



*Today I visited Abhaya, a home run by a poet for the destitute and mentally ill. It also houses and educates women and girls who have been terribly abused. We gathered in a hall and the girls danced. Then the women and girls sang to me “We Shall Overcome” in Hindi. These are women and girls with so much to overcome. So powerful and humbling. I sang the same song in English. Some things translate—hope is needed everywhere. Blog post, Carrie Newcomer, Oct. 2, 2009*

When Carrie Newcomer tells you that her trip to India last fall was life changing, you believe her, if only because of those sad and soulful green eyes and, oh Lord, that brow, as earnest and expressive as her music. Serene and self-possessed, the 51-year-old Bloomingtonian traveled to India at the invitation of the American Embassy School in Delhi as a visiting artist focused on peace and justice; her trip coincided with an appearance at the school by His Holiness Karmapa, head of one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. After a week in Delhi, she embarked on a rigorous tour of the country on behalf of the U.S. Department of State, performing in the evenings and working with community service groups by day.

One of the definitive voices of contemporary Midwest folk music, Newcomer says she was flattered by the State Department’s interest in her, but also a little bewildered. “I asked them, ‘Have you gone to my website? Do you know what I do? We’re visualizing world peace here,’” she says, in her thoughtful and deliberate way. Newcomer was assured that the State Department was well aware of her work and she was exactly the sort of person they wanted for this tour. “They told me they were looking for an artist who would build bridges instead of create walls.”

Indeed, Newcomer performed at world peace concerts in the cities of Chennai and Trivandrum. Both concerts were originally meant to honor the memory of murdered journalist Daniel Pearl, but concern over a terrorist attack led organizers to remove all references to Pearl for the event in Chennai. Both concerts held profound significance, reflecting a slowly blossoming relationship between the United States and India. Newcomer notes that the state of Kerala, which has the highest literacy rate and standard of living of all the states in India, is a democratically elected moderate but socialist government. “And they’ve been very cautious about any association with the U.S. govern-



Performing at the Chennai World Peace Concert: I did two World Peace Concerts on this tour. I absolutely love Indian audiences—they were warm and welcoming everywhere I went. Photo by K.S. Bijukumar

ment,” she says. “So I was very honored and pleased that they felt my music contained messages of peace, justice, acceptance, and hope and agreed to present the concert with the American Center.” At the end of the concert, local socialist government officials presented gifts to Newcomer and American Center representatives. Newcomer says the moment was “a very big bridge to build.”

At the American Embassy School, too, Newcomer’s focus was on peace and justice, and she was involved in a range of classes and activities organized around the theme of international peacemaking. As soon as she arrived, she figured out ways to plug into the school’s curriculum. In English classes, for instance, she worked with students to transform an event into a creative format like a song or poem. In social studies she created multimedia presentations on a social-justice topic or story. With the theater stu-

# A Life-Changing Journey

CARRIE NEWCOMER’S TOUR OF INDIA  
FOR THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT

BY DEBRA KENT

(opposite page) Music Basti program, Delhi: I visited a project for orphaned children run by dedicated and passionate young people. They use music in an educational format and as a way to foster ideas of peace, justice, and compassion. This little girl presented me with a picture she’d drawn and gave me a big hug. Photos by Shiv Ahuja



dents, she helped them create original pieces to be performed at the Peace and Justice Concert scheduled for the end of the week. She also rehearsed with a group of interested students to create a rock band, and then performed with them at the same concert. And in all the classes, Newcomer made herself available for conversations “about the life of a musician. Why I create songs, what has been fun, what’s been difficult, what keeps me going.” A high point of Newcomer’s visit was the appearance by His Holiness Karmapa, “which was a very exciting thing to experience and take part in,” she says.

*I saw a man on the sidewalk bow toward Mecca and say his prayers. I saw a small shrine to Ganesh next to a flower stand. I saw tiny children walking alone next to a slum not a mile from the city’s wealthiest neighborhood. I saw women in bright saris. I saw a man with very few teeth.... Everything happens together. Life is not separated in this compartment or the next. Everything is everywhere.*  
Carrie’s blog—Sept. 14, 2009

“Here in the United States we separate things,” Newcomer reflects. “You know, here’s the pretty part, here’s the not-so-pretty part. Here’s the poor part, here’s the wealthy part. We all know that there are people living under the bridge but we don’t have to see them if we don’t want to. In India, everything is together. You don’t have the option of closing your eyes. What’s glorious and fascinating and beautiful and what’s utterly heartbreaking—in India, it’s altogether. For someone who takes in so much and feels very deeply about what I take in, it was a profound experience.”

But just as Newcomer was struck by the differences between the cultures, she was also intensely aware of the commonalities. “I was so moved by the ways in which we connected, the thread that pulls us together as human beings. I really sensed that if I was talking about love or family or grief or struggle or that unstoppable quality of hope, there was immediate recognition.”

That immediate recognition was nowhere more apparent than in her work with the country’s most disadvantaged—the impoverished and destitute, the children purposefully blinded to make them more effective beggars, the women sold into sex slavery. Newcomer spent time at a home for at-risk girls, many of whom were rescued from a life of prostitution. “These are women who have gone through more than I could ever imagine. I went into this situation thinking, ‘What can I possibly have to offer?’” But Newcomer came to understand her purpose. “I realized that I was there to bear witness. They wanted me to see them, to be willing to take them in and go home and talk about what they are accomplishing there.”

She had a similar experience at The Happy Home & School for the Blind in Mumbai, where some of the children were sightless from birth or through accidents, but many others had been blinded to make them more compelling beggars. The home was established to give them skills and to help them escape from the “cycle of poverty and begging,” Newcomer explains. “It is a very powerful place. And again I walked in thinking, ‘What can I do here? What can I give?’”



(top left): Music Basti program, Delhi: I performed with two members of a local fusion band, Advaita. Pictured—band members Suhail Yusuf Khan and Chayan Adhikari later joined me at a concert at the India Habitat Center in Delhi. Photo by Shiv Ahuja

(bottom left): Abaya, in the city of Trivandrum, is a home for destitute and mentally ill women and girls. I fell in love with them, as well as with the wonderful people who ran the home and school. Photo by K.S. Bijukumar



(top right): I’m pictured here receiving a gift from a local official after conducting a songwriting workshop in Kerala, in the southern part of India. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen so many palm trees. Photo by K.S. Bijukumar

(bottom right): I performed with students at The Happy Home & School for the Blind in Mumbai. The students, teachers, and staff were so inspiring. The students learn practical trades as well as to read and write. Music is a very important component of the school’s curriculum. Photo by Ajmal Palakal



They sang me Hindi songs. They also learned to sing John Lennon's 'Imagine' in English." Newcomer pauses to sing a line from the song in her clear, honeyed voice. "Imagine all the people, living for today..." She stops. "It was just stunning. And then I sang to them, and they sang back to me, and we did that for many hours."

*What really struck me was the inner language of music. When the Baul musicians were singing and playing, I found myself totally moved and wiping away tears. I could not translate a single word because I do not speak Bengalese, but the music and the spirit of the man singing spoke clearly.... I sang my song "If Not Now" and the Baul played and the rest of the room sang. It was a powerful moment to state in music that now is the time to create a more harmonious and less violent world.* Carrie's blog—Sept. 22, 2009

Raised in Elkart, Indiana, in a not-particularly-musical family, Newcomer taught herself to play guitar as a child. This biographical detail turned out to be surprisingly reassuring to the boys at the home for the blind, who wanted to know who taught her how to play. "In India it's considered polite to always acknowledge your teachers, and I love that they see teaching as such an honorable thing. But I am self-taught. I didn't have a teacher that I could point to." Newcomer didn't want to be rude, but she also didn't want to be dishonest. "So I told them, I loved the sound of guitar so I got books and recordings and I taught myself." And as soon her answer was translated, "two hundred boys stood up and started clapping and cheering." Newcomer was confused, "until someone explained that I had just given the boys hope. Having a teacher implies that you have the resources that many of these children don't have. Instead, I told them, I'm like you. It's entirely possible to teach yourself."

The boys, like all of the audiences Newcomer encountered during her stay, were demonstratively appreciative. "Indian audiences were wonderful. They'd sing along with songs and they had a sense of humor," she says. "They also seemed to really connect with songs about hope. We need hope everywhere, but India really needs it. It's a very big country with an enormous population and a good deal of that population is still struggling in poverty."

*India is beyond description. I just keep taking notes with absolutely no way to process yet. The best I can do right now is say that India is like incredibly complex Art Nouveau design. It grows out of a principle that is very different than that of a simple Shaker chair. What are common to both is great beauty, intent, design, and elegance. What is glorious is that each expresses these principles uniquely. India is like a lush green vine that travels in curves, embraces the trees, entwining beautifully and naturally.* Carrie's blog—Sept. 25, 2009

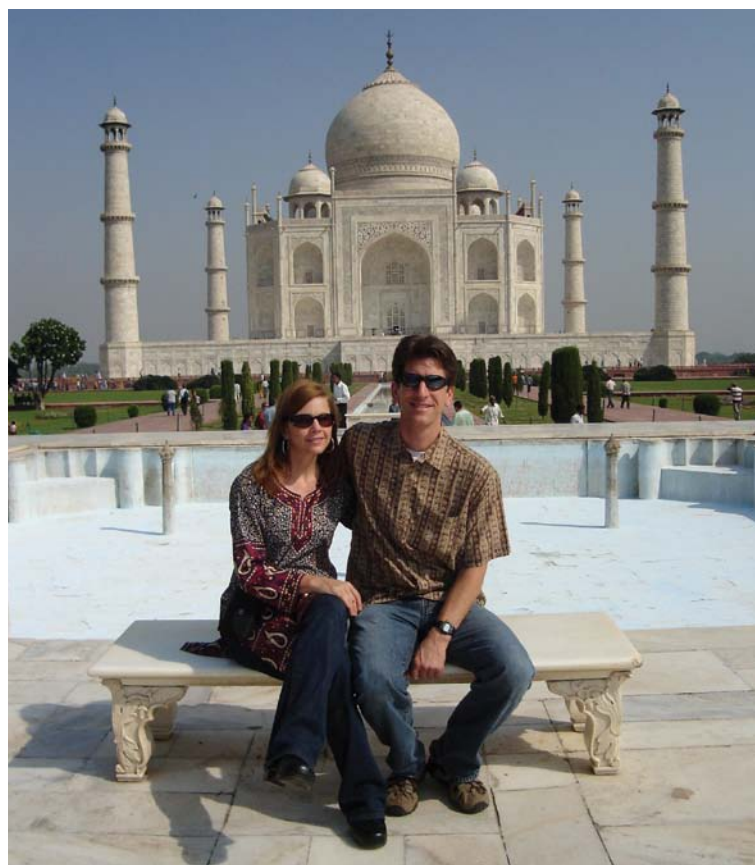
Newcomer fell in love with India, and she borrowed a bit of its style herself by wearing the traditional salwar kameez, a



(top): I received flowers from a little girl in Abaya, at the home for women and girls in distress. Photo by K.S. Bijukumar

(bottom left): Agra, India: On a day off I visited the Taj Mahal with my husband Robert Meitus, who was able to join me for a few days. It was wonderful being able to share a bit of this life-changing experience with him. Courtesy photo

(bottom right): Some children at the Music Basti program in Delhi. India has captured my heart completely. Photo by Shiv Ahuja



pair of light trousers with a long tunic. "I was born to wear Indian clothes," she says, smiling. "I kind of dress like that anyway—the tunics, scarves." She notes that the people she met seemed to appreciate seeing Westerners wearing Indian garments. "If someone came to Texas dressed in a 10-gallon hat and cowboy boots we'd call them a poser, but in India it's considered respectful to wear their clothes. When Americans get off the plane we all look like sparrows in our browns and blacks. In India women walk down the street like jewels with their bright yellows and reds, pinks, and blues."

How will the trip affect Newcomer's songwriting? "It already has. But I can't write about India in the same way I can't write about world peace. It's too big. The way I generally approach songwriting is to tell a story in a moment as a way of talking about something much bigger."

Those significant moments comprise the theme of Newcomer's latest album, *Before and After*, her 14th. "It's the idea that we don't remember days, we remember moments. We live moments," she explains, adding, "We live in an information culture. We're getting so much information all the time from computers, BlackBerrys, cell phones, Twitter. This is about choosing to simplify, peeling back all the layers of distraction to find the heart of what really matters day to day, moment to moment. It's not an album with a message. I don't do messages. I'm not selling anything. But I do ponder this idea of the moment, being very present in your life."

*I leave for home tomorrow. I leave with my heart full to the brim and overflowing. There will be songs and stories that come from this journey. What is your heart filled to the brim with today? Maybe this is the day to say it out loud, write, sing, dance, or paint it—or to ponder it quietly with wonder, bowing your weary head in gratitude. What gift of this life fills your heart and what will you do with it today?* Carrie's blog—Oct. 1, 2009

Read all of Carrie Newcomer's blog posts and sample her newest album, *Before and After*, at [carriewcomer.com](http://carriewcomer.com) ✨

