

Reuben Mashangva — a Wandering Minstrel from the Hills of Manipur*

Aiyushman Dutta**

The present article on Reuben Mashangva - a wandering minstrel from the hills of Manipur, by journalist Aiyushman Dutta, is interesting and educative especially for the upcoming generation. Popularly known as the father of modern Naga Folk Blues, Reuben Mashangva has not only rediscovered and reinvented the variegated rich folk traditions of the Tangkhul Nagas, but he has also refashioned tribal musical instruments to suit the Western tonal scale. Reuben's mission of popularizing his brand of music, singing of the common man's joy and travails and also reviving age-old traditional folk culture is sure to have a long-term impact on many generations to come. Reuben, however, is not a mere practitioner or researcher of folk traditions. Besides unravelling the richness of his tribal heritage, Reuben has also managed to revive passion and interest in age-old tribal traditions. If he has received high accolades for his experimental folk music from the critics, he should also be credited for showing the way and inspiring many young artists towards innovative ways to preserve and develop folk music.

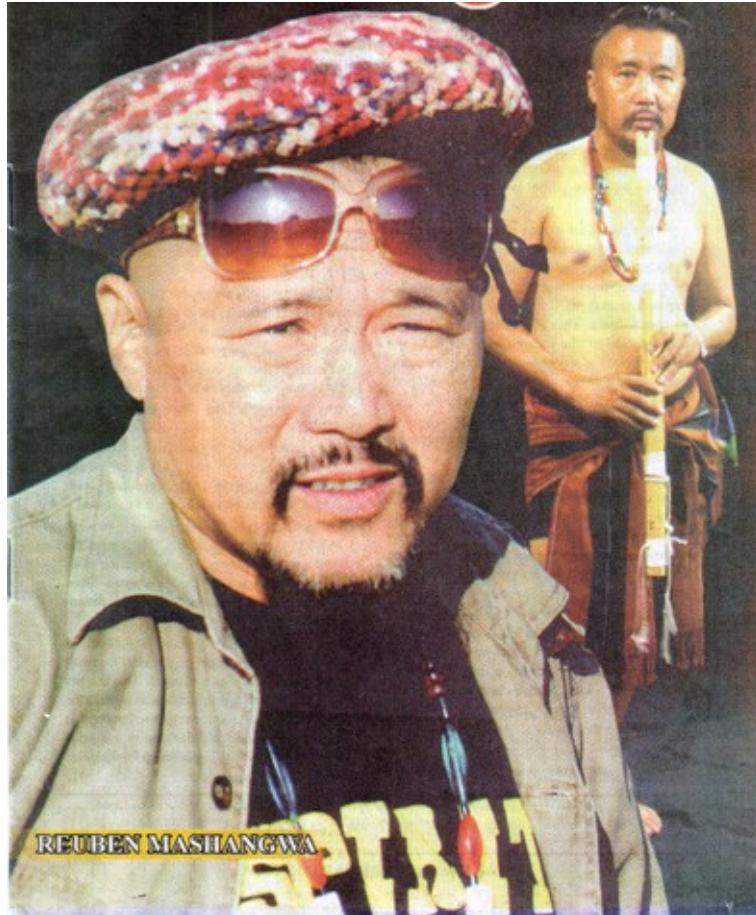
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Author



Reuben Mashangva



Reuben Mashangwa

What is it about Blues music that keeps drawing me closer towards it? What is so special about its earthy authenticity that keeps me up all night, when I probably should not be, listening to the plethora of emotions that its practitioners let loose? I guess it is probably the inspiration. Anyone who has ever listened to the 'Blues' will know that it is more than just music; it is, but, an inspiration, the unfolding of emotions that we all feel. Right from influential Blues legends like Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Willie Dixon and many others to more contemporary Blues artists such as Robert Cray, Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Blues has always been and will continue to be part of our musical heritage.

I am sure that most of us have at least heard the names, even if it might be in passing, of these legendary Blues exponents. But how many of us are even aware of the existence of a musician in our midst who has given rise to an entirely new genre of Blues with his experimental brand of tribal music, at the same time, paving the way for the preservation and

propagation of the rich traditions of his tribe? Meet Guru Reuben Mashangva – a wandering minstrel from the hills of Manipur who is popularly known as the father of the modern Naga Folk Blues! The principal exponent of ‘Hao Music,’ this crusader has not only rediscovered and reinvented the variegated rich folk traditions of the Tangkhul Nagas, but he has also refashioned tribal musical instruments to suit the Western tonal scale. Though he might not have ‘toured the world’ as the word is understood in the current music ‘industry’ idiom, his assumed apostolic mission of popularizing his brand of music, singing of the common man’s joy and travails and also reviving age-old traditional folk culture will not just evaporate without a trace. It will definitely have a cyclic impact on many generations to come.

One of the hallmarks in Reuben’s illustrious career was his painstaking efforts in the amplification and customization of the *Tingtelia*, a fiddle like traditional stringed instrument. Reuben had to experiment for almost a decade with the original *Tingtelia* in order to create a distinct sound that goes harmoniously smooth with the modern acoustic and electric guitar and harmonica. The other instruments which accompany his ‘Hao Music’ include *Yankahui*, a long bamboo flute, and a yak horn played with a mallet apart from an assortment of modern and traditional percussions.

Reuben Mashangva was born to Shangphai and Lasengla Mashangva in remote Choithar village of Ukrul district in Manipur. Though he did not enjoy a musical environment at home during his childhood, save for the sound of the *Talla* (a bamboo folk instrument) that his father occasionally played, Reuben’s love for his ancestral traditions was so deep that it continuously egged him on to know more about his roots. A self-taught musician, Reuben’s first real brush with music occurred when he brought his first guitar at home at the age of 15, from a trader who ferried it on his shoulder across the border from what was then Burma. Made of Burma teak, these guitars were a much cheaper alternative to costly Indian guitars but at the same time, they were highly unpredictable. As Reuben, whose English still remains broken, says, “Sometimes they sound good, sometimes bad.” He started singing in church but his sole teacher was the radio, where he used to listen to western music programmes – his only link with the western world and its music.

The turning point, however, came when a friend came over, bearing cassettes of Bob Dylan. The friend played *Blowing in the Wind*, and explained to Reuben the lyrics – line by line, word after word. And it was love at first instance. It might have been foreign music, to be sure, but how deeply it resonated with his landscape, he had thought. “So

relevant to our area,” he remembered thinking. “No drum, nothing, just guitar. Paddy field. Cows. Looking at the buffalo. So matching our area.” Voice of America Radio then acquainted Reuben with the Beatles, Credence Clearwater Revival and later, Bob Marley. However, even after sampling so many different genres, he ultimately decided the Blues was what came closest to his people, except that the Blues, as he likes to say, began only 150 years ago. “Our folksong is a thousand years old.” Though it is true that he has had early influences, over the years, Reuben has managed to carve a unique place for himself in the world of music and these so-called influences hardly matter much now. His musical journey, as well as that of his entire life, is best summed up in the song, *My land and people*, where he sings, *Here I am, Here I am. Oh! The son of this land.*

Having dropped out of school after his tenth standards (matriculation examination), Reuben ventured out of the protective environment of his family to try his hand at menial jobs around his ancestral abode. His love for his traditions and nature, however, did not ensure a secure livelihood and his family anticipated a dreary future for him. His first cousin, after much prodding, finally managed to make him go to Imphal and join an investment company – a place where he worked for five years. His job ensured that he didn’t have to worry about a living and he spent most of his time practicing his music. Incidentally, he conceived his first composition – a love song – during this very period. This was the time when he met Stephen Angkang, the president of the Thangkhum Naga Long and an authority in folklores, who introduced young Reuben with the beauty and immense artistic potentialities of their rich tribal folk traditions. Together with Angkang, he began playing the guitar and practicing folk songs, which used to be aired in the local radio station. Today, as Reuben erects milestones with his experimental brand of music, he cannot forget the umpteen visits he made to Ukhrul district and how he travelled through the hills and dales looking for enlightening interactions with the gradually vanishing traditional folk crooners of his tribe. Each of these interactions had given him immense folk wisdom which would have otherwise been hidden or extinct. At the same time, he also embarked on several fact-seeking trips to the interiors where he learned about these folk arts and instruments. Some of the folk experts who guided him and whom he remembers today are Akhothing of Phungyar Village, Shamphang of Nungshang and Shimeingam Shinglei, who had all imparted rich insights on different folk art forms and the use of indigenous musical instruments to him.

Reuben, however, is not a mere practitioner or researcher of folk traditions. Besides unravelling the richness of his tribal heritage, Reuben

has also managed to revive passion and interest in age-old tribal traditions by creating an innovative space for himself. Unlike many others who believe in just showcasing their skills, Reuben's mission involves making others aware of the twine that binds all forms of sounds with life; the fact that innovation is a continuous process and also the possibilities of man-made sounds enjoying a harmonious relationship with nature. If he has received high accolades for his experimental folk music from the critics, he should also be credited for showing the way and inspiring many young artists towards innovative ways to preserve and develop folk music.

It was highly improbable that Reuben's love for his folk traditions would supplement his fascination for western music, and at one point of time, a clash ensued between both. This clash can be said to have sown the seeds for the creation of his own brand of music – the Naga Folk Blues. Another factor was his deep desire for reviving the passion of his people for their rich tribal traditions. "Our folk music is boring," he says. "Today, children do not go to paddy field. They do not go to village. They go to school, they travel in cars. We have to refine our folk music if we want them to be interested." And to refine the folk traditions, Reuben chose the Blues, which is all about transmitting emotions. As he says, "When I started listening to music, I heard the story of the Blues. It is very similar to our folk. But it has proper structure. When I first heard the Blues, I realized that all music is ultimately the same; only instruments might be different." Similarly, if one is to define it, the Naga Folk Blues is just a creative fusion of sounds deeply rooted in the many folk traditions of his tribe.

Talking about Reuben's brand of Hao music, I was simply left awestruck once I saw him handling the acoustic guitar. The tribal folk musicologist so expertly wrenched notes from his guitar that it sent shivers up my spine. Using typical blues guitar techniques, and a whole lot of emotions, Reuben created a slow blues, absolutely heart wrenching versions of some popular as well as tribal songs, which was unlike anything I had ever heard before. It was so raw, real and authentic that I was immediately blown away. Moreover, when it comes to music, instead of technical expertise over an instrument, I tend to be impressed more by the manner in which a musician conveys the emotions of the song, adds to them and enhances the overall mood. Anyone can learn to play blindingly fast with a million notes, but when someone can make their soul speak through the instrument, that's what music is really all about. Judging from that aspect, Reuben is truly a gifted musician.

Having been listening to some of Reuben's compositions for almost a month now, I found that all his songs manage to strike a chord with the

listener – even people like me who do not understand a word of his dialect. Commenting on his experimental music, Reuben says that once anyone masters the given traditional folk musical roots, it is easy to fit in those elements into western music or add western elements to the folk. Most of Reuben’s compositions have the guitar sounds replaced by sound of folk instruments or folk instruments’ sound supporting and supplementing other sounds produced by modern instruments. But the one thing which remain constant is the emotions – pure, unbridled emotions having the capacity to bring the listener on the verge of sadness or unrivaled ecstasy. “Whenever I travel for my performance, my *Tingtelia* and bamboo flute always accompany me. Even when I get a chance to tour the world, it will be with this bamboo instrument and I am sure my audience and fans will love it,” he says, picking up his bamboo flute. He has so far released two seminal albums called, *Naga Folk Blues* and *Creation*.

And for someone whose love for his folk instruments and traditions is so deep, it is unlikely that the socio-cultural and political milieu in which he grew up would escape his compositions. Most of Reuben’s songs reflect his uncanny understanding of human life and its relationship with Mother Nature. Beauty of the feminine body as well as the grace of Nature’s abundant bounty is something which this wandering minstrel exploits with trademark finesse. Perhaps, it is his uncanny knack of understanding the relation between music and nature that has made his mission so vibrant and arresting. Alongside his journey, he has also gained copious amount of knowledge on human being’s harmonious as well as destructive relations with the land, forests and animals and the associative values attached to these very relations. Right from his first music album produced by the Naga Cultural Development Society in 1999, his passion and love for ecology has been unmistakably evident. Even while just enjoying Reuben’s kind of music, no one can do away with the intrinsic politics of poetics that is ubiquitous in all his songs, lyrics and the sound.

In an eventful career, Reuben has been sharing experiences with other pioneering musicians of North-east India, like Rudy Wallang of *Soulmate*, master percussionist Momocha Laishram and Mangang, the famous *Pena* (indigenous folk fiddle) artist of Manipur. Having participated in several folk fusion projects, he has interacted and shared performing space with several international artistes. Reuben is also the founder of the Folk Art and Cultural Guild (FACG), Manipur and has taken part in many kaleidoscopic cultural shows and festivals in the State. He is married to Happy Mashangva, whose moral support had been unwavering and who

has encouraged him in all his endeavors. They have raised three daughters and a son and are now settled at Nagaram, Imphal.

For a person who has dedicated his entire life towards finding his roots, the present trend of music in the region, which is more inclined towards western rock, bothers him a bit. But did not he begin his musical career after being influenced by western rock musicians? Over a lunch of rice, *khar* and fish curry, Reuben clarifies, “Different faces, different thoughts. I appreciate rock. But the question is about relevance. Can you relate to its lyrics? Here rock musicians are only imitating noise.” “It is noise music,” he adds with his characteristic warm smile. “Rock and folk are two different things; wherever I go, I take my culture with me. But is it the same about rock? How many of our young musicians know the roots of rock? But still they play rock. This type of music has no chance,” he says, in a bid to explain the futility of a life without having knowledge of one’s roots.

Dwelling further on the importance of roots, he says, “The current crop of young musicians in our region think that to be a successful musician, modern western music is the only option. I choose to differ. Our talented youth can become complete musicians only when they learn about their roots. Just as you cannot ignore your parents even if they are blind or maimed, you cannot ignore our age-old folk roots.” The idea becomes reassuring whenever one sees his little son, Saka Mashangva, accompanying him on numerous performances as a regular percussionist and *ad hoc* backing vocalist. In most concerts, the father and son duo not only sounds harmonious, but also looks breathtakingly adorable with their traditional attire and their traditional hairdo, *Haokuirat*.

A recipient of a National Folklore Support Centre fellowship, Reuben is presently working on his third album. This would be his first album of English compositions. One of the tracks in the to-be-released compilation that gives an overview of its entire essence is the one titled, *Hornbill*. The track is basically one of self-inspiration and it draws an allegory with the Hornbill bird, which he uses to represent the North-east. “The Hornbill is a very powerful and expressive bird. Through this song, I want to break the fear psyche that has pervaded into the mentality of the people of the region.”

Some artists never received the recognition they truly deserve but if an artist can inspire others, than that is the biggest of all success. Beyond that, there is very little that really matters. For Reuben Mashangva, love for his traditions still reigns supreme in his mind, body and soul. The same is evident as he says, “I love music and I love my culture. I’ll do music till my last breath.” And the ecstasy of this man with an apostolic

mission would know no limits, if some of his passion and enthusiasm passes on to some of the new generations of musicians as well. As he exhorts, “Go ahead! Don’t turn back. Without music, there is no fun. And without knowing your roots, life has no meaning!”

*Take a flight,
Reach out for your dreams.
Take a chance,
Spread your wings of hope.
Like the hornbills,
Your flight is your song.*

– (Reuben Mashangva in *Hornbill*)



* *Courtesy, The Sentinel, Melange, February 8, 2009.*

** *Aiyushman Dutta is a Guwahati-based journalist who has been working for the preservation and promotion of the oral and folk traditions of the country. Having worked in different State capitals of North-east India for the past decade, he has also tried his hand in alternative media and development journalism while posted at New Delhi. He is at present associated with The Sentinel as their cultural reporter and music critic. He can be reached at optionaldutta@gmail.com or 91-9957193228.*



INFORMATION EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW....*

Blood Clots/Stroke - They Now Have a Fourth Indicator, the Tongue

STROKE: Remember the 1st Three Letters....S.T.R.

STROKE IDENTIFICATION:

During a BBQ, a friend stumbled and took a little fall - she assured everyone that she was fine (they offered to call paramedics). She said she had just tripped over a brick because of her new shoes.

They got her cleaned up and got her a new plate of food. While she appeared a bit shaken up, Ingrid went about enjoying herself the rest of the evening.

Ingrid's husband called later telling everyone that his wife had been taken to the hospital - (at 6:00 p.m. Ingrid passed away.) She had suffered a stroke at the BBQ. Had they known how to identify the signs of a stroke, perhaps Ingrid would be with us today. Some don't die. They end up in a helpless, hopeless condition instead.

A neurologist says that if he can get to a stroke victim within 3 hours he can totally reverse the effects of a stroke...totally. He said the trick was getting a stroke recognized, diagnosed, and then getting the patient medically cared for within 3 hours, which is tough.

RECOGNIZING A STROKE

Thank God for the sense to remember the '3' steps, STR. Read and Learn!

Sometimes symptoms of a stroke are difficult to identify. Unfortunately, the lack of awareness spells disaster. The stroke victim may suffer severe brain damage when people nearby fail to recognize the symptoms of a stroke.

Now doctors say a bystander can recognize a stroke by asking three simple questions:

S *Ask the individual to SMILE.

T *Ask the person to TALK and SPEAK A SIMPLE SENTENCE (Coherently) (i.e., it is sunny out today)

R *Ask him or her to RAISE BOTH ARMS.

If he or she has trouble with ANY ONE of these tasks, call emergency number immediately and describe the symptoms to the dispatcher.

New Sign of a Stroke ——— Stick out Your Tongue

NOTE: Another 'sign' of a stroke is this: Ask the person to 'stick' out his tongue... If the tongue is 'crooked,' if it goes to one side or the other, that is also an indication of a stroke.

** Received by e-mail from sandeep banerji <sand_bane@yahoo.com> on Thursday, January 22, 2009.*