The dolorous "Come Around," a song about loss, anger and hope of return is the track he feels closest to. "I really don't talk about

that they would be able to sufficiently rework it to suit the new Indus Creed sound. "So we raised the tempo, changed the groove, lifted the energy and made it an Indus Creed track."

Evolve, when released in the coming weeks (the band had not finalized on the record label when we went into print, though it has been playing some of the songs in live concerts and has also been putting out teasers on the internet) is bound to help Indus Creed re-establish its credentials among its die-hard fans who have been looking for new material from the band for a long time. But it will also, in all probability, bring in a lot more new young fans to their concerts. For one of India's longest surviving rock bands that would be a big achievement.



Rock 'n' Roll Renegades

The sound of the new Indus Creed is a world apart from the swashbuckling guitar rock of Rock Machine and Indus Creed, seen here in various avatars through the years.



The band has existed in a variety of avatars for nearly three decades now. It began life as Rock Machine in 1984, a brainchild of South Mumbai kids Tinaikar and bass guitarist Mark Selwyn. Ian Santamaria on vocals, Aftab Currim on guitar, and Suresh Bhadrachia on drums were the other members. That line-up did not survive for long, and Uday Benegal stepped into Santamaria's shoes. Jayesh Gandhi replaced Currim and Mark Menezes took Bhadrachia's place. Keyboardist Zubin Balaporia, who was friends with Benegal, also joined soon to prop up the rhythm section. As Balaporia recalls, "Benny [Benegal] had just joined Rock Machine and he told the other members he knew about this keyboard player and they told him to call me. I went over to where they were jamming in Colaba. And that's the first time I played 'Karen' and 'Chains and Black Leather,' with Mark [Selwyn] showing me the tunes. Then I went back the next day and then the next, and I started hanging out with them. And nobody asked me to leave. As the rest of the guys would say, 'He came for one rehearsal and then he just never left.'"

Like with most Indian bands at that time, Rock Machine started out as a cover band, but switched very early to composing original music. Importantly, they had the balls to play their original compositions at big concerts, which eventually brought them a big fan following across the country. "We don't like to boast about stuff, but we are proud to have played a role in getting original music accepted," says Benegal. Adds Tinaikar, "Audiences now make fun of people who play cover tunes. Which is a great thing. But it was different then."

Mumbai guitarist Ehsaan Noorani, who co-produced and guested on the second Rock Machine album, says they are a very important band in the history of original Indian rock & roll. "They were the first band to release three albums of original music. They paved the way for bands to play original music," he says.

Their 1988 debut album *Rock 'N' Roll Renegade* spawned hits like "Rock 'n' Roll Renegade," "Top of the Rock" and "Polyvinyl Lady." 1990's *The Second Coming* was equally well-received. The 1990s also saw the advent of music channels like MTV and Channel V and Rock Machine was among the first band to use music videos to expand their fan base. Unlike the preponderance of Bollywood music now, music channels for a brief period in the early days were devoted to rock & roll. In a smart move in 1995, to time with the release of their self-titled album *Indus Creed* (by then they had changed the name) the band got two of Mumbai top advertising filmmakers and music lovers, Subir Chatterjee and Namita Roy Ghose of White Light Moving Picture Co., to make a video for the track "Pretty Child." The slickly produced black-and-white video be-



came an overnight sensation on the music channels and served as the bridge between Rock Machine and Indus Creed, in terms of musical sensibilities. "MTV and Channel V were fantastically supportive of us," says Balaporia. "That was one of the principal reasons we managed to pull through the Nineties. It was great, because our videos were on air five times a day. They really really plugged us. It would have been impossible without that."

White Light followed it up with videos of other tracks "Trapped" and "Sleep," both of which went on to become hugely popular. For Chatterjee, a musician himself who had a popular band in Kolkata, these videos presented an opportunity to do something different, far removed from the humdrum of commercials that he was used to. "Music videos at that time offered the chance to do something experimental, avant garde," he says. And he was happy doing it for Indus Creed, a band he admired greatly. He says he found their music, "deep and layered enough that it demanded other things be said. There were other areas you could probe as a filmmaker."

But by the late Nineties, things had begun to change. The music channels discovered that there was more money to be made airing Bollywood and Indi-pop songs. Radio and internet was still a few years away. The future of rock music in India looked highly uncertain, at least from the musicians' point of view. Like other

bands, Indus Creed had to face up to the reality that it was impossible to make a living out of rock music in the country. Band members were getting to an age where they had to make a choice between music and some other careers. And not surprisingly, some of them decided to go their separate ways, and Indus Creed disbanded, with the members parting as good friends. "It was 17 years from the time we started and we'd worked very hard at it," reminisces Balaporia. "And it wasn't just the music. There was no manager, there was no internet. So everyone had another small role [apart from the music]. That drove us crazy. We had reached a point where we felt that the support we got here was dwindling. Bollywood had started taking a very strong precedence. There was a lot of pressure on us to do an album in Hindi. So we decided that rather than just flog a dead horse, we should give it a break. It was the best decision we ever made. There was no break-up, we parted as friends and we all continued to meet up and hang out."

In 1999, Gandhi and Benegal decided to move to New York to pursue music in the Big Apple. "The reason I went to New York was that I didn't want to deal with the crap here. In New York too, I would have to deal with some different crap, but at least, it would be fresh," laughs Benegal. Alms for Shanti, the band they formed there with some local musicians had a short life performing their brand of rock-meets-India

in NYC clubs. ("I would never call Alms for Shanti a fusion band, even though that word has been used," Benegal had told me in August 2010. "I preferred to call it a rock band with a lot of Indian sounds in the mix.") They released a self-titled album in 2000, following it up with another one with the same songs reworked with Hindi lyrics in 2001. But neither the band nor the albums picked up any traction, and eventually the duo disbanded.

While in NYC, Benegal took on writing jobs at *The Village Voice* and for *Sunday Mid-Day* in Mumbai for whom he wrote a column. "We had a good time, but we also went through moments thinking, 'The way the industry is, should I even bother doing this?' Those were tough moments," recalls Benegal. But along the way, he and his wife Charu developed a passion for international cinema, which led him to take up courses in cinematography and filmmaking at New York's School of Visual Arts.

In fact, it was with the idea of writing and directing his own films that Benegal moved back to Mumbai in late 2008. "I certainly have no delusions of hoping to have an impact on cinema over here. But I would love to make some good films," he told me in 2010. But that was a time which coincided with the recession that had badly affected the film industry, particularly those trying to make small independent films, the kind Benegal was interested in. After making repeated rounds of film producers'

offices across the city for several months, he was forced into putting the filmmaking dream on hold.

But along the way, Benegal discovered that rock music scene had picked up tremendously in the country since he left in the late 1990s. More live venues were coming up and bands were finding an increasing audience for their original compositions. So it was only a matter of time before he got together with his old bandmates to explore doing something together once again. "As my wife always tells me, I cannot ever not do music," says Benegal. "I guess I've always known that but I ignored it." Benegal and Tinaikar decided to team up once again, this time to form a largely acoustic band called Whirling Kalapas, a name that Benegal came up with after a course in Vipassana meditation, and refers to "kalapas," the smallest unit of physical matter in Theravada Buddhism. "We thought we would do some acoustic stuff, take some old tunes, write some new tunes, do some obscure covers," Benegal told me at that time. Other band mates included bassist Kenneth Rebello, multi-instrumentalist Sankarshan "Shanks" Kini, and drummer Jai Row Kavi, with Balaporia making occasional appearances at live shows.

Whirling Kalapas' live repertoire included stripped down versions of Rock Machine and Indus Creed hits and some acoustic covers of songs by The Who and Tears for Fears. The formation in the September 2009 only led to frequent requests from old-time fans for a full-fledged Indus Creed reunion. And the fans must have prayed very hard because a year later in September 2010, Tinaikar and Benegal announced they were relaunching Indus Creed as a quartet along with Jay Row Kavi on drums and Rushad Mistry on bass. "I had told Benny in a very lighthearted way that we can do it," says Tinaikar. "But when he actually said, 'Let's do it,' I started getting the jitters. I almost pulled the plug on it." Tinaikar was scared of all the expectations people might have had. "We had built up a lot of goodwill over the years and we didn't want to disappoint," he adds.

By the time the reformed Indus Creed took stage at the Harley Rock Riders gig at Mumbai's Hard Rock Café in October 2010, keyboardist Zubin Balaporia had been convinced to come on board too. "Unfortunately, the year in which Benny decided that we should come back, was the year in which my dad had passed away. And there was a lot of family stuff that he was looking after that came on my shoulders," says Balaporia. "I wasn't sure that I would be able to take this on. Playing in Bombay is one thing, but it's more than that - travelling, touring, recording an album would be the next logical step... So initially I said no." But, Benegal managed to convince him and a five-piece Indus Creed was in place.

ROCK MACHINE
Mark Selwyn, Tinaikar,
Mark Menezes, Benegal,
Balaporia and Jayesh
Gandhi (from left)



The addition of Mistry on bass and Kavi on drums brought the element of youth and some fresh thinking in the band. "The musicians that I looked up to early in my life were the ones who looked up to [Indus Creed]," says Mistry. "It's like a legacy that keeps on going through the ages." Both Mistry and Kavi, at 30 and 25 respectively, are far younger to Benegal (44), Tinaikar (47) and Balaporia (45), and not surprisingly hadn't heard too much of the earlier avatars of the band. "I first heard Indus Creed in 2003 or 2004. I heard 'Pretty Child' and I was like, 'Wow, that's an Indian band?'," says Kavi. "And I kept hearing stories about how they were like the most professional guys and stuff like that. So when I was asked to be part of the band, I was like, 'Wow, that's cool!'"

While Kavi had first crossed paths with Benegal and Tinaikar playing in Whirling Kalapas, the Pune-based Mistry was recruited on Kavi's recommendation. "Once, Gary [Lawyer] had told me, 'For six of you guys to find each other, with common tastes in music and have the same mindset, is nothing short of a miracle,'" says Balaporia. "And I think this is Miracle Number Two - to find two guys who've got a great sense of humor, and who can play their ass off, basically have the same headspace as the other three."

"They are the coolest bunch of old guys I know," laughs Kavi, prodding me to put that statement in print just to take their goat. "The way we approach life in general is very similar. The only thing they probably don't get is heavy metal that I listen to, bands like Meshuggah." It's clear that the "seniors" in the band respect the youthful exuberance that Kavi and Mistry bring in. "They are very very mature musicians," says Tinaikar. "Even though they are like 20 years younger, they've added a lot to the band. I think 50 percent of the sound of the band today is because of these two guys."

And that sound is a lot more younger, a lot more contemporary and a lot more layered. Balaporia tells me, "The only conscious decision was to try and make the material as contemporary as possible, without compromising on what we are. You can't be contemporary for the sake of being contemporary and change your sound. We can't be Beyoncé obviously, because that's not what we want to be, even though that might sell a million records more."

A large part of the sound was also sculpted in collaboration with Tim Palmer, their mixing engineer. For Palmer, the criteria for choosing projects is pretty straightforward: "Can I bring something to the project to elevate it, and do I enjoy the music?" says the Texas-based engineer. "When you have to hear a song over and over for two days straight, you better be sure you like it, otherwise it could be considered a form of torture." Palmer's involvement was very significant especially because the band had recorded live drums. "There are great mixing engineers in India but the bulk of their work is Bollywood and advertising films," says Benegal. "But mixing live drums is an art by itself."

I ask them if the earliest Rock Machine and Indus Creed songs - "Top of the Rock," "Rock 'n' Roll Renegade," "Pretty Child" et al - which they are frequently asked to play from during live concerts these days, are a burden they are forced to carry. "No, it's not a burden," says Tinaikar emphatically. "But yes, you do get sick of playing it sometimes." "I would be happy if I didn't have to play those songs all the time," says Benegal. "But I have learnt to appreciate them for what they are and appreciate the audience for who they are." His hope is that the newer, younger audience will ask for the new songs now. "If these new songs on Evolve become anything like what 'Pretty Child' is to the older fans, then I could say, 'Hey, man, we've done something right...'"