

Remembering Saigal

One often hears people speak sadly about the good old days, especially in fields like music where technology seems to have arrived as a mixed blessing. One reads the most amazing things about digital recordings. Yet when one listens to the same music on one's old Long Playing record with all its grains and subsequently on a digitally re-mastered CD one finds that more often than not, that a lot of something Good....call it warmth, call it soul....has also been removed along with the grains. One is forced to hear (If not listen to) the most bizarre forms of fusion in the name of "Freedom", "Experimentation" and "Reaching out to other cultures." When a master in his or her own field like say Ustad Zakir Hussain does it, one can see the point to a certain extent. But these days one finds large numbers of so called musicians who are competent neither in one system of music nor the other, peddling bastardized forms of sounds to audiences who don't seem to know much better either. Noise abounds. One is bombarded with the Aarati "Aum Jai Jagadish Hare" when one leaves the elevator door open or when a car is reversing. One hears mobile phones ring with an array of sounds ranging from Strauss Waltzes, to the latest hits by Dixie Chicks to Tamil film songs lifted from Arabic Songs to Malayalam film songs lifted from Beethoven to the voice of the obligatory screaming baby of the family to the voice of cine star Madhu, perfectly mimed by somebody, drawling "Mone, phone adikkunnuuu....followed by "Mone Raju, Phone edukkedaaa !" at the second ring and something unprintable, shouted a lot louder on the third ring. One visits airports, railway stations, restaurants, shops....and one can never escape the horrendous amount of sound pollution that one is exposed to in the form of "Music" be it from TV sets or from the sound systems installed in those places for this purpose. The punishment inflicted on society at large by the blaring speakers of places of worship takes the crime to a different dimension altogether, particularly when school children have their exams.

Yet, on the other hand, with all this going on, one finds "New" CDs flooding the market, with titles like "S.D.Burman. When Melody Was Queen," "Evergreen Hits of Geeta Dutt," "Mukesh. That Old Feeling," "Vintage Kishore" and so on. Does every generation view its predecessors with a certain sense of awe? Or do they just not Make them the same way any more? Made to Last, that is. Even in a field like Tennis, with all the young talent sprouting up all around the world, names like Martina Navratilova, Bjorn Borg or Mac Enroe still remain in a class of their own. Speaking specifically about singers of Hindi Film Songs, one may personally prefer Mohammed Rafi....or Mukesh.....or Kishore Kumar....or Manna Dey.....or Talat Mehmood....or Hemant Kumar...or the Mangeshkar Sisters....or Geeta Dutt....the list runs long and colourful, not to mention melodious. Each of them had....and continue to have....their legion of loyal fans who swear by their individual styles, charm and appeal. Yet....ask any of these legendary singers themselves who Their biggest hero was and they all would have the same answer.

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Saigal. Kundan Lal Saigal. Born in 1904, he lived for just 42 years and had a career in the film industry for a little under 15 years. Yet the impact he made during his short but glorious career remains undiminished by the passage of time. Saigal was the antithesis of much that one watches on screens big and small nowadays.

These days, even a banal event like the lady of the house announcing that dinner was served (Especially in sordid TV serials) could easily run as follows. "Come!" *TA TAAAAANG!* "Dinner is served!" *TA TAAAAANG!* Her daughter in-law would clasp her clenched fist to her throbbing chest and go "Entha? Eee kelkunnathokkey sheri aano?" *CHAAAAANG!* or the equivalent of that in other relevant regional languages. Saigal however sang the most heart breaking songs (Literally so, as in the case of the following example) like "Jab Dil Hi Toot Gaya, Hum Jeeke Kya Karengay?" (When the heart itself is broken, what is the point in living?) with an austere, stoic and tearless quality. Listeners who are used to the kind of exaggerated emoting mentioned earlier may initially find Saigal flat, dry, unidimensional or boring. This is because he doesn't "let it all hang out" as they say....or Simulate emotions with contrived vocalization. There's almost a Zen kind of discipline and economy in his delivery. He makes even difficult phrases like the "Kya" in "Mein Kya Jaanon" look as simple as reading out a number from the telephone directory. I once read about football great Pele having caught a ball when he was the goalkeeper for his team. Though he actually caught the ball quite easily, when he saw how wildly the fans were cheering since it was really a miraculous catch from the normal human perspective, he obliged them by deliberately falling on the ground and rolling around a bit....to make the catch look difficult enough to merit their thunderous ovation. Saigal never did any such thing. He just sang.

H.G.Wells wrote "I write straight. And I walk straight. Simply because it's the easiest way to get there." And Saigal sang straight. Superficially speaking there was little difference between a sad Saigal song, a happy Saigal song or a romantic Saigal song. But then "Superficial" is the one word one could never associate with him. Everything was genuine and simple about the man. He loved his music, he loved his drink, he loved his food (And was an amazing cook himself), he loved his friends, loved to laugh and to make others laugh and loved life itself. The concept of "Artistic temperament" was utterly alien to him. He was the first mega superstar in the Indian subcontinent, with his fame spreading to other countries like Pakistan,, <?Afghanistan,Iran, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Indonesia and so on even those days when the world was a much larger place than it is now. The fact that his music cut across barriers of language the way it did even in India at the time was miraculous, with Keralites, Tamils, Kannadigas, Bengalis and others relishing numbers like Soja Rajkumari, Jab Dil Hi Toot Gaya, Diya Jalao Jagmag Jagmag,

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Madhukar Shaam Hamarey Chor, Ae Qatib Ae Taqdeer, Baalam Aaye Baso More Man Mein, Babul Mora Naihar Jhooto Jaay and others in large numbers. Saigal was the first non Bengali to have impressed Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore hugely with his rendition of Tagore songs. He sang in other languages too including Tamil, Punjabi and Persian and was a poet himself. I myself have witnessed certain Iranian friends of mine literally being moved to tears by his rendition of the Persian poem, Maaraba Ghamsa Kust-au-Qasa Raa Bahaana Saaqt." His simple and kind heart is reflected enchantingly in the sweet little poem "Main Baithi Dhi Phulwari Mein" written, tuned and sung by him in Raag Bhairavi. Shri O.N.V.Kurup from Kerala was inspired to write a Ghazal "Paaduka Saigal Paadu" in Malayalam, tuned and sung by Shri Umbaai. Saigal is one of the easiest of artists to caricature or mimic but one of the hardest actually to do justice to by other singers. The great Kishore Kumar, one of the most ardent admirers of Saigal, who knew every song of his by heart, refused to record a single one of them since he felt it would be a "Guru droham" to do that and believed that the originals should be preserved as they were. Lata Mangeshkar lost a lot of votes among Discerning listeners (The key word here being "Discerning") by bringing out an album called Shradhdhanjali, where she sang songs by Saigal, Pankaj Mullick and others.

The album was a huge commercial success however, but that's how it goes I guess. The earlier recordings of people like Kishore Kumar and Mukesh are very much in the shadow of Saigal. (Marne Ki Duaayen by Kishore and Dil Jalta Hai by Mukesh for example.) Many people like C.H.Atma (Who sang evergreen hits like Preetam Aan Milo and Roun Mein Saagar Ke Kinare.) could never successfully find a path of their own because of the overwhelming musical presence that Saigal was at the time. Most of us like the music we listened to as children and as young adults because of sentimental reasons. And many from the younger generation write off our grandparents' love for Saigal as something rooted in reasons of nostalgia and sentiment. But, as a practicing musician myself, I can vouch for the fact that he has the place he has Purely based on merit. I myself had never heard him (Or even heard Of him) till I was in my early twenties. And though I can't say I was instantly blown away by his voice (I found Pankaj Mullick with his lilting songs like Piya Milan Ko Jaana, Chale Pavan Ki Chaal and Ayee Bahaar Aaj Ayee Bahaar and the haunting Guzar Gaya Woh Zamaana, which seems to speak of the time when giants like Saigal and Pankaj Mullick themselves made music, much easier to like instantly.) something about him held my attention. And within a very short time I was completely hooked. I used to spend hours and hours and hours with my late Veena Guru, Prof.K.S.Narayanaswamy (Who knew Saigal even before he became a mega superstar) singing, discussing and analyzing the music of Saigal note by note. He himself used to marvel at and celebrate the fact that Saigal's music continued to work its charm on someone more than half a century

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younger than him. I myself discovered that on orkut.com, (An online community basically for youngsters) there was a community dedicated to him, run by a conscientious young man at least twenty years younger than me. The music industry may change; tastes and value systems may change, but some things quietly continue to live and thrive for all time to come. When Raksha approached me to write an article for their souvenir, there was no question about the subject matter since most of the time I got to spend with Shri Manjoo Menon was spent talking about Saigal. His brother Shri Raghava Menon had actually met and interviewed K.L.Saigal himself. (And written a book on him too.) And I feel blessed to have met people who've met Saigal.....and even people who've met people who had met Saigal. Though I am neither scared of death nor particularly looking forward to it, the idea of meeting all these people in the next world does have its own tantalizing appeal, I have to admit. Meanwhile let us make the most of what we have here by soaking ourselves in the kind of genuinely good music that men like Kundan Lal Saigal made.