
NOTES FOR HARMONY

REMEMBERING THISULA

During troubled times when too many have died or live in fear especially in the island's north and east in a situation of not war nor peace, and in a world with the blatantly unjust war continuing on Iraq, it is still no easier to come to terms with unexpected and senseless death. Such was last month's loss of Thisula Jayanetti Abeysekera.

We pay tribute to Thisula, truly an example of generous and compassionate humanity. She was indeed 'a rock of quiet strength,' whose home in central Colombo was for many decades a centre of alternative music, arts and culture. She was someone who unassumingly always offered a helping hand and brought together so many different people. Thisula was a gifted musician, singer, guitarist, drummer, who more recently began her own recording and composing, including for films, with her own small home studio. And right up to the week before she died, she gave active space and encouragement to countless musicians.

Sadly, a month ago on a sunny Sunday in Colombo, Thisula was hit on her bicycle by a speeding private bus. That Reid Avenue – Royal College junction where this tragedy took place is locally long infamous for fatal accidents. Urgent action is needed, for lights and warning signs at such danger spots, and to improve our public transport system and control private buses that race often for Rs5 fares with terrible consequences. And in a capital city jammed with pollution, to encourage and ensure safety for alternative healthier modes of transport, through bike lanes (in China women and men of all ages have been biking for decades along tree-lined separate lanes). Perhaps that junction's famous school that produces many leaders should make urban design a new subject and start by redoing their own environs.

The funeral on 10 May was attended by hundreds of grieving friends and family. At the house there was choked-up chorus of songs like "Where have all the flowers gone," followed by handfuls of white jasmine strewn, and ending with the clear, dear voice of Thisula, extending crystal notes floating through the air singing her evocative song for peace (written by her friend Nedra Vittachi) from an old cassette. Most memorable were the simple, now extra-poignant, lines: "lying on the roadside..., dying on such a sunny day."

River That Never Sleeps

That song was Thisula's contribution to *Niddi Nethi Nadiye Naadaya* (The Sound of the Restless River), the Movement for Interracial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) cassette of the late

1980s, an early call for an end to war through the creative and inspirational medium of music. The cassette was launched at a May Day concert at Royal College Hall Navarangahala (then open to public performances). Workers thronged the two performances, which also included Vijaya Kumaratunge. The songs on the cassette were innovative in both music and lyrics – peace songs with a strong political message (unlike the current slogans of 'peace' emptied of social justice). It was probably the first coming together of a group of artists to compose and sing on issues of national harmony, equality and a negotiated resolution to the conflict.

Thisula's house over the last decades was also home away from home for so many, from musicians to peace and women's activists, to artists and travellers from near and far. It was an open space used by people of all ages and backgrounds. It was also the site of an incredible range of activities, from regular jam sessions, poetry readings, drama and dance rehearsals, to enlightening workshops on nonviolent communication and engaged Buddhism. There were also delightful art, poetry and music camps for young children; and last year it became an organizing centre for youth to creatively support tsunami-affected children in the south and east. Thisula organized Tamil classes at home for the latter work. She was also instrumental in rebuilding preschools in Ahangama, Habaraduwa and Trincomalee after the tsunami.

Raising Hope for the Future

The diversely talented younger generation fostered by her, including her own children and many others, are now living shining tributes to Thisula. She was the multi-talented 'mother' (to so many of all ages) who created and sustained that alternative artistic space and open way of living. This new generation represents hope for the future of a country struggling to find new ways forward that yet do not forget the old.

Thisula Abeysekera still provides an enduring legacy that should inspire all of us, not to waste any more of the vast and deep experience, talent and knowledge remaining untapped especially among the women and youth of Sri Lanka, as elsewhere. Now remains the difficult but vital task to fill the still painful void left by tragic untimely demise of so many artists and others snatched and lost too early from a land still crying for their creative and compassionate healing. Another recent case is Nihal de Silva, as well as earlier losses of those such as Ranjini Thiranyagama, Richard de Zoysa, Sivaramani. In their memory let us continue their work to bring people together, toward real lasting peace and harmony. ■