

WASIFUDDIN DAGAR

dhruwad vocal



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Wasifuddin Dagar Interview

Ira Landgarten: This is your first tour of the U.S. and it's been seventeen years since your father and uncle [Faiyazuddin and Zahiruddin Dagar] have been here. Now we're in the twenty-first century so you are the first dhrupadiya to perform in the United States in the twenty-first century, which is an exciting idea! Most people who are aware of dhrupad have heard your father and uncle, and elder uncles [Moinuddin and Aminuddin Dagar] who were mostly known for their jugalbandi — duet — style. You are now performing alone; how do you deal with that aspect since you began your career singing as part of a duo with your uncle Zahiruddin?

Wasifuddin: Actually when we learn this art form, it's individual attention that we get from the teacher. Everybody has their own problems; somebody could be good in rhythms, somebody could be good in *gamaks* and different patterns, longer patterns and smaller patterns. This is up to the teacher how he develops it, how he makes you do your best within your capacity. When we learn, it's never together; it's always individual attention we get when we are about to perform for the very first time. First they sang separately — not in the big concerts, they performed in home gatherings and such — and then they decided, because to sing together is very tough. It's tough to sing alone also, but it's even tougher when you sing with someone because you have to understand a lot of things. You have to coordinate, you have to understand, you have

to adjust according to the mood of you partner. But most of the time it happens that if one is not in good mood the other could be in good mood, and after some time he can inspire you so much that you come back in good mood. In *jugalbandi* it's like that. So, in a nutshell, I come back to the same thing, that when we learn it is always alone. Our development is in the *raag* and the personality of *raag*, how much you understand. With me when I was learning, it was for my solo performances — who would have known that my father would have died so soon? I was always being trained for solo performance but after the death of my father there were so many people who were curious about my uncle also — what will happen to him? Of course, they had not heard me so much at that time so they didn't know about the future, the next generation, what is happening there. I had already given one or two concerts but I was not in front of people yet — not in Delhi or Bombay — it was in Bhopal that I gave my first concert. Some people asked my uncle, “With whom now will you sing?” He decided, “OK, Wasif will sing with me.” My first question to him was, “Can I sing with you? Do you think so?” Haha! He said, “Yes, of course you will sing.” He was very encouraging. Then I gave my first performance...

IL: When was that?

WD: It was the 25th of February 1989, just twelve or thirteen days after my father's death. We decided this was a new combination of 'uncle-nephew' — otherwise usually it was brothers.

IL: And you became known as ‘Dagar Duo.’

WD: Yes, some people called us ‘Dagar Duo’ — we were known as the Dagers. I had most of my training from my uncle, Zahiruddin Dagersab, and my father also.

IL: You said most of it; do you consider that you had one guru or two gurus?

WD: I have more than two gurus. Heheheh...It’s very good to be born in a family of musicians! After the death of my uncle and father, I can go and ask questions to my elders and they give replies. One of my uncles would say, “You can not receive blessings while begging. You have to be deserving to get blessings.” It will not come just out of anywhere, from you elders or anyone — you have to be honest, you have to be honest with your music, with your notes and with yourself. You have to be nice with your mannerisms and the etiquette of the family, and how to develop as a musician, as a sincere musician. This how you can win the hearts of your elders. Gurus do not give just by throwing something, “Oh, take it!” You have to have proper hands to take it. Right now I feel that most of my music is from my uncle, and my father, but a few of the techniques of Aminuddin Dagersab, Fahimuddin Dagersab and something of Sayeeduddin Dagersab. Of course, you know my voice resembles my father’s; the techniques are my uncle’s. I feel that I am under them; they are putting all the blessings on me when I’m performing.

IL: You’ve combined the qualities of your father and uncle in performance...

WD: Yes, of course, you do so much of your practice that all the techniques become part of your music and then it's up to your nature what you like more, what you select.

IL: Did you begin training as a very young child?

WD: Yes, but I was listening before I was born! At three, four or five you can not teach anything serious to children but you can give them a sort of atmosphere. In the beginning, in the *riyaaz* we were given the first note 'sa' and our brain is the fastest computer, our mind is the fastest computer in the world because it can 'catch' things unconsciously also. With computers you have to type, then only you say, "Yes, memory. Yes, I want memory;" then it catches. But our brain catches unconsciously. At that time of *riyaaz*, whether our mind was there or not — pulling out the thread from the carpet or anything, heheh — we were singing, "SA...." And if the sa would waver, "No! Behave! Do it properly." They are also checking us. Consciously or unconsciously, we learn. If I can concentrate, I can visualize that — some of those 'pictures which were clicked.' I can see my uncle and my father; I was too young to remember Rahimuddin Dagarsab, but I have a few glimpses of him, also — he died in 1975. I was about five or six.

IL: So you were just constantly surrounded by the sound of dhrupad. At some point when you were old enough were you presented with the idea that now you are going to seriously start practicing in the traditional manner, and

take this up and become a dhrupad singer?

WD: Yes, it was already started. And what attracts a child most is rhythm — whenever there was some fast composition I would really love to hear that. And the second thing a child likes — to be the center of attraction. My uncle taught me a few compositions, which were recorded by some of his students also — I heard that. Whenever there were some guests, “Yes, our son is also singing. Come on let’s hear something from you.” And this is up to the teacher how he molds the child; this is up to the parents how they mold the child. Some protect their children so much that in the winter if they take their hand out they catch cold. Some people just say, “Oh, jump from here, no problem. Just be free, carefree. Whatever you want to do.” This is up to the parents. Since then I was told, “Oh, it’s a very nice composition. Yes, you will do, *beta*, you will do definitely. You will also sing like us.” So there was encouragement throughout. Some interesting lessons were given which always inspired me to wait for the lesson rather than being dragged to it. I used to wait for the lesson; it used to be one hour or forty-five minutes lesson in the beginning. After school and after playing a little bit, I used to get a lesson in the evening, and I used to wait for that lesson. It is up to the teacher how he injects the interest to learn, the urge to learn more. In this classical music you have to be very ‘impatiently patient’ to learn. You have to be impatient to learn more but you have to have patience to have the proper grasp of it.

IL: I would think so; just about all the Indian musicians I've spoken with — instrumentalists or kheyal singers — have a special reverence for dhrupad. One of the things they've said is that dhrupad requires an extraordinary amount of practice and learning. They tend to give one the impression that this is even more so than the other forms of classical music, and because of that they imply that perhaps a lot of students are not up to the level of work in the old traditional style. Many musicians are getting popular, name and fame, that haven't done the kind of work that dhrupad demands. What do you think about that?

WD: It takes a lot of...not takes, it extracts a lot of energy out of you, and you have to have a very decent understanding and you have to see the notes, not only to admire but in a worshipping way. You have to be honest...Yes, it's a difficult art form; I will not say it's easy. But anything, if you want to do it properly, is not easy. I'm so happy that they have kept *dhrupad* in such a high place but at the same time they are also protesting that it does not have the scope of improvisation; it doesn't not have what they call 'ornamentations' and it's a very serious matter.

IL: Sometimes we hear the word 'austere' which suggests the lack of ornamentation. 'Purity' is another word used to describe dhrupad...

WD: Purity of the note is very essential, and my viewpoint is, of course, music is an ocean. Each and every note has the depth of an ocean if you really want to see it with your microscopic eyes to judge the microtones

— the *shrutis*. But I'm always confused by 'ornamentations' — what do they mean? What are they putting — some earrings, some necklace? I don't know what they mean by ornamentations in *kheyal* because the *badhat* [detailed improvisation in the *alap*] of the *raag* is the same. We are singing the same *raags*; our viewpoints are different, definitely our way of thinking, our way of approach is different but we are also doing — if you want to say they are decorating the notes, we are also decorating it. We also try to bring out the different meaning of the same text. They have the words — what they are elaborating with the help of notes — but we are doing it without the words. It needs a lot of understanding of the *raag*. In a *raag* you get a *mukhara* [literally 'face;' the first part of any composition that is used repeatedly] and then you improvise *mukhara*. *Mukhara* is the first cycle, the first round of the *raag*. You elaborate, always remembering the *mukhara* and you repeat that same thing whereas in *dhrupad* you go in a lower octave, then you come to middle octave, gradually you go up. We are also decorating it. I really can't understand why they have used this word 'ornamentations.' What do they mean by 'ornamentations'? "There is no ornamentation in *dhrupad*; there is ornamentation in *kheyal*." Ornamentations are just because of the words? Words are very feeble if there is no feeling behind them; it's meaningless if there is no feeling behind them. Feelings are much more important than the word — words are important, I don't say that words are not important. And at the same time the note you are singing does not have enough strength to — it can not bear the weight of words, it's

so delicate. The note — the *swara* — is so delicate it can not bear the weight of a word. When you have *aamad* [a skilled entry, with an artistic phrase, into the orbit of *sam*] when the *sam* comes in the time cycle — there is a way of presenting it in which you see the *sam* coming from very far — that is called *aamad*. It doesn't need a word, people understand it. If you're aware of that because it is being repeated in front of you so many times, then after some time you don't need to say that, and you just present it in such a way that the listener catches it. "Here; this is *sam*."

IL: The listener anticipates the sam...

WD: Yes, this is anticipation; the right word for *aamad* is anticipation. We are singing the same *raag* and of course *dhrupad* is difficult — so other forms are also difficult. But just don't get away simply by saying, "It's difficult."

IL: From what I can hear there is a slightly different psychological or spiritual intention in your approach to singing that's at the root of it...

WD: My singing, or Dagers' singing?

IL: The Dagers' singing. It's got a stronger devotional, meditative quality than kheyal singing, a lot of which is often closer to entertainment. I think that's perhaps what some people may refer to because to have that state of mind is not easy in this world now! The kind of devotional, peaceful, inner

approach — much of the music, especially from the West, is very outer and very superficial. Isn't there a real philosophy behind your music and its purpose in your family?

WD: In our family, we have as I told you, sincerity and honesty towards the music, towards the note, towards your guru, towards most things. The examples that we get from our teachers are always towards God. If they would explain about the singing of someone — I'm talking about at the beginning of the century — Allabande Khansab, Zakhiruddin Khansab. In our Indian ways of learning, we are not supposed to ask a lot of questions. There is a story about the brothers of my grandfather's generation — Nasiruddin Khansab, Rahimuddin Khansab, Imamuddin Khansab, Hussainuddin Khansab. Their father, Allabande Khansab, used to say that there was one musician whose voice was so beautiful, his singing was so nice; that's all, he would finish. Then after discussing with all the brothers, the eldest one said, "You are often talking about his singing but what kind of singing was it; what kind of voice quality did he have?" So then he replied that his voice was so nice and his approach to the notes was so great that you would feel that the doors of the temple are open. Because of the very nice approach and voice, you feel like you are somewhere else — in a temple or shrine. Our philosophy, our family's way of thinking has always been meditative and spiritual and towards God — it's a prayer to God. You do whatever you have to do, whatever you've been given to do, whatever has come in front of you;

just do that and leave it to God whatever the result is. Whether there are five people in front of you or fifty, or five thousand or fifty thousand in front of you, it's no matter; you be honest with yourself because it's not only them who are listening, it's some greater thing behind it which will always support you, which will always be there. So the approach had been, "You are nothing; you can not do anything! It's only that big Power which can do anything." You may become so big — as big as a camel — but that is a mountain, as big, as tall as a mountain! In the music field, even if you've become big, huge or very well known, you are still a speck of dust in front of that Power. You try, you are trying, you are trying to serve. That's all.

IL: Do you sing every day as a personal devotion whether you are performing or not?

WD: Yes, there's practice which goes on every day. It's not fixed — four or five hours, nothing is fixed, one hour, two hours — it's up to the mood how it develops. It's not that when you just sit for your concert or anywhere, you start singing and you go into a trance — it's a very, very rare thing which happens. It just happens and you feel that it has happened. When you look at your watch you just feel that it was just that much, and when you look at your watch it's been four or five hours!

IL: There's definitely something very hypnotic and trance inducing about listening to the music, Im sure performing and creating the sound is even more

powerful because your body itself is vibrating that way. You are the closest to the sound.

WD: Oh, yes. What my uncle, Zahiruddin Dagarsab, and my father would say, “How much we enjoy, nobody else can enjoy that much!” When I said that in Europe everybody said, “No, no, no, everybody enjoys it; everybody can reach to that level.” I said, “Okay.” What should I say? But how much we enjoy the different techniques, and the sound, how it travels.

IL: In your very cells! The cells and organs in your body are vibrating like that. It's Nada Yoga.

WD: Yes, yes, it is a yoga of sound. I'm just telling that to you; I don't like to exhibit what I feel so much. For instance, a few times I had an experience of zero gravity, also. I would not say every time, but it happened and I was holding myself, and it was during my concert. I thought, “What is happening here, what is this?” Heheheheh! That's something.

IL: I think any musician who practices in this deep fashion is dealing with sound and vibration, and can have extraordinary personal experiences. It's an altered state of consciousness that you're working with. That's what I mean about the difference between dhruwad and other forms of music that don't necessarily have that type of sadhana or Nada Yoga approach, starting in your own heart and mind, the psychology of what you are doing. I think

that's one reason why there's a certain acceptance and receptivity in the West. Also there are some people who have been exposed to Indian culture for many years, and the side of Indian culture which drew many people to India — the spiritual, mystical experience — is still available in the dhrupad music.

WD: Often they say that *dhrupad* is rigid, it's fixed. But it's continuous, it's regular, constant. The same words; you see a half empty glass or a half full glass. Rigid and fixed; they have projected the meaning of the words as this, but it's continuous, regular, constant, flowing.

IL: How do you feel about your first tour of the States so far in terms of the audience's understanding of dhrupad, its receptivity?

WD: I enjoyed performing and you can see that my second *raag* crossed the time limit. Hahahah! Second *raags* are often half an hour but I kept singing on and on! So the next time, in other places I was told, "Please, the second *raag* is short, yes?" Hahahah! Where you find good energy from the audience — they might not be saying, "*Wah, wah, wah! Shabash! Kaia baat hai!*" — but their eyes say so many things. Their blank expressions can also say a lot of things; there is a quality in so many different positions of blank expressions. Hahahah! So far I have enjoyed, and I've gotten a good response all over, touch wood. Most probably I will return very soon. I am nothing, it's whatever has been handed over to me, I just want to explain that. It's not rigid, it's constant, it's regular, it's not fixed, it's flowing.

IL: You've got a great tradition and legacy, and your enthusiasm and enjoyment make it obvious that you really do want to share this with people. This is really important and that's what people thrive on — your own enjoyment which is probably greater than anyone else's.

WD: When you see things are moving how you want, it's fantastic, and that's the best time when you don't have a sense of time. That's the best time of your life when you don't have the sense of time, and you look back and it's hours gone!

IL: Perhaps you could discuss a bit about the raag Bihag which you performed, its mood, etc.

WD: It's one of the *prachalit raags*, which are commonly performed by almost everyone. This is an evening *raag*, you can say a late evening *raag*, sung sometime between evening and night. The *rasa* [mood] of this *raag* is towards pathos a little bit, but it has its different way of presentation which brings it later to a joyous mood. Its combination of both romance and yearning; it's the viewpoints which make it different. The *raag* has a big capacity; every note has a good area to discover because in some *raags* you have to repeat a few notes again and again. Of course, in every *raag* we repeat the notes again and again but there are some *raags* whose notes have so much depth that you can stay there like you are going on a big steamer. You are going on a big ship and first you have a halt, like you embarked from somewhere then you had a halt in Mauritius and then

in Saudi Arabia, and then you reached here. There are two *madhyams* which makes it more special— *tivra* [sharp] and *shuddh* [natural] — which makes for a floating way of coming down.

IL: What is the size of your repertoire, the number of raags that you concentrate on, your core favorites?

WD: There are sixty, seventy, eighty *raags* that are absolutely common, and then there are a few more...it's over 100, 120, something like that.

IL: That many within the Dagar repertoire?

WD: I'm talking about mine — eighty or ninety. These are mostly the *prachalit raags* but some people have enormous numbers of *raags*, I don't have to say anything for that. They have a lot of *raags*.

IL: There are theoretically hundreds...

WD: The *nayaks* [leading musicians] have found seven hundred, but with the combinations of notes if you calculated seven ascending and seven descending, and then 6/6, 5/5, 5/6, 5/7 or something like this, it goes up to three hundred thousand or something like that!

IL: Practically speaking, you have within your tradition certain raags which seem to be favorites, ones that are concentrated on in the Dagar tradition...

WD: It's around fifty, sixty *raags*, I would say. I'm the youngest one; one of my elders might say, "How can you say that?" Right now I can say

sixty or so *raags* which are very *prachalit* with us. We like to sing those *raags* whose every note has the identity towards the *raag*.

IL: Certain raags that I've heard seem to be real favorites within the Dagar style; one that I think of immediately is Kamboji.

WD: Yes, Kamboji, Malkauns — you will hear a lot of Malkauns from us — and Bihag, Desh, Darbari, Bhairavi...

IL: Could you perhaps briefly explain what you would like your contribution to this art to be?

WD: First of all, I just want to relax the spines of *dhrupad* listeners. When they come, when they listen, when they talk about *dhrupad* it's a serious matter, then they need an erect spine and they should be proper. No! Music is music! It's not necessary that you understand music to enjoy it. When you understand music then you are always judging your understanding with the performance which is happening. You are always clashing with your knowledge and the person who is singing. If the note is good it will come automatically, "*Wah! Wah, wah.*" I want to relax their spines. There is also a beauty in simplicity and there are also ways of presenting how it can just flow in a nice way. People should accept this form as a musical form. It's not necessary that everybody will go in depth; they are the rarest people who can go in depth. So enjoy the essence of sound because the body is the *vina* which is made by God. It can have a lot of different variations — it can have the variation of wind

instruments, of string instruments. I have great love for these instruments — it's not that I'm dishonoring them — I love these instruments so that's why I try to bring out the different variations. I want to do things for *dhrupad*. You know, there's not a single book about the Dagar family! I really want somebody to come forward and write something.

IL: Laurence, you've been a long-time devotee of dhrupad and student of the Dagers, perhaps you have some closing thoughts?

Laurence Bastit: Along the lines which he has elaborated upon, it seems to me that this music was born in India but out of a very scientific quest for the ultimate beyond the visible. So this gives this music its universal appeal. It should and can be perceived and experienced and enjoyed by everyone and anyone. It's not even needed to know India or Indian culture and all the deities, the Indian pantheon, to be able to enjoy it. It's much beyond that. It's really deep down in this whole very minute scientific research about sound and its power and its application, how it is a connecting link between the human soul, the human body and these other forces. In India, when they had discovered or established that vocal music is the shortest way to experience this harmony within and without — inside and outside — I think they have based that on experience which can now be proved scientifically. This is what music brings to people, it makes them more in harmony with themselves and the forces outside. Anyone in harmony is more peaceful with the neighbors.

— *New York, June 22, 2000*

Bihag Bandish: Chautal

**Sunder hon gayee birakh bhanu ke bilok aayee bairan ko baadhoo
vyethaa birhe bali aayee kee**

In the love of Krishna, Sunder, myself, have become such that I don't know when the sun rises and the light looks like my enemy in the separation of Krishna

**Bhool jaat khaan paan roop rang aan baan manas ko chetnan hoat
chith chaayee kee**

In separation of Krishna, I have forgotten eating, drinking, my own beauty and complexion and all pride, even my senses... what they remember is the love for my beloved Krishna



Ustad F. Wasifuddin Dagar is the son and nephew of the Late Dagar Brothers, Ustad N. Faiyazuddin and N. Zahiruddin Dagar, his father and uncle respectively. He started his career at an early age as a soloist and also performed with his uncle in jugalbandi until 1994, and in solo later on, after the latter's passing away. He is the only heir and direct descendant in the Dagar family to perpetuate, in the twentieth generation, the family vocal style of Dhrupad singing. He took over the responsibility of preserving and disseminating dhrupad as the President of the Dhrupad Society of Delhi.



