



THE SECOND



COMING

Indian rock legends Indus
Creed return with a new
sound and a new outlook

By **MATT ROSS**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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IN TRUE ROCK BAND FASHION, THE BAR IN WHICH I meet Indus Creed is already filled with tendrils of cigarette smoke and the faint smell of Guinness. It's just turned midday, which Rushad Mistry and Jai Row Kavi – two-fifths of the band and the newest additions to the recently re-formed group – seem to believe is a perfectly acceptable time to start drinking. The remaining trio – original members Uday Benegal, Mahesh Tinaikar and Zubin Balaporia – are not quite so sure. For the first hour at least, they leave the drinking to “the lads,” as they affectionately call the two younger musicians, who joined Indus Creed as part of a reunion that set India's music press ablaze.

Indus Creed are one of the biggest names in Indian rock music. Formed in 1984, the group – then a covers band known as Rock Machine – enjoyed more than a decade of success after taking the (then) unusual step of playing their own material. They are held up as one of the pioneers of original rock in a country which, prior to the introduction of MTV in 1992, had little time for anything other than Bollywood music. In 1993, the group – which, after a few line-up changes, then comprised vocalist Benegal, keyboardist Balaporia, lead guitarist Tinaikar, bass player Mark Selwyn, guitarist Jayesh Gandhi and drummer Bobby Duggal – changed their name to Indus Creed. With the increased visibility that MTV gave both the band and their innovative music videos, their popularity began to rise astronomically. Before their split in the late Nineties, Indus Creed could boast three studio albums, shows with Slash and Bon Jovi, an appearance at WOMAD, and international gigs that took them across Asia, the U.K., the Middle East and even into Russia. After an entirely amicable break-up – Balaporia describes it as “one of the best decisions we ever made” – the band members went their separate ways. “There was no animosity,” Balaporia continues. “We realized that the sound, and our individual tastes in music, were changing. You don't listen to the same things over 16 years. Uday and Jayesh were thinking along certain lines, and I know that Mahesh and Mark were very convinced in what they wanted to do, and I was somewhere in the middle.” Though they remained extraordinarily popular, the band had also begun to notice a shift in the national music scene away from the original rock music that they had helped blaze a trail for. Despite the great strides made by MTV, the appetites of audiences remained fickle. “The scene was changing drastically,” says Balaporia. “It was becoming very, *very* Bollywood and shows were getting hard. But we'd really had a long run. You

know, 15, 16 years is a long time, and I think it was time to stop while the going was good.” While Balaporia and Tinaikar both concentrated on studio work, and other members pursued their own interests, Benegal and Gandhi headed for the U.S., where they started fusion band Alms for Shanti.

Thanks to the lack of any earth-shattering rifts or explosive tour-halting feuds, the former bandmates stayed in contact. Indus Creed became something that they used to do together. “Everyone went their own way, did their own thing, and kept in touch when they came back,” Balaporia recalls. “We hung out, finished off a few bottles of whisky, had a meal, chatted about the old times and pulled each other's legs all over again.”

But at the end of 2008, Benegal moved back to India after nine years of living in New York. Kept busy with a film project, it wasn't until the following year when, during one of the whisky-fuelled catch-ups, the idea of restarting Indus Creed was seriously put on the table. “When I moved back to Bombay, I was hanging out with these guys, and I think it vaguely popped into conversa-

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tion,” Benegal says. “For that first year I was just too busy with the film project, and I think Zubin was busy in the studio doing his thing. But then a year later, we started to talk about it again.” Balaporia recalls mulling the idea over. “When he first brought it up, I wasn't really sure I would be able to do it because I had other commitments, and it had been 10 years since we'd stopped.” However, the keyboardist found himself agreeing to play one show, then another, and then another.

Benegal had already been writing new material in 2009, some of which had found its way into the setlist of Whirling Kalapas, a project he had started with Tinaikar. “Mahesh and I had formed a little acoustic band. It was a side project, even though we didn't have a main project.” The neo-folk, alt-country Whirling Kalapas shows featured a mixture of re-imagined Indus Creed numbers and new songs. Along the way, Benegal and Tinaikar had recruited Jai Row Kavi, and as plans to reform Indus Creed gathered momentum, they offered the young drummer a place in the new line-up. Kavi had played in a lot of bands during his career, and was quick to recommend Mistry, a bassist that he'd played with in a group called Distil Soul. Benegal put a lot of stock in Kavi's opinion, and in other reports that Mistry was a serious talent. In what he insists is an out-of-character move, Benegal called Mistry out of the blue and offered him the job before he'd even heard him play, an opportunity that the bassist describes as a little scary, but mostly “cool.” Whirling Kalapas was absorbed – to date, the acoustic band hasn't played together since the Indus Creed reunion was announced – into a new, five-piece group.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN VERY EASY TO merely dust off the old Indus Creed material. Tunes like “Rock n' Roll Renegade” and “Top of the Rock” have become anthems of the Indian music scene – calling cards for their unique brand of late-Eighties-style rock. Indeed, on the night of our meeting, when the band play to a packed venue in Dubai, the spaces between every number are dominated by (mostly) good-natured screams for songs like “Pretty Child” – to the point where, before playing a new track, Benegal has to give his word to the audience that they'll play the songs they want to hear. But putting the band back together was about more than just wheeling out the classics to sell a few tickets, or repackaging old records with a couple of extra tracks. By January, the band hopes to release a new album, which will not only boast new material, but a new sound as well. Adding younger players – Kavi and Mistry are 25 and 30, whereas Benegal, Balaporia



ROCK & ROLL RENEGADES

(Above) The band began life as Rock Machine, before changing their name to Indus Creed in 1993. From left: Mahesh Tinaikar, Zubin Balaporia, Mark Selwyn, Uday Benegal, Bobby Duggal and Jayesh Gandhi. (Right) Indus Creed play an unplugged set at Rangbhavan, Mumbai in 1996.



and Tinaikar clock in at 44, 45 and 47 respectively – has introduced the original members to a host of new influences. “Personally, I would hate for this album to sound like one of the old albums,” Balaporia says. “It’s got to have its own energy, it’s got to have a more contemporary sound. I think it’s inevitable that, with three original members, something of the past will be there, but with two guys coming from a new generation, the kinds of bands they’ve been hearing are different. I’ve heard so much more music now after hanging out with them, and I think that’s fantastic: to bring in a whole new kind of sound, without losing any of the old part.” Besides, given the amount of time that has passed since they last put out new material, it’s inevitable (and perhaps necessary) that the core trio have changed as both performers and songwriters. “For the three of us individually, with so much time having gone by, you experience life differently,” says Benegal. “You listen to new stuff, and you absorb new ideas. So we were looking to move forward anyway, and Rushad and Jai were the perfect guys to move forward with.” The result, as showcased in Dubai, is an Indus Creed sound that is undoubtedly classic rock, but with an

anthemic, stadium-friendly edge. Traces of the past remain, with soaring synths and spiraling guitar riffs that harken back to Rock Machine albums *Rock n’ Roll Renegade* and *The Second Coming*, but there’s a distinct maturity to the soundscape, and a heavier edge that undoubtedly owes a lot to the new rhythm section.

Recording more than 20 years after the first Rock Machine album also enables the band to take advantage of the improved rock infrastructure in India. In the late Eighties, recording an album in that part of the world was an enterprise riddled with compromise. The facilities and expertise needed to record an international-quality album simply didn’t exist – the first two Rock Machine LPs feature programmed drum tracks because there was no studio set up to lay down the real thing. For 1995’s *Indus Creed*, the first album after the name change, the band traveled to L.A. to finally achieve the level of professionalism that they felt their material deserved. “When we were discussing [the new re-

cord], we thought there was no way we could record it in Bombay,” says Balaporia. “The drums have always been an issue. But there’s this drummer that we know who’s set up his own studio, and he called me over one day to hear his album. For the first time I actually heard something done in India that was at an international level. So we don’t *have* to go to New York or Los Angeles or whatever.” Impressed with how much the technology had progressed, the band decided to stay at home, finally able to record to the standard they had always been looking for. After laying down the drum and bass tracks, the rest of the band set up in Balaporia’s personal studio. They recruited a consultant from New Zealand to work on the guitar sound, are in negotiations with a mixing engineer from Texas, and intend to master the final copy in New York. It’s the kind of international production that would, for an original Indi-

an rock band, have been unfeasible a decade ago.

This technological liberation also allows for a more piecemeal approach to recording the new album. Work on the record can fit around the other commitments – musical or otherwise – that the band members have. The show in Dubai is a perfect example. There are six tracks on the new album that are close to completion, with two more still to be worked on. But because they're not ensconced in the studio, jetting off to play a gig can be simply slotted into the schedule. "I don't think we're taking time off the record as such," Kavi says. "But we're doing it in bits maybe; we'll go off to do a gig, and then pick it up again." In 1995, when Indus Creed flew to the U.S. to record, they locked themselves away to focus on the music, and nothing else. It's a process that still has an appeal. "I kind of miss that actually," says Benegal. "I personally like that way of doing it. When we recorded in L.A., you had to leave everything behind; there were no distractions. There was no question of a gig coming up, or an interview, or kids going to school or whatever. You were there, you hunkered down and that's all you did, morning to night." Balaporia recalls that time with similar fondness. "You woke up in the morning, you drove to the studio and you sat the whole day and worked on your album. And because you were totally broke, there was no money to go out at night and party. So you just went and grabbed a meal, had a drink and went to sleep. And then the next day was the same. You were really very focused on what you were doing."

A consequence of starting the band up again, however, is that distractions now exist. "When you're [recording] the way we're doing it now, you can't really take off and do that," Balaporia continues. "Of course you're distracted by other things. If somebody falls ill, or if you have to go somewhere, that's a distraction. If you have a session, that's a distraction..." "If you've got a PTA meeting to attend..." Benegal chimes in. "Exactly," Balaporia agrees. "But this is the way it is now, you can't change that. I see what Uday is saying though." The rest of the band agree that, in a perfect world, they would set aside time to work on new material. But there's no feeling of resentment about the situation they are now in, or any concern that it's to their detriment. "We're making it work," Benegal says. "This is not going to affect or compromise the sound of the album. In fact, because we're so mindful of that, we work extra hard to make this work. But I'm just saying that, for me, that would be the ideal scenario. Bombay is a very distracting place, there's a lot of shit happening at once. Everything in the world is happening at the

same time. And it can really get to you. We all have very busy schedules, and we get buttressed by all this stuff. It's just that much harder for us to keep our eye on the ball and say we want to make this happen. But we are making it work."

Time away from the studio is also far from wasted. As a group, Indus Creed have always believed in trying new material on their audience. "The minute we have a tune that we think is ready and playable, we throw it into the set and see how it goes down," Balaporia explains. "We really test it," Mistry says. "We change things around, we test things live, see how it feels. [Even when on tour] if it needs to be changed, it gets changed."

But playing new material also has the potential to put the band in a precarious position. They want to appease the loyal fans that have stuck with them, but the sonic direction in which the band is now heading is irrefutably different. "We're very much about writing new material, and when you write new material, it's got to be a here-and-now kind of sound and feel, which is what we want anyway," Benegal says. "We can't throw out the old songs – not that we want to, but there are some tunes that you really get bored playing. And we *are* pretty bored playing them. But that's what people want to hear, that's what the older fans want. So we try and strike that balance between playing what the old fans want, and saying, 'Here's what we're doing now.' Because there is a new audience out there too. We don't want to lose sight of either." Perhaps as an indirect result of Whirling Kalapas, some of the older tracks have also been given the once over. "We've reworked a lot of the older material to make it sound more interesting for ourselves," Balaporia adds. "That enables us to perform those songs in a newer way, or in a more exciting way. It doesn't really have to be off the

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album like it was in 1990 or whatever." Kavi, who was at school when some of the older Indus Creed numbers were released, relished the opportunity to put a new spin on those songs. "We were playing a couple of Indus Creed tunes [with Whirling Kalapas], but in a different way, completely stripped down. It was pretty cool for me to play those tunes then, and [I remember thinking] 'I would love to rock them out in a big way.'"

IT'S INEVITABLE THAT A BAND THAT enjoyed such success during the Eighties and Nineties is going to struggle to immediately throw off such nostalgia. "Some members of the press also grew up on our music," Benegal admits. "So they'll talk about the good old days. Some are just new, young journalists, who also want to go back to that because, for them, it's some kind of lore. And they'll say, 'Tell me how it was when you guys first started out,' and I'll think, 'F***... do we have to go through this again?'" Examining the minutiae of the band's creation, rise to prominence and their later decision to



FRIENDS REUNITED
Indus Creed soundcheck at the Music Room in Dubai, Oct 21, 2011. From left: Zubin Balaporia, Uday Benegal, Mahesh Tinaikar, Jai Row Kavi and Rushad Mistry

split makes up the majority of the articles written about Indus Creed since the reformation was announced. And the tendency to look backwards rather than forwards has not escaped the original members of the band. "It can be a little tedious," says Benegal. "But I've learned to be patient. I gently let them know that Wikipedia has a fair amount of info about the old stuff." The three original members trade knowing smirks when conversation turns to the media's fondness for harping on about the past. For Kavi and Mistry, however, it's a source of both amusement and envy. "I'm actually a little jealous sometimes," Kavi admits. "Especially when I hear all the stories about all the fun they had when I was still learning to read and write." Later, as the band wait for the soundcheck to begin, Balaporia - who is regarded as Indus Creed's chief storyteller - comes out of 'interview mode' and recounts a few of the more colorful tales from the Rock Machine days. Highlights include a fan from a remote Indian town who wrote to the band asking them to bring a pair of size six boots should they ever visit, the story of a drug-addled mu-

sician he used to know who was so far gone he obliviously crapped his pants, and the reason why they dosed former bass player Mark Selwyn's dog with valium (so that it could be smuggled onto a train carriage). Throughout, Kavi and Mistry listen with rapt enthusiasm. All parties are happily resigned to the fact that the band's past will always be on everyone's agenda. For Benegal, Balaporia and Tinaikar, it's a necessary evil, and after joking about the tedium of nitpicking the times and dates of Indus Creed's history, they all insist that they are, honestly, happy to talk about the early days. The newer members, far from seeming like kids at the grown-ups' table, appear happy to be a part of a band that has both an illustrious history and a promising future.

The distinction is this: the dates and places of what Indus Creed have done, and where they've been are pretty much public record, and while those details are important to some, to focus on them too intently detracts from the fact that, as a band, they continue to musically evolve. But the ride they've been on, forging a career in a country that has only recent-

ly embraced the idea that making original music can constitute an actual profession, and the stories they have to tell as a result, are an integral part of who they are. To deny the differences between the early days of Rock Machine, and the band as it is now, is impossible. The core members remain the same, but the change in line-up, the more contemporary sound, and even the advances in technology that have been folded into the group's recording process mark a fundamental shift. But it's not a case of the old versus the new. "I would look at it as more of an evolution than a divide," Tinaikar says. "You can't cut off that history, you can't forget it, because it's part of what you are." Benegal agrees. "We were a six-piece outfit, and five of us were together since almost the very beginning. It's only really the drummer's chair that saw a few changes. So Mark and Jayesh, they're still very much a part of it. Those guys were an integral part of our lives, and they're not here now. So we've got these new guys, but at the same time we've evolved into a whole new thing, while retaining everything that we've built over the years." 25