

MY CALCUTTA THAT WAS

By Win Jacobs



Prologue

130

The Elvis Presley contest held in Calcutta at the Great Eastern hotel in 1958 was won by an unknown seventeen year old kid.



Going to school was an adventure! Before catching the tram we had to walk down Monkeys Lane and on many occasions the monkeys used to scare us, take our lunch sandwiches and run away.

The rivalry between the schools, especially St. Thomas Kidderpore and the Armenian College on Free School Street, was intense. There were boxers at that time like Tiny Buntin, Kenny Orr, Noel Jones, Neville Wetton, John Kirk and many others but the boxing match of the century was between Vaughan Gregory and Jerry Hayes. It was world class.

On the “Burra Maidan”, just across from the Victoria Memorial, came groups of kite flyers who used to take part in competitions called ”Baddan”. Every Sunday, It was a sight to see!

Softball used to be played at the maidan, between many teams like the Kal-Katz, Dodgers, Braves, Tigers, Flashes and more, cheered on by the fans who enjoyed watching the games.

Calcutta had eight cinemas all of which were very popular like the Globe, Lighthouse, Tiger, New Empire, Metro, Elite, Minerva, and the Regal.

On every 31st New Year’s Eve night we used to go to the midnight picture show where it was literally a “bang”, for we used to let off ‘Patakas’(small bombs of fireworks). At the stroke of midnight, all the ships on the Hooghly River used to toot their horns and bring in the New Year.

Making a suit at Christmas time was a great thing and our tailors had our suits ready for us in twenty-four hours. Everyone got the Christmas spirit when they came to the New Market. Its original name was Sir Stuart Hogg Market but nobody ever called it that. The centre of the market was filled with shops selling decorations, as kids we just loved it!

If you wanted to get yourself a pair of good shoes you would head straight for Bentinck Street and would bargain with the Chinese shop owner till you got a fair price. Except that where you thought you got him, the owner always got you.

On every 26th of December many families used to go to the Calcutta Zoo to spend the day and every time we used to go to the same spot and enjoy the picnic. We had our home cooked meals and all of us kids playing and having a ball.

Calcutta has many clubs, here are a few I remember: The 300 Club, The Saturday Club, The Armenian Club, The Bengal Club, The Rangers Club, The Royal Calcutta Golf Club, The Judean Club, The Dalhousie Institute more commonly called the “DI”. But the most popular was the Grail club. They had everything, from sports to card games to wedding receptions, and dances for the May Queen, Easter, and of course the New Year’s Eve ball.

There was also the Tollygunge Club where you could play golf or bet on a horse that was racing. The races were only for amateur riders and the goings-on in the betting ring was like nothing you have ever seen. The few jockeys that come to mind are Alan Tyabji and

his sister Fiona, many local and inter-state jockeys and my buddy Jimmy Keshany, who along with me had great excitement every race day.

The best Horse Racing was held at the Royal Calcutta Race Course where many foreign jockeys and trainers participated. The ones that come to mind are Gaulstan, Captain Fownes, M.P Davis, Laurie Fownes and my friend Farley Rodrigues who is still a trainer along with Richard Alford who was a brilliant jockey and still trains horses today. The foreign jockeys were Eddie Cracknell, Val Faggoter, Wally Swinburne, Ted McGaffin. Among the best of the local jockeys were Ron Butfooy, and Noel Remedios. On a very special race day, the atmosphere was electrifying for the duel between England's number one jockey Lester Piggot and Noel Remedios in the Queen's cup, Photo finish! Magic!

We also had some colourful bookies like Perpino, Abbas Begg and others. As well as the pleasure of Queen Elizabeth II who visited the Calcutta race course in the 50's.

Calcutta was booming. I fondly remember all the great shopping at Whiteaways, the New Market where you could get the famous Bandel cheese, cakes from Nahoums outside the market was Keventers and the tasty Baldwin sausages. Behind the market we had Bihar and Nizams restaurants (which still stand today) where one can eat the world's best 'Kati kebabs'.

Another popular shopping centre was Shelia's, just next to the Globe cinema, still going strong. another landmark which still stands after all the years, Saldanhas Bakery down old Turner Street or the New Abdul Raman Street.

Sunday masses at the Middleton Row church, St. Thomas Free School Street, the Armenian Church and St James' churches were all packed for every mass.

Many families used to go to Bandel for picnics or to the Eden Gardens for a canoe ride admiring the Giant Chinese Pagoda. Outside the Victoria Memorial eating all the delightful, delicious chhaat dishes . . . bhel puri, *muri* and the unforgettable *gol gappas*.

Way back in 1958 there were no talent agencies to help kids get the experience they needed. All the experience they got was from watching movies, listening to songs on the radio and from records.

Calcutta at that time was swinging, the talent was first class. At Magnolias restaurant on Park Street was the great singer Pat Tarley, followed by Marie Samson who is still going strong. Eve also sang at the venue. The Blue Fox had singers like Brenda Lilley and Bonnie. Louis Banks' band played there. There was the spectacular Delilah at her Moulin Rouge restaurant. The Waldorf, Maureen Morgan sang, with the Denny Baptist band. Around the corner on Free School Street was Mocambo where many artists performed but the one and only great Pam Crain was the queen.

On Middleton Row we had the night club El Morocco where Shirley Myers sang and Philip Peters (El Rey Del Bongo, he was nicknamed) performed as well. Just outside the Grand

Hotel; we had the Capri and Neeras where Pam Sweeny was the Crooner. The most popular restaurant was Trincas run by Joshua and Puri.

Each Tuesday night, talent shows were held to help local talent. The resident band was the Jimmy Revetsy Band. Here many performed like the Trojans, Hazel Jacob, Toto Wallang with the Fentones, The Mini-Winnies, Pat Thomas, the Juniors and many more.

Towards the end of Wellesley Street we had the famous Lucettes school of Dancing and the Calcutta school of music where the brilliant Stanley Gomes performed.

We had the editor of the Bandwagon newspaper Mr. K.C. Sen who covered all the standard entertainment all over Calcutta. KC tutored hundreds of the local talent and held many stage shows at the most popular New Empire Cinema. KC also had 'talent time' nights at the great Scherezade open air under the stars restaurant at the Grand Hotel every Thursday night.

There were other promoters who came along such as Mr. Showbiz Vivian Hansen who was a top singer, then came Mr. Toby Severn another who helped encourage the locals. One of the greatest promoters was Mr. Esmond Fonseca, his shows were first class, Es then teamed up with Mr. Win Jacobs who also produced many shows all over Calcutta.

Calcutta was the mecca of entertainment. Cliff Richards performed at the Kala Mandir Theatre. We had our very own Candy Cole, Calcutta's Kim Novak, Jack Dante Calcutta's Eddie Duchin, Ajit Singh the Neil Diamond, Derrick Francis the Frank Sinatra, Derek Godeno the Harry Belafonte. We had them all.

Just to name a few stage shows we had at the New Empire were Heat Wave Tribute to Cole Porter produced by Esmond Fonseca. Win Jacobs produced and directed Musicano, Starlite Nite, Showtime, Monsoon showers.

The massive Ken Stuart show was held at St Xavier's College which was produced by Esmond Fonseca, and Win Jacobs wrote the lyrics of "My Calcutta". We had the power voice of Mr Laurie Pereira, at the "Party's Over" show, A charity held for Mother Theresa.

To name all the artists who performed all over Calcutta would be impossible. But I will name a few; Errol Ribeiro, Clive Hughes, Len O'Connors, Sandra Knight, Jack Dante, Phillip Peters, Shirley Churcher, Carol Knight, The Beck Twins, June Marsh, Rudy McNamara, Sharon Berge, Claude Kenny, Yvonne Arden, Eugene Edmonds, Faye Lilley, Sam Hardy, Noel Martin, Marino Tyro, Tony Mascarenhas, The Tornados, The Kings, Rudy Rodrigues, Eugene Maddox, Richard Gillaussey, Colette, Colleen Hughes, Angel DeSousa, Veronica Beck, Devika Halder, Gerri Dee, Errol Lobo, Lou Holder, Gopa Ganguli, Joey Lee, Mike Booth, Val Balsara, Shefali, Gloria Dowington, The fantastic Ian Gomes, Basil, the Blow-worms, Rodney Rodrigues, Marian, Pat Kay and Cedric, Sheila Milner, Marguerite, Mike Danton, Phillip Thivy, Pat McFarlane, Virginia Montgomery, Trevor Harris, Johnny Forshore, Aubrey, Linda Menlycott, John Chiramil, Lesley

Decruze, Rodney and Errol Thompson, Neville Matanda, Danny Walshe and who can forget Lola. And still swinging in Calcutta is USHA.

We had great world class musicians like Tony Menezes, Victor Shreeves, Dominic Fernandes, Mike Dias, Jimmy Sams, Joe Pereira, Johnny Vaz, Sonny Lobo, Benny Rosario, Braz Gonsalves, Cecil Dorsey, Allen Fernandes, Louis Banks and Chris Perry. My favourites: Anto Menezes, Stanley Pinto and the great Baby Menezes.

Every Sunday we used to listen to Ita Jane, host of Musical Bandbox.

There were other artists like Millford Hennesey, Laurie Adelaide band and the magnificent Kitty Brinand.

We had great masters of ceremonies like Ernie Gambuzi and Elmore Morris. Now still living in Calcutta the velvet voice of Rubin Ribeiro who performed at the Golden Slipper for many years. Still in Calcutta we have Mr. Mel 'Foo' Browne. All these great artists and musicians brought great joy to all the packed out venues wherever they performed.

But the greatest master of ceremonies without a doubt was Mr. Ken Stuart. Ken was a house hold name, everybody's favourite. He was a brilliant actor and some of the roles he played ('Mitu of Mettia Bruz', the 'Mad Senator' and 'Mad Mary') are still often recalled. When the Anglo Indian reunion was held in Calcutta 2012, which I attended, I must say I was very disappointed for the theme of the concert was to pay tribute to Ken Stuart, It was a total mess. Except for recognising Pam Crain, Rubin Ribeiro and Carlton Kitto, not one of the above artists and musicians were mentioned for they all were the heart and soul of the entertainment in Calcutta.

As for me I say to all the artists, singers, musicians and bands who are not with us today – Thank you for the joy, the laughter, the excitement and the privilege of being among you all at the fantastic time in Calcutta. Your memory will linger in the hearts and minds of those still around.



Epilogue

**As for the kid who won Calcutta's Elvis Presley contest in 1958,
his name was Winston Jacobs.**

