

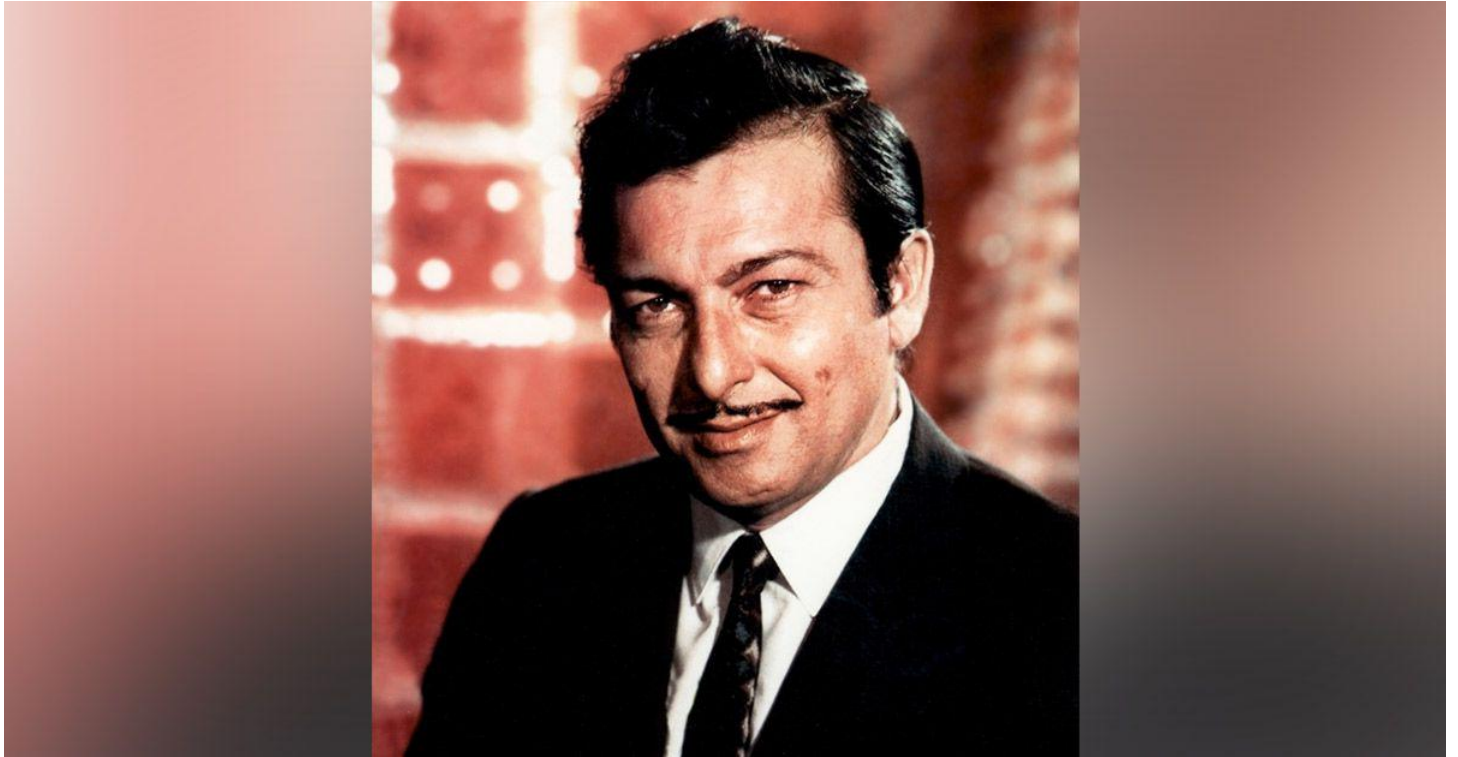
Hindi Film Music

Madan Mohan tribute: 'Each word of the lyric gained significance through the way he tuned the song'

Sanjeev Kohli provides a rare look at his father's early years, his struggles in the Hindi film industry, and his professional relationships.

by *Nasreen Munni Kabir*

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Madan Mohan. | www.madanmohan.in

Madan Mohan's song list is astonishing. Though famous for his ghazals, his musical range and depth of feeling can be heard in every musical genre. His orchestral melodies can sweep you away. I am thinking of Lata Mangeshkar's *Lag Ja Gale* from *Woh Kaun Thi?* (1964), written by Raja Mehdi Ali Khan and recently voted the best love song of all times. And when Madan Mohan foregrounds poetry – he knew Urdu poetry perfectly – he would compose a melody holding back his orchestra and using only a few instruments to create a contemplative mood. Think of Mohammed Rafi's [Main Ye Soch Kar Uske Dar Se Utha Tha](#) from *Haqeeqat* (1964), written by Kaifi Azmi.

Like the great composers of the past, Madan Mohan worked with the top lyricists and poets too, encouraging excellent performances from his musicians. The voices of all the leading playback singers, including Mangeshkar and Rafi, express so much in his songs that they have given an extended lifespan to films that otherwise would be totally forgotten today.

I had the pleasure of meeting Madan Mohan's eldest son, Sanjeev Kohli, in London in the early 1990s. He was instrumental in helping me direct and produce a six-part series for Channel 4 TV titled *Lata in her own voice*. Sanjeev Kohli is hugely knowledgeable of every aspect of film music and is responsible for a [rich and informed website](#) on his father. In addition, he has made a wonderful and moving documentary on Madan Mohan.

It is impossible to cover every aspect of this standout composer in one interview, so I asked Sanjeev Kohli to share moments of what it was like growing up in his father's company and to start by telling us something of their family background.

Sanjeev Kohli: Madanji was the eldest son of Rai Bahadur Singh Chunnilal, an accountant general in the British Raj administration. The family name was Kohli, and my father decided to add Mohan to his name Madan when he made his debut as composer in 1950.

A very suave and educated man, Rai Bahadur Chunnilal married a very rustic Punjabi lady, who didn't even know English. He was transferred to Baghdad, which was part of the British territory then, and that's where my father was born in 1924. My dad had two siblings, sister Shanti and young brother, Prakash. My grandfather spent a lot of time away from home because of work, so Dad grew up more with his mother. When the family moved back to India, to Rawalpindi, that's when my grandfather left the British administration.

Madanji and his father were always clashing. Because my father was a bit of a rebel. He roamed around, didn't know what to do with his life. After spending his early years in Rawalpindi, the family moved to Mumbai. They lived in a lovely sea-facing building on Marine Drive, and their neighbour was Jaddanbai, Nargis's mother. So, Madanji used to go to Jaddanbai's home in Chateau Marine, stand behind the curtain, and listen to her sing. She was a great singer who sang for a select group of people, as did Begum Akhtar.

Dad was very influenced by Jaddanbai and became very good friends with the young Nargis. Raj Kapoor would come there often, and Raj Kapoor and Dad became good friends too. Suraiya was living in nearby Krishna Mahal and they would all go together and sing children's songs on All India Radio – Raj Kapoor, Suraiya and Madan Mohanji. Then my grandfather became the general manager of Bombay Talkies.



Madan Mohan with his son, Sanjeev Kohli. Courtesy www.madanmohan.in.

Nasreen Munni Kabir: How old was Madan Mohan then?

SK: Dad was about 14 or 15. He thought of becoming an actor, but his father hated the idea and said a flat no. Dad's friend Kishore Kumar would hang around Bombay Talkies too. Here was another rebel – bindaas people – while grandfather was all about discipline, so he didn't understand the creativity of his son and did not believe he had any.

Father did his ISC at St Mary's School, Mumbai, but wasn't interested in studying further. In 1943, Sashadhar Mukherjee, Ashok Kumar, Gyan Mukherjee and my grandfather left Bombay Talkies after the demise of Himanshu Rai and started a production company, Filmistan. My father would then hang around Filmistan. He was especially keen in observing SD Burman record – SD was working a lot there – he scored *Munimji*, *Do Bhai*, etc. SD heard some of my father's tunes and told him he had great creativity and he should forget about acting and become a music director.

Father's acting ambitions led to small roles. He played Nalini Jaywant's brother in *Munimji* and Kamini Kaushal's brother in *Shaheed*. But he realised he could not make it as a lead, despite the fact that he was quite good-looking. Grandfather thought it was best to send Dad off to the army because he did not want his son hanging around the wrong crowd at the studio. This was the time of World War II. Two years later, Madanji left the army and was offered a job at All India Radio, Lucknow, where he worked as a music producer/coordinator.



Madan Mohan. Courtesy www.madanmohan.in.

In Lucknow, he met a lot of Urdu-speaking people, including Begum Akhtar, Ali Akbar Khan, Vilayat Khan, Fayyaz Khan, Talat Mahmood and various poets. He loved Muslim culture and imbibed much of it – the shayari, the uthna-baithna, the leheja of Lucknow and that became a strong part of his personality. He learnt how to read Urdu too. Divisions on religious ground did not exist in films. Rafi saab and Lataji liked each other as people – not because he was a Muslim and she was a Hindu. Never. Divisions were created by other people.

NMK: When did he return to Mumbai from Lucknow?

SK: In 1947-48, when he was about 23. He told his father he wanted to become a composer. Grandfather said, there's no question of it.

Unfortunately or fortunately, my grandfather got married a second time. In those days, it was allowed legally, you could have multiple wives without a divorce. His new wife was a doctor, a very nice lady who didn't have much time for his children, because she had two daughters of her own. My father found himself disinherited and had to live in a chawl, sharing a tiny room with four friends, including Ramanand Sagar. Sagar saab became a very well-known producer/director, and he tells this story that there were times when they had just only one untorn shirt between them and so would take turns to wear it when going to look for work. It was a time of struggle for young people coming into the film industry because the studio system was ending.

Around 1949, director Devendra Goel, the actor Shekhar, whom no one had heard of, and Madan Mohanji borrowed some money and made a film called *Aankhen* with Nalini Jaywant, who was a big star. Bharat Bhushan was also in the cast. The film did not do brilliantly, but it meant he could compose the film's music, which was liked. He used the voices of Shamshad Begum, Meena Kapoor, Geeta Dutt, Mohammed Rafi and Mukesh. In fact, Mukesh sang the important songs of the film.

Dad told us when grandfather saw the preview, he didn't say a word, walked out and sat in his car. When Madanji went looking for him, my grandfather had tears in his eyes when he said, "I did not have enough faith in you, son." Saying this, he drove away. He died two-three years months later. Maybe if he had lived, Madanji would have got a break in a Filmistan production, a big banner film, but that did not happen.

NMK: Was your father like the composers of his era – personality-wise?

SK: SD Burman wore a dhoti, Naushad saab was very traditional in every way – most of these top composers did not speak English. Madan Mohanji spoke English better than the English. He was educated and very classy in the way he dressed – his suits, his T-shirts – his whole personality was very impressive and you could never have imagined that a westernised man like him would be so traditional in his music.



Madan Mohan with his wife, Sheila, and filmmaker Raj Kapoor at the premiere of Aashiana in 1952.
Courtesy www.madanmohan.in.

NMK: I have heard that many classical ustaads such as Ali Akbar Khan, Allarakha and Bismillah Khan loved his music. Listening to a few bars of his music, people say they can instantly recognise a Madan Mohan tune. What are the distinctive elements of his compositions?

SK: His songs have a melodic flow from the introductory music to the melody of the main song, to each interlude leading to the antra and back to the mukhda. It's a seamless flow.

To achieve this, he was very hands on as far as the musical arrangement was concerned, irrespective of who the music arranger was. His use of violins and western instruments blended with Indian instruments, especially the sitar, was also very melodic, never obtrusive or overbearing on the melody itself.

And most of all, each word of the lyric gained greater significance through the way he tuned it. His compositions brought out the meaning of the lyric and thus allowed the singer to express the emotion. Through the 25 years of his career, he did have to sometimes create songs which worked in a specific style and rhythmic pattern, but even today many of his songs sound fresh and do not sound dated.

NMK: People discuss and often list the number of tunes that have been plagiarised. You once told me that your father too had copied two songs. Which were they?

SK: There is this Rafi song, *Tujhe Kya Sunaoun Main Dilruba* from *Aakhri Dao*, which was definitely inspired by Talat Mahmood's *Ye Hawa Ye Raat Yeh Chandni* by Sajjad Hussain from *Sangdil*. And there is a blatant copy of the first two lines of *The Isle of Capri*, a popular Frank Sinatra number.

The second instance happened because Kishore Kumar was very influenced by foreign music and foreign singers. He used to buy many records in those days. He wanted to have that same melody in his voice and persuaded Dad to use the *Isle of Capri* mukhda. The resulting song was *Dil Dil Se Milakar Dekho*.

It's similar to what is rampant today in terms of remixes and recreating old songs. A popular melody, a phrase or a catchy tune can be presented in a different way with the music arrangement of the time. Every generation will like it, as long as you modernise it.

NMK: What about composers copying your dad's tunes?

SK: In the 1956 *Bhai-Bhai*, there were a few songs that were less popular than the other big hit numbers. *Bhai Bhai's Sharabi Ja, Ja, Ja* with exactly the same tune, same phrasing, same meter and similar lyrics became *Kabutar Ja Ja Ja* in *Maine Pyaar Kiya*. And the other *Bhai Bhai* song *Is Duniya Mein Sab Chor-Shor* became *Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast Mast*. It's not just the same repetition of "chor-chor" as "mast-mast," but the tune is the same too. It happens.

NMK: Was his music appreciated by other composers of his time?

SK: In *Anpadh*, there are two very popular ghazals, *Aap Ki Nazaron Ne Samjha* and *Hai Isi Mein Hai Pyaar Ke Abaru*. One day, Naushad saab, who was one of Dad's mentors, was known to have said: "I was so impressed by these two ghazals that I went to Madan's house and told him to give me these two songs and take my entire repertoire of work." Naushad saab may have said this to make Dad happy, but his words get quoted everywhere.

NMK: It is well documented that Lataji was a very close family friend and regarded your father as a brother. What about Rafi saab?

SK: On Eid, kheer would come from Rafi saab's house in the morning. Every year. Seviyaan and kheer. Dad would wake up at 9.30 and go to work. By lunchtime, I would have finished the kheer. Then in the evening when Dad came home, he would ask for "Rafi saab ke ghar se kheer," and I'd have to admit, "Kha lee maine."

We thought of it as the sweetest kheer ever, because it came from Rafi saab's house. We kids used to call him Mohammed Barfi, instead of Rafi, because of that sweet and delicious kheer. We had lovely times.



Madan Mohan and Mohammed Rafi. Courtesy www.madanmohan.in.

I remember Dad had this white and blue Studebaker car which he used to wash himself as he did not want anyone else to touch it. He used to call it “my baby.” Everybody knew the car belonged to Madan Mohan because there were only a few owners of Studebakers in those days. One day, he took us kids for a drive on Worli Sea Face and drove the car quite fast. I was six years old and egging him on. Before we knew it, we heard police sirens and a police jeep was following us. I got very worried, and my mother said, “Stop the car, what are you doing? You’ve broken the speed limit.”

A senior police officer got out of the jeep and came to our car window. Dad rolled down the window and said, “Officer, sorry, I’m driving fast.” “No, Madanji, I stopped you only to tell you that your music in *Anpadh* should have won the Filmfare Award.” Dad was so touched. He looked at my mother and said, “See, I’ve been given my award.” I cannot forget that incident.

I tell a lot of people, when they ask me about his career, that Dad died feeling he had not been appreciated enough – that’s the truth.

NMK: Was he bitter about it?

SK: Very bitter, and in the last three-four years of his life, that bitterness made him turn to alcohol, which I hate to say, but that’s the truth. He did not comply with people, he would not go to functions, he kept away. In those days, the parameter of success was a big-banner film. He didn’t get any. A very big director, Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, etc, he didn’t have any big-name director till Raj Khosla who came later. He did not have a big star film – say a Dilip Kumar film. He composed for a few Raj Kapoor films, in which Rajji acted, but they were flops. The same applied to the Dev Anand films he had worked on.



Lata Mangeshkar and Madan Mohan. Courtesy www.madanmohan.in.

In those days, the only way you could hear music was on a 78rpm record, or on the radio, or in the theatre while watching the film. If a film of his only ran for a week, not many people saw it. If the film did not do well, HMV did not make enough records, and consequently all the radio stations did not have the records to play. You had to have a Binaca Geetmala super hit song. Or your film must enjoy a silver or golden jubilee or you must get the Filmfare award. These were the parameters of success for a music director. He never got any of this in his lifetime.

Now look at the irony of fate. He died in 1975 feeling unappreciated, and the day he died, three months later comes *Mausam*, which was a silver jubilee. Six months later comes *Laila Majnu*, a golden jubilee. The *Laila Majnu* song [Husna Haazir Hai](#) was Binaca Geetmala number one song for 18 weeks. His songs never used to play on street loudspeakers in his lifetime, and even today [Kar Chale Hum Fida](#) is the song played first thing on 15th August and 26th January.

Dad could never have guessed that 30 years later, the biggest director, Yash Chopra, the biggest banner, the biggest stars would be miming his songs in *Veer-Zaara*. It's just an irony of fate that everything happened after he had passed on. So, the frustration just grew and grew because he could see others succeeding. Yet despite this, he was the only composer of his generation who had films releasing till he died and even after his death.

In the early '70s, all his contemporaries and seniors had kind of packed up. SD Burman was unwell, so RD Burman had taken over. Roshanji and Jaikishanji had passed away, C Ramchandra had no films, Naushad Saab did not have many films, nor did OP Nayyar or Shankarji. It was all the young guard, Laxmikant-Pyarelal, RD Burman, Kalyanji-Anandji etc, and yet Dad was the only active composer.

The first time he worked with Majrooh Sultanpuri Saab was for a film called *Baaghi* and there is a song which says it all. But again, the film flopped. The song was “Hamaare baad ab mehfil mein afsaane bayan honge, bahaaren humko dhoondegi, naa jaane hum kahaan honge.”

There are some artists who end up being acclaimed and prized after they are gone. Many artists have suffered the same fate. You know, we always say what great people they were, but we never said it when they were around.