

PABAN Das Baul, a world-renowned Bangali Baul musician, is revered for being the pioneer of blazing a trail for Baul music on the international music scene and for establishing a unique and innovative genre of folk-fusion music. The legendary minstrel entertained legions of enraptured fans at two consecutive concerts held in Dhaka recently. During his stay in Dhaka, Paban and his wife Urmimala Sen Mimlu (USM) took some time out to share a few thoughts in an exclusive rendezvous with the Star Weekend Magazine.

SWM: Could you tell us more about your early life and the origins of your musical inspiration? How did you develop your passion for music?

PDB: I was born in 1961 in the village Mohammedpur, in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. My parents were from a very simple background. While my mother and sister liked to sing, it was my father who especially loved and was involved in music, though he wasn't a famous artist or anything of that kind. He used to be a skilled wrestler, but after losing his property, he would travel through Murshidabad, singing Baul songs and wrestling to make both ends meet. I would keep him company on his travels and sing with him, from the time I was just five or six years old. We would render songs at various places... villages and fairs, stages and festivals. And that was my 'schooling'. This was the way I learned to sing... I never had any training. I had a natural passion for music and learnt everything I know about it by watching and listening to other musicians. In the course of time, we came across the Bauls and performed at their fairs. Eventually, I was initiated by Suban Das Baul when I was fourteen years old.

SWM: And that was when you became Paban 'Das Baul'. Could you recount any momentous anecdotes from your early life?

PDB: There is one incident I remember particularly well. One day, I heard a 'Sufi fakir' playing an instrument called a 'dubki' (a tambourine-like instrument) in our village. I was so captivated

Rendezvous With Paban Das Baul

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that I asked my father to buy me a *dubki* just like the one the Sufi was playing. I was six years old then. My father bought me the *dubki* with three annas; now it is worth about 120 to 150 takas, so you see, this was many years ago. No-one taught me how to play the *dubki*. I learnt to play it by myself by watching others play it. Likewise, no-one taught me how to play the *khamak* and *dotara* either, I learnt through observation. The people from whom I learnt so much by observing their playing are the very people I regard as my gurus.

SWM: You have been featured in a French documentary, on Bauls, called 'Le Chants Des Fou'...

PDB: Yes, the French Government made a feature film on me in 1979. It which was telecast on French TV. In Bangla, the title of that film 'Le Chant Des Fou' translates into 'Pagolder Gaan' (Songs of the Mad People).

USM: It was a very beautiful film, about the Bauls. It followed a young boy called Kartik...

SWM: ...who, incidentally, is now a well-known Baul singer...

USM: ...Yes, and at that time he was only about seven years old. In the film, he was following Paban and other Bauls around, and the story basically centered on how Kartik was getting apprenticed with these older Bauls and how he was gradually assimilating the Baul lifestyle. The film showed that the whole Baul tradition is actually handed down amongst generations orally. For instance, when Paban learnt about Baul music, his 'educators' was simply the other older Baul singers. Similarly, Kartik, being very young, learnt from Paban and other older Bauls, in the film.

PDB: The film was shot in 1977, and released in 1979. Several of us Bauls were in this film, which was basically a documentary on Bauls. 'Le Chant Des Fou' was aired in various European countries. I personally think it was one of the most beautiful documentaries ever made, because it portrayed the Baul way of life so accurately.

SWM: 'Le Chant Des Fou' indeed took a lovely approach to enlightening the Western world on one of the most arcane and mystical, and yet profoundly fascinating, facets of South-East Asian culture. When and why did you actually decide to move to Paris?