

**Tribute: SP Balasubrahmanyam**

**S Viswanath**

**SPB – Impeccable, Inimitable Yodeller**



***Sripathi Panditaradhyula Balasubrahmanyam (4 June 1946 – 25 September 2020)***

The deathly Covid -19 may have consumed him at the ripe, much active age of 74. But the pandemic cannot blight the rich, luminous legacy SPB has left behind as an everlasting memory of his humungous achievements in this mortal life.

Yes, SPB aka Sripathi Panditaradhyula Balasubrahmayam or briefly Balu, affectionately and admiringly addressed by his near and dear ones, lead a life less ordinary. One could safely say he was to the music manor born. A prodigious talent who found his calling at that tender, decisive teen years itself to tread a trail not trodden. With Harikatha artist for a father, and brahminical upbringing to boot, it was only to be expected that the boy, who had an ear for music, would take to it and tower tall by the end of his lifetime.

Balu, or SPB, who virtually spelt the fading away of his erstwhile, equally versatile peer and much senior predecessor PBS (P B Srinivas), may, like the elder playback performer, have also faded away into the twilight horizon. However, the soulful, scintillating songs he sang and crooned with that magical charm, during his fulsome life,

will ever nestle in the hearts of every human being.

The songster, who brought in a certain peace and quietude into the lives of ordinary mortals and soothed many a soul with his rapturous renditions, across genres. A peerless performer par excellence, whose magical, mellow voice saw legion of listeners drawn like bees to honeycomb as if like the Pied Piper of Hamilton had cast a spell to be transported to an Elysian world.

With 4,000 plus songs, spanning over a chequered career of 50 sing-sing prodigious years, like many of his ilk of his time, SPB was a colossus cultural phenomenon nonpareil. Led by his self-belief motto: *I love my life. If possible I don't want to die. I have a passion for life.*

Indeed, it is this very passion and zest to live life in royal size saw the gracious rotund Balu with his infectious smile bringing sunshine into lives of people across all stations of society. A musician, playback singer, television anchor, music director, actor, dubbing artist, film producer, the roly-poly powerhouse, perfectionist songster, was so versatile, having sung in 16 languages.

A polyglot, whose flair and felicity with languages, effortless singing, rendered him not just a phenomenon but an iconic institution, saw him being bestowed with a Padma Shri and a Padma Bhushan as crown jewels by a grateful nation in appreciation of his illustrious and fulfilling career.

Besides all South Indian languages – Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, SPB was a virtuoso in his Hindi renditions as well, a terrain, which even the likes of exalted Kamal Haasan could not scale despite his natural versatility in acting he was gifted with.

Kamal Haasan's Tamilish Hindi diction doing him in – with only K Balachander's *Ek Duuje Ke Liye* being a sole exception, thanks to SPB's impeccable voice, with Ramesh Sippy's *Sagar* despite 'Bobby' lass - Dimple Kapadia, vanishing without trace, and fellow actor Rishi Kapoor hogging all the limelight.

Records were like second nature for SPB be it the Guinness Book of World Records for his 40,000 songs or the coveted six national film awards for best male playback singer, or recording 21 songs in Kannada for composer Upendra Kumar from 9 am to 9 pm, or the 19 songs recorded in Tamil and 16 songs in Hindi on a single day.

The lad from Telugu Brahmin family from Nellore, the then Madras Presidency, defied conventional wisdom and familial tradition of pursuing much preferred and safe career course of an engineer or a doctor or such other academic career, that would fetch him a handsome salary. The call of music much strong and his natural inclination to navigate its various structures and textures, rhythm and rhymes, in this impressionable, artistically aspirational boy.

Despite enrolling himself for engineering education, the young man, gave it up stricken by typhoid and being more interested in studying musical notations, was learning and pursuing music, saw him win several awards at singing competitions. The decisive turn was in 1964 when a young Balu, seeking to cut his teeth in the cut-throat world of music, bagged the top prize at a music competition for amateurs as a leader of a

light music troupe with still upstart and undiscovered Illaiyaraaja as guitar and harmonium accompanist along with Gangai Amaran (on guitar). The two later branched out into music directors of repute later on with Illaiyaraaja being hailed as the *Isaignani*.

For his debut audition he took to render his peer, contemporary and equally erudite crooner, P B Srinivas's song, who was more in the mould of Manna Dey and Mohammad Rafi, unlike SPB, who was the southern version of Kishore Kumar Ganguly, yodelling in as diverse a manner the song demanded. Brilliant with his boggling range of eclectic expression and enthralling cadence that music directors expected of him and sought him after, he lit up the musical world, sticking true to the destined philosophy that "*I planned to be an engineer. Then music turned the course of my life. I realised not to plan and let things play out for me*" that was SPB.

The tempo and timbre which SPB brought into his renditions garnishing each song that he sang with the right registers and range was impeccable making him the most sought after playback voice for many a stars that basked in the super hit songs that became a household name, hummed across all ages and class and creed.

The sonorous PBS song being "*Nilave Ennidam Nerungadhe*" written by Kannadasan and composed by M S Viswanathan for '*Kadhala Mannan*' Gemini Ganeshan's *Ramu*, he debuted in Kannada in *Nakkare Ade Swarga* with the fast paced romantic duet with P Susheela – *Kanasido Nanasido muguda manada bisi bayakey, idu ciguru hareya selevo ciguru hareya selevo* and first Tamil song being *Athaanodu Ippadi Irundhu Eththanai Naalaachu* with L R Eswari composed by M S V for *Hotel Ramba*. Indeed it was heavenly when Balu sang and nothing could come in the way of the man and his legion of rasikas who simply rooted for him.

However, it was the 1980 Telugu film *Sankarabharanam* and his classical Carnatic rendition of the songs that pitchforked into the big league including globally. Not being classically trained singer, he impeccable aesthetic music sense and renditions fetching him his first of the

four National Film Award for Best Male Playback Singer, which was followed by an encore with *Ek Duije Ke Liye* the very next year.

Among his other classical Carnatic oriented songs including in 1983 *Saagara Sangamam* and 1988 *Rudraveena* for which both Ilaiyaraaja and Balasubrahmanyam won the National Awards for Best Music Director and Best Male Playback Singer respectively.

The 1989 saw the as yet, young as a yuppie upstart Salman Khan's *Maine Pyar Kiya* ensured SPB became *Dil Deewana* for audiences up North of Vindhayas, firmly cementing his place in the recess of India's cow belt. Most importantly Maximum City Mumbai with his duet with the prima donna of Bollywood music world Lata Mangeshkar with that sing song chiding cheery chirpy *Didi Tera Devar Deewana* ensuring none of Hindi speaking audiences would have ready repartee for SPB's *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*. Indeed, SPB became the off screen voice of bad boy of Bollywood like his equally ersatz senior Kishore Kumar became Rajesh Khanna's singing alter ego.

A R Rahman's score in Mani Ratnam's *Roja* ensured SPB would be sought after if his alto voice was required to niftily render the soothing lyrics in all its nuances and notes. As if playback singing was not enough proof of his virtuosity you had him giving voice to Kamal Haasan, Rajinikanth, Vishnuvardhan, Salman Khan, K Bhagyaraj, Mohan, Anil Kapoor, Girish Karnad, Gemini Ganesan, Arjun Sarja, Nagesh, Karthik, and Raghuvaran in as many languages these acted in.

Proving that dubbing too came as easily as singing a song in the studio or in front of a packed auditoriums the world over to a man who found his metier in music and chased his dreams like there is no tomorrow, his velvet voice being the passage of rite for the musical renditions he gave the world of music.

Giving truism to the Bard of Avon William Shakespeare's metaphorical poem: *All*

*world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts,"* truly epitomised the rich legacy of musical and other works SPB has left behind. Each of his songs ensuring the poor us will reminiscence and rejoice the S P B we have known him ever since we came to romance the melting pot of movie music that has been part of our collective conscience.

Indeed, the versatile voice, with its multifarious mellifluousness that brought meaning to our existence will never be stilled like the many others before him whose works still resonate and reside with us till our own lifetime.

A prodigious, youthful and zestful singer blessed with that rare artistry in several languages his evergreen songs that embellished the Indian movie marquee for half a century has left a treasure trove of glistening gems such as *Aayiram Nilavae Vaa* for MGR in *Adimaippenn*, *Iyarkai Ennum Ilaya Kanni* for Gemini Ganesan's *Shanti Nilayam* or *Tere Mere Beech Mein Kaisa Ye Bandhan* for Kamal Haasan in *Ek Duije Ke Liye* or *Pehla Pyar Hai*, for Salman Khan in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, or *Dorakuna Ituyanti Seva* or *Samaja vara gamana* for J V Somayajulu who came to epitomise Shankara Sastry in *Shankarabharanam*.

Well examples galore of the scroll of songs that Balu belted out, with that mirthful, mischievous laugh here, an angst ridden sigh there, playful, pert, all so unique to his repertoire of rendering songs are all an inseparable part of common man's everyday lives.

The genius, gentle genie of 4,000 songs may have gone to reside in eternal rest far from the madding life he was part of, leaving one and all inconsolable in grief to seek solace in the haunting humungous melodies that becalm and are a balm to soothe the void and the absence called SPB. RIP!