

Hari Can Sing

But the applause for Hariharan has got loud only after the success of Colonial Cousins

He has nearly always managed to miss the bus. He has had the ticket and the talent but got the schedules mixed up. Lucky, he didn't go breathless climbing on board.

Ponder this: when he was training in Carnatic classical music, there were too many big names in a minuscule market.

When he turned to *ghazals* it was to battle a strong north-Indian bias and a small window of opportunity.

When he sang for Hindi films, his fame was lost in a blizzard of younger talent.

This time, though, this very versatile and talented singer is writing his own schedules. Not only will he not miss this bus, it's probably going to be named the Hariharan Special.

In his latest avatar as a *Colonial Cousin* (along with Leslie Lewis), our boy from Matunga, now 41 years old, has finally joined the big league. Just when the new musical language that exploded across India with Star TV was gaining currency, along comes Hari, buttressed with his skills in both Carnatic and Hindustani music and takes off just where fusion groups like Louis Banks' had somehow left off. Riding on the

fiery tail of a multiethnic, multilingual comet, Hariharan has seized his stardom, not with a bang or a rap, but with melody.

And what melody! Listen carefully to the first album of *Colonial Cousins*. Clip out the hype, forgive the blasphemy of *stotras* juxtaposed with romance, discard the paucity of the lyrics. Just let the music pour into your ears. Do you recognise the arrival of real Indo-fusion? Most of the songs have a very harmonious blend of chords from the East and West, the North and South. Seamless fusion. The entire range of Hariharan's versatility is on display here. At any meandering turn of the songs, his voice could as easily break into a pop song, a *ghazal* or a rock ballad. Or, for that matter, a *bhajan*.

It's Hariharan's deep timbre, erupting into a *taana* that makes *Colonial Cousins*' music different from other fusion attempts. Leslie Lewis' higher pitch provides an interesting foil to the baritone that Hariharan has perfected



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"I DON'T THINK WE ARE JUST A FASHION"

Q: What did you learn from chasing success?

A: Number One: it doesn't come soon to you. You got to keep waiting and doing your bit. And not think of success, because if you do, it evades you. It's taken a long time. I was just doing my style of music. Even in the film industry, you know, because I have a different kind of voice and I sing differently. I'm not a Kishore Kumar or a Rafi clone. It's taken me time to establish my style. When it's an original style it takes a long time.

Q: But the success of Colonial Cousins is quite different from your earlier successes.

A: Yes, it's more of a wave, I would say. And I can see it going international.

Q: Is it frightening to have such time-crunched success? It took about four months for the Colonial Cousins to reach this fairly dizzying height.

A: The media is so powerful today that overnight you are at everybody's house. If they lap it up, then you are like any other product.

Q: Does it bother you, to be turned into a product, and to worry whether your shelf-life will be short?

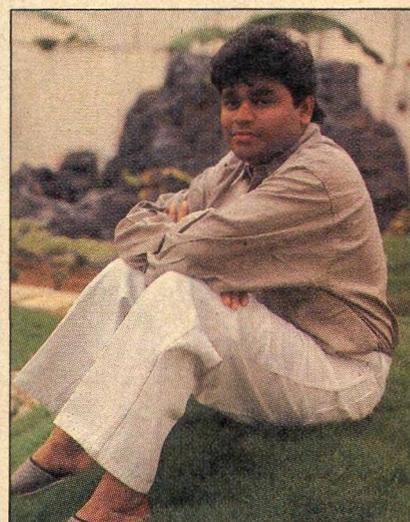
A: Maybe, in terms of CC, I don't know. But I don't think we are just a fashion. There are some songs which are meant to get the pulse of the people, like *Sa Ni Dha Pa*, but there are others which are very emotive, like *Rain*, *Krishna*, and people have reacted to them also. The good thing about Colonial is we have a fan following from six to 60 and this can't die out very soon.

over two decades. One of the rare musicians to be quite at home in both Hindustani and Carnatic styles of music, with rigorous training in both from a very young age, he has never hesitated to lend his voice to any form of music. He was not too uppity to sing jingles — remember the Colgate Gel tune Lez composed for him? He was also equally at home singing Hindi film songs. And Telugu and Tamil and Marathi. "Don't call him a *ghazal* singer or this singer or that singer," offers Leslie Lewis. "He is just a singer. Period." Somehow, Hariharan has managed not to let his erratic choice of musical assignment corrupt his voice. He says he would still love to cut a classical record. Take a year off from everything, concentrate on *riyaaz*, slip into another world. Hariharan is always looking for more avenues for his voice.

Still, his favourite form of singing is quite definitely the *ghazal*. Ever since he



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A.R. Rahman: Teaming up with the music composer suddenly made Hari's Hindi film songs go national

"I HEARD MEHDI HASAN IN 1978. THE GUY REALLY BLEW ME"

Q: Does your music have the power to change people?

A: It definitely has power to affect people. To what extent I don't know. A friend in the States was telling me about his friend, who had been going through terrible depression. He said Hariharan's music has sustained me for one year. It's given me peace, inner strength. I felt that was great. A lot of people have taken my *ghazals* as a religion. It has helped them.

Q: How did you hit upon the *ghazal* as a form of musical expression?

A: I heard Mehdi Hassan in 1978. The guy really blew me. This format of music is fantastic, I thought. It has everything in it — *aap kahayal ang ga sakte hain, thumri ang ga sakte hain*. The lyrics are there, the romance, spiritualism, everything comes into it. So I just got zapped. And I threw myself totally into it.

Q: Did anyone ever suggest that you change the name Hariharan when you are trying to sell *ghazals*?

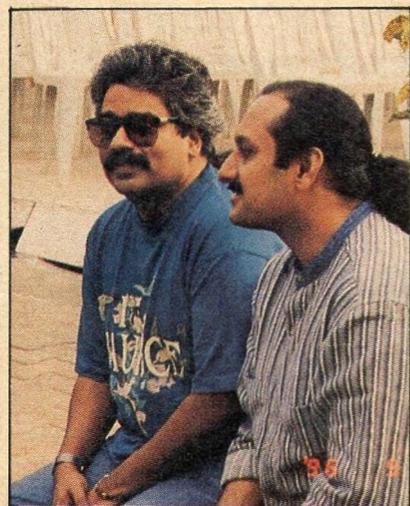
A: It happened once. I changed the name for one year to Ravi Anand. *Sukoon* was under Ravi Anand. *Aur, change karne ke baad jitna kaam aata tha woh bhi bandh ho gaya!*

Q: The *ghazal* is essentially romantic. Are you a romantic?

A: Horribly.

Q: Are you romantic about your wife?

A: Oh, yes. I like to surprise her. Our s was an arranged marriage, so the romance came later. I think this is something very good about arranged marriages. The romance lasts, even after the children. Romance has given me a lot of strength in my music.



Leslie with Hariharan: "Hari is basically a good person. And that comes through in his music"

was judged a winner by music director Jaidev in the Sur Singar competition in 1977, Hari has settled his soul for the *ghazal*. Not that it was easy. It was a long, hard struggle. A south Indian (Madras!) in an essentially northern, essentially Urdu genre! Could it work? Often in the down periods, in the early Eighties, he would lose hope. But his family would pull him up again. His mother, Alamelu Mani, is a professional classical singer in the Carnatic style. Herself a purist, she has an open mind on music. She was his first supporter when he switched, at the age of 17, from Carnatic to Hindustani under Ghulam Mustafa Khan. So, Hariharan persisted. Once he had decided that the *ghazal* was to be his

metier, he went all out to master the form. Faithfully following the Mehdi Hassan style of *gayaki ghazal*, he practised upto nine hours each day, even while he was still completing his studies at the Government Law College, Mumbai. After college, he would stroll over to Jaidev's house, watching him at work. "I learnt the subtle art of music composition from Jaidevji, how to bring out the emotion from the *swara* itself," he says. Practising the music was one thing. The Matunga Maama also had to learn the phonetics of the language of *ghazals*: Urdu. Jaidev put him on to Chand Bala, an actress and singer who lived life like a begum of the Forties. "She was a darling," says Hari. Chand Bala and Hariharan had a great relationship. "*Madrasai, pehle Urdu sudhar* (improve your Urdu)," she would tell the singer in the throes of his music. She was there when Hari cut his first album under the aegis of Polydor in 1980, *Ghazal Ka Mausam*, followed by *Sukoon*. Unfortunately though, she died before she could see her pupil reach stardom.

But his friends from the old days are happily around to share in his success. Among them Ram Nagaraj, himself a professional singer, who opened Hari's concert in Bangalore with a few tunes of his own. Nagaraj marvels that Hari has retained his simplicity, his goodness all through his turbulent career. Not that he gets to see much of him now. "Gone are the days when we could play the *baja* together. Then, he used to wait for the phone to buzz. Now, both phones are ringing off the hook!" he says. Nagaraj is all praise for Hari's total dedication to his music and his unwillingness to compromise for money. Lez echoes the praises. "Hari is basically a good person. And that comes through in his music."

It took time for Hariharan's accent to become acceptable, as it did for his personal appearance. The curly hair, the thick moustache, the unflattering spectacles, the ill-matched clothes: none of them matched the emerging plastic standards of the popular *ghazal* singer in the Eighties, especially as epitomised by Pankaj Udhas. And yet, except for a disastrous attempt to change his very southy name, Hariharan made no great effort to change his image. "I have always been myself. Because if you're not, you can't convince the people." Finally, it was his golden voice and not his looks that carried the day. Each cassette that followed: *Reflections*, *Horizon*, *Hazir* (with Zakir Hussain), *Dil Ki*

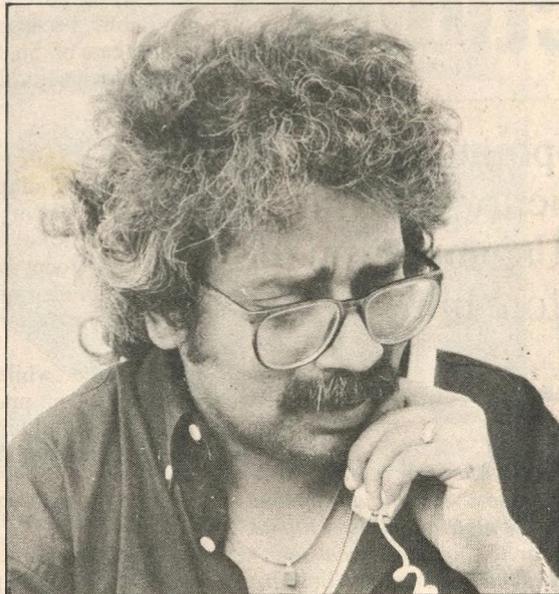
Baat, *Hariharan Live In Concert* etc. only added to his stature as a talented singer. In 1994, *Gulfam*, under the Venus label, catapulted him into the double platinum class. There was now no looking back. His image also changed with his success. Better photographs on jacket covers, better clothes, no more glasses. You could tell the butterfly had emerged from the chrysalis.

Meanwhile, Hariharan continued doing film songs. His first song in *Gaman* with Jaidev remains his favourite. Few people know that he went on to do more than 250 film songs in various styles, from *bhajans* to romantic duets. Teaming up with fellow Tamilian A.R. Rahman suddenly made Hari's Hindi film songs go national. In *Roja*, he sang

style of singing and the versatile Asha Bhonsle had flattered him by rendering it faithfully.

If Hariharan had developed a distinctive style, it had not come easy. And it became a conviction. He would not alter the style for any current fashion. When *ghazal* singers began *filmi*, *geet*-like melodies to cater to a gallery, Hariharan stood apart. "I'm a rebel. I want to do my thing. Success for the sake of success, was not important to me. I wanted it on my terms. I hate mediocrity. Although I respect popularity. If I don't get success, fine. I'll go to the grave with the conviction that I had done my best. And at least I would be proud of that," he says.

Now that *Colonial Cousins* is such a success, Hariharan is touring almost continuously. He was in the States to do a



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one version of the title song. For *Bombay*, he did the very melodious *Tu Hi Re*. Rahman seemed to be outdoing himself for Hariharan. His songs for Hariharan were quite different from others. "Rahman is a guy who relates to me, musically. Vibe is very important," says Hari. Rahman knew that whatever Hariharan sang, he would use his *ghamaks*, his *gayaki andaz* that had stood him in good stead with the *ghazal*. "It's a question of positioning," says Hariharan. "This is all I know, how to sing. *Bas. Aur kuch aata hi nahin hai*." And so, when he composed an album of *ghazals* with Asha Bhonsle, *Aab Shaar-e-Ghazal*, rehearsing with her for more than a fortnight, a fan enthused: it was as if Ashaji was singing in Hari's voice. It was the Hariharan trademark

charity show celebrating 35 years of Merchant Ivory productions at the Carnegie Hall. With an 80-piece New York Symphony orchestra playing with Zakir Hussain and Hariharan for a short song. "There's no time to get them into the studios for an audio or video shoot," rues Shashi Gopal. There's also less time for *riyaaz*, less time for new composition. Time, the singer has discovered, is not very elastic. It will be his *ghazal* fan who suffers. Although he's planning a double album with Venus and would love to work with Javed Akhtar, *Colonial Cousins* is sure to take up a lot of bandwidth over the next one year. And those who yearn for more of the soulful sound of his *ghazal*, will have to wait. •

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