

All My Friends

Meet the band: Kiran Shahi, Abhishek Bhadra, and Ian Eustis. Kiran, 22, plays the drums, and his style is impeccable; the beat stays tight, rapid-fire fills flesh out any lull in the melody, and he throws in kicks and hits at just the right moments to catch the audience off-guard and cause surprised smiles. When Kiran plays the drums, they do a lot more than just keep the beat. Abhishek on the keyboard is just as accomplished, providing the group's melodic backbone. But it's when he leaves the melody behind and loses himself in improvisation that he really comes into his own, showing a musical maturity that seems far beyond a young man of only 23. He lists Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau as key influences, and you can hear echoes of both masters' styles in Abhishek's playing. And there's Ian, at 25 the oldest of the trio, hunched over his double bass and with his fingers racing all over the fretboard. He generates infectious energy and swing from his instrument, and has the good looks to keep bringing every female eye in the audience back to his corner of the stage. Together they call themselves All My Friends, and trust me, these guys are good.



All My Friends was selected as the outstanding band at the Jazz For The Next Generation band competition as part of Surya Nepal Jazzmandu 2011. The band contest kicked off five days of great music all over Kathmandu, with artists from as far afield as Cuba and Australia joining Nepali musicians for what is rightly described as the biggest jazz party in the Himalayas. All My Friends faced stiff competition from The KJC Power Trio and The KJC Quartet, but won over the judge panel of five visiting Jazzmandu musicians with their spectacular musicality. That they did it with an assured cool even as technical problems threatened to upset their rhythm says volumes about the young band's maturity and poise.

Soon after sitting down to talk with the guys, it struck me that All My Friends is a particularly suitable name for the group given their obvious rapport both on and off stage. "We laugh a lot," Ian admitted. That understanding comes through in their music too "We all speak the same musical vocabulary," Ian said. Listening to them play, their humour and candour draws you in. It's like indulging in an inside joke between friends, but they make you feel like you're in on it too. Take, for instance, the bands' rendition of *Resham Phiriri*. After a cheeky intro with that familiar melody slowed way down, the band suddenly launched into the jazz standard *Cherokee*. The switch in pace and mood was extreme, but they did it seamlessly, never missing a beat. I couldn't help but grin like a fool.

The band first played in its current configuration only two weeks ago during five days of gigs at Pokhara's Lakeside. "It was a rehearsal gig for Jazzmandu," Kiran says with a smile. "We sacrificed Dashain for it, escaped from Kathmandu and started playing." The group started playing together 4 months ago as a quartet with guitarist Jigme Dorje Sherpa, before Sherpa went abroad and the band carried on as a trio. The new arrangement has worked astoundingly well, according to Ian. "After Jigme left, we came up with our own sound."

Jigme was like a father figure, we learned a lot [from him], but he had to leave for us to grow."

And the stories don't stop there. Ian was once a classical violinist, stuck at band camp and hating it, when he heard a jazz band and gladly decided to swap his violin for the double bass. Abhishek heard Cadenza playing fusion at Jazzmandu, and though first baffled by the music, he caught the jazz bug. And Kiran can't forget his joy when, while still in grade 6, he came home from school one day to find his father had bought him his first drum kit. With plans for a CD and a tour of India sometime in the near future, the stories promise to keep coming.

But before all of that, there are more immediate concerns facing the young musicians. "*I wish there was a cash prize,*" Kiran says, prompting grins and sympathetic laughter from his bandmates. "*I'm broke right now.*" Jazzmandu organizers take note.

-Roman Gautam