



Queen of melody, Lata turns 78

She turned 78 on September 28, but the 'Nightingale of India', Lata Mangeshkar, still has the Midas touch and even today the 'Queen of melody' rolls out hits and continues to lend her voice to the latest crop of actresses, some young enough to be her granddaughters.

From her first superhit 'Aayega anawaala' to 'Jab pyaar kiya to darna kya' and 'Noorie' to her recent sellouts like 'Yeh hum aa gaye hain kahaan' (*Veer-Zara*) and 'Luka chuppi' (*Rang De Basanti*), Lata has managed to thrill music lovers of every generation with her soulful singing.

This year this legendary singer offered two back-to-back rare treats to her fans — a ghazal album 'Saadgi', and a devotional 'Sumiran'. While the ghazal album is her first in 17 years after 'Sajda', 'Sumiran' is a 17-year-old private recording done by the singing sensation for a temple, which was unearthed by a quirk of fate. Her brother Hridayanath Mangeshkar has composed the songs of 'Sumiran'.

From popular and light classical music to film songs, from ghazals to bhajans and pop, she has sung all kinds of songs in her more than five-decade-long career. Lata has worked with almost all the top music composers and singers in the industry. She has sung more than 30,000 songs in over 20 Indian languages. "I have sung thousands of songs and I feel there are many which are not good, but there are also many songs which are the best."

The septuagenarian singer also enjoys working with new young music directors. "I love working with new talent. In recent times I've sung the first compositions of Vishal Bharadwaj, Rahul Sharma and now

Mayuresh," she said.

Asha Bhonsle, her sister and popular singer, was quoted as saying, "Have you ever seen a waterfall retrace its path? I have seen it... rather heard it in didi's voice. The tinkling notes of her *taan* (fast trill of notes performed in a very high speed by a classical vocalist) tumble forth like a waterfall plunging down a cliff and then go back exactly the same way."

Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan echoed her when he said: "When the voice achieves perfect harmony with a *sur* (note), it is as if the soul has soared up to become one with the Supreme Being. That is how I feel when I listen to Lataji."

Headstrong and confident, Lata also pioneered many constructive changes in Bollywood, which proved to be beneficial for singers, not only for her contemporaries but also new generations. She was the one who introduced the royalty system for singers in the industry. She also insisted that the singer's name be published with the songs instead of actors. However, her revolutionary

ideas were not taken to kindly by many big-wigs of the era and they tried to stop her. For instance, she stopped singing with Mohammed Rafi. She even refused to sing for S.D. Burman. She had a tiff with Bollywood's biggest showman Raj Kapoor as well. But such was her clout that she had her own way and they came back to her.

In the beginning, however, it was very difficult for Lata to find a foothold. Well-known producer S. Mukherjee refused to engage her for his film 'Shaheed', saying her voice was too thin. However, the film's music composer Ghulam Haider was impressed with this new singing talent and used her voice for the song 'Dil mera toda' in *Majboor*. The film was released in 1948 and opened new avenues for the struggling singer. The very next year Lata struck gold with *Barsaat*, *Andaaz*, *Dulari* and *Mahal*. The songs changed Lata's fortunes. Her high-pitched singing proved to be a welcome change in front of the base nasal voices of the day. Her initial style of singing was reminiscent of Noorjehan, but she soon evolved her own distinct style. The iconic success of *Mahal* made Lata the most powerful woman in the film industry during that period.

After the 1962 Indo-China war, Lata sang 'Aye mere watan ke logon' which moved the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to tears, and he said, "*Beti toone mujhe rula diya* (Daughter, you have made me cry)". It was at this time that the then Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan said he would gladly "exchange Lata for Kashmir".

Satyajit Ray and Lata are the only two people to have received both the Bharat Ratna — India's highest civilian honour — and the Dada Saheb Phalke award. ■

