

Music

KEEPING ALIVE THE LEGEND OF MOHAMMED RAFI

FUZAIL RAFI, currently a Georgia resident, is not only a gushing fan and a doting grandson of the legendary singer but has also launched a worthy initiative to build on the unmatched legacy of his grandfather, one of India's greatest vocalists.

This genial scion of Rafi Saab sat down for an endearing chat with **AJAY VISHWANATHAN** to share little-known facts and facets about his illustrious granddad and his music.



To me, what made Mohammed Rafi exceptional was not that he sang more than seven thousand songs in his lifetime; or that the Indian government announced a two-day public mourning when the legend breathed his last on July 31, 1980, at 55.

In my view, his uniqueness comes from his effortless grace, his being content as a singer in an era where the singer-actor combination was highly desirable. The man's uniqueness comes from preserving and nurturing, all his life, his inherent persona of that simple, ever-smiling, humble neighbor—his demeanor gave barely any clues of how massive an icon he had become.

Mohammed Rafi never took his greatness for granted. He spent countless disciplined hours on *riyaz*, on honing a voice that would never let his master down—or his fans. A master who himself never forgot how it feels to be an ardent fan. One delightful story is about how Mohammed Rafi, a boxing enthusiast, flew all the way from Chicago to Kentucky to meet for a few minutes with Mohammed Ali. Still gung-ho from



Even after 40 years of his passing, Mohammed Rafi's legend and legacy live on.

the meeting, he asked his son Shahid, “Beta kaisa laga?!” , carrying in his eyes the same spark of adoration he'd seen in his own fans.

I would've taken a flight myself if only I had the chance to meet Rafi Saab. That never happened, but destiny steered me to his grandson Fuzail Rafi, who has inherited not only his blood but also that lucent smile and glowing face, that same warmth of a tight embrace, that same humility of a well-rooted sapling.

A scion's quest to celebrate and share Rafi Saab's genius

Currently living in Rome, Georgia, with his maternal uncle, aunt and grandparents, Fuzail is doing a master's program in finance in the Atlanta area. “I came in 2019. It was an impetuous decision. My mom and I were sitting around chatting about the possibility. Suddenly, I said, let's just do it, and didn't even inform my dad! I quickly booked my tickets and within two weeks I was flying out,” says Fuzail about what brought him to Georgia. “It was a quick call, but I believe it was the best one

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Music

I've ever made. It has changed my life. I am not only getting an advanced degree but have also started an online portal, The Mohammed Rafi Musical Institute (MRMI)," he adds.

Fuzail laments that he never met his *Dada Abba* (granddad) in the flesh—Rafi Saab had passed away before Fuzail's birth. "I wish I could have seen him just once! All my cousins have seen him, I'm the only one who hasn't," he rues. And yet, he hasn't shied away from taking up the tall task of spreading his *Dada Abba*'s legacy.

That's because Fuzail draws a lot of inspiration from witnessing the awe-inspiring fondness and regard that Rafi Saab's fans have for him, even decades after his passing. "I used to get passionate, admiring messages and wishes on Facebook from his fans. When I replied, they would say, *Hamare toh bhaag khul gaye!* (Fortune has smiled upon me!)."

Fuzail says, growing up, he knew his granddad was famous but had not realized the magnitude of his popularity. Later, he was stunned to learn just how revered his *Dada Abba* was. Recounting a childhood incident, he says, "One day, I was returning from school in a rickshaw. We got down outside our house, and the rickshaw wala asked if I lived there. When I said yes, he got excited. 'Arre, yeh toh Mohammed Rafi Saab ka building hai na?' As a child, it was not a big deal to me. The man asked me how I was related to him, and I replied, 'Woh mere dada the.' I'm not kidding, that man jumped off his rickshaw, bowed in front of me, and told me I had no idea how blessed I was. My mother was there with me. I asked her why the rickshaw wala was behaving like this. She politely thanked the man and led me away. Inside, she explained what meeting *Dada Abba*'s grandson had meant to that person. She told me this was the love and admiration they had for *Dada Abba*, that they see him in me."

"As an adult, it dawned on me that his impact on Indian music has only grown with time. MRMI is my

small tribute to him for the name and legacy that he has left for us," he says.

Fuzail created the MRMI portal to offer a broad variety of training in voice culture, Bollywood music, classical singing, *tabla*, guitar and keyboard. He has recruited skilled, highly qualified instrumental and voice gurus. Fuzail's passion for this new venture is overshadowed only by his reverent and impassioned awe of his *Dada Abba*—as is evident in the following Q&A which was an easy-flowing conversation over chai at the *Khabar* office.

When did you think of the Mohammad Rafi Musical Institute?

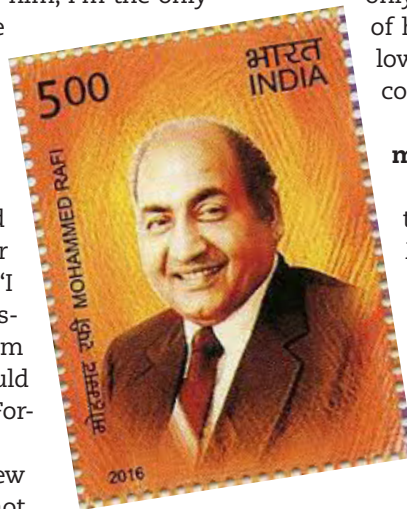
I've always wanted to do something to make the family proud, something for *Dada Abba*. Wherever I go, people expect me to sing like him but sadly I can't. I realize it would be impossible to measure up to the legend that *Dada Abba* is. I focused instead on my own strengths. My BBA taught me various aspects of business—marketing, finance. It taught me the basics of founding a startup. And now, a master's degree is going to give me the edge, *inshallah*.

At first, an online initiative did not come to mind. Then, I met Maheshbhai and Tanweerji (Mahesh Patel and Tanweer Mian, Atlanta-based musicians) who were pleasantly surprised to see me in Atlanta. They said, 'We did not know Mohammed Rafi Saab's grandson is here.' From all the conversations that followed, I told myself it was time to do something. Then the time during the pandemic gave me the idea of an online portal. And MRMI was born.

Tell us about your grand plans for this online venture.

Through MRMI, we want his fans to learn and connect with music, connect with *Dada Abba*. Recently, we organized a global *antakshari* on Zoom. We had people logging in from New Zealand, Canada, London, India...

... people were up at four in the morning in their countries. Some were there to see us, *Dada Abba*'s family. It was humbling for me to receive this outpouring of love and passion. Right now, all MRMI courses are virtual. Eventually, I want to have at least



From the Padma Shri award to postage stamps—the Indian government has duly honored the singing sensation.



Fuzail Rafi's Mohammad Rafi Musical Institute is a credible endeavor to spread the legacy of the genius.

Music

one physical institute in every country and will do anything to achieve it. MRMI's goal is to make Mohammed Rafi Saab more accessible.

This is a very ambitious goal. Such effort takes heart, hours and sweat. You have recruited skilled, highly qualified instrumental and voice gurus. Tell us about the process.

Not many people know this—my mother belongs to a popular lineage with a strong Hindustani classical musical background. Her granddad was a scion of the *Mewati Gharana*. My mom's uncle was a renowned sitarist—Rais Khan Saab. My mom's dad, my nana, was a child star known as Master Romi. So, my mother's network is vast, full of people immersed in classical music. With dad's inspiration, she was the one who reached out to all her contacts and brought many of them on board. One person led to another. Recently, I spoke with Sukhwinderji, an amazing singer! He expressed his desire to join our group. I felt great listening to him praise Dada Abba. He could join us as a guru or a consultant. Anyway, going back to my mother, she's the backbone of MRMI.

Indeed. People working in the background often go unnoticed.

Absolutely. *Ek baat yaad aati hai*—my dad always used to say—Dada Abba strongly felt that most singers get their dues but all those instrumentalists who make up the backbone of any song don't get mentioned enough. During all his shows, he made it a point to give each one a shout-out.

Tell us something about Rafi Saab's private museum.

This museum is at Rafi Mansion in Mumbai. The place is carefully maintained by my dad's younger sister's husband, Parvez Ahmed. It's filled with awards, trophies, Dada Abba's *tanpura*, *tabla*, harmonium, phone,



Left and Bottom: Fuzail's passion for this new venture is overshadowed only by his reverent and impassioned awe of his Dada Abba—as is evident in the easy-flowing conversation over chai at the Khabar office—with Ajay Vishwanathan.



HE MAKES UNEXPECTED TRANSITIONS-MUKHDA TO ANTARA-AND THEN BACK. FOR EXAMPLE IN GULABI AANKHEIN HE SAYS GULABI AANKHEIN IN DIFFERENT WAYS. IN ALMOST EVERY SONG HE HAS A DIFFERENT HARKAT, SOMETHING YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED THE FIRST TIME.

car, transistor, his work chair and table. We even have his plates and the tea thermos he used to carry to his recordings. This place is full of nostalgia—I'm getting emotional talking about all this.

I've heard Bollywood icons like Javed Akhtar talk about Rafi Saab's charitable nature.

This might sound clichéd, but Dada Abba's left hand did not know what his right hand was doing. He used to give whatever little he had in his pocket, often without even checking. *Mutthi band karke dedi*. Even at his peak, he didn't care about money, he just wanted to sing. My father is working on a biopic of Dada Abba. I don't know much about its progress, but I told him I could play the young Rafi (laughs).

You've talked online about Rafi Saab's singing style, the nuances. Any specific songs that come to mind?

Oh yes. He makes unexpected transitions—*mukhda* to *antara*—and then back. For example, in *Gulabi Aankhein*, he says *gulabi aankhein* in different ways. In almost every song, he has a different *harkat*, something you might have missed the first time. He improvised during live recordings and the songs turned out better than imagined. There's one song from the film *Neel Kamal* ... dad has mentioned this multiple times. *Babul ki duaain leti jaa*. Dada Abba had to record

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Music

it soon after the wedding of my dad's oldest sister, someone he was very close to. Apparently, on the day of the wedding, Dada Abba did not cry. But he burst into tears after recording that song. It was finalized in one take. Dada Abba's manager said, "Bhai, aapko aisa take wapas nahin milega." The composer agreed. That was it! It was a wrap.

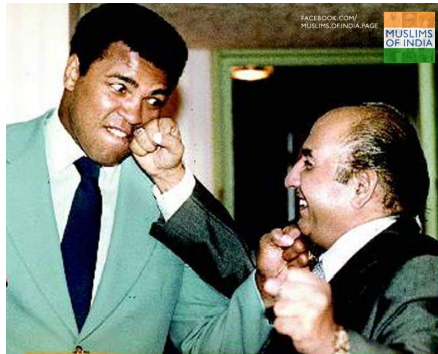
Wow! This story is an absolute gem. Please give us a few more.

My father told me Dada Abba used to go out during studio breaks and grab a hot samosa and chilled lassi. Then he came back to record with the same voice, no ups or downs. When asked about it, Dada Abba used to point skywards and say that his voice was a God-given gift.

I remember having a long conversation once with Shammi Kapoorji. He said there were so many stories I needed to know about Dada Abba. One day, after a song recording, he asked Dada Abba how he had managed to get all the mannerisms right, despite him (Shammiji) not being present in the recording studio. To this, Dada Abba smiled and said once they informed him the song was to be picturized on Shammi Kapoor, he knew exactly how to sing the lines.

What about Rafi Saab as a youngster? What can you tell us?

Mohammed Rafi's private museum at the Rafi Mansion in Mumbai (photo: courtesy Fuzail Rafi)



When Mohammed met Muhammad: the legendary singer with the legendary boxer.

His family was into catering and also owned a barber shop. His father was totally against singing. But Dada Abba came to Mumbai against his father's will, with only his mother's blessings and support from a family friend. It was a rebellious journey, just like in the movies, which ended with him becoming arguably the greatest male singer in the Hindi film industry.

Looking back, it's shocking that someone so mild could rebel. Dada Abba barely scolded his

children. When upset, he used to talk to them in an even voice or go and complain to my dadi who then did all the shouting and beating (smiles). Dadi was the one who was known as the strict one in the family. Dada Abba stayed away from confrontations and gossip, so he even avoided big parties. Whenever he found time, he preferred to play badminton at Bandra Gymkhana with Dilip Kumar Saab, Naushad Saab and a few others. He loved going to Naushad Saab's bungalow to fly kites on his terrace.

What a tragic day that must have been, the day he passed away!

It was. Heart conditions are common in our family. Dada Abba had felt some uneasiness. Without telling anyone else, he just went to the hospital with his dadi and the driver. I'm sure he sensed that something was not right. From there, things went downhill as his discomfort turned out to be a massive heart attack. When it got serious, all family members were called to the hospital where he died. All of us still wonder why he didn't tell anyone and decided to drive quietly to the hospital. Then, I tell myself that maybe he didn't want to create a scene or cause panic. Dada Abba was someone who chose not to misuse his position or to ask for help. He bore most burdens himself. He lived his life on those principles. Until his last breath.

A virologist with the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Ajay Vishwanathan is also a widely published fiction author, and a connoisseur and dabbler in singing and the performing arts.