

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Anna Morcom sizes up one of the most recorded artists on earth

ASHA BHOSLE



Asian Music Circuit

Asha Bhosle's voice sizzles and excites, infecting listeners with its sense of fun and boundless energy. Most famous for vocal ebullience, sparkle, cheekiness and naughtiness, Asha's voice can just as easily shimmer with sweetness, tenderness and heart-stopping beauty. Whatever she sings, technical prowess is a given. Her career has spanned over five decades, for the most part working as a playback singer in the Hindi film industry, singing songs for the on-screen characters who lip-sync the words. Asha and her sister, Lata Mangeshkar, have dominated Hindi film singing and are undoubtedly the greatest female vocal icons of modern India. People attempt to compare them, but they are both manifestations of true perfection. Qualitative comparisons seem meaningless.

Asha Bhosle was born in 1933, in the Satara district of Maharashtra, with two sisters and a brother in addition to Lata. All grew up steeped in music as their father,

Dinanath Mangeshkar, was a famous actor-singer in Marathi theatre. Asha entered the world of *filmi* in 1944 (a few years after Lata), singing for a Marathi film. In 1948, she sang her first song for a Hindi film. During her mid-teens she eloped with a much older man, Ganpatrao Bhosle. Family duties certainly slowed her rise in the world of playback, and while Lata was established in 1949 as the undisputed top female singer with three huge musical hits – *Mahal*, *Barsaat* and *Andaz* – Asha was still struggling.

Asha's big break came in 1957, when one of the top music directors of the era, OP Nayyar, chose her to sing all the songs for the hit films *Naya Daur* and *Tumsa Nahin Dekha*. Asha had a long-standing relationship with OP Nayyar, and became his favourite female singer, above Shamshad Begum and Geeta Dutt, the latter whose vocal

style Asha had much emulated in her early years. Famously, OP Nayyar never used Lata Mangeshkar. From 1957 till the late 80s, Asha reached the top of Hindi playback, albeit alongside Lata, singing for all the major heroines. Asha is most famous for her hits by OP Nayyar, SD Burman, C Ramachandra and RD Burman, who she married in the late 70s.

Asha has sung approximately 7,500 Hindi film songs. To the great surprise of many, this stupendous figure was found to top the total of Lata, commonly seen as more successful. Lata was discovered to have 'only' sung around 5,250 Hindi songs, not 30,000 as had been erroneously reported in the *Guinness Book of Records* in the 80s. The sense of Lata's greater success partly rests on the fact that she sang for most of the giant hits of the 50s and 60s, such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). In the world of Hindi film music, blockbuster songs are usually the songs from blockbuster films, rather than the best songs per se.

Although certainly rivals, Asha and Lata came to occupy different vocal characters, in many ways complementing each other. Asha is seen as vocally vivacious – a live wire – while Lata's voice is perceived as embodying purity and innocence. These vocal identities are supported – and created – by an understanding of their personalities. Lata Mangeshkar, who never married, is always presented as religious, restrained, and perfectly composed. When she performs live, she sings with a stooped posture, reading her



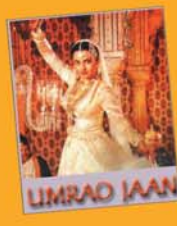
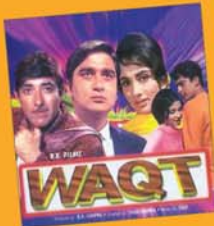
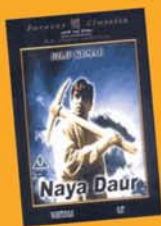
Asha with Boy George (far left)



lyrics from a book, barely looking up. Asha Bhosle, on the other hand, is seen as colourful and ebullient, an exhilarating stage presence, moving agilely and interacting with the audience. To some extent both singers have become typecast as polar opposites: Asha widely singing for the funkier heroines, vamps or cabaret dancers, Lata for the more traditional heroines. Yet Asha has sung countless sad, serious and traditional heroine songs (generally lower profile to those of Lata) in addition to her cheeky and zany fusion songs. Lata's forays into zingy, funky, fusion numbers, however, have been more limited.

In the last 15 years, Asha's sparkling presence and vast repertoire of groovy, retro film songs have helped her move effortlessly into the visual era of Hindi music, emerging as a much-loved and highly hip pop queen, releasing remixes of her old songs. In 1997, the British band Cornershop released their trans-Atlantic hit 'Brimful of Asha', paying tribute to the Bollywood icon and the hope which she gave to ordinary Indians through the romance and passion of her singing: 'She's the one who keeps the dream alive'. Asha also became involved in more fusion experiments, such as Boy George's single 'Bow Down Mister', while at the same time returning to classical Indian music with a Grammy-nominated album, *Legacy*, featuring the *sarod* player Ali Akbar Khan. While she sang less playback in the 90s, her mature songs make up in power and punch what they lack in number. This has formed the high-points of many recent film albums, such as 'Le Gayi' from *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997); and 'Kambakht Ishq' from *Pyaar Tune Kya Kiya* (2001).

SOUNDTRACKS



BEST SOUNDTRACKS

As primarily a playback singer, Asha Bhosle has released few albums. One which must be included is *Legacy*. Also to be included are some of the film soundtracks for which she has sung virtually all the songs:

- *Naya Daur* (1957), music by OP Nayyar
- *Tumsa Nahin Dekha* (1957), music by OP Nayyar
- *Waqt* (1965), music by Ravi
- *Umrao Jan* (1981), music by Khaiyyam

BEST INDIVIDUAL SONGS

Asha Bhosle has sung far too many great songs to begin to list them all, and thousands are still to be rediscovered. However, here are a few of her best and most famous numbers:

- 'Piya Piya Na Lage' from *Phagun* (1958), music by OP Nayyar
- 'Saqiya Aaj Mujhe' and 'Bhanwara Bada Nadan' from *Sahib, Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962), music by Hemant Kumar
- 'O Meri Sona Re' from *Teesri Manzil* (1966), music by RD Burman
- 'Jhumka Gira Re' from *Mera Saaya* (1966), music by Madan Mohan
- 'Kajra Mohabbatwala' with Shamshad Begum from *Kismet* (1968)
- 'Dum Maro Dum' from *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971), music by RD Burman
- 'O Saathi Re' from *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978), music by Kalanji-Anandji
- 'Rangeela Re' and 'Tanha Tanha' from *Rangeela* (1995), music by AR Rahman

BEST COMPILATIONS

HMV's India series, *The Golden Collection*, is the best compilation series I have found for Hindi film music, continually bringing to light lesser-known gems. It contains several solo and duet compilations of Asha Bhosle.

See also *The Rough Guide to Asha Bhosle*, which is more easily available in mainstream outlets outside India. |



Asian Music Circuit

LIKE ASHA? THEN TRY...

◆ *Geeta Dutt – The Golden Collection*

Those really taken with Asha might like to check out some Geeta Dutt, who was one of the most important sources of inspiration for Asha in her early years, and incidentally, the wife of the renowned director Guru Dutt. While Asha's voice exudes cheekiness and energy, Geeta Dutt could playback sheer seduction like no other Hindi film song singer. This double CD is a compilation of some of her best-loved songs.

