

## **Now will the real SA Indian community please stand up**

By Yogan Naidoo

I've had it with Bollywood. And while I'm on about it, I've also had it with bunny chow and bhangra.

Don't get me wrong, I'm aware that Bollywood should be viewed as an escapist movie genre and that the whole dancing among the trees thing must be taken with a pinch of Himalayan salt. And God forbid I have to go without a bunny chow from Patel's for the rest of my life. But right now, I'm sick and tired of how these things continue to primarily define us, the South African Indian, as a community.

One hundred and fifty years later, a part of our collective psyche remains indentured. We're still playing to the damning stereotype inflicted upon us by our colonial "lahnees".

What exactly does Bollywood say to me about my life as a South African Indian?

Pretty much nothing, actually. Well, except to perpetuate those myths that only the fair-skinned, beautiful, handsome and affluent determine our world view and that a propensity for melodrama as well as the ability to dance among the bougainvilleas may just get you that girl.

Where else is the representation of our true and fundamental South African Indian-ness if it's not only within the context of the struggle or business or sport or whatever we choose to practice about our culture and traditions?

Possibly we've got the literature covered. Generations ago, Ronnie Govender conquered the world with his evocative stories of Cato Manor. He wrote - and still does - with the brutal elegance of a sure-footed boxer whose sharp jabs of phrase culminate in a series of graceful hooks which inevitably floor you with how perfectly they capture the nuances of life in Cato Manor.

Luminaries such as Aziz Hassim, Ashwin Desai and Phyllis Naidoo are further fuel to that iconic South African Indian literary torch.

In music, for one brief, beautiful moment in the 1980s I heard a full-on South African Indian rock band called Uttama Purush put out a single called "Just for your Love" that defied any classification and which paid not even the slightest heed to our Indian-ness except by virtue of the band's Sanskrit name. The track was so good it conquered the Number 1 spot on Radio 5.

And thereafter, sweet masala tea, nothing - no more South African Indian rock bands with original songwriting lighting up the airwaves, no acerbic comment on our lives from a manic vocalist backed by two howling electric guitars all held together by the counter-intuitive rhythm of an eccentric tabla player from the Bayview Arupta Kazhagam.

Sadly, our collective musical and artistic sensibilities were seductively hijacked by the Bollywood-Bharatya Natyam nexus, as we line-danced a quick retreat into our Char Ou laager - a laager now festooned with the insular delusions of our cultural grandeur, effectively entrenching our "otherness" from the other race groups with whom we share this beautiful country.

So, where exactly are our angry young men and women? Where's the rough and gritty musical body of work that speaks directly to the experience of living in a sugars-infested Chatsworth? Where's that remorseful rap about the Shakespearian consequences of the Dre Boyz drive-by shooting a few years ago?

We certainly have the stories but does anybody want to tell them in a challenging format other than Bollywood? I tell you, it's all gone a bit Terina Patel and "Trance Aunty".

It's not like we have no legacy of which to feed off in terms of a South African Indian rock- or dance-music sensibility. Ask Ravi Govender. Ask a living legend like Steve Fataar. They'll tell you that the South African Indian rocked.

In the invigorating days of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, we produced a breed of Western-oriented musicians who were not only entirely self-taught and multi-talented but also had something thought-provoking to say about our place in this country. And, what they said on the bandstand was informed by that singularity that makes us uniquely South African Indian.

This is the beauty of our immigrant experience so overlooked by our "1860 powers" that be: we graciously adopted a subculture entirely alien to us, picked up on the very substance of that subculture and effortlessly made it our own. We deftly articulated our South African Indian experience within this musical order.

Listen to some of the great dance bands of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s - such as the Crescendos and Dukes Combo - and you'll hear a sound that is still like no other in the world. It is inimitably and spectacularly South African-Indian.

Other bands - with names like Sam's Latin Kings, Stepping Stones, the Jets, Kreme, Cheyennes, Blue Ricks, the Santiago Dance Band, Los Pepitos, El Remos and Raiders - also reigned over this era.

I recall a sultry Saturday night in the 1970s, when knee-high to a grasshopper; I sat beside my father at a table bearing the heavyweights of the Southern Natal Soccer Board at a Soccer Awards Ceremony at the Himalaya Hotel.

With the formalities over, a band called The Blue Jewels commandeered the stage. Like a powerful, orchestrating yet symbiotic organism it amplified, fed off and again replenished the enthusiasm of its audience.

They were a tight unit of young South African Indian men who, in all likelihood, would return to exploitative day jobs the Monday after, but for that Saturday night, to Durban's assembled soccer elite, they were the undisputed gods of the dance floor.

That night mirrored thousands of others featuring a variety of bands, audiences and occasions at other venues such as the Island Hotel in Isipingo Beach, The Railway Hotel in Isipingo Rail, The Butterworth Hotel in the Durban CBD, the Apollo Nightclub in Sea Cow Lake, the Admiral Hotel in Overport, the Pelican and Sol Namara in Chatsworth, and at the Goodwill Lounge in Victoria Street.

Playing at rock concerts at Curries Fountain, the Durban City Hall's Battle of the Bands and community halls were rock bands such as Nirvana (well before Kurt Cobain's Nirvana), Atomic Ash, Shackles, a folk outfit called Silver Willow Sterling and many more of that ilk.

Inspired by 1960s and 1970s groups such as the Beatles, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin, our bands composed a multitude of original songs with socially conscious lyrics.

Because the major record companies of the time were white-owned and goaded by an apartheid mindset, they never considered the anomaly of a South African Indian rock band as a viable option.

Our musicians received either no material reward or were paid a pittance for their musical undertakings. Yet, they were driven by an overwhelming passion for their vocation.

Recently, I met a few of the remaining members of these bands. Their stories, while touched by nostalgia, are still underlined by the pathos of just how much more professionally rewarding their lives as musicians could have been.

Decades later, it seems nothing has changed. We, the very community from which they originate, are ignoring their contributions to our musical canon.

The Crescendos, for example, was established about 50 years ago in Cato Manor. How then are they not part of our heritage? How is it that not one single celebration commemorating our 150 years in this country ever considered inviting them or any of their peers to share the stage?

Unlike Bollywood, we own this intellectual property. No other community in the world can lay claim to this legacy. This is our Buena Vista Social Club. Along with our strugglistas, our writers and poets - these are my heroes.

We owe them our respect, reverence, gratitude and recognition.

I'd venture to say we've now become our very own post-apartheid stooge. We're so smugly ensconced in our luxury German sedans and our Bollywood aspirations that we will neither court anything mildly controversial nor connect with a medium of expression which resides outside the mainstream. And yet, our history tells us that we're a resilient, creative and analytical people.

Again, don't get me wrong on this Bollywood thing. I actually think that Shahrukh Khan fellow comes across as a really nice, well-grounded person. But, I believe we're so much more than Bollywood.

We're Natalie Rungan with her jazz-tinged melodies. We're Elvis Gengiah with his rap-metal, hip-hop ensemble called Anarchy. We're the cutting-edge sound of Kesivan Naidoo, who deconstructed and reshaped Beyonce's Single Ladies to the extent you can just recognise it.

We're Lloyd Paul, whose distinctive weave, boundless energy and Afro-Pop/Kwaito-inspired, rhyming-backwards musical hybrid could have been the best vehicle for racial integration at any celebration of our 150 years in this country. Unfortunately, he just wasn't invited.

These are brave and inventive individuals, on the periphery of our community, determinedly pursuing a way of articulating our experience in a fresh, different way and I hope there are hundreds more we've yet to come across.

Thus, at this point in our history, I want to see a Morningside white drummer, a black female vocalist from Umlazi and their rock guitar maestro from Whitehouse, Phoenix, clutch a handful of Grammys

and gushingly thank all those back home who actively listened to what they had to say - when they needed it most. Am I asking too much? I don't think so.

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