

IN TRANSIT: THE PIANIST

By Anuka Roy, Mumbai Mirror | Feb 22, 2017,

Ian Gomes, who has played for the likes of Sinatra and at the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, shares stories from his musical journey.



Ian Gomes who had once won the BBC's Best British Pub Pianist competition, has been playing for The Ritz, London, for 22 years



*(Above) Gomes with Engelbert Humperdinck;
(Below) He used to play privately for the Queen Mother and the Queen*



In 1965, a man from Calcutta arrived in London, upon the advice of his father to look for better opportunities as a pianist. He entered a talent competition organised by the BBC for the Best British Pub Pianist. The grand prize? A slot on BBC radio. The man won the competition; it turned out to be one of the many pivotal moments in a truly glorious life. The man in question is Ian Gomes or ‘The Piano Man’, as he is popularly known by his peers. “Every pub nominated their pianist. The Monpelier, where I used to play, nominated me. I won it and got my spot there, that’s where I was heard by The Savoy and Claridge’s — two of the top hotels at that time in London. I became a resident pianist at both these hotels which were frequented by prominent personalities,” says 74-year-old Gomes.

It was at The Savoy that he first met Frank Sinatra. “In 1984 — when I was playing the piano at the lounge — I heard that he (Sinatra) was coming, and I got very excited. I saw him as he sat there. It was later that I realised that he was listening to me,” he says proudly. That night, he was informed by the hotel that Sinatra would like Gomes to play for him privately in his suite. He played for him from 11.30 pm to five in the morning — and that’s how his connection with Sinatra began. Contrary to popular belief, Gomes clarifies that he used to play for him exclusively during all his visits, but was never was his personal pianist.

There’s no surprise that music runs through his veins. His father, Stanley Gomes, was the first violinist of the Calcutta Symphony Orchestra. “I was trained as a classical pianist. My father said that if you want to take your music seriously, you got to learn popular music. If you go to London,

you cannot survive on classical music,” remembers Gomes. His father’s guidance did help him fulfil his dream.

It was not just Sinatra that Gomes played for, he also played on the eve of the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. The Queen held a reception for the honoured state guests and Ian Gomes was the man behind the piano. His association with the Queen also goes back a long way. “During my time at The Savoy, there was a lady called Lady Elizabeth Anson. She heard me playing there. She organised all the parties for Her Majesty and was also the second cousin of the Queen. Whenever there was a function or any private dinners, I would take my portable piano and I would play for them,” he says. He reveals that one of Queen’s favourite songs is People Will Say We’re In Love, a show tune from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Oklahoma (1943).

However, you can sense the disappointment in his voice when asked about the unpopularity of the piano in our country. “In my days, I am talking about the early 60s, Calcutta and Bombay were two very prominent music hubs. The music scene in Calcutta was one of the best in India. It is very sad that piano as an instrument is not popular in this country. During my father’s time there were pianos everywhere. There were musicians all competing with each other. It was the Anglo-Indian community in Calcutta which held together the music scene, and as the years passed by, a lot of them left for other countries, and the music scene died down. When I last visited there was nothing. It was so sad because Calcutta was my birth place and I learnt everything from there. It never carried on,” he reminisces.

He has been playing for The Ritz, London, for 22 years, where he plays for 12 hours a day for five days a week. Do we get to hear him play in Mumbai? He’s happy to play privately for a limited audience but not comfortable to play at a huge gathering. Well, we expect an invitation.

