

SIGHT & SOUND

SOUNDINGS: NAZIA HASSAN

by Geeta Dayal

Qurbani, a 1980 Bollywood thriller featuring a motorcycle stuntman who gets caught up in a series of heists, was not a great film. What made *Qurbani* stand out was the music. The soundtrack was mostly the handiwork of the Bollywood producer duo Kalyanji-Anandji, but it also featured the startling debut of the Pakistani pop singer Nazia Hassan, in a track produced by the disco don Biddu. Biddu had achieved major success earlier in the 1970s after producing the international mega-hit 'Kung Fu Fighting', and it seemed that everything he touched in those days turned to gold.

The track was 'Aap Jaisa Koi,' an instant classic. 'Aap Jaisa Koi's lyrics, roughly translated, were romantic, chaste: 'If someone like you would come into my life - it would be so nice,' it begins. The soft, lilting tune - sung with innocent sweetness by Hassan, who was then 15 years old - became a bona fide hit in India, Pakistan, and beyond. In *Qurbani*, the film star Zeenat Aman lip-synchs to the song while gyrating on a light-up disco floor wearing a racy red dress, flanked by a battalion of backup dancers. The dance number makes no sense in the context of the film, just there to add a spark of excitement — a common Bollywood tactic. But 'Aap Jaisa Koi' broke Hassan into the big leagues, and she soon became a household name to millions on the subcontinent — the sweetheart of Pakistan, and of India, too.

There were other Bollywood films in 1980 with memorable disco soundtracks, most notably *Shaan* and *Karz*. *Shaan* — the director Ramesh Sippy's hotly awaited followup to his 1975 Bollywood classic *Sholay* — featured an epic Bollywood disco tune called 'Pyar Karnewale Ki,' written by R.D. Burman and sung by Bollywood playback queen Asha Bhosle in her trademark radiant soprano. *Karz* featured the mega hit 'Om Shanti Om', sung with exuberant fervor by Kishore Kumar and produced by the dynamic duo Laxmikant-Pyarelal.

The concept of the 'playback singer' - the vocalist who sings the songs behind the scenes, and generally does not appear in the film - is Bollywood's bread and butter. Top playback singers like Bhosle, who is now 82 years old, and her sister Lata Mangeshkar, now 86, are big stars in their own right, and have sung tens of thousands of film songs over the decades. Their familiar voices have animated generations of Bollywood stars, who happily lip-synch to them during song and dance numbers. It requires a certain suspension of disbelief to watch a youthful star on screen singing with a playback voice of someone old enough to be her grandmother—and a belief in the transporting magic of Bollywood.

But many of these big-time playback singers could never quite transcend the trappings of their own immense virtuosity to fully embrace the machine sounds of disco. As Nazia Hassan grew older, she was proving herself to be something different, mapping a way

for a new Bollywood disco sound. Hassan was strikingly beautiful, often more beautiful than the film stars she was singing behind the scenes for. Her voice was in stark contrast to the syrupy soprano vox of singers like Mangeshkar and Bhosle. She had a somewhat lower vocal range than other playback singers; she sang her lines straighter, eschewing theatrics and excessive ornamentation. She was unique and different in the way that Charanjit Singh — the late Bollywood session musician who was then at the verge of producing a prescient proto-acid house album called *Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat* — was different.

New sounds were in the air. In 1981, Kraftwerk came to India, playing two well-attended concerts in Bombay for the 'Computer World' tour. A few Bollywood movies in 1981 sported tracks that were hinting towards electro - like R.D. Burman's disco tune 'Dil Lena Khel Hai Dildar Ka', from the movie *Zamane Ko Dikhana Hai*. The year 1981 also unleashed Hassan's debut full-length with her brother Zoheb, the first hit disco album in India that didn't depend on any Bollywood films for its success. Biddu produced the album, titled *Disco Deewane* ("Mad for Disco"); he was rapidly becoming the Giorgio Moroder to Hassan's Donna Summer. *Disco Deewane* was a massive hit; the album swept the subcontinent and charted in 14 different countries, selling hundreds of thousands of copies.

The immense success of *Disco Deewane* foreshadowed several Bollywood disco movies to come. In 1982, two of the most over-the-top specimens of the Bollywood disco genre were *Disco Dancer* and *Star*. *Disco Dancer* was a stone-cold classic of B-movie ridiculousness, with a dynamite soundtrack produced by the Bollywood disco svengali Bappi Lahiri.

Star sported a soundtrack produced by Biddu, sung by Nazia and Zoheb Hassan. *Star* was a mostly forgettable movie, which lacked most of *Disco Dancer's* hilarity and goofball charm. Briefly summarized, the plot of *Star* goes like this: a boy named Dev sets his sights on being a big music star. He eventually gets a job at a joint called Charlie's Disco, where he meets a girl named Maya and falls in love. Dev gets beaten up, and Maya falls in love with someone else.

Looking back at *Star*, it's easy to see that the true star of the movie was Hassan, the unforgettable playback singer. The haunting disco song 'Boom Boom' featured a hard arpeggiated Moroder-style bassline with Hassan's vocals floating over the top. "Boom Boom" was the closest that Bollywood ever got to the 1977 Moroder/Summer smash hit "I Feel Love," and the track proved Hassan to be another creature entirely, a singer never replicated before or since. She sounded resolutely modern, signaling a path for a minimal disco sound. Decades later, Nazia Hassan's "Boom Boom" still sounds like the future.

Bollywood kept on making disco movies. Nazia Hassan went on to make more music with her brother; their hit 1984 album 'Young Tarang' was the first album in Pakistan to use music videos. Hassan left music in 1992 to pursue other interests. But by 2000, her life had fallen apart. She was simultaneously struggling with cancer and a failed

marriage. The luminous Pakistani disco diva died tragically in London in 2000 of lung cancer, at age 35. The spirit of Nazia Hassan lives on in her strange and beautiful disco records. Rumors are swirling in India that a biopic based on Hassan's life could be in the works, starring a major Bollywood actress. But matching Nazia Hassan may be—to this day—an impossible feat.