



Cloning rockstars

They look, sound and act like your favourite rockstars, only they're not. But if you can't see the original rock acts in the flesh, tribute bands are the next best option, says Elizabeth Soumya



Breathe — The Floyd Sound, a UK-based Pink Floyd tribute band performed in Bangalore yesterday



Writing on the wall...

Use it or lose it is an evolutionary maxim. A smug corollary, called Dollo's Law, jeers 'and it ain't ever coming back'. This has always worried me. It is punitive, like religion, and sounds like bad science. My suspicion was vindicated last month by a tree frog. About 200 million years ago, frogs decided to jettison the teeth in their lower jaws. But a splinter group of tree frogs grew them right back again 20 million years ago. Today, *Gastrotheca guentheri* has unquestionable bite. We have John Weins of Stony Brook, New York to thank for discovering this spot of re-evolution.

When millions crowded Tahrir Square, the Western press wondered if Egypt was ready for democracy. Would they be able to tolerate it, after years of dictatorship? Haven't they evolved into gormless flakes devoid of will and action?

Like Guenther's tree frog, Egypt has re-evolved. That's a terrible word. It exists only because we haven't invented one, not yet, for 'evolution revised'. Evolution was derived from the Latin for *unrolling*. Darwin never used the term for his celebrated theory; rather his friend and champion Charles Lyell first used it in this connection. Devolution, the reversal or regression to a more primitive state, makes for great science fiction, but is seldom true in biology. This tree frog's decision demands a new word. It also demands that we start thinking outside the box.

Since 25 January, the Arabic word *tahrir* has become synonymous with liberty. American papers call it Liberation Square with faint irony as though liberty were a stay-at-home location, rooted firmly in the Verrazano Narrows. To the rest of the world, *tahrir* has spelled hope. *Tahrir* has a second connotation — it also means writing, and the liberation that ensues from a piece of writing. It is this meaning that worked for me as I read the words of those millions gathered in Cairo, people like you and me who had never before raised their voices in protest, never publicly voiced their convictions.

The net is a great example of *tahrir*. Never in the history of human thought has information been so universally accessible. Writing is freedom. The moment it is censored or banned, democracy is gone. Hosni Mubarak, like all dictators, broke the pens of dissident writers. And Egyptians saw it for the fearful, cowering gesture it was.

We haven't had our pens broken, but books have been banned and libraries burnt. Such actions don't spell the end of democracy. We bring that about by our response to these threats. *Tahrir* showed us the choice. We can either continue being obedient—refusing to display MF Hussein's paintings and excluding James Laine's book from the public discourse—or we can do what we did so well a century ago. Be civil, but disobedient. We taught the world how to do that. In Memphis, in Wenceslas Square, in Tiananmen, people did what we no longer know how to do. Like the tree frog we will have to opt out of our sixty-three-and-a-bit spell of evolution and recover our bite.

Before *Tahrir* became a Square it was a *Midan*, a maidsan, a field, a place for debate. Calling it *square* represses its exuberance into Euclidean rigidity. Geometry is all about the writing on the wall. The human spirit is all about erasing the writing on the wall—how else can you make place for graffiti?



What would you say if the quartet from Liverpool, with their mop-top hairstyles and all intact, were still in circulation? The boys, in fact, just performed their set, including *A Day in the Life*, *I Am the Walrus*, and the big medley from *Abbey Road*—which had never been sung live before—in an English pub the other day. Wait a minute; these aren't the Beatles or their ghostly apparitions. This is a Beatles look-alike, sound-alike, act-alike tribute clique — Sgt. Pepper's Only Dart Board Band. That's no John Lennon, that's John Legend (Martin Dimery) with Paul McCoatoff (John Freeman); George Hare Singh-Song (Colin Holley); Ringo Stalin (Marc Bendell) and Sgt. Pepper himself thrown in too (Rob Waller). The Dart Board Band is just one of numerous Beatles tribute acts, sharing the heritage with Beatlejuice, Beatlemania, 1964 the Tribute, The Bootleg Beatles, The Fab Four, The Fab Faux and RAIN, to name a few clones that come closest to the original pin-ups.

In fact, the tribute band phenomenon can be traced to the advent of the Beatlemania portmanteau. The Buggs were perhaps the first music maniacs who wanted to be realistic copies of the authentic four. They formed in the mid-1960s, and had a somewhat original Liverpool sound, only difference being that it came from Nebraska, USA.

By the late '90s tribute acts had become a serious trend — more than a few songs rehashed here and there. "It was an entire subculture that essentially existed in a parallel universe," says Darren Hacker, who set out with co-director Jeff Economy to capture this other universe of rock imitators in their documentary *An Incredible Simulation* (2000).

Initially, Economy confesses he was both "disgusted and fascinated" by the fact that so many local (Chicago) bands were choos-



Björn Again is a tribute show to the Swedish pop group ABBA



Australian singer Craig Pesco is Freddie Mercury down to his fingertips. He claims to have kept the spirit of Queen alive with his performances

ing to play as tribute acts, instead of performing their own material. But what did make an impression on the duo was the impeccable attention to detail, the time, energy and expense that went into the dedicated duplication of music. The band Prezence could play literally every song in the Led Zeppelin catalogue. The Kiss tribute Struter performs over 200 shows a year, complete with makeup and costumes to the blood-spitting, fire-breathing pyrotechnics.

The drive for authenticity by bands that focus on covers of a particular music band can vary in its manifestation. While some bands focus on re-creating only the sound; others push the envelope to mimic every nuance of their idols including the superficial. "Several band members have actually gone to the extreme lengths of having facial reconstruction surgery," says Hacker.

Australia, in particular, has been a cradle of tribute bands. With big bands leaving the continent out of their itineraries, local bands had to recreate their music. "People

will settle for the next best thing I guess," reckons vocalist Robby Walsh, from the Deep Purple tribute band Purpendicular. The result was that some of the most successful tribute bands in the world were formed in Australia: the Australian Pink Floyd, Beatnix, Zeppelin Live and Björn Again (an ABBA tribute band).

Today tribute bands are rampant in the US, Australia and the UK; so much so that it's a crowded market. "In fact there's so much competition that we have to try to stay at the top of the game," says Dave Gee, drummer of Breathe — The Floyd Sound, a Floyd tribute band that performed in Bangalore yesterday.

Celebrating this trend is Glastonbudget — an annual music festival held in Leicestershire which will have bands such as Kasabian (Kasabian), Oasis (Oasis), Blings of Leon (Kings of Leon), Greendate (Green Day), Guns 2 Roses (Guns and Roses), Four Fighters (Foo Fighters), The Fillers (The Killers) and the Antarctic Monkeys (Arc-

tic Monkeys) performing this year. Martin Dimery of Sgt. Pepper's Only Dart Board Band, who is also the author of *Being John Lennon*, tries figuring out why they're swelling in number: "Western popular music has changed little over the last 50 years. The music of Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Pink Floyd and The Stones, for example, resonates with young people today just as it did with their parents. For those who missed the 'golden age' of '50s or '60s pop music, and for those who nostalgically look back to that era, tribute bands are often their only chance to get an idea of what this music sounded like live".

Breathe — The Floyd Sound, is the second tribute band to perform in Bangalore this year following Led Zepplica, a Led Zeppelin tribute band that dropped by last month, while Guns 2 Roses will tour India next month. Sanjit Ganguly of Campus Infotainment is a resolute believer in tribute bands. "As an organiser, you can't afford the original international bands which might cost a thousand times more. At the same time, not everyone wants to hear upcoming, original music," he says.

As for the sentiments of the purists, he

SOUNDS LIKE

Tribute band names try to retain some essence of the original bands with name puns and references to songs.	Stones
The Muffin Men (Frank Zappa)	Beninem (Eminem)
Dread Zeppelin (Led Zeppelin)	Oasisn't (Oasis)
aRe wE them (REM)	Red Hot Chili Beans (RHCP)
Rolling Clones (Rolling)	Who's Who (Who)
	No (Yes)
	MetalLiquor (Metallica)
	Simon and Garth's Uncle (Simon & Garfunkel)

says, "Only 10 per cent of the audience is very discerning. We respect them, but we are not really catering to them. Others just want to have a good experience." he says.

But the tribute audience aren't really a bunch of clueless dunces who don't appreciate music. On the contrary, "they are very exacting. After a gig they'll walk up to you and say that note in such and such a song was off. Or they'll ask us which version we were listening to. Some will even say the guitar you're using isn't the same as Floyd," says Chris Barnes, Breathe's vocalist.

There are even examples of tribute bands being acknowledged by the original heroes. Former Oasis lead singer Noel Gallagher had called No Way Sis the "second best band in the world", and presented his doppelgänger Gerry McKay with a golden Les Paul guitar, while Deep Purple drummer Ian Paice often plays with Purpendicular on small European tours.

Then there's the story of John Kadlecik who was first 'turned on' by the Grateful Dead when he was 18. Kadlecik, who was good at imitating voices, became a star imitator of both the voice and the guitar techniques of The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia in the tribute band — Dark Star Orchestra. In 2009, 12 years into playing with Dark Star Orchestra, two listeners got in touch with him to play with them. They were Bob Weir and Phil Lesh, founding members of The Grateful Dead. Today they play together in a band called Furthur. Kadlecik says some folks have likened this to moving from the minor leagues to the majors, but for him, "it was more like going from post-graduate schooling, then spending 12 years 'writing my doctorate thesis', if you will, to getting that perfect job." e_soumya@dnaindia.net

THE BAND ABOUT THE BAND

1. Why be part of a tribute band as opposed to a band that plays its own original music?

From a personal point of view it's because most of us in Purpendicular have worked with the original members of Deep Purple throughout the last decade, so it's what the audience want us to play and probably expect of us. All of us individually have original projects. But Purpendicular is to represent the music and play the songs that Deep Purple don't play today.

2. There's an accusation that tribute bands lack originality and creativity. What do you have to say to that?

In some cases yes, where tribute bands dress up and copy the songs whether that be live versions or studio versions, these are the bands that lack creativity. Then there are bands like us that do it our

Robbie Walsh from the Deep Purple tribute band Purpendicular chats with DNA Sunday



way. Every night is a new show, full of improvisation within the song structures. We don't dress exactly like the real Deep Purple as we have our own style. But we remain very creative and have received

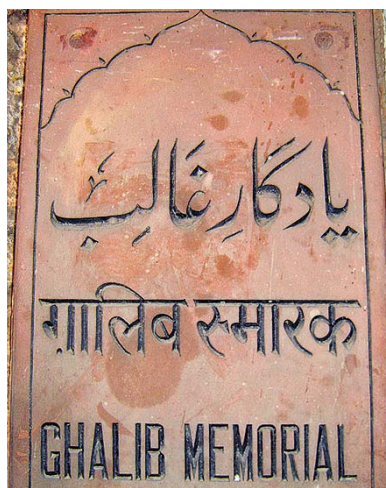
huge compliments from the original Deep Purple members for doing so.

3. What would you attribute the rise of tribute bands to?

In most cases it's because the original band whatever band that may be has ceased to exist from playing live gigs. Bands like Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin etc. There is a major audience for these bands and the people will settle for the next best thing I guess. There are very professional tributes and also hobby tributes from almost every band nowadays. In our case it's a little more difficult as the real Deep Purple tour extensively to this day.

The Ghalib who lived here was probably a horse

After reading the Diwan-i-Ghalib, Paras K Jha felt he must visit Ghalib's Haveli in Delhi; what he found instead was a stable masquerading as the poet's last residence



When I received the Diwan-e-Ghalib poetry book as a surprise gift on my marriage anniversary, my hobby of listening to ghazals, which gave colour to a monotonous life, was rejuvenated. I decided that I must visit Delhi, and Ghalib's residence itself, which formed a backdrop to many of the poems in the book.

As luck would have it, I soon got an opportunity to spend three hours in Delhi, while I was returning to Ahmedabad from Shimla. I quickly put away my luggage in the cloak room at the railway station, and set out to find the great poet's home, where he lived out the last decade of his life.

Delhi's Chandni Chowk is known for its history and teeming populace. Modern and ancient India meet on its streets, and people with different pursuits bump into each other. Landmarks include the Lal Quila and Shishgunj Gurudwara, and then there is the renowned Paranthewali Galli, one of the best-loved streets for foodies such as myself. But I had to move on to find my poet's residence.

Ancient market

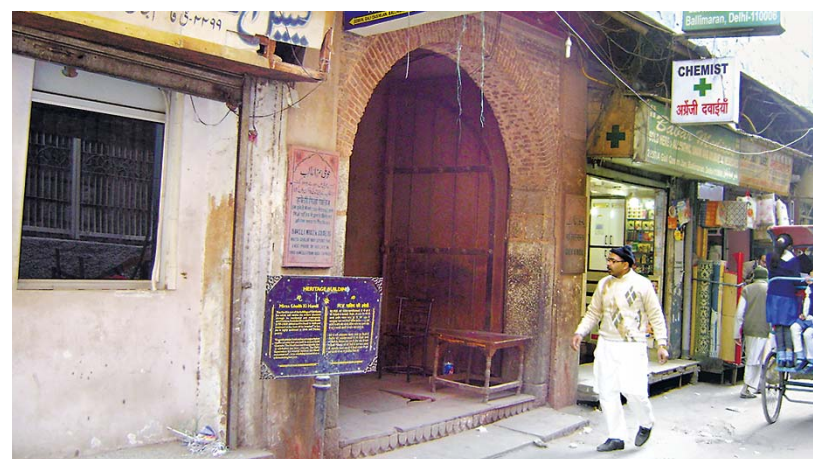
Mirza Ghalib's Haveli is located in Gali Qaasim Jaan, in the Ballimaran area of Chandni Chowk. Ballimaran is one of the most ancient markets of Delhi, but it has obviously lost the pride of place it once

enjoyed in the time of the Mughals. Today it is noisy and congested, but one of the packed lanes radiating from here leads to Ghalib's haveli.

You need to ask more than once for directions to the haveli, however, because most of the younger traders and shopkeepers of the area seem oblivious to Ghalib or his residence. I spotted an old man with a long white beard and a round cap on his head, sitting quietly in this noisy and confusing bazaar, and approached him. "Chacha, do you know where Ghalib miya's haveli is?" Without looking at me, he said, "Go straight and ask for more directions there."

At least, I was on the right way. Finally, a helpful man told me to take the next right turn and look to my left. With mounting excitement, I approached my idol's last home, which he had occupied from 1860 to 1869.

Whatever picture I had conjured up in my head about Mughal era architecture reflecting Ghalib's tasteful nature evaporated quickly thereafter. The main entrance of the building has a plaque claiming it to be Ghalib's residence, but once you enter the place you hardly get a feeling that this was where Delhi's best known poet spent his last years. There is just one dark room with the poet's picture on the wall. There are also photos of his contemporaries, like the last Mughal emperor Bahadurshah Zafar, a photograph



A crowded street in Chandni Chowk with the haveli purporting to be Ghalib's last residence. February 15 was the 141st death anniversary of the poet.

of Ghalib's handwritten letters, a chronology of events from the poet's life, his genealogy and some photographs of his grave. One cannot imagine that Mirza Ghalib would have wanted to occupy a room such as this.

Half of the haveli is in fact a shopping centre with shops like Meraj Telecom Point and MD Optical. I ignored these and explored the other half, which contained a small statue of Ghalib locked in glass, and displayed some couplets of his

poetry. There were some utensils from that era, some books, and a listing of his favourite food, attire, and games.

A curious tale

Dissatisfied, I went over to the telecom shop. Its owner, Merajuddin, had a curious tale. "This haveli was bought by my grandfather Haji Mohammad Ibrahim 110 years ago," he said. "After independence, many people from Pakistan used to visit the haveli, but its upkeep was diffi-

cult for us and it crumbled over time."

Although half of the building is now maintained as a memorial, Merajuddin has his doubts over whether this really was Ghalib's residence. "Any residence would have doors, windows, rooms, and a kitchen, but here nothing can be seen, not even floors. When my grandfather purchased this building, it was being used as a stable for the horses of Hakim Azmalkhan. Even today you can see the holes in the pillars, where wooden poles used to be fixed to lock the horses in the stable. A professor from Aligarh University even did some research and concluded that it was a stable."

I looked at the place once again, and sure enough I found the pillars indeed had holes. As I left the haveli, neither wanting to believe Merajuddin, nor my eyes, a couplet from the display of Ghalib's poetry caught my eye, and I felt that the poet was reciting to me —

Bus ki dushwaar hai har kaam ka aasaan hona/Aadme ko bhee muyassar naheen insaan hona

(It is, indeed, difficult for every task to be easy/Just as it is not possible for a man to always be human)

Giriyaan chaah hai kharaabee mere kaashaane ki/Dar-o-devaar se tapke hai baayabaan hona

(Tears are seeking the destruction of my abode/From the insides of the walls trickles the wilderness)