



Sunitha Sarathy

I'm seated in musician Sunitha Sarathy's drawing room, surrounded by seven cats. One of them plonks itself on my lap as Sunitha emerges. She smiles radiantly and asks me, "Aren't they adorable?"

I want to tell her that they're adorable as long as they're not on my lap, but I check myself. You don't argue with divas, and Sunitha does have a reputation of being a diva in her role as the stern-faced judge on the hit TV talent show Sangeetha Mahayudham.

I smile, nod in agreement, open up my notebook, and we begin...

Tell me how it all started... How did you decide to pursue a career in music?

Music seems to have been my destiny. My mother is a trained pianist, and has been playing for the Santhome Cathedral Choir for several decades. And my uncle Das Daniel was an accomplished violinist and pianist. Western classical musicians who would come to Chennai for concerts would land up at our house for impromptu jam sessions, so I was exposed to top-notch musicians and music from a very young age.

I sang my first jingle for Cadburys Eclairs when I was four years old, and my first performance on stage was when I was seven. So you could say I turned professional at four.

As my mother was the pianist in the church, I started singing there — mostly devotional songs in English. I was invited by other church choirs to give performances. Singing in college was a natural transition from singing in church and in school, and while I was in college I won the best vocalist award for three years in a row at all the cultural (fests) I attended.

How did you transition from being an amateur to being a playback singer?

While in college, I started getting offers to sing in movies, but my parents turned them down as they were wary of the film industry. But everything changed after I won the Virgin Voice Contest, a joint initiative of Virgin Records and Channel V, out of 45,000 contestants. Offers from the movie business poured in after that, and my parents did finally relent. I made my debut as a playback singer when singer Srinivas offered me a small portion of the song 'Ini Naanum Naan Illai' for the Tamil film Ye! Nee Romba Azhaga Irukke.

The song that launched my career was the song I did for Harris Jayaraj, 'Thoodhu Varuma' (Kaakha Kaakha, 2003). Both the movie and the song went on to become big hits. There was no looking back after that.

What would you say are the highlights of your music career so far?

I've done over 700 film songs so far, and it's hard to pick just one song or an event. But, opening the Indian Film Awards with A R Rahman was certainly an honour; the duet with Shankar Mahadevan in Don 2 was a privilege; being the vocalist in one of the highest-grossing songs, 'Hey Goodbye Nanba', is definitely right up there — these have all been the highlights of my career... if I had to choose the most-rewarding experience, I think it would have to be the compliments I receive from the maestros and super-accomplished musicians in the industry.

What are your plans for future?

Vandana Srinivas, a playback singer, and I have done a few live gigs together, which have been extremely well-received. The music is multilingual and a combination of genres — from film music to R 'n' B/ soul, ghazals to folk — and the songs are re-done for a total live feel. We have put together a back-up band of some supremely talented musicians. We want to make real singing popular. The way our voices blend is something unique.

We are planning on live gigs all over the country; abroad too. Both Vandana and I are reasonably well known amongst the Indian expat communities in the UK, US, Middle East and Malaysia; we have done a large number of film gigs. So we hope this will be a refreshing change for the audiences as well. I've just returned from a tour of the UK with music director Imman, and Vandana is currently touring Australia. I'm also working on my first album, which I hope to release in 2018.

Tell us more about the album...

The album has songs penned and composed by me. The songs are on the topics that are close to my heart. It's going to be about my personal experiences.