

THE CROONER COMES TO TOWN

On 14th February, Ilya Serov will delight music lovers at the NCPA with contemporary takes on jazz classics from eras gone by. In an interview with *ON Stage*, the young Russian-born American vocalist and trumpeter talks about his musical journey.

By Beverly Pereira

He may be young in years, but Ilya Serov is terrifically old in experience. Although the Russian-born American musician was trained in classical trumpet, it was not long before he was bitten by the jazz bug. His fondness for the music of Chet Baker and Nat King Cole, among others, is apparent in his beautiful renditions of classics as much as it is in his original music. Fusing jazz with soul and R&B with a touch of Latin, Serov's approach to the big band era in contemporary times continues to captivate fans and new generations of jazz lovers.

ON Stage (OS): What were your formative years like?

Ilya Serov (IS): I started playing music at the age of seven and my first instrument was the trumpet. It was not necessarily my first choice, but it was what the band director at the local music school recommended. My parents just wanted me to learn music and didn't have a very strong opinion on the choice of the instrument, although my mom always liked the saxophone. From the beginning I started learning and playing classical music, as jazz wasn't as present in my somewhat smaller town. My parents were never big jazz listeners either. We only had a couple of jazz albums in the house, and both were by Louis Armstrong.

OS: When did you discover jazz?

IS: In my teen years I got introduced to more jazz artistes from diverse styles, including Arturo Sandoval, Miles Davis, Chet Baker and a few others. Sandoval's music was something that got me to start paying attention to jazz. Then came Miles and Chet. I was

hooked. After listening to Chet's early albums for the first time, I absolutely fell in love with his style and sound. His voice also inspired me to start singing, although that didn't happen until I was in my late 20s.

OS: How did the foray into jazz happen?

IS: Even though I started listening to jazz and falling in love with this genre during my high school years, I didn't start playing it until I got to college and moved to St. Petersburg. In the big city, the presence of jazz was prominent and there were lots of incredible players. My formal education at St. Petersburg Conservatory was still based on classical music. I worked in symphony orchestras and at opera theatres as a professional during my college years and would study jazz on my own. I never had a formal jazz education. I learned the music by listening to it and working with some of the most influential musicians.

OS: And how did you become the beloved vocalist that you are?

IS: I was always inspired by Chet's vocals, considering he was also an amazing trumpet player. The crooners of the big band era too had an influence on me. I never thought of myself as a vocalist though and never knew I

could sing. It happened almost accidentally. I had to fill in for someone at one of my small local gigs, and even though I didn't sound good at all, I had fun and felt challenged to develop that skill. I started taking vocal lessons and practising on my own.

OS: You played the annual Dave Koz and Friends Sea Cruise between 2017 and 2019.

IS: Playing and travelling around the world with Dave has

“My formal education at St. Petersburg Conservatory was still based on classical music; I worked in symphony orchestras and at opera theatres as a professional during my college years and would study jazz on my own”





(From left) Jermone Randall, Norman Jackson, Kay-Ta Matsuno and Tony Moore will join Ilya Serov onstage

been a life-changing experience. I have done every one of his yearly cruises since 2018 and will be at the upcoming one too. I consider him to be my mentor as I always learn something from him after every interaction, both musically and personally.

OS: Tell us about your collaboration with the Riverside Philharmonic in California.

IS: The Riverside Philharmonic is a beautiful orchestra consisting of some of the most amazing players in L.A. I was very honoured to receive an invitation from them to be a guest soloist at one of their shows. Since I hail from the symphonic world, it was great to be back and experience the power and beauty of orchestral sound. During that concert I presented some of my original renditions of classic jazz standards. I truly enjoy playing and singing with orchestras and am always excited about the opportunities of being a guest artiste at such shows.

OS: Tell us more about your 2021 album *Just Friends*.

IS: I created *Just Friends* to pay tribute to one of my biggest influences, Chet Baker. The idea behind the album was to imagine what Chet would sound like in 2021 as a contemporary jazz musician. I picked some of my favorite songs from Chet's repertoire and rearranged them with a contemporary jazz twist. I added a few original compositions of my own to the album as well for a bit of a personal touch.

OS: Tell us about the 'jazzhorn', an instrument that you have designed.

IS: The idea behind the 'jazzhorn' goes back a few years. Just when I first started to think of the recording of my very first contemporary jazz album *Just Friends*, one of my producer friends suggested I explore some cool-looking instruments made by Andy Taylor. Looking at all the unique instruments, we had an idea to make a trumpet that looks like a saxophone. Originally, I thought it would

just be funny to make an instrument like that, but when we really got into the process and the instrument turned out the way it did, it became a huge part of my musical palette for recordings and live shows.

OS: What can the audience expect at the NCPA concert on 14th February?

IS: For Valentine's Day, I will be bringing a very special show I am preparing specifically for this trip. It will consist of some classic love songs as well as some of my original music. My amazing band and I will cover multiple genres including jazz, Latin, soul and smooth R&B. It will be an intimate, romantic journey filled with different musical colours and levels of emotions.

I am bringing my favourite musicians with me: Kay-Ta Matsuno on guitar, Norman Jackson on keys, Jermone Randall on bass and Tony Moore on drums. I have been working with these guys for many years now. They are incredible musicians and amazing human beings.

OS: Will this be your first time in India?

IS: It is my very first time in India and I couldn't be more excited. It has always been my dream to visit this amazing country with such

a rich history. I feel honoured to be invited to perform at the NCPA and I can't wait to make some new friends in Mumbai, celebrate the day of love and experience beautiful music together. Also, I absolutely love Indian food, so I am looking forward to trying some local flavours.

OS: What can your fans look forward to in 2024?

IS: I've got some very cool festivals in the U.S. and another amazing trip to Europe with Dave Koz & Friends at Sea. Also, I will be releasing a brand-new album of original music sometime in the spring, so I can't wait to share my new music with the world. ■

.....
Ilya Serov will present A Romantic Rhapsody on 14th February at the Tata Theatre.