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Stringing it together

Called a living legend at 40, sitarist Kumar Karthigesu talks about the future on the heels of two MyPAA grants

By ZEENEE COOGAN
lifestyle@mmmail.com.my

YOU may call him a virtuoso.

You may even call him a living legend in Malaysia. He has the paper to prove it. Having been awarded the National Living Heritage Treasure and *Anugerah Karyawan Seni*, sitarist Kumar Karthigesu is not stopping there.

Currently heading the music department at the Temple of Fine Arts, Kumar is also recipient

of two grants from My Performing Arts Agency. One is for his band of five years, Akasha, while the other is for his contribution and ongoing work as a sitar musician advocate.

"As a musician, you take whatever opportunities you get. It's survival," says the 41-year-old.

"You can't pick and choose because there's not much going around. That said, I don't see myself delving into street performing or pub crawling gigs.

I wouldn't want to do things like that because my craft is sacred to me. So, I'm quite careful with what I do," says Kumar, who is also a principal artiste with Orkestra Tradisional Malaysia.

The grant, worth RM50,000, will assist in the costs for Akasha's performances in South Korea, India and United Kingdom. The other RM20,000 is for Kumar's solo work, where he tries to raise awareness about the sitar as an instrument of not only Indian music, but a very strong collaborator for other genres.

"Akasha has done about 140 shows locally and internationally, up to date. Many times during our (Akasha) shows I've

had people come up to me and say that they've never heard the sitar played that way — blues, jazz, Cuban jazz. This gets me sort of mollified, but I suppose the thirst is good for improvisation."

The Penang-born Leo, whose craft is traditionally classical Indian, has used his background of being born and bred in Malaysia to his advantage as he regularly experiments with sounds he has grown up listening as well as music from his travels.

With Akasha, Kumar is always testing his instrumental boundaries, creating new sounds and techniques. But as a soloist, he struggles to convince traditionalists with new material.

Not one to give up easily, early next year Kumar will stage a show that will see the evolution of the sitar.

Called *The Sitar Journey*, the performance will see him orchestrate his personal odyssey and its progress.

"This is where my grant money will go. I'm calling in musicians that I've previously worked with to collaborate at different junctures of the show. The performance itself should narrate to the audience the flourishing of the sitar, from its birth in India to the current crescendo in world music.

"Back when it all started, the sitar was never an orchestral instrument. Sitarists were only accompanying instrumentalists

to the vocalists. Then naturally, people started appreciating the sound of the sitar and began giving it an ensemble exposure before it revolutionised into a solo instrument."

Kumar promises an eclectic group of accompanying instruments, including the saxophone, flute, gambus, yangqin, sarangi and sarod.

When asked if he would be doing anything with electronica music, Kumar said he had "not found that niche yet".

"I'm not a person who closes doors to new ideas, but it's just that I've not liked anything I've heard thus far. So, it's not hooking me in yet," explains Kumar, who adds that his tenure as the "music principal" at TFA exposes him to many New Age music through his students.

"TFA has always been my centre, and right now the main place where I pass my knowledge. Also with the many things I get to do with Akasha, it's good to have this responsibility to shoulder and keep me grounded. I'm walking in a fairly nice stride. It's taxing, but exciting," says the music lecturer who also teaches at Aswara.

"I've come to a point where I don't have to go looking for work — work now comes looking for me. My space is here, and I know I'm in a right place now."

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KUMAR KARTHIGESU,
MUSICIAN AND TEACHER

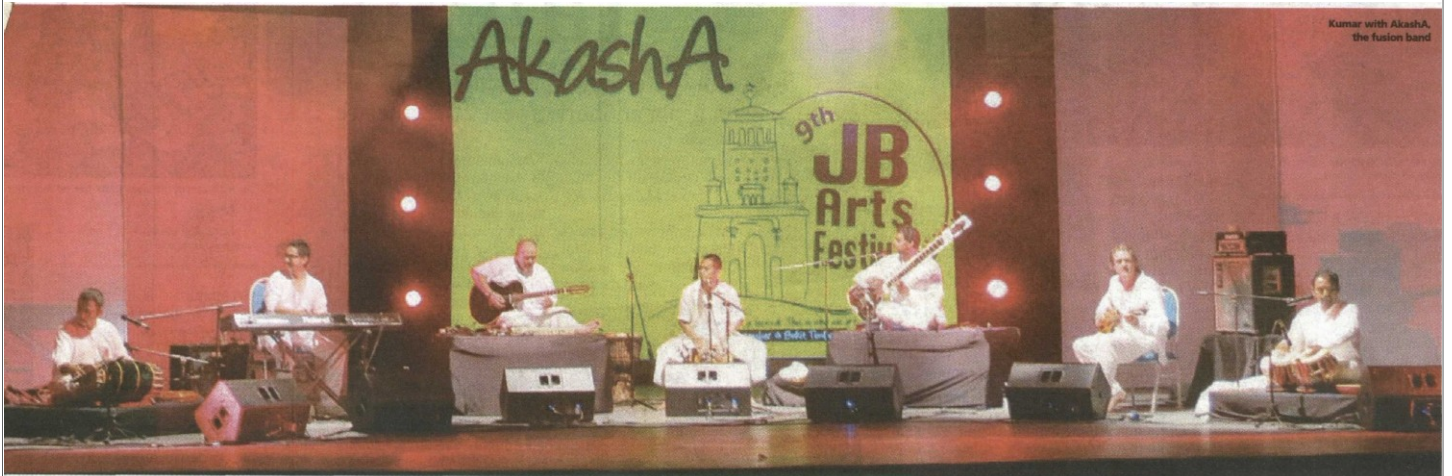


WE GOT FUNDING! The extremely talented recipients of the Royal Arts Gala Fund 2012, by My Performing Arts Agency and in collaboration with the National Department for Culture and Arts and with support of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and Performance Management Delivery Unit



Some of Kumar's sitar students giving a performance at TFA last week

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