

A purist's night out



COURTESY PHOTO

Sitarist Paul Z. Livingstone has studied and performed North Indian classical music for decades. He performs at Center Stage Theater on Saturday.

By Josef Woodard
NEWS-103.5 CORRESPONDENT

Like countless other musicians based in Los Angeles, Paul Z. Livingstone has diversified, by necessity and also by personal instinct.

An accomplished sitarist also skilled at guitar and other instruments, Livingstone has found himself in a wide array of work situations. He has been a studio player with credits on albums by Ozomatli, Alanis Morissette and many others, and has played on and scored films.

As a leader, Livingstone has also put together synthesis-based "world music" projects, combining Indian and Latin music, dance elements and even hip-hop touches.

But when Livingstone shows up at Center Stage Theatre on Saturday night, it will be in a purer musical mode that is perhaps closest to his heart, and one relatively divorced from the world of commercial interests.

Livingstone on sitar and frequent collaborator Gregg Johnson on tabla will perform in an evening of ragas and talas in the Northern Indian classical tradition.

Saturday's concert, the first of a series sponsored by the local "Future Traditions Foundation," will showcase Livingstone in a "purist" light. But that p-word by no means translates to dull or didactic.

"I always emphasize, though, that this music is a creative music, which involves a great deal of improvisation, interaction and risk taking," Livingstone says. "That is what keeps these time-honored ragas fresh, exciting and dynamic."

The native of Beirut, Lebanon, has studied Hindustani music in India and in the United States, mostly through his teachers Amiya Dasgupta — the late sitarist — and sarod player Rajeev Taranath, at Cal Arts in Valencia. Livingstone

now teaches at Cal Arts, as well as at his own Sangeet School of World Music and Dance in Los Angeles.

Along the way, Livingstone has also established a protégé and colleague relationship with the great Ravi Shankar and has studied with him both in his Encinitas home and in Delhi.

"Whenever I sit with this man," Livingstone says, "I thank God that I am so blessed to be his presence. He is an ocean of music, and even at 88, he is so sharp and exacting with his teaching, nothing gets by him."

There have been notable examples of serious Indian music performers who have ventured into east-west experiments, including tabla player Zakir Hussain and Anoushka Shankar, the daughter of Ravi, who has also occasionally ventured outside the realm of classical tradition. The results can be mixed, but it makes a difference when the musician/mixologist is coming from a place of rich understanding and traditional grounding, rather than as a casual dabbler.

The delicate art of mixing world music styles, Livingstone notes, is

IN CONCERT

PAUL Z. LIVINGSTONE

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Center Stage Theatre, 751 Paseo Nuevo

Cost: \$18, general, \$16 for seniors

Information: 963-0408

"really not easy. I feel that to use an element, whether an instrument, a form, style or even a rhythm from a specific cultural tradition, you have to know what you're dealing with deeply. If you only know something superficially and you want to use it in your music, it comes across as a gimmick and it's just a sound and the people who know will know.

"But if you use it with knowledge and respect, then people who know will appreciate it because you are putting it in a good light and they

know that what you're doing is spreading their tradition in new ways to new audiences."

His Cal Arts connection also played a role in his involvement with Ozomatli — on whose Grammy-winning album "Street Signs" Livingstone appears — having gone to school with some of the band members.

Livingstone has incorporated a similar eclectic approach in his multi-cultural Arohi Ensemble and also on his musically border-crossing new CD, "the Salaam

Suite," also featuring some Ozomatli players.

He says that "knowing (Ozo members) and working with them all these years, you could say has created a cross-pollination of influence. It can create in the mind of the listener a metaphor for unity, which is what we need in this world — all of this while retaining an accessible sound and yet stretching the pop comfort zone. I think this actually educates people through new sounds, the instruments and rhythms from Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East."

Whether he's working in a traditional or an eclectic musical setting, Livingstone seems to have a serious faith in the power of music, as a universal language and even as an instrument of peace.

"Music does have a special magic," he says, "to put you in another zone. It has the power to take you out of your hum-drum-ego self. For me, the highest ideal of music is being able to let go and be fully prepared so that you become an instrument for God to shoot something through you and into the world.

"I've really felt that, like I'm watching myself play and what's happening on the stage has nothing to do with me. That is the ultimate feeling of peace, wonder and joy. Music is service really, for people to get connected to the spirit and then they might forget about their religious, racial and national differences." ■