

In Search of Her Song

Carnatic artiste Bombay Jayashri, who sings across genres and was recently awarded the Padma Shri, was once a reluctant musician, coaxed into the art by her mother

Suanshu Khurana

TWO YEARS ago, on a humid Buddha Purnima evening in Delhi's Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), as Carnatic classical vocalist Bombay Jayashri Ramnath, seated under a peepal tree, chanted *Buddham sharanam gachhami*, it began to rain. She invited the audience to join in the guttural prayer. Soaked to the bone, she segued into a Pahari, without a microphone, and concluded with, as is tradition, raga Bhairavi. "It was an instance of how music can be so rewarding," says 55-year-old Jayashri, who, after a four-decade journey, has been awarded the Padma Shri — one of India's highest civilian honours. "I feel a lot of gratitude," she says.

When the Padma awardees were announced last month, the artiste's first call was to her 92-year-old mother, Seethalakshmy Subramaniam, a Mumbai-based music teacher, who has always been more than just a doting mother. Back in the day, she was an exacting guru to a young Jayashri and an unrelenting taskmaster, who wanted to live her own dream of wanting to be a professional musician through her daughter. "I was not allowed to do things that my friends did, like go out and play. I had to practise," she says.

Jayashri, however, was a reluctant student. She resented the prospect of singing and practising, but her mother would not relent. "She pushed hard," says Jayashri. "I had to wake up at 3.45 am every day and practise. Often, I'd continue into a film song that my mother had liked on AIR's *Sangeet Sarita*. Then there were lessons with this or that teacher because s/he taught something that my mother felt I needed to imbibe, and then also go to school. It seemed like I had no choice in what was happening in my life," says the Calcutta-born Jayashri, who otherwise enjoyed listening to the melodies of Mohammad Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, Farida Khanum and Mehdi Hassan, among others.

Jayashri was three years old when her family moved to Mumbai's Matunga. Her father, NN Subramaniam was also a Carnatic vocalist and she'd often wake up to him singing *Omkaram* (Lord Shiva chants) and go to bed with music playing on the radio. She was six when her father passed away. The responsibility of bringing up three children — Jayashri and her two brothers — fell on her mother, who would teach music to children and women in the neighbourhood. Her remaining energy was put into training Jayashri, who, in her teenage years, started learning from Carnatic vocalist TR Balamani, who also taught composer Shankar Mahadevan. She received Hindustani classical training from K Mahavir Jaipurwale and Kirana *gharana* exponent Ajay Pohankar.



Her learning also included Bharatanatyam and theatre.

Jayashri was about 16 when her mother began taking her to perform everywhere — at weddings, village concerts, Navaratri *pan-dals* and Ganesh Chaturthi functions. "I didn't know where it was going. She would say, 'sing here, sing there, this temple, that stage'. I would just go and rattle out something.

SING ALONG
Bombay Jayashri

There would be days when I would not speak to her. But she didn't care. She knew this was her dream and that I, perhaps, will be able to achieve it. It wasn't a waste of time for her," she says.

It was only after she entered college (RA Podar College), in the early '80s, that Jayashri started enjoying being on stage. She discovered that her new friends appreciated her

knowledge of music. "My self-esteem was defined by the fact that I could sing. I started to realise that this was a blessing which I may have ignored," says Jayashri, who won a few college competitions. She soon landed at Mumbai's recording studios, singing TV-commercial jingles for brands such as Bournvita and Rexona. "It allowed me to learn how to project my voice," she says.

She was, however, still unsure whether music was her calling. Her move to Chennai in the '80s put things in perspective. An art form that was just an expression earlier now became her identity. Her maternal grandfather was friends with the late violin virtuoso Lalgudi Jayaraman, under whom Jayashri began training. "He taught me to befriend the *swaras* (musical notes), make this world my own and swim in it," says Jayashri, who gradually understood that music can be an inward-looking personal pursuit. The calm she achieved then would reflect in her singing years later.

Performance opportunities started pouring in. Successive seasons at Chennai's famous Margazhi festival and, soon enough, Jayashri became the toast of the town. With her singular focus, grammar and poise, her concerts became an experience for her listeners. "On stage, flanked by my fellow musicians, we attempt to be on a journey together, to reach destinations that music is capable of taking us to," says Jayashri, who has collaborated with a plethora of artistes including Shubha Mudgal, TM Krishna, and Alamel Valli, among others.

Jayashri is accessible to her listeners, old and young. She breaks the mould that classical music necessitates and has traversed genres, from Hindustani to Carnatic and film music (such as *Vaseegara/Zara zara, Narumugaye*, etc.). She asks her audience to sing along with her in Carnatic classical concerts, which is rare for classical musicians, who are often caught in the idea of intricacies and technicalities. "If I'm delving into Bhairavi or Todi, then it's a lonely journey. But I have enjoyed singing with the audience and believe in giving them the experience, however small," says Jayashri, who was nominated at the 2013 Academy Awards for singing *Pi's Lullaby* in *Ang Lee's Life of Pi* (2012).

The story behind her rechristening — from Jayashri Subramaniam to Bombay Jayashri — is an amusing one. As is the tradition in south India, the village's name is prefixed to a classical artiste's, and so, Bombay (where she comes from) got prefixed to Jayashri's name while she was still in Chennai. "To them, I was Jayashri from Bombay," she says. A few years later, at Mumbai's Shanmukhananda Auditorium, the emcee announced: "We welcome Bombay Jayashri from Madras." She smiled and broke into a profound *alapana*.

