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Portraits of Lataji from different points in her life; from contemplative young girl to award-winning Bollywood playback icon

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Lata Mangeshkar

Jameela Siddiqi looks back on the incredible career of one of India's best-known playback singers

Lata Mangeshkar turns 80 in 2009, having been the singing voice of Indian cinema for the best part of 60 years. But Lata is not a songwriter: the lyrics of Indian film songs are penned by professional poets of Urdu and Hindi, and tunes are set by a 'music director' – *filmi* parlance for 'composer' – who quickly take her through the tune, after which she's said to get it right in one take.

The daughter of classical vocalist Dinanath Mangeshkar, Lata initially disappointed her father by wanting to sing for films, because the cinema still carried a somewhat unsavoury moral reputation, made seedier by its dilution of India's ancient classical music tradition. But her father's early death forced her to look for work in Bombay – and cinema

was the only game in town.

Strangely, Lata's voice was initially rejected, with more than one music director thinking it too fragile and squeaky compared to the voices of other female vocalists of the time – mostly former courtesans – whose deep, rich, classical tones had become the format of the talkies. In 1948 – the year before her major breakthrough – Lata was still virtually unknown, struggling from song to song, peppered with a few small acting roles in Marathi films and theatre. But in 1949, with the simultaneous release of films like *Barsaat* and *Mahal*, both of which featured landmark songs in her still very young voice, she was, quite literally, the talk of the town. By the time the groundbreaking Raj Kapoor film *Awara* was released in 1951, Lata Mangeshkar, aged 22, was already being dubbed India's greatest



singer. The voice that had previously been considered too squeaky was now being toasted for its astonishing three-and-a-half octave range. Composers were falling over each other to compose in higher and higher octaves and from that point on, there was no looking back. Lata has lent her voice to almost five generations of actresses and she's worked with every music director through the decades, right up to AR Rahman in 2000 – and beyond.

Songs are an indispensable part of Indian films, featuring a minimum of six and, in one instance, even 42 songs in a single film. Even mediocre films often do good business at the box office based on song sequences alone and, in pre-VHS days, it was not unusual for poor people to sell a pint of blood in order to see a film for the umpteenth time and, more often than not, just for one single song. But the songs are almost never sung by the actors themselves. Playback singers pre-record the tracks which are later lip-synched by the stars of the film. The same singer can sing for literally scores of actors of all ages and in all situations – romantic, comic or tragic – requiring singers to be more like voice-actors, adjusting accent, tone and pitch to match the action.

The songs can range from Indian classical and semi-classical to traditional, folk, and any number of foreign influences, including Western classical and pop, as well as Latin American, Caribbean, Middle-Eastern and Central Asian, all the way to *gamelan* and Chinese court music. Similarly, traditional Indian instruments like *sitar*, *shehnai* and *sarod* sit comfortably alongside guitar, clarinet, saxophone, piano and keyboards. This kind of instrumental 'fusion' which is often assumed to be a trend of modern times, was already the norm in Indian film music by the late 1940s.

Although classical purists are often disdainful of film songs, there is now a general consensus that this kind of song makes far greater demands on singers: for instance, a well-modulated voice as well as flawless diction in dozens of Indian languages. But a successful playback singer also needs to have a full understanding of the 'song situation' within the script itself, and the emotions expressed by the lyrics of the song.

The highest praise for Lata came from unexpected quarters: from one of the heavyweights of the classical vocal arena. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan confessed to remaining glued to his radio in the hope of catching Lata out on a false note. He is reported to have said, with mock bitterness, to one of his friends: "I have known the biggest of Ustads to hit a false note occasionally. What is it with this chit of a girl? She never ever gets it wrong!" ●

WHAT TO BUY



Chala Vahi Des (late 1980s)
In her later career, Lata did start putting out some (non-film) albums. This was composed by her younger

brother Hridaynath Mangeshkar and features the exquisite poetry of the medieval saint-mystic Meera Bai. But this is by no means representative of the kind of songs that made Lata Mangeshkar India's 'First Lady of Song'. Albums solely devoted to Lata are surprisingly rare, and only started to appear in the early 90s. Thousands of Lata's film songs can be found on LPs, cassettes and CDs, under the title of each film. Below is a list of some of her most enduring songs from landmark films:

TOP TEN LATA SONGS

Universally loved by several generations of Indians all over the world:

[song opening line (film name and date), music director]



1. 'Aayega Aane Wala' (from *Mahal*, 1949), Khemchand Prakash



2. 'Hawa Mein Urdta Jaaye' (from *Barsaat*, 1949), Shankar-Jaikishen



3. 'Yeh Zindagi Usi Ki Hai' (from *Anarkali*, 1952), C Ramchandra



4. 'Bachpan Ki Mohabbat Ko' (from *Baiju Bawra*, 1952), Naushad



5. 'Aja Re Pardesi' (from *Madhumati*, 1958), Salil Chowdhary



6. 'Allah Tero Naam' (from *Hum Dono*, 1961), Jaidev



7. 'Lag Ja Galle' (from *Woh Kaun Thi*, 1964), Madan Mohan



8. 'Thaare Rahiyo O Banke Yaar' (from *Pakeezah*, 1972), Ghulam Mohammad



9. 'Kabhi Kabhi' (from *Kabhi Kabhi*, 1976), Khayyam



10. 'Yaara Seeli Seeli' (from *Lekin*, 1991), Hridaynath Mangeshkar

BEST COMPILATIONS



Lata – The Greatest Film Songs of Lata Mangeshkar (Nascente, 2001)

This features many of the songs listed opposite and presents one song from each decade of Lata's career. There's a good selection of Lata's biggest hits, covering a wide range of moods, from the drunken and well-timed with hiccups: 'Mohabbat Mein Aise' (from *Anarkali*, 1952), to the soft romantic, semi-classical 'Suno Sajana' (*Aaye Din Bahar Ke*, 1967).



The Legend (Manteca, 2006)

This double album showcases some of Lata's most important performances, including the song thought to have launched her career: 'Aayega Aane Wala,' from the film *Mahal*. It was a Top of the World review in #39.

WHAT ELSE?

Lata also sang some outstanding songs in some easily forgettable low-budget films. The songs, however, endure to this day. The ones composed by Madan Mohan are particularly notable, as he and Lata were one of the most successful teams of all time in the history of Indian film music with gems like 'Hum Pyar Mein Jalne Waalon Ko' (from *Jailor*, 1958) 'Unko Yeh Shikayat Hai' (*Adalat*, 1958) and 'Teri Aankhon Ke Siva' (*Chiragh*, 1967).

WHAT TO AVOID

Basically the bulk of Lata songs from the late 70s and 80s, as this was the lowest point in Indian film music. It became very loud, with orchestration getting even heavier, with multi-tracking facilities and the emphasis moving from melody and poetry to rhythm and beat.

ONLINE Hear a selection of Lata's best songs on the interactive sampler at www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/063

PODCAST Hear an excerpt of an iconic Lata song on the podcast

LIKE LATA MANGESHKAR? THEN TRY... SUMAN KALYANPUR

Lata's younger sister, Asha Bhosle, is also a hugely successful playback singer, but the likeness ends there. It is, however, the voice and tonal quality of Suman Kalyanpur that has an uncanny resemblance to that of Lata, albeit without full control over diction in the higher octaves. Kalyanpur experienced a surge in popularity during the 60s, particularly in her duets with the leading male playback singer Mohammed Rafi, the best known of which is 'Aaj Kal Tere Mere' (*Brahmachari*, 1968), because Lata and Rafi had had a temporary falling out over the way royalties should be paid. Music directors responded by retaining Rafi's voice and opting for Kalyanpur for the female part.