

Cover Story

A R Rahman - Mozart of Asia

By: Lata Kumar

A R Rahman, the Mozart of Asia, needs no introduction. He is as well known in India as he is all over the world and his appeal lies in the way he blends popular music into the classical and remains true to music at its very core. When we hear the "Bombay Theme" music in Lord of War and "Chaiya Chaiya" in Inside Man, every Indian heart swells with pride.

When CityMasala called me for an interview with Rahmanji, I was thrilled. I am fortunate enough to know this great musician. When I emailed him asking for an interview for CityMasala he replied immediately in his endearing way... "soon". He was busy with the opening of his Music Conservatory and many other projects. I contacted him initially in February of 2008 and he kept in touch constantly to let me know he would do the interview soon. Finally, my wait came to an end. He said he would talk to me after his interview with Hi! Blitz on Saturday, May 31, 2008.

We have all read about his birth, converting to the Muslim faith, his first break and other tidbits. In this interview, I have tried to get a closer look at Rahman, the person.

I also wanted to make our community aware of my group called Thaiya Thaiya, which provides musical entertainment for all ages and occasions. I created it in the year 2000 with Rahmanji's blessings. I met him for the first time in New York at that time while he was on a tour in the US.

LK: Rahmanji, first of all, congratulations on all the awards you have received in the last few months, both as a composer and for Best Background Score for Guru. It is you who has made the background score as important as it is both in Guru and Jodha Akbar. How difficult or different is it from composing a regular song?

ARR: It is not tough. You just have to absorb the film completely, and the music. Sometimes you go with it and sometimes, you go against it.

LK: Do you see the whole movie at one time or one scene at a time?

ARR: I see the whole movie first and then I take certain sequences and start working with them. Sometime we do generic themes and try to make them fit in the movie.

CM: Your fame precedes you, yet you remain elusive to the media and people know very little about who you really are. Is this because you are innately shy or because it is unnecessary for people to get to know you – your music touching their hearts is sufficient?

ARR: (chuckling) I think of it this way - I am not an actor, I'm just a musician so, all people want from me is my music. Although, I have done many interviews, I always feel it is not necessary. For me it is just the music and the love for it.

LK: I agree wholeheartedly and we all enjoy your love for your music through your compositions.

LK: What gives you the most creative satisfaction, music for Tamil or Hindi movies, for Hollywood or Broadway musicals or private albums like Vandhe Mathiram?

ARR: Music is just one element in the film when

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When Rahmanji finally called me to do the interview, the first thing that came out of my mouth was a squeak! Then I took a deep breath and thanked him for giving me his time. He was at his music studio and I could hear the hustle and bustle of traffic as we started to talk. It was late in the night for him but he answered every question with openness and passion. He was relaxed and did not hurry me to get it over with.

you take a classic. The composition definitely has its own value such as a piece like "Bombay Theme" which you enjoy by itself on the radio. When you take a movie, the music may be good but the movie doesn't do well. The whole impact of the music is halved, or a percentage of it is, so it is important when the whole theme succeeds in a movie. That is when I get full satisfaction.

When you consider Jodha Akbar in this scenario, or Yuva or Rang de Basanti, it gives me a lot of satisfaction because it has reached many more people and they understand what went behind it.

CM: You say you are a deeply spiritual person and that Sufism is where religion and music meet – could you elaborate on this?

ARR: I think art is a reflection of what is inside. Sufism is what you feel when you meditate, what you feel when you listen to beautifully composed music. It is said that there are different names for God and some of the names don't have words. In my opinion, and I feel this very deeply, music is one of the major Gods. There are no words in it, there is feeling in it and spirituality in it.

LK: Is there any song from any period that you wish you had composed?

ARR: Hmmm ... I can't think of any because I appreciate people for what they do. Each one has their share of creativity that God has given them and I value that and respect that, and so I look at it in a different way (laughs).

LK: "Humility" is the first word uttered to describe you. Even when you received the Filmfare award, you were so humble. You said that it was a



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LK: You have had the chance to work and create music all over the world. Other than in India itself, where do you think Indian music in particular is at its most vibrant and creative?

ARR: There is good and bad all over. There are some great musicians in Kerala, some in Chennai, Calcutta, Bombay and some in Rajasthan. I don't think the place is important, it is just the feeling inside. Some musicians are yet to be discovered. We get surprised when we see a person who comes from a village delivering a beautiful and energetic piece in a beautiful voice or playing an instrument really well.

LK: Do you feel a special connection with specific people in the industry? For example, who are some of the people whom you consider yourself eternally grateful towards?

ARR: I think my whole journey started with Mani Rathnam and Subhash Ghai. These are the two main people and there are also many more.

LK: Before I end the interview, do you see a budding Rahman in one of your children?

ARR: I don't know what future they have. I can only pray for them (laughs). I am introducing them to music and they will always have a choice of taking to it or not.

LK: You are said to be very busy with your dream project, the KM Music Conservatory which once again shows your philanthropic side. What is your long term dream for this school?

ARR: In a place like Chennai or Tamilnadu in India, there are lot of talented young kids who want to go beyond certain clichés and expectations that are placed on them. This school is an opportunity for such children to not be frustrated anymore and to give them exposure to all kinds of music and help to train them so that they can become musicians of the next century. As a result of such an environment, the whole society and community here will get uplifted in their artistic taste. These children will get the opportunity to have music as an honorable profession in their lives. People here still don't like to say 'my son is a guitarist or a violinist' because they don't feel any pride in it. In the US, for example, parents would love to say, 'my son plays in the Chicago Symphony.' Parents here need to feel that pride in talking about a child who is a musician. This school will have so many features complementing each other. I am coming with a movement here. The clichés where parents want their children to be a doctor, an engineer or a software engineer because that means it is a job which is secure and pays for life, will gradually take other shapes with this school. Music is much more than a secure job because with it you give something so beautiful to the world. People should want to take music as a profession because it is so much more than a profession.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT LATA KUMAR'S GROUP THAIYA THAIYA

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