

Dr Varuni Kulasekara, 50, is a Sri Lankan-born entomologist turned teahouse entrepreneur. Her husband, American Brian Ritchie, 46, plays bass for the Violent Femmes and is a shakuhachi (Japanese flute) teacher and performer. Both are Buddhists and, when not touring, divide their time between Sydney and Hobart.

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Dr Varuni Kulasekara
& Brian Ritchie



Varuni: I had tickets to see the Jesus and Mary Chain the night I met Brian but a friend talked me into going to the Femmes at a club in Baltimore. It was meant to be. At the show I was right in front of him and we were both looking at each other. Afterwards, I asked the sound man if he could go get my CD autographed and he invited me backstage to meet the band. Gordon, the singer, spoke to me first, then Brian rushed over and said, “Hey, she was on my side.”

When I went on their tour bus, I saw Brian had a stack of books by Edgar Allen Poe, Paul Bowles and Samuel Beckett and thought, “Hmm, he’s not the usual rock star you hear about.” We went for a drink and exchanged phone numbers. I didn’t think Brian would call me the next day but he did and we started talking – about entomology.

For a while it was romantic but not romantic. It got serious the next year, in 1995, when I joined the American Museum of Natural History and we moved to New York. The next year I got a grant to go to Australia and collect insects. Brian came along and we both fell in love with the beauty of Tasmania and said, “Someday, let’s move here.”

We’d both been married before so we were cautious. We dated for three years before getting married. I’d never been with a musician before, and there were times when we had to find a middle path, coming from totally different backgrounds, but I never had any doubts. The

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only difficulties we’ve had were after West Nile Virus broke out across America in ’99. I was head entomologist at the New York Department of Health, in charge of mosquito surveillance and control. I was working a lot and on call 24/7, and it upset him, which was part

of the reason I eventually resigned. These days the only thing we fight about is Sting; I like him but Brian doesn’t. I don’t have any issues with Brian’s fame. And I’ve never had a problem with female fans; I’ve never been the jealous wife because I’m comfortable and confident in my self. I go on tour with the Femmes and Brian and I try and see the places we’re visiting. We go to museums, go hiking, and we’re both foodies so we love going to restaurants.

When we moved to Hobart last year, I realised it wasn’t going to be easy to get a job as an entomologist, and I wondered what I should do. In the past few years we’ve gotten into tea, so I decided to open teahouses. A big tea culture has developed in the US, and I wanted to introduce that to Australia.

Brian and I are fascinated by Japanese culture: the tea ceremony, food, fashion, temples, Zen Buddhist spirituality. I was born into Buddhism and Brian chose to embrace it, but it wouldn’t bother me if he was a different faith. As long as he is a spiritual person, that’s enough for me.

Until I met Brian I never felt I would find a guy I could be completely myself with. This is the first relationship I’ve had where I respect the guy completely. He is very secure in himself; he doesn’t try to control me. I can have my personality and he can have his personality and we can have a good relationship because of that.

Brian: When you’re a musician you meet people on the job; I can’t remember ever having been with a woman who didn’t know what I did. The Femmes were never full blown Mötley Crüe/Keith Richards-type people but I certainly tasted most of what rock’n’roll had to offer. But in the end I got bored with that lifestyle, and I guess I straightened out after meeting Varuni.

When I saw Varuni in the crowd I could tell she wasn’t your typical starry-eyed teenager. I would have given her a backstage pass if she’d come up to the stage, but she didn’t. The sound guy invited her backstage for Gordon’s sake – he’s addicted to dark-skinned girls – but I shooed him away.

What struck me was her effervescence. Varuni has the ability to meet anybody and make them feel good when she talks to them. That first night I thought to myself, “I could spend the rest of my life with this woman. But I probably won’t.” There just didn’t seem to be any path to that – we were living in different towns, involved in different relationships. I was married to an Italian woman, she was a great person, but that was ending.

Rock’n’roll is a runaway train – you either get on board or you fall off the track. Varuni got on board, but I also got on board with her thing. I’d go out and help her identify insects. It’s not like I thought my job was more important or she thought her job was more sophisticated. I was never intimidated by her – I’m into intelligent women – but her friends were intimidated by my lack of education. They saw me as some semi-literate brute. They were saying, “Varuni, wake up, you’ve got a PhD and this guy didn’t even finish high school.” I’d say, “But I did finish school.” And that’s the only time I’ve ever needed my high school diploma.

Of course Varuni’s exoticism appeals to me. I don’t like American women, haven’t dated one for 20 years. They have strident voices and I live with my ears, so I can’t listen to that. But exoticism is not enough to sustain a relationship. Most of the time I forget we’re from different races and cultures. Then she’ll have a conservative response to something, and it’s clear she’s thinking in a way no American would. But I like that, it’s kind of charming.

We don’t really have roles: it’s not like I’m the man, you’re the woman. In a lot of relationships you have to remember the person is sensitive about this or that, speak indirectly, worry about hurting their feelings. We don’t have that.

We got married during the 1998 International Shakuhachi Festival in Boulder, Colorado, near a beautiful crater lake up in the mountains. We’d discovered it collecting insects. There were only four people there. My shakuhachi teacher played *The Wedding March* and conducted the ceremony, then we had a beautiful picnic. You look at our wedding photos and Varuni is just beaming so happily. But then she’s always beaming away.

We were both very keen on coming to Australia. Varuni hasn’t lived in Sri Lanka for 20 years and Milwaukee never felt like home to me. I always had this idea that there was a place that could be home, and something here struck a deep chord in me. I’ve thought Australia was a country on the way up since I first toured here in 1984.

We’ve been together for 13 years now, travelled constantly, lived in four different cities. There is no stability but the stability we give each other. The amount of chaos and contention that swirls around me, I must be a magnet for craziness. But Varuni is my anchor. **GW**