

The music man of Peshawar

Art
Dawn
20.6.09

A few weeks ago Allahdad Khan passed away in the city of Peshawar. His untimely exit from the world went mostly unnoticed because his life and his accomplishments had remained hidden from the public at large. It was only in recent years that some people began to take note of this remarkable man.

He was a connoisseur par excellence and an ardent collector of Indo-Pakistani music. At the time of his death his collection came to 14,000 78rpm records of Pakistani and Indian music dating back to the early days of music recordings in the subcontinent. His is a fascinating and interesting story.

Allahdad Khan was born in a lower middle class family in the walled city of Peshawar. As a young lad he was more interested in movies and music than in studies. He would often skip school to catch a matinee of an Indian movie at one of the theatres in the city's cinema row. He also started collecting music records and movie memorabilia. He did that to help keep the

movie scenes fresh in his mind. Dropping out of high school in the early '50s, Allahdad landed a job in the city government as a draftsman. He acquired an old Motorola gramophone and embarked upon a lifelong journey that was still in progress when he suddenly died of a heart attack at age 68.

As a young man, he did a lot of financial juggling to balance the needs of a growing family and his passion for collecting music. On a limited fixed income of a draftsman he managed both rather well. As his reputation spread among other private collectors, some of them in India, a bartering system developed between them where extra copies of records were exchanged to fill in the gaps in their individual collection.

Many of those collectors also sent him unconditional gifts of music that he reciprocated. At the time of his death, in addition to the massive collection of 14,000 records, he also had hundreds of videos of old Indian movies, songbooks, movie posters and other memorabilia. In time, he became a walking

encyclopedia of subcontinental movies and music.

Our paths crossed about 10 years ago when on a visit to Peshawar I heard of the man and his collection. I called him with some trepidation for I was not sure he would allow a stranger into his secluded world. He turned out to be a typical Peshawari who could 'inflict' his hospitality to the limits.

My first impression of seeing his collection was no different than that of a kid in a candy store. The shelves and cupboards in his *hujra* were stacked high with cardboard boxes bearing names like Saigal, Kamla Jharia, Jag Mohan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Ustad Miran Bakhsh, G. M. Durrani and hundreds of other singers.

Sitting Peshawari style on the carpeted floor with bolsters and cushions, he played my favourite music on an old electric record player. He knew his collection well and could find a record from his collection blindfolded. As he played music he would talk about the particular

score, the year that record was cut and interesting anecdotes about the singer. He also played the very first record cut in Calcutta in 1905 by Gohar Jan who, incidentally, was from Peshawar and had gone to what is now Kolkata in search of fame and fortune. He also played a rare and now almost forgotten early 1940s song, *Allah Allah Hosla Hai Quaid-e-Azam Tera* by, Sitara Kanpuri. She was the one who had sung the immortal song *Pardesi Kyun Yaad Aata Hai*.

Thus started a rather special friendship between us that lasted for the remainder of his life. A sitting with Allahdad Khan became the highlight of my periodic visits to Peshawar. Every Friday afternoon he would open his *hujra* for his friends and even strangers to enjoy, over tea and refreshments, the offerings of forgotten melodies from the past.

Allahdad Khan reminded me of another connoisseur of art, in this case visual art, who single-handedly collected a vast array

of minimal and conceptual art. Herbert Vogel, a salaried employee in the post office and his wife Dorothy, a reference librarian in a public library in Brooklyn, New York, started collecting modern and contemporary drawings and sculptures in the early 1960s.

They became interested in art because of their friendship with a then obscure artist by the name of Sol Lewitt whose work they patronized. In due course they also started adding the works of other budding artists to their collection. Along the way came the works of Robert Mangold, Donald Judd, Christo (famous for shrouding buildings and monuments with fabrics), Carl Andre and dozens of other artists.

I look at Allahdad Khan's single-minded devotion to collecting and preserving music in the backdrop of a bizarre spectacle I witnessed 56 years ago in the lawn of Radio Pakistan, Peshawar. A huge pile of records was being smashed to smithereens by a number of peons. It seems some hare-brained official had ordered the destruction of the fabulous music

wondered about the future of his collection. The plastic records have a finite life and when left to the wild temperature swings of Peshawar, they would eventually deteriorate. I suggested converting the entire collection into digital format and then preserving the original 78rpm records somewhere in a museum, library or archive. He agreed to the idea and in preparation one of his good friends, Haji Aman Durrani, had already catalogued the entire collection. But it was not to be. The fatal heart attack got to him before he could see the project off the ground.

Like art, music has no geographic boundaries. It transcends all barriers — cultural, religious and ethnic — and depending on individual tastes, affects the very inner core of our souls. In the end, heritage is not preserved by the politically correct nationalist or emotionally charged zealot but by eccentric visionaries like Allahdad Khan who are able to transcend racial, political and religious barriers to achieve something that others are either incapable or unwilling to achieve. ■

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