

Pop Talk: 'Slumdog' music rocks, but will it have lasting impact?

by *George_Varga*

Will the extraordinary success of "Slumdog Millionaire," whose vibrant soundtrack alone accounts for three of the hit film's 10 Oscar nominations, help make the typical American pop listener more receptive to Indian music in general and the country's Bollywood movie music specifically?

The answer, several experts say, remains to be seen.

But there seems to be general agreement that the music by A R Rahman in "Slumdog Millionaire" — which has one Oscar nomination for best score and two for best song — is not typical by conventional Bollywood or Hollywood standards.

One of the two songs, "O Saya," is a hip-hop-tinged collaboration with Grammy-nominated English-Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A., whose hit single "Paper Planes" appears in two versions on the "Slumdog Millionaire" soundtrack. Peter Gabriel's Grammy-winning "Down to Earth," from the animated film "Wall-E," is the only other best song nominee this year. (Because "Paper Planes" was not written specifically for "Slumdog Millionaire," it was not eligible for an Oscar nomination.)

Still, the fact that Rahman has earned three Oscar music nominations for his work on one film is remarkable in and of itself.

"I'm not aware of any song from a Bollywood movie that has ever won," said veteran producer Richard Lewis, whose film "August Rush" last year earned an Oscar nomination in the best song category. "But I don't know how many have ever been nominated before." (Answer: none.)

Rahman, who won a Golden Globe for best film score, doesn't need any help to achieve a higher profile. At least he doesn't outside of the United States — his worldwide album sales for his nearly 100 soundtracks over the past two decades now exceed 100 million.

But "Slumdog Millionaire" is his first to make an impact in this country, although how big is unclear, with or without any Oscar victories.

"I'm sure it will open some doors, but a lot of the music in it is not really Indian; it's more of a hybrid," said Yusuf Gandhi, who co-produced the Grammy-nominated 2008 "Miles From India," which teams American jazz artists with some of the same Indian musicians featured on the "Slumdog Millionaire" soundtrack.

Gandhi also is the head of Times Square Records, an eclectic New York label that has recently seen a sales jump for "Introducing A R Rahman," its 2006 compilation album of his music from earlier Bollywood movies.

"I can't say it's the dawning of a new age," Gandhi said. "But when I came to the United States 24 years ago, in some cities people would say to me, with surprise, 'You speak English well.' Now, Americans are trying to find out more about the rest of the world. And perhaps things will grow now, because a movie like 'Slumdog Millionaire' hits many more people than an album like 'Miles From India.'"

That opinion was seconded by noted composer and sitar player Kartik Seshadri, who has been the director of Indian classical music studies at the University of California at San Diego since 1997. He was slated to perform on the "Miles From India" album until a scheduling conflict found him performing in Australia instead.

"From John Coltrane and The Beatles to Philip Glass, with whom I have worked, Indian music has had an international impact for some time," observed Seshadri.

"But 'Slumdog Millionaire' is happening on a much bigger popular level. A R Rahman has carved a completely different niche for himself. Before the 1970s, the music in Bollywood films was Indian classical music. Now, we live in a different world, so we have a different universal rhythm that we are all dancing to. Bollywood music borrows heavily from the Western, or universal beat, and at the same time tries to indigenize Indian music, in its own way."

No other Bollywood composer straddles these two worlds as successfully as A R (short for Allah Rakha) Rahman, himself the son of a film composer who died when Rahman was just 9.

As a young man, Rahman toured as a keyboardist with such genre-leaping Indian musicians as percussionist Zakir Hussain (who counts guitarist John McLaughlin and the Grateful Dead's Mickey Hart among his collaborators) and violinist L. Shankar (Peter Gabriel, Frank Zappa). He then went to England, where he earned a degree in Western classical music at Oxford University's Trinity College of Music.

Rahman has been hailed since the 1990s as one of the finest and most imitated Bollywood film composers. But few of his contemporaries, in or out of Bollywood, are as daring in their work or as easily able to meld (and sometimes subvert) the musical traditions of the East and West, from darting dance-pop synthesizer lines and throbbing hip-hop beats to stately Indian classical melodies performed on traditional sitars or by entire orchestras.

"A R Rahman has been described as 'the Mozart of India,' but he really is a pop composer and producer," opined film composer Larry Groupe, who wrote the scores for the films "The Contender" and "Nothing But the Truth," as well as for the TV series "Commander in Chief" and the Emmy-nominated "Line of Fire."

"My gut reaction is that 'Slumdog Millionaire' does not mean we'll have more interest generated here in Indian music," he continued. "Because as good as the score is, it really is Bollywood music, and is not as rich and diverse as Indian music. Indian music is so vast that you can't say that this film's score will represent it or create any long-term interest in it."

Perhaps not.

But iTunes, which appears eager to exploit listener interest (and potential sales), has already launched an online "Slumdog Millionaire" music room. It contains the film's soundtrack, a podcast, interviews and music playlists of favorite songs chosen by Rahman and the film's director and stars.

"It's hard to measure the musical impact of 'Slumdog Millionaire,'" said UCSD's Seshadri. "But I'm seeing an effect more in the sense of people here asking, and wanting to know more, about India. If you visit a Blockbuster store or go on Netflix, there are far more Bollywood titles in stock now. There seems to be recognition of what a huge market India is — not just in music and film, but in social, political and economic matters, and a growing understanding of what the country and culture is about."

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