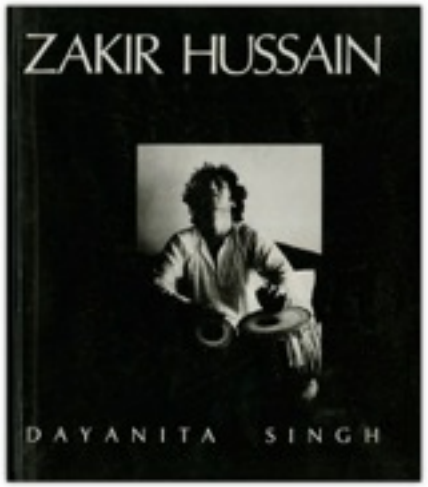
Time Travel

Shanay Jhaveri



Dayanita Singh has often told the story of how she came to make her first book of photographs. In the early 1980s, when she was in her first year at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, she was assigned to capture a person's "moods." She decided to shoot an evening concert of tabla player Zakir Hussain. She didn't have a permit, however, and when she stood near the stage to take photos, a concert organizer aggressively stopped her. Singh fell to the ground, in front of an audience of a thousand. She nursed her injured pride until the concert was finished, at which point she called out, "Mr. Hussain, I am a young student today, but someday I will be an important photographer, and then we will see."[1] Impressed by Singh's self-assurance, Hussain invited her to photograph him practicing in private the following morning. Singh accepted, and went on to spend the next six winters traveling with the musician, who became a close friend. Some of the resulting black-and-white images would eventually be published in 1986 as *Zakir Hussain: A Photo Essay* (Himalayan Books, New Delhi).

A volume of eighty pages, measuring approximately 8 1/2 x 9 5/8 inches (21.5 x 24.5 cm), *Zakir Hussain* was initially produced for a book design class at NID. Singh's tutors provided no direction in terms of content or organization, and the artist had scant access to photo books or other sources for reference, freeing her to "make it up"[2] as she liked. At the time, Raghubir Singh was the only significant Indian photographer devoted to the book form. He produced several books of color photographs, which take as their subject various cities and states of India; his images are accompanied by long, authoritative essays. The younger Singh, however, chose more intimate material, and the result feels like a cross between a family album and a diary.

The book opens with an image of Ustad Alla Rakha, Hussain's father and mentor, and a quote in which he speaks of his son: "His mother wanted him to be a doctor. But I knew from the very start that he would be like me, a tabla player." Tender portraits of Hussain with his own children, wife, and nephew follow, along with an affecting suite of photographs of the two musicians playing together, in which Hussain's admiration and respect for his father are palpable. The two men's joy and love for music are apparent in a photo that captures the split-second moment when they lean in toward each other just as their duet reaches a crescendo.

Zakir Hussain reveals a private world: the discipline and ritual of rehearsals; intense recording sessions; Hussain napping, waiting, and

contemplating. The inside of both covers feature full-bleed images of the musician in calm repose; in the closing image, he lies in bed beside his tablas, arms behind his head, and looks straight down the camera lens. The book is full of close-ups of Hussain's face—wearing aviators; resting his cheek on the edge of a chair deep in thought; lifting a small bowl to his face, one eye glimpsed under a thick bush of hair. These images are carefully balanced with those of a life lived onstage, a life full of travel and movement. In one photo, Hussain performs with sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar; another reveals the crackling atmosphere of a concert in Baroda, lit by dozens of imposing chandeliers. Photos are often paired with text—a smattering of short quotes from Hussain as well as other Indian classical musicians shown performing with him; excerpts from longer interviews conducted by Singh, they do not directly respond to the images. On two photographs, Hussain has handwritten comments. These unadorned fragments, musings, and self-articulations, candid and casual, move *Zakir Hussain* further out of the realm of straightforward photojournalism.

Although the images in *Zakir Hussain* were made over several years, they are not presented chronologically. Singh is very free with her images, both in terms of sequence and layout. They are loosely ordered, not following obvious patterns. At first glance, the musician is missing from an image of a couple walking down the street, a brasserie awning in the distance; closer inspection reveals Hussain walking with a female companion just a few short paces behind, smiling, one hand in his pants pocket. Opposite, on the right-hand page, Hussain is dead center, dressed in a traditional *kurta* and *lungi*. He stands barefoot on a stone floor, looking upward; a series of arches recede behind him. Like many of the photos in the book, neither image is captioned; readers must make their own inferences as to the locations of the photos and the meaning of their placement side by side. Yet they effortlessly capture Hussain as he inhabits the world.

Throughout the book, Singh is unafraid to crop, enlarge, and isolate elements, as seen in a spread that shows only Hussain's hands atop his two tablas. This keen attention to the musician's gestures and expressions is also shown in those instances where Singh creates a sequence of photos, resembling a contact sheet or a filmstrip; one such series follows the movement of Hussain's hands during a conversation, while another reflects the shifting emotions visible on his face while he plays.

Zakir Hussain was printed in an edition of 2,500 and given to street vendors to sell, but it found few buyers. All unsold copies were pulped, making the book incredibly rare today. A decade and a half would pass before Singh published another book. During this time, she continued to photograph, creating an archive of images that she continues to mine today. In many ways, *Zakir Hussain* served as a template for what would follow, introducing core concerns and organizing principles: Her second book, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Scalo, 2001), similarly examines the life of an extraordinary individual; *Privacy* (Steidl, 2004) is a series of family portraits; *Sent a Letter* (Steidl, 2008) is made up of petite journals, each one made for a friend. What is consistent across all of these books is a certain elliptical quality, made manifest through Singh's editing. The ability to leave things unsaid is something she credits to her time traveling with Hussain, observing "rigor and restraint" of Indian classical music: "You have a configuration of notes to work with . . . . [U]nlike Western classical music, where all the notes are fixed and you interpret rather than elaborate, here you have these fixed notes on which you have to elaborate. It's a question of how you combine these notes, and that's your genius."[3)]

It took Singh time, however, to fully appreciate *Zakir Hussain*. For years, she was "embarrassed" by it and left it off her list of publications. But as she prepared for her 2013 exhibition "Go Away

Closer," at the Hayward Gallery, London, she began to recognize the affinities, connections, and continuities between her earliest book and her latest work. At the Hayward, Singh introduced a new format in which to present her pictures: freestanding, portable wooden structures, of varying size, with space to display a certain number of images (the "display collection") and to store even more (the "reserve collection"), making it possible to change the presentation. Thus, while editing and sequencing remain important, as in her books, here the ability to alter the configuration of the photos is crucial. Perhaps for this reason, Singh calls these new works "museums." Although Singh did not shoot any new material, only about ten percent of the photos in the museums had been published or exhibited previously. But as she regrouped her old photographs in these new "photo architectures," she detected correspondences she had not noticed before. The resulting works, collectively titled "Museum Bhavan," include *Museum of Machines* (2013), *The Museum of Furniture* (2013), *Little Ladies Museum* (2013), and *Museum of Chance* (2013).

To acknowledge the strong resonances between her earliest book and her new works, Singh displayed a copy of *Zakir Hussain* on the gallery wall. She had never presented the book in a museum context, and none of its images has ever been exhibited as a print. The photographs only live within the book, and they must be experienced in relation to each other. "Museum Bhavan" evinces a similar desire. Moving, clever, or mysterious, the images ricochet off each other. Quietly, they reveal the temporal arc of Singh's practice, as familiar faces—friends and mentors—recur. Photos taken years or decades apart are placed beside each other, underscoring the weight of the past on the present, and all of the joy, sadness, and regret that it brings. Wandering in and around *Museum of Chance*, we encounter Hussain as a young man on the cusp of prominence, only a few frames away from the global star visiting his father's grave. Singh captured Hussain coming of age, moment by moment, as life played out around him.

SHANAY JHAVERI is a writer and curator based in Mumbai and London. This essay was first printed in PARKETT 95 in 2014.

Notes

1) Quoted in Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2004), n.p.

2) Dayanita Singh, in conversation with the author, July 20, 2014.

3) Quoted in "In Conversation: Stephanie Rosenthal and Dayanita Singh," in *Dayanita Singh: Go Away Closer* (Hayward Publishing, 2013), 57.