

June 2018

## The State of the Guitar in Kathmandu

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### Recommended Citation

Brown, Mason and Regmi, Samyog. 2018. The State of the Guitar in Kathmandu. *HIMALAYA* 38(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol38/iss1/13>



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### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Noé Dinnerstein and Andrew Alter for asking them to submit this article, Sienna Craig for encouragement and advice on revisions, and the anonymous reviewers for their astute and helpful comments, which ultimately enabled the authors to improve the article greatly. The authors would also like to thank all of the interviewees for their generosity and openness in giving their time and insights to this project.

# The State of the Guitar in Kathmandu

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The thriving guitar scene in Kathmandu is not well known outside of the country, and particularly not in the West. It has also not been the topic of much recent scholarship. It has been assumed that for Nepalis the guitar, as a foreign instrument, represents freedom and modernity; but, is this true, and what else might it signify to Nepali guitarists themselves? This article gives an overview of the history of the guitar in Kathmandu by drawing on both published scholarship and interviews conducted by the authors with twelve prominent Nepalese guitarists and guitar educators to establish the current state and future outlook of the guitar in Nepal. Findings suggest that, in addition to freedom and modernity, the guitar is connected with individualism, and is becoming naturalized and less foreign than it used to be.

**Keywords:** Nepal, guitar, class, transnationalism, caste.

## Introduction

The diverse pop, rock, and jazz music scenes of Kathmandu are vibrant and overlapping, and in all of them the guitar figures prominently. While these scenes have been written about to greater or lesser extents by scholars since at least the 1970s (Anderson and Mitchell 1978; Henderson 1996, 2002, 2005; Greene and Henderson 2000; Greene 2001, 2002, 2011; Grandin 2005a 2005b, 2007; Smucker 2012; van den Dool 2016; and Stirr 2009, 2010, 2017), these works do not focus on the guitar, per se. Some of them, (e.g., Henderson 2005), are about rock music, the most common locus for the guitar, but are at this point somewhat dated, (see Smucker 2012). Through an analysis of interviews with some of Nepal's prominent and up-and-coming players, in this article we explore the current state of the guitar in Kathmandu—particularly in the context of the rock scene—and analyze how its meaning and significance have changed. In so doing, we problematize the idea that the guitar, after at least a half-century in Kathmandu, should still be considered a 'foreign' instrument, and suggest that, in fact, it is undergoing a process of naturalization and is becoming fully incorporated into Nepali culture.

We proceed from the assumption that the guitar has long signified Western freedom, modernity, global community (Greene and Henderson 2000), and individuality (Smucker 2012). In the 1960s, when Nepalis began to have substantial contact with Euro-Americans and their music, the guitar was closely associated with the freedom-loving hippies, and began to be appropriated by Nepali youth along with other visual markers of Western

freedom, (such as long hair, T-shirts, and blue jeans). This uniform, with the guitar as an essential accessory, was practically required for “performing Western musical forms complete with stylized emotional expressions and stage personae” (Greene and Henderson 2000: 96). Buying guitars, and the associated rock fashions, was also in line with “the expansion of [Liechty’s] ‘consumer modernity’ in Kathmandu: the identification of the self in material terms necessitating the ongoing purchase of ‘modern’ commodities and therewith ‘modern’ identities” (Greene 2002: 46).

At the same time a process of ‘schizophonia’—a term coined by R. Murray Schafer to denote the splitting of sounds from their sources and contexts by the technological process of recording, and expanded by Steven Feld to refer to “the recontextualization and resignification of sounds” (Feld 2011: 41)—has unmoored the sounds of the guitar from their cultural associations to the West and allowed Nepali youth to connect the guitar symbolically with specifically Nepali notions of modernity, such as the freedom to date or marry outside of their caste (Liechty 2003; Greene and Henderson 2005). Among our interviewees, the function of the guitar not only as an instrument one plays, but also as a kind of fashion accessory, for the purpose of attracting girls, was a common trope. The guitar was also associated with physical and social spaces such as parks, jungles, fields, and picnics, which are also major sites of dating activity among Nepali youth. In such spaces, youth may escape the scrutiny of parents both to be alone with members of the opposite sex, or to practice guitar with friends. We also found the guitar to be closely associated with individuality and personal expression, to be implicated in discourses about a ‘Nepali sound,’ and to be learned through pragmatic and localized pedagogies. While Western role models are still important, Nepali guitarists are increasingly significant as influences.

The guitar has a long but obscure history in South Asia. In Martin Clayton’s words, “the greater part of the Indian guitar scene remains hidden: Westerners have remained largely uninterested in that part of Indian musical culture that most wants to identify with the West” (2009: 66). He points out that, in spite of its being the “the most global of instruments,” the guitar is theorized and understood on a local level (ibid, 65). This is also true of Nepal, where the guitar is widely associated with the West, but its meaning, repertoire, and praxis are understood in uniquely Nepalese ways. The guitar is very popular among Nepali youth. In spite of a lack of support from parents due to the low social status afforded musicians in Nepalese society, large numbers of youth master the instrument and educate

themselves in what have been thought of as essentially foreign musics, such as jazz and rock (van den Dool 2016). Using borrowed or very cheaply purchased Chinese or Indian-made instruments, and teaching one another with whatever resources and information they can get from friends or find on the internet, they enthusiastically practice in whatever spaces they can find—rice paddies, cowsheds, abandoned buildings, neighbor’s houses, or rented practice rooms.

In the early 1990s, bands such as 1974 AD, Cobweb, and Robin ‘N’ Looza iconized guitar to the point that many teenagers had one or were waiting to buy one. Since then, Nepali youth have developed the quintessential Nepalese lineup: the ‘cover band,’ a trio consisting of two acoustic guitars, or sometimes one acoustic guitar with flute or acoustic bass guitar, and Peruvian *cajón* (percussion box), playing covers of Western and Nepali pop and rock songs. Due to its affordability and ease of transport, the *cajón* is nearly universal in the cover band, and Nepalese players have taken it to a high level, skillfully imitating the sound of a modern drum set. That this stripped-down acoustic ensemble is utilized to play music that is often essentially electric in origin is a characteristically Nepali strategy to creatively deal simultaneously with scant resources, the unavailability of electrical power, and the difficulty of transportation; it results in a distinctive sound, which is one example of localized praxis. It is possible to see an entire such band, with their instruments, traveling to a gig on a single scooter! While the cover band seems to be the most common context for the use of the guitar among Nepali youth, many are also seriously studying jazz and classical guitar at institutions such as the Nepal Music Center, the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, and Kathmandu University’s department of music. Findings suggest that rock and heavy metal are the most prominent genres among serious guitarists.

Western music in general began making inroads into Nepal by the first half of the 20th century, brought first by Western, and later by ethnically Nepalese Christian missionaries from Darjeeling and Kalimpong (Dalzell 2015). Brass bands also introduced Western music through “the old Anglo-Indian presence in Nepal, including the British affiliations of Gurkha soldiers” (Anderson and Mitchell 1978: 250). The history of the guitar in Nepal, however, begins in the early 1950s when Nepal opened to the outside world. As a part of the monarchy’s project of nationalist modernization, the newly created Radio Nepal was tasked with musically ‘remodeling’ the idea of Nepaliness as a unified identity (Henderson 2002). One genre they created for this purpose was *ādhunik git* (Nepali, modern song), which used vaguely traditional

singing styles and melodies “matched with instruments like guitars, mandolins, *tablas*, clarinets, and violins that by themselves show the emergence of Nepal into a modern-sounding cosmopolitan space” (ibid, 21). Musicians such as Narayan Gopal and Gopal Yonjan prominently featured guitar in their songs and arrangements. During Nepal’s *Panchayat* era (party-less assemblies, 1960–1990), all kinds of infrastructure was expanded for the dual purposes of development and integration, and musical infrastructure was no exception (Anderson and Mitchell 1978; Grandin 2005a, 2007). “Cultural apparatus[es]” like Radio Nepal and Shri Ratna Recording were incorporated into a “modern musical conglomerate” that was largely responsible for contemporary Nepali musical practice (Grandin 2007: 5).

Globalizing modernization in Nepal was implemented both from within and without. The 1960s brought an influx of ‘hippie’ tourism that centered around the ‘Freak Street’ of Basantapur, which introduced many Nepalis to Western music in general, and the guitar in particular, through personal interaction and the spread of cassettes, as well as television, fashion, and “bands like Wrathchild, Crisscross, Chimpanzees, the Elegance, and Next” (Greene and Henderson 2000: 96; see also Manuel 1991 and 1995). In the 1970s, Om Bikram Bista pioneered Western-style Nepali pop, and the Himalayan Band, formed by *lahure*, or Gurkha soldiers, based in Hong Kong, developed Nepali-language hard rock. From the mid 1990s to the early 2000s there was an influential magazine called *Rock Wire*, (the same company now produces a magazine called *Rock Fever*), which contained articles about players, gear, and the local, as well as international, music scene. It was something like a Nepalese version of *Guitar Player* magazine. Each issue of the magazine contained a CD compilation of songs from diverse artists. It was not unusual to have such disparate artists as Pink, Bryan Adams, AC/DC, and Slipknot on the same CD. Stationery shops around Kathmandu also featured ‘fake books’ that contained the lyrics and chords, but not the melodies, of Nepalese pop songs. Almost every musician had to have such books; they were a primary source of musical education for Nepalis trying to learn guitar. Access to the internet also exposed musicians to various styles of playing, and they picked up skills and knowledge from wherever they could. The music scene in Thamel—the later relocated hub for would-be hippies, tourists, and trekkers—demanded that musicians play lots of different songs of diverse styles to cater to Nepalese audiences brought up listening to MP3 collection CDs, as well as to foreign tourists, who were not only seeking the exotic, but also reveled in the familiar.

The transnational flows of music under globalizing modernity do not guarantee the easy learning of Western

music in non-Western contexts. In his study of music learning in Kathmandu, Jaco van den Dool found that Nepali youth learning Western musics employ diverse and pragmatic methods to learn the unfamiliar idioms of jazz and rock, whose functional harmony, (i.e. the occurrence of a dominant chord necessitating a return to the tonic), they have presumably not internalized (van den Dool 2016: 86). The idea of ‘intermusicality,’ which van den Dool expands, following Monson (1996), and uses to refer to the blending of foreign and native modes of learning, is very well-applied to Nepali youth. Not only do they use whatever resources they can access through technology, such as YouTube video tutorials, online chord charts, transcriptions, and the like, they also learn from friends and relatives, and teach themselves through repeated listening and imitation. In addition, Nepali youth also “transfer specific practices and learning strategies from their local music culture into unfamiliar systems,” and “actively create new learning strategies” (ibid, 101, 86). Since learning the guitar is largely a middle and upper-class phenomenon, (Greene 2001, 2011; Henderson 2002; Smucker 2012), many students of means are now able to access formal classes at institutions like the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, the Nepal Music Center, and Kathmandu University’s Department of Music.

Mark Liechty (2003) has written about how both the middle class and youth culture in Kathmandu are produced through the conspicuous consumption of commodities, especially fashion and media. For Liechty, the fashions, films, and music consumed not only demonstrate financial means, but produce narratives of values and status that are constitutive of the middle class. The production of youth culture is a central project of this class (ibid, 35). The guitar itself, as well as related products and fashions, such as band t-shirts, gig bags, recorded music, and magazines, are powerful symbols of the very freedom to consume them in performance of middle-class youth culture, communicating prestige and foregrounding youths’ participation in global modernity while distancing them from ‘the traditional’ (i.e. family, religion, caste). Liechty also refers to a “generation gap” in Western music tastes, (which we also note among our informants), that points to changes in the “*mode of mediation*,” (ibid, 198, emphasis in original), from hippie tourists to global systems of marketing in which Kathmandu is increasingly “tied in intricate ways to a new world of identity resources” (ibid, 204). Music education is also an avenue for privileged youth to perform and inhabit modern identities as they join with like-minded circles to attain musical knowledge and skills that rival those of youth anywhere in the world.

While the guitar is assumed to be a symbol of modernity, westernization, and cosmopolitanism, it is, consciously or unconsciously, often theorized locally, in that as “a global music culture [it is] given a local interpretation” (Clayton 2009: 65). Some degree of schizophobia is a necessary condition for this since it opens up space for resignification or remodeling (Henderson 2002). Thus in Nepal, “reggae does not [necessarily] bring to mind Jamaican Rastafarianism, nor is it heard as rebellious or counter-cultural.<sup>1</sup> Instead, reggae is most commonly used as a persuasive musical setting for seductive love songs”; the Christmas melody “Jingle Bells” is used year-round as switchboard ‘on-hold’ music with complete unawareness of its seasonal meaning; (Greene 2001: 173); rap is not associated with race, the lower classes or social protest, but with the West, technology, progress, and the party atmosphere of the discotheque; heavy metal, shorn of all dangerous or transgressive associations, “functions as a prestige marker” (ibid, 174). In fact, the tribal divisions of musical genre that are so circumscriptive in the West are hardly visible in Nepal, as “the youth market, although culturally diverse, seems not to be comprised of distinct music taste groups” (ibid, 171). Therefore, it is not unusual to hear a Nepali heavy metal band play songs by AC/DC, Bryan Adams, Black Sabbath, and Michael Jackson in the same set and for the audience to respond with equal enthusiasm to each, as was witnessed recently by one of the authors [MB] in Thamel’s Purple Haze Rock Bar.

## Methods and Population

In order to form an admittedly anecdotal picture of the perceptions of educated insiders of the state of the guitar and its future in Kathmandu, we conducted semi-structured interviews, in both Nepali and English, with twelve professional guitarists for this article. Some are prominent performing musicians, some are primarily educators, and some are both; some are established, with notoriety in the Kathmandu music scene, and some are up-and-coming. All gave permission to use their names in this article. They are: Iman Shah, guitarist for the band Mental Radio, film composer, and principal of the Nepal Music Center since 2007; John Shrestha, guitar instructor at the Nepal Music Center and guitarist for the band Sabin Rai & the Pharaoh; Nikesh Shakya, private guitar instructor, game composer, owner of the Art 8 Studio, recording/mixing engineer for media company, Katha Haru, and electronic music teacher at Ullens School; Bijay Kapali, guitar instructor at the Nepal Music Center, first runner-up on Guitar Maestro,<sup>2</sup> and guitarist for the band Meso; Rajkumar Malakar, professor at Kathmandu University Department of Music, and director at the Arco Music Institute; Riken Maharjan, recording engineer

at Bajra Creation Records, instructor at the Arco Music Institute and guitarist and songwriter for the band Space, (he also plays Bass in the band Mi Ku); Rojib Charvel, guitarist for the bands Momentum and Space, and an aspiring guitar luthier/manager/guitar tech for the Sound Factory Music Store; Shardool Shrestha, a session guitar player and guitarist for the band Elbow Room; Hari Maharjan, gypsy jazz guitarist, teacher, and former guitarist and arranger for the band Nepathya; and finally Kesang Dawa, a performing guitarist and pub singer. We also interviewed two female guitarists, Adishree (Addy) Dhungana, who utilizes classical guitar in her YouTube cover versions of pop songs, and Mannu Shahi, guitarist for the all-girl band DidiBahini.

The most noticeable thing about our sample of informants is the prevalence of musicians of the Newar ethnicity, (see Table 1). This is not necessarily surprising, since anecdotally Newaris seem to be overrepresented in the Kathmandu music scene. We believe this is due to the importance of music in their traditional culture and their historical dominance in the valley coupled with the fact that they tend to be of higher economic status and, as mentioned, rock music in Nepal is largely a middle-class phenomenon, (see Smucker 2012). Widely believed to be the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, the Newars are unique among the *adivasi janajati* (indigenous nationalities) of Nepal in that historically they tend to be more privileged than other Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups (Gellner 1997; Shrestha 1999). Newar culture also places a high value on music—particularly processional music—and some sub-castes, including Kapali, (musicians), and Maharjan, (agriculturalists), are expected to learn to play traditional instruments at a young age (Bernéde 1997). The Newar are also the largest single ethnic group in the Kathmandu Valley, comprising 26.92 % of the population as of the 2011 census.<sup>3</sup> Newar guitarists amount to 66.6% (n=8) of our sample. Our guitarists range in age from 20–55 years old.

Of the four remaining interviewees, three are high-caste Hindu, including the two women. The fourth is a Tibetan refugee who was born in Nepal. Though our sample is not necessarily representative, nor is it strictly random, it nevertheless supports the idea that musicianship, with its attendant expenses of instruments, lessons, and gear, is largely restricted to the middle class, (youth of lower socio-economic status still often aspire to learn guitar, but have less access). The one informant who is neither high-caste nor Newari comes from a prominent Tibetan family and was educated in Darjeeling and the United States, advantages not available to many Tibetan refugees living in Nepal.

Name	Caste/ Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Genre
Iman Shah	Thakuri	M	45	Rock
John Shrestha	Newar	M	31	Rock/Fusion
Nikesh Shakya	Newar	M	25	Rock/Jazz/Pop
Bijay Kapali	Newar	M	27	Progressive Rock
Rajkumar Malakar	Newar	M	46	Classical
Riken Maharjan	Newar	M	25	Rock
Rojib Charvel (Shahi)	Newar	M	27	Rock
Shardool Shrestha	Newar	M	25	Metal
Hari Maharjan	Newar	M	42	Jazz
Kesang Dawa	Tibetan	M	55	Pop/Rock/Blues
Adhishree Dhungana	Brahmin	F	20	Classical/Pop
Mannu Shahi	Thakuri	F	26	Folk/Progressive Punk/Pop/ Hardcore/Math Rock

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Interview Subjects.

Although equal rights for women have been promoted by political parties and promulgated in law since the *jana andolan*, (People's movements), of 1990 and 2006, and are now guaranteed by the constitution, patriarchal ideologies continue to be disseminated by the media and in society (Liechty 1996; Tamang 2017; Becker 2017). Though since women's access to education their 'freedom' has increased, especially before marriage, traditional gender roles are still widely enforced by peer pressure, gossip, and traditional norms of marriage. The common association of the guitar and rock music with drugs stigmatizes guitar playing for boys, and the additional association of the same with promiscuous sex creates even higher hurdles for girls. While we do not have hard numbers for the ratio of girls to boys among guitar students, it appears low, but is apparently growing. Thus, the percentage of women in our sample, at roughly 16%, (n=2) is not surprising. These two women are both young, unmarried, well-educated, and of high caste, conditions which would be expected to be conducive to taking up the guitar.

We asked our informants open-ended questions about their musical influences and 'guitar heroes,' their opinions on whether there is a distinctive Nepali sound on the

guitar, pedagogical resources and strategies, the lack of women guitar players and their thoughts on the future of the instrument in Nepal. Besides these broad topics which were defined from the outset, we also coded and analyzed the texts of our interviews by hand to see what other themes might emerge. These included the association of the guitar with individual expression and emotion, the connection of a Nepali sound with *adhunik git* (modern song) and the *madal* (cylindrical, two-headed drum), the importance of technology, as well as family and friends, to learning, the belief that girls are inherently less adept at guitar, the importance for social acceptance of making an income through music and the idea that the low social status of musicians is connected with the belief that they are 'just entertainers,' which is related to Nepali histories of servitude. In the following sections, we summarize our informants' responses to these lines of inquiry.

### Influences and Heroes

The influences cited by our informants show the pervasiveness of virtuosic rock and metal in Kathmandu. Jazz and jazz fusion are also prominent. Our respondents listed some of the most important, archetypal 'guitar

heroes' as put forth by Western guitar magazines over the decades. Steve Vai and Joe Satriani were most often mentioned, followed by Guthrie Govan, Jimi Hendrix, John Petrucci, Yngwie Malmsteen, Steve Morse, Pat Metheny, Brett Garsed, and Dave Mustaine. Metal has long been one of the most common genres for Nepali youth forming bands in Kathmandu (Smucker 2012: 10). It is thus no surprise that the influences and guitar heroes listed by interviewees also included virtuosic hard rock and metal musicians like Eddie Van Halen, Richie Blackmore, Jeff Beck, Eric Johnson, Mike Stern, Shawn Lane, Buckethead, Ben Weinman, and Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, (as well as blues guitarists B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robben Ford). Informants also mentioned jazz fusion and progressive guitarists like Alan Holdsworth, David Fiuczynski, Walter Becker, and Wayne Krantz, as well as more classic jazz guitarists like Joe Pass, Django Reinhardt, and Jimmy Raney.

For our sample of Nepali guitarists, figures from the 1980s and 1990s dominate their pantheon. Punk, post-punk, hip-hop, EDM, and avant-garde seem to have had little influence on most of them, and conventional virtuosity seems to be a primary value—it is the one thing all the guitarists they mention as influences and heroes have in common. However, two younger respondents did mention the Japanese post-rock band Toe, and one (the youngest) listed progressive punk and hardcore as among the genres she plays. There was a definite divide between older and younger respondents in terms of the artists and genres that were influential, with the older guitarists citing more classic rock, Hindi, Nepali influences, and the younger ones listing more modern influences. Younger guitarists also highlighted the centrality of technology, such as CDs, MP3s, iPods, and music videos from television and YouTube, to their formative listening experiences. This suggests that, for them, harmonic music comprised some of the earliest musical sounds they heard, and Western harmony may not seem as foreign to them as it did to the older generation.

### Nepali Influences

Some also cited Nepali music as influential on them as guitarists. While this is particularly true of the older musicians who grew up outside Kathmandu and did not have as much access to Western music in their youth, younger respondents also listed contemporary Nepali guitarists. Rajkumar Malakar recounts:

Guitar was not my first instrument. The first instrument was probably a *madal* in the village that I grew up in. There was no TV during that time so everybody sang *dohori* [antiphonal courting]

songs for recreation. My dad was a big music lover. Although he couldn't play any instruments, he used to gather a bunch of people and make them play *madal* and sing songs in the evenings. As a child I used to observe what the *madal* players were doing very keenly. And in between their breaks I used to play what I could retain from my observation. The first instrument that I learned systematically was the *tabla* [Hindustani drums] with a guru.<sup>4</sup>

Malakar also first learned harmony not on the guitar, but on the harmonium. Harmony is the most foreign element of Western music that is learned by Nepali guitarists, and is often the most challenging (van den Dool 2016). Malakar, who is now highly educated in Western music and a professor of classical guitar, told story that resonates with van den Dool's theorization of intermusicality:

In that era, I didn't know about any guitarists as such. English songs were rare at that time. Hindi and Nepali songs were the most available. There were musicians like Deepak Thapa, Om Bikram Bista, and Ram Thapa. I used to listen to those people and other Hindi songs a lot and that used to get me inspired...There was a guitar player named Jagatkrishna Prajapati who was friends with Ram Thapa and other musicians of that era. He used to teach about chords and scales on the harmonium too. So, when we were school kids we learned from him. Although I played many instruments, later I found guitar to be best suited for me to express myself...I already knew about chords and scales from Jagatkrishna Prajapati. I didn't have a guitar at that time. So, I used to borrow my friend's guitar and learn songs. There was no formal training at that time.

The influence of native music early in life was also salient for some of the Newar musicians, who first learned traditional instruments in local cultural contexts. Hari Maharjan, a member of an agricultural caste in which playing ceremonial music during youth is required, talked about the importance of those experiences to his guitar playing:

My first instrument was not guitar. But through our tradition and culture I was exposed to lots of music and traditions, festivals, etc. In my community it was compulsory for us to learn traditional instruments in those days. And I did that. So, my first instrument was Newari percussion called *dhimay*. When I was very young I was into music already without knowing. I used to play in festivals and such, but later I saw the guitar and grabbed

one. But whatever I was doing with the drums in those days came out of the guitar for me. Because those sounds were still there inside me. There are very weird sounds and rhythms during sacrifice and other rituals, and I even recorded those things in many albums for many singers. There is a song by Nepathya called *Ghatana*, in which I used the sacrificial music. When I was young I used to play drums for these processions. I did that for three years. Those things have hypnotic quality to them; there is something musical going on but it's hard to figure out. There are some rhythms that are four pages long and there is no concept of bars or anything. So, if you try to fit those things into a bar [a 'measure' of music] it'll be a four-page long bar. I try to incorporate these things when I do albums. So, even though playing drums and guitar are different from one another, the connections are there inside your head. Once the sound is stuck there in any form you can bring it out with whatever tools are available to you.

As van den Dool also points out, friends and relatives are often important resources for Nepalis trying to learn the guitar. This was also a recurring theme that emerged from our interviews. According to John Shrestha, "My uncle was my first major influence towards the instrument. I loved to listen to his playing and how he would sing and play guitar. Then, I saw many guitar players including some of my friends which drew my attention towards the instrument," and "my main influence is my friend Jeevan Lama whose playing style and musicianship inspired me." Adishree Dhungana recounted: "I was very much influenced by my uncle who used to sing and play for us. He used to sing to us especially at night and make us go to sleep. While my brother used to listen to him and sleep, I used to go to the other room, get a *kaapi* [Nepali. notebook] and sit beside him and copy his strumming." Mannu Shahi was "very attached and inspired by [her] cousin Manav, who was very much into rock music and played guitar himself." Rojib Charvel said "my elder brother played guitar, and we both started self-learning together. That's how we got into music." Kesang Dawa spoke of learning with friends in parks and open spaces: "We would go into the field, and take a lot of oranges, and just jam for hours."

Most of the guitarists we interviewed shared their opinions on the most prominent guitarists in Nepal today, although four of them would not answer this question, possibly due to humility or not wanting to offend or leave anyone out. The person most commonly mentioned was Sunny Tuladhar, electric guitar luthier and guitarist for the band Jindabaad. Also mentioned more than once

were Binayak Shah, guitarist with Crossroads and Urban Gypsy; gypsy jazz guitarist Hari Maharjan, (one of our interviewees); and teacher and guitarist Deepak Moktan. Other Nepali guitarists named by our interviewees as important were Diwas Gurung of the band Ayurveda; Rupesh Mall; Samyog Regmi of Mi Ku, (one of the authors); Iman Shah, (one of our interviewees), Sunny Manandhar of the band Albatross; John Shrestha, (also an interviewee), Sarad Shrestha of Tumbleweed; Kishor Gurung, classical guitarist and ethnomusicologist; jazz guitarist Subash Siwa; Roshan Sharma, *chaturangi* (Indian slide guitar) player and guitarist with the band Urja; Manoj Kumar KC, of 1974 A.D.; and Rajat Rai, guitarist with the jazz band Cadenza. Interestingly, this list also contains a plurality of Newars.

### A Nepali Sound or Style?

We assumed going into this research that a distinctive Nepali sound would be something our informants would value and define, given the history of government 'remodeling' of a national sound (Enderson 2002) and the association of a vague 'village' or 'mountain' imaginary with Nepali music in the minds of many modern urban migrants (Henderson 2002), as well as the enthusiasm ordinary Nepalis have for slogans like "Buddha was born in Nepal," which is specifically used to differentiate themselves from India (Gellner 2017). Since generations of Nepalis have grown up hearing from such outlets as Radio Nepal that there is a Nepali sound, it might be expected that guitarists would agree. However, when asked if they thought there was a unique Nepali style of playing, or Nepali sound, our informants gave us mixed responses. Bijay Kapali said: "I don't think there is any typical Nepali style of guitar playing. However, there are some songs like *Taal ko Paani* (*Lake Water*), *Gurasai Phulyo* (*The Rhododendrons Have Bloomed*) [Nepali folk songs with stereotypically Nepali rhythms, recorded by rock bands Nepathya and 1974 A.D., respectively], and *Hami Aayau* (*We're Coming*) [by Diwas Gurung] with typical Nepali feel." Rajkumar Malakar said: "I don't think there is one. It's hard to categorize something as Nepali style. Almost all instruments in contemporary music in Nepal are foreign. Even though they may play folk tunes, the playing techniques are foreign as well. So technically I don't think there is a Nepali style of playing."

When thinking about a typical Nepali style of guitar, several respondents gravitated toward the genre of *ādhunik git* (modern song). For Nikesh Shakya, a typical Nepali guitar sound "would be the strumming along to popular *ādhunik* tunes. The [chord] changes on those songs are very rich, too." Shardoool Shrestha and Riken Maharjan, as well as many others, pointed to the rhythms

of the *madal* being played on guitar as a particularly Nepali sound. Iman Shah connected *ādhunik* and *madal* to a Nepali style and, like Nikesh Shakya, singled out the harmonic progressions of *ādhunik*:

The guitar has been around for a long time in Nepal. People have used it to sing songs at picnics and whatnot. And there are certain voicings and rhythms that are typically Nepali in style. These things have also influenced pop songs as well... there are millions of Nepali songs with the same G, C, D [I, IV, V] chords in what we call a *jhyāure* pattern, which is similar to 6|8 [a typical *madal* rhythm]. If there is a pop style then there is a similar pattern. That is one particular Nepali style. If you look at it from theoretical point of view, then there is a genre called *ādhunik sangit*.<sup>5</sup> The modulations that happen in that genre are quite unique. That came about after fusing eastern *raga*-based melody and western harmony. The chords can be major for four bars and may change to minor in the next four. Especially with composers like Amber Gurung, Deep Shrestha, etc...*raga* [an Indian system of scales and modes] itself gives a melody. There are fixed notes for ascending and descending. There

are notes which should be avoided. And if you just play the notes, that gives you a peculiar melody of a particular *raga*. There are mostly rhythmic instruments in *raga* without harmony. Whereas in Western music there are chords or harmony. When these two were combined in Nepal, genres called *sugam sangit* [beautiful, melodious music] or *ādhunik sangit* were born. The lyrics are poetic like *ghazals*,<sup>6</sup> the singing style is influenced by eastern classical traditions and there are Western harmonies. This particular genre is distinctively Nepali, hence the style of playing is also distinctively Nepali.

Rajkumar Malakar agreed with much of what Iman Shah said about *ādhunik git*, but stopped short of calling the adaptation of it to guitar a truly native Nepali sound because, even though Western harmonies have been completely adapted to it as a Nepali music, to him they are still ultimately foreign:

Even though guitar is played in *lok git* [folk song] and *ādhunik git*, the harmonies are not ours. The chords used in those styles can't be called Nepali chords. The rhythms are Nepali, melodies too, accompaniment is done by *tabla* and guitar where

Figure 1. *Nira Jahile Risaune, (Nira is Always Angry), Part 1.*

(transcription by Samyog Regmi)

the guitar follows the rhythms and accents of the *tabla*. But those meters and patterns happen elsewhere, too. So, technically I don't think it's a Nepali style. It may happen a lot in Nepal, those *jhyāure* patterns, but theoretically those can't be classified into something new.

Several respondents had negative associations with what they would call a Nepali sound. Rojib Charvel said: "Chord progressions suck big-time in Nepali music! Guitar solos and melodies on commercial songs are ridiculous. The artist/singer hires a session guitarist, and the guitarist pulls out all the skills he has, which don't necessarily suit the songs most of the time." Charvel seems to be talking about guitarists with an excess of skill, but a lack of taste. Mannu Shahi referred to an "approach you hear in almost 80% of the mainstream music used from back when we were kids. The one which you hear and say, 'Eww! *Tyo Nepali khale guitar part nabajata tyaha*' (Eww! Don't play that Nepali kind of guitar part!)." Kesang Dawa said:

Well, there is now [a Nepali style], and unfortunately it's not a very good style. Everybody seems to be playing in the same old manner, and not only playing, even when they are singing, Nepalis, they have this accent. When they pronounce Nepali words, they sound like they just got back from America, you know? This has become like a fashion. Personally, I don't like it, but it seems to work for the younger generation. They can't just say a simple word like *katimaya* ['how much love,' with an exaggerated accent], it's like a style now. They put an accent on that, you know? And the guitar is pretty much the same way, so it's kind of like arrested. They're not exploring new ways of playing it.

Be that as it may, most of these guitarists would probably agree that if a distinctive Nepali guitar sound emerges anywhere, it comes from native folk music conventions, and especially from specifically Nepali rhythms associated with the *madal*. As Jaco van den Dool (2016: 93) says,

Nepali youth, exposed to wedding bands, *sarangi* [Nepali fiddle], *madal*, *lok git*, and film music from early childhood, have developed a specific sensitivity toward high-pitched female voices, pentatonic folk melodies, and repetitive 6|8 rhythms. Absorbing their local music, albeit in a largely unconscious way, influences their musical ear and defines a certain harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic sensibility that utterly differs from that of jazz and rock music.

The distinctive 6|8 *jhyāure* rhythm is "an important part of Nepali folk music and literature that has several definitions. It is a polysemic term that denotes a wide variety of song genres, a variety of poetic meters (*chhanda*), and the six-beat musical *tāl* known as *jhyāure tāl*" (Stirr 2015: 7). *Jhyāure* songs "are not confined to certain ethnic backgrounds and geological areas, but are prevalent and are cherished by the people from hills, plains, forest and mountain areas throughout Nepal. From east Mechi to west Mahakali" (Tiwari, 2003: 57, transl. Samyog Regmi). The songs have a polyrhythmic feel of three against two or six against four, so they can be notated as simple duple or compound triple meter. The melodies are phrased in threes, whereas the accompaniment by bass drums and cymbals are phrased in twos. This creates the peculiar *jhyāure* feel. Almost all *jhyāure* songs are in 6|8 meter. Of the thirty-seven *jhyāure* songs in Subi Shah's folksong compilation, all are written as such (Shah 2006), so it's safe to assume

7  
T.  $\text{8}$   
jai le ri sau ne... ni ra kai le ho la ma ya san ga ma ya mi sau ne  
E. Bass  
Shk.  
Perc.  
S. D.

Figure 2. *Nira Jahile Risaune*, (Nira is Always Angry), Part 2. (transcription by Samyog Regmi)

*jhyāure* are predominately in 6|8.<sup>7</sup> In terms of the guitar, this distinctive sound can often be heard in chordal rhythmic accompaniment that essentially plays the part of the *madal* on *jhyāure*-based pop songs. *Nira Jahile Risaune* (Nira is Always Angry) by Kali Prasad Baskota is a good example.<sup>8</sup>

In Figures 1 and 2, we can see that the sung melody is phrased in groups of three. This would evoke a triplet feel if sung *a cappella*. The shaker might be a contemporary addition to the *jhyāure*, but the *madal*, (doubled by acoustic guitar), which is the main accompaniment in *jhyāure* tradition, is also phrased as such. The bass guitar and bass drum, however, are phrased in twos which creates the typical *jhyāure* polyrhythm. The bass drum plays duplets against the meter, and the duplet feel of the bass guitar is only made clear on the V (dominant) chord when the E and G# resolve back to the I (tonic) chord in the next measure (mm. five and nine). The use of the guitar here to play or double the *madal* part points to the naturalization of the guitar as it is incorporated into such traditionally-based pop genres, and is an example of a typically Nepali sound on the instrument.

### Pedagogical Considerations

When asked about the challenges of learning guitar for Nepali students, our informants broke roughly into two camps. The ones who had more formal education, or were educators themselves, saw pedagogy as more important, while those who were more self-taught downplayed or problematized the importance of formal learning. Rojib Charvel was deprived of formal music learning environments: “I never attended a proper class, so that created lots of trouble for self-learning, because I had so many questions and confusion. Moreover, I didn’t have any idea of what to study or practice to work on teaching myself. And during the time I was studying I also lacked computers and internet.” Shardool Shrestha had trouble benefitting from the formal teaching he *did* have access to: “In my case, it was really hard for me to explain to my teacher what I wanted to learn. And learning their way was really frustrating for me. So, I couldn’t last more than a month in any guitar class. Then, I thought of learning on my own and I guess it’s really working out.” Riken Maharjan, true to his independent, experimental style, dismissed the concern about a lack of standardized pedagogical resources for the guitar, and focused on individuality: “I was first taught by Hari Maharjan then John Shrestha. Both of them played different styles. Guitar is a very versatile instrument, so a strict curriculum is not necessary. For example, In Jon Gomm’s *Passionflower* he plays melodically by turning the tuning keys, which

I think is not taught in any standard curriculum.” John Shrestha, one of Maharjan’s teachers, also focused on individuality in learning modalities while also insisting on the necessity of a teacher: “In my opinion, everyone in the process of teaching themselves develops a pedagogical method of their own. The process is always changing and developing but the only thing that matters is proper guidance. Everyone needs a person at every stage of our learning process to guide us and to give little hints to help us get our direction.”

Some of our respondents are highly educated in Western music theory and their responses reflected that. Rajkumar Malakar stressed the importance of the piano keyboard for learning theory, and claimed that it cannot be done—or at least is very difficult—on guitar, a sentiment that will be familiar to many Western guitar students:

If you want to go to serious, classical composition then you have to learn the piano. Guitar cannot replace that for you. If you look at it harmonically, then the things you can do on the piano in terms of extensions and upper structures you cannot do with the guitar. It has limitations—you have to leave out certain notes when voicing a chord. There may be complications and limitations, but there are many advantages as well. Limitations are there for every instrument and you do things that are within the limitations of that instrument.

Nikesh Shakya attended the Berklee College of Music and emphasized the importance of a guru-like figure as a teacher and the difficulties of sorting out the plethora of internet resources: “Only after having attended Berklee and understanding Mick [Goodrick]’s approach did I really feel like my guitar playing bases were covered. Guitar playing resources on the Internet are quite fragmented and one has to spend years and experience it in order to figure out what works for you.”

The range of options for learning guitar in Kathmandu is definitely expanding, with institutions like the Nepal Music Center, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory and Kathmandu University’s Department of Music supplemented by growing private teaching resources and increasingly accessible and dependable internet access. The possibilities of peer-to-peer learning are also burgeoning as more and more youth become proficient on guitar and share their knowledge with friends and relatives. Many younger informants specifically stressed the importance of the internet, which has become widely accessible only in the last ten years.

## The Future of the Guitar

Our respondents for this article were unanimous on only one point—that the future of the guitar in Nepal is bright. They described the guitar as such a versatile tool that they could not envision it becoming obsolete. Iman Shah said:

Guitar is a worldwide phenomenon. It's changed its appearance in every era like synth pop, guitar rock, etc. In every decade there is a guitar hero and the masses will follow that kind of music. I think for guitar to become extinct is impossible. For example, we have virtual guitar player, and other technologies, but they are not like the real thing. I also do film compositions too, and I use virtual guitars to make dummies. But at the end of the day I always record the real instrument. So, guitars and other acoustic instruments will stay.

John Shrestha pointed to the utility and flexibility of the instrument:

I don't know about the future, but currently people are using guitar as a versatile instrument. Not only does it have the ability to do both melody and harmony but is also capable of experimenting with various soundscapes. We can see many fusion bands which have guitar players and it seems that it also blends quiet well with Nepali folk instruments.

As did Hari Maharjan:

This instrument is capable of producing new styles and playing techniques continuously. There are too many possibilities. When we were young, we thought the guitar was just an acoustic instrument meant to play chords on. We didn't even know that solos could be played on the guitar. And then came the gadgets, electronics, 'air tapping' method, classical methods, flamenco, gypsy, etc. So, there's just too many ways to play. This instrument is capable of producing rhythms, harmony and bass lines. So, you just need to find your own way around the instrument and come up with new things to play. The possibilities are endless.

Rojib Charvel thinks the guitar in the future will be "huge." "I see kids learning so quickly and the availability of resources, gear, and music schools has been changing and developing, so it's secure I guess." According to Rajkumar Malakar, "there are a lot of factors as to why guitar is such a popular instrument. It's very portable and fits in every genre. It is capable of playing harmony, rhythm, and single notes as well. You can very much do a one-man band kind of thing with it. So, I don't think it's going to go

anywhere. I think its future is safe." For other respondents as well, the versatility and portability of the guitar practically guarantee its continued use in Kathmandu and Nepal more broadly.

## Conclusion

At the outset of this research we assumed that the guitar represented freedom and modernity, and indeed two of our respondents explicitly said as much. However, the much bigger theme that emerged from our coding was that the guitar is connected with individualism. Many respondents used language like "the guitar represents my life," or "myself," "a friend," "a tool to express myself," and so on. For us, this points to a rise in individualism as a response not only to new social freedoms and economic mobilities, but to a greater connection to a global culture in which the individual artist is venerated and personal responsibility narratives are everywhere reinforced. We also took Martin Clayton's idea that the guitar must be theorized and understood in local ways as a given, and our results bore that out. Our interlocutors pointed to the guitar's association in Kathmandu with specific social and natural spaces—parks, open fields, jungles, and picnics—sites which are associated with hanging out with friends, away from the family, and with dating; its utilization to play the rhythms of the *madal*; its use by legions of young boys as a fashion accessory as they wear their gig bags around town. One informant even gave an example of his experience of the ruptures in context and meaning, or schizophonia, that can occur when musics move trans-globally:

You'd be surprised if I told you I loved Lynyrd Skynyrd, but later I went to Portland, Oregon to study, and I realized Lynyrd Skynyrd was really, you know, a 'skinhead' [read: racist] band—I had no idea! You know, because we were young and we just loved the Southern rock, and in America they told me these are all redneck bands. We didn't even know what it meant, and it didn't really matter to us, because we were purely playing for the music.

Finally, we do not believe the guitar is considered as foreign as it once was in the days of Greene and Henderson (Greene and Henderson 2002; Greene 2001, 2002, 2011; Henderson 2002, 2005). Many of our younger informants were exposed to the guitar early in life—sometimes as the first instrument they had contact with—and thus cannot see it as truly foreign. Therefore, we assert that, for the guitar in Kathmandu, a process of naturalization is already well underway.

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The authors would like to thank Noé Dinnerstein and Andrew Alter for asking them to submit this article, Sienna Craig for encouragement and advice on revisions, and the anonymous reviewers for their astute and helpful comments, which ultimately enabled the authors to improve the article greatly. The authors would also like to thank all of the interviewees for their generosity and openness in giving their time and insights to this project.

## Endnotes

1. As one of our anonymous reviewers pointed out, today's Nepali youth are much more conversant with the global left, and thus are more likely to hear reggae as "revolutionary."
2. "Guitar Maestro" was an Indian television show produced in Darjeeling, (ca. 2008–2015), that claimed to be the "first guitarist TV reality show in world TV history" (from the Facebook page of the show: <<https://www.facebook.com/events/403499449694374/>>). In the show, contestants compete to be the best performer in the manner of "American Idol," or its wildly popular derivative, "Nepali Idol." The existence of this show is more evidence of the vibrancy of the guitar scene in Nepal.
3. According to the 2014 Population Monograph of Nepal, published by the Central Bureau of Statistics, Newars are a plurality, at 33.3% in Lalitpur and 45.6% in Bhaktapur, and the second-largest group in Kathmandu, at 22% (33). Their numbers as a share of the population have fallen since the 2001 census, when they were over 32% of the Valley.
4. All interviews were conducted and translated by the authors in September, 2017.
5. "Git" means "song," while "sangit" means "music." In this context they are basically synonymous.
6. A poetic genre derived from Indian, Arabic, and Persian tradition, (see Sthapit, 2008).
7. Shova Tiwari mentions that some *jhyāure* can be in other meters as well but doesn't give any examples in her book to support her statement.
8. "Nira jaile risaune full video," YouTube video, posted by RANDOM NEPALI CHANNEL, 6 December, 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4vYou02G18>> (accessed on 15 September 2017).

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