**PopLore #4: Persistent innovations in Singapore's Indian pop**

**David Pandarakannu:**
Welcome to Episode 4 of *PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop*, a seven-part series. I'm David Pandarakannu, a programmer at Esplanade, Singapore's national performing arts centre. And in this episode, I'll be telling you about Singapore's Indian pop, with a focus on the Tamil music scene.

At this mid-way point in a series that's all about music, you may be struck by just how much we have talked about the movies. In earlier episodes, you heard about how Chinese movies showcased some of Singapore's earliest pop stars; how Malay movies featured new genres like pop yeh yeh; and how movie theatres in Singapore were also performance venues for many local bands.

The silver screen is even more important to Singapore's Indian pop, which is very much influenced by the movies of India. So, let's set the stage for this story by getting acquainted with the uniquely musical nature of Indian cinema.

Almost every commercial Indian film, across all genres, features five to eight song sequences. These are usually sung by playback singers, who are often well-known to the public, and, in some cases, even more famous than the actors lip-synching on-screen to their voices.

In the Indian movie industry, the music director for a film is so important that his name sometimes appears on the marquee alongside the movie stars. The most influential music directors of each era are the people who shape the musical memories of a whole generation.

The distinctive way Indian films use music has been called this industry's crowning achievement. And these movie songs are very pervasive. They are effectively the pop songs of the Indian subcontinent, and their reach extends to all corners of the world where the South Asian diaspora can be found, including Singapore.

How exactly did this way of movie-making come about? Singer-songwriter Shabir has some answers.

**Shabir:**
Based on what I've studied so far, I believe that having songs in a story, it comes from the whole culture of, like, stage dramas back in the day, even before film technology was invented. People used to go watch these plays, like these musicals, you know, whether it's a story of *Ramayana*, or *Mahabharata*, all your epics, or any kind of play, stage play, they always told these stories through songs. And this whole thing of having musicals, it's an intrinsic part of Indian culture, not just in south, but also in north.

So, when the film companies wanted to make films in India, generally it was run by the British, and the people from the West, when they came in, and they wanted to produce films, and they worked with, like, the local talents there, they understood that films should have songs. And because they were kind of continuing the culture of the stage plays on films. And the audience got to experience what they experience on

stage, live in person, in theatres. So it was like a process of continuation, but all the excitement and the presentation is now augmented because of film. So it's very much cultural.

And then after that, this was commercially proven to be very successful. I mean, when something has that much power, and so much of a commercial, social viability, and it penetrates the hearts and minds of people, I don't think it's going to be like removed that quickly, just because, you know, the other parts of the world, it's not the trend. So it stayed on because it proved to be extremely powerful. And it still continues to stay on in films till today.

But the thing is, now it's changing, it's separating, like songs are now being created outside films. And there are many, many films which have gone on to be successful in the box office that does not have a single song. But it's changing for sure, and it's changing quite rapidly.

**David:**
Why are things changing, and why might some music-makers welcome that change? Well, we should start by pointing out that Indian movie music is very dynamic. For instance, in the late 1960s, the Beatles began their love affair with classical Indian music. The fascination was mutual, and Indian movie music soon transformed. Musician Md Raffee elaborates.

**Md Raffee:**
Before the ‘60s or ‘50s, very traditional. The traditional Indian music was very Ghazal-based, Carnatic-based. But after the ‘60s, there was an explosion. Just like there was an explosion as well in the world. The pop thing became very evident in India.

**David:**
As you heard in earlier episodes, this same British rock ‘n’ roll sound entranced many different music streams in 1960s Singapore, and that included local Indian pop. In those days, many Indian musicians here were part of bands known as music parties. Some players from this scene branched out to form a group called the Van Cliff Rhythm Boys, which paid homage to Cliff Richard & The Shadows. Singer Christina Edmund, whose father Edmund Appau founded the well-known Singapore Indians Music Party, sang on two Tamil records featuring original songs that also likely had some degree of British influence.

But, by and large, audiences here who listened to Indian music absorbed Western pop, and other trending genres, through film songs. When the music parties played at weddings and social gatherings in Singapore, they tried to replicate the orchestral arrangements of Indian movie songs with their smaller band set-up. Raffee’s father, who was a musician in India before he settled down in Singapore, played in a music party named Jeevans.

**Raffee:**
Accompanying my father as young as I was five years old, six years old… it was like, he'll bring me to all the shows and I sit down and watch them play all the songs. It's really huge events those days. And most of the parties are held on like open ground

under tentages and like huge crowds and the band was a very important thing for every wedding and parties.

Most of the band musicians, they're not full time. They work in the daytime and they meet up on the weekends to rehearse. And weekends are all spent practising songs and picking up new songs and other latest songs… and whatever that are hits in Chennai or in Bombay, those were the songs that were played.

**David:**
Movie songs remained just as popular in the 1970s. Singer V. Suriamurthi, who was a teenager then, remembers performing film songs when he took part in school competitions, and when he performed on radio and TV.

**V. Suriamurthi:**
Then we have two icons who are playback singers in the movies. Namely, Mr K J Jesudas, another icon is S. P. Balasubrahmanyam. So these are the two iconic singers we have, and we would like to imitate them. We were in the era known as music director known as M. S. Viswanathan. Then we have another era, call the director as Ilaiyaraaja. Ilayaraja is known as actually as a maestro in music and when he came into the scene, the music took a great change, and there's many instruments playing the same melody. It's not just one or two. It sound very different. This is a Western thinking, which he had input in his music. So that changed the music world of Indian movies then, during his era. In the 1970s, ‘80s, all the songs were so beautiful.

**David:**
In 1985, Suriamurthi won a singing competition, performing a film song made famous by S. P. Balasubrahmanyam. One of the judges for that competition was Gangai Amaran, the younger brother of music director Ilaiyaraaja.

**Suriamurthi:**
After the competition, in fact, the judge invited me to India, to see if I can sing in India. So he introduced me to his brother Ilaiyaraaja. But they told me to stay put there for at least six months to polish up, and then they will give me an opportunity to sing in India, the movies. But I was newly married, and I was secured here as a technician with Singapore, and I thought I don’t want to take the risk lah. What happens if I don't make it?

**David:**
Instead, he decided to continue performing part-time in Singapore, and later became a lawyer. Today, he still stays in touch with music, and has no regrets about not pursuing a career in India.

Raffee, on the other hand, chose a different path. He had started playing music at a very young age. By the time he was 10, his father had arranged for him to join the Singapore Indians Music Party, so Raffee could learn from this band’s top-notch musicians. He also exposed Raffee and his brothers, Mohamad Bashir and Mohamed Noor, to many different kinds of music within and beyond Singapore. In 1975, when Raffee formed the band The Vasantham Boyz with his brothers and

some friends, they added their love for funk and Motown to this eclectic mix of influences.

**Raffee:**
We were backing people on television, backing artistes on stage… we even backed artistes from India, professional playback singers there, who came to Singapore, we were also backing them when I was my late teens. We had a funny thing about ourselves, every time we took a song, we will play it like the original, and then we will not play like the original. We will say, look, maybe we can do this like this, you know. From that age, we will always kind of re-mixing the songs from the beginning. Some producers didn't like it. They said like, hello, can you just stick to the original, you know, don't do this. But we were always going on. And that probably drove us to one day say, why can't we just do our own thing?

**David:**
By the time he was 21, Raffee had his heart set on becoming a full-time musician. Despite sharing and encouraging Raffee's love for music, his father found this decision hard to accept.

**Raffee:**
My father was kind enough to, when I was 16, 17 years old, he bought me a Gibson Les Paul, which is today will cost about $7,000. At that time, it cost about $1,500 in Sing(apore dollars). So he gave me a guitar which I still have it with me. So one day I had a fight with him and I told him, look, I want to play music full time. He said you better don't do that, okay, you can't do this, you got to carry on your study and going to work and do this and all that. I said if you don't let me I'll throw this guitar from the fourth floor. We always had this, this fight with each other, but eventually I didn't throw the guitar. He let me play.

**David:**
What he really wanted to play was original fusion music that could stand on its own, without being tied to the movies. And in 1986, he got a chance to do just that, thanks to Reggie Verghese, the legendary lead guitarist of The Quests, which had been the reigning English-language Singapore band of the 1960s. By the 1980s, Reggie had become a well-known producer.

**Raffee:**
I was introduced to him by another gentleman, who was a guitarist. He played with the Singapore Swing, Joe Ranjan; older people will know who he is. He is a very good guitarist, Joe Ranjan. And he asked me one day, do I have any demos out? I would like to introduce you to Reggie. I said yeah, okay, we can do something.

**David:**
What they came up with, was a song titled *Nilave*, which means "Moon".

[song plays]

**Raffee:**
That is our first composition and that's what we did and showed as a demo to Reggie Verghese. If you go back to 1986 and listen to any Tamil song you can get hold of,

none of them will sound like this. So when Reggie heard it, he said he never heard an Indian song being played that way. So we were playing a lot of fusion stuff. Indian melody but arrangement, everything was fusion. So when Reggie heard it, he said, wah, a bit different. So he invited us to his studio, and he proposed that he'll produce the album for me. Then he told me, one of my ambition was that to produce one nice Indian or Tamil album from Singapore, you see, because I've produced so many Chinese albums and English albums.

**David:**
Reggie took on the cost of producing Raffee's album himself. And they were all very happy with the final product. Unfortunately, listeners in Singapore and India were not quite ready for this fusion sound.

**Raffee:**
We took the album and went to a lot of shops in Singapore, and to some little little clubs, Indian clubs and played. Nobody understood what we were playing. We were very modern sounding. The recording was done in his custom-made studio. So you could hear the depth of the recording, which were normally not there in the Indian-made recordings in cinema, because they had different bandwidth. And they were focusing on more of the vocals for the heroes and everything else was compressed, you know. Whereas we had technology that made it sound very good.

So when people heard the snares and the bass and the kick drum, so they said, this one sounds like a Western song. The flavour is suddenly like, hey, it doesn't sound like an Indian song. And it was very difficult for us to convince them. I said this is how it should be, you know, when you go out of the box and show people something, people take some time to receive that, you know.

I was young, in my late 20s, 27. I was like, I was firing up to do things, and I realised it didn't go. Then we went to India, India was the same thing. We went right up to Bombay, they wanted the product, but they didn't know where to field it. Because it didn't sound like a cinema song. It didn't have the flavour of cinema song. But it had something very different, which is very pop, very fusion. But they say, we don't even have an album culture in India. They don't know how to release this album. The only other private albums were devotional albums.

**David:**
This album was never released. Still, the experience was not a total loss. Raffee was able to work with an icon of Singapore pop, and he learned a lot.

**Raffee:**
Reggie was an inspiration. You see, nobody comes up to you and say, I'll produce an album, you know, I mean, it's very rare. He's very disciplined when it comes to music. He can be a very different character when he's out of the studio. He's very jovial you know, he's playful and that kind of stuff. But inside the studio, he is very, very disciplined. He can be very serious and he's got a great ear for tuning. He can be miles away and suddenly offbeat somewhere in a guitar or something, and he will come in and say do that line again. I learned all that from him.

**David:**
Over the next few years, Raffee finetuned his approach to music-making, trying to find a balance between commercial appeal and staying true to his creative instincts.

**Raffee:**
I realised that being in Singapore, against a crowd that's so so so so influenced by music from the Indian films, we have to understand that no local music, no bands, no nothing, everything they hear and they pay homage to, is Indian film songs. So I told myself, if I'm going to do this jazz fusion thing, I will probably fail and probably have no jobs and nobody will ask me to play again because they want to hear what's popular. So in that 10 years, we took some of the songs that were signature, that reflected who we were as Singaporean musicians, and the rest of it we played to the pulses of the crowd. So we made something as close as to the original cinema songs but not, not too close. So that paid off lah. That paid off until today because all the songs people love from the 90s and from both my albums, but two or three particular songs that they keep on playing on the radio until today.

**David:**
These hits include *Karupaayee*, which means “Dark Beauty”, and *Manthiram Vatchye*, which means “You Cast A Spell On Me”. The 1990s also saw Raffee venturing into the film industries in India.

**Raffee:**
Because, see, my contemporaries, those around me, my friends, most of them moved. The Malay guys went to Malaysia. The Chinese guys went to Hong Kong and Taiwan. We were all together as musicians at one time, friends, you know, so we had to make decisions like that. So I said I will go to India and work, and I want to work with the best guy around, so I said I will work with Rahman. I knew him so I gave him a call and say I want to come to India and start working there. So I started working with him.

**David:**
Music director A. R. Rahman is one of the towering figures of Indian cinema music, and he is known for his use of technology and for blending diverse styles. Through his film songs, audiences became receptive to the fusion sound that Raffee had always believed in. During his years in India, Raffee worked as a music director, arranger, musician, and vocalist for feature films.

**Raffee:**
The songs that I programmed for Rahman, it was well received. And I think the budding youngsters who came after him, they have heard the song, they followed and they recognized that it was my work. Younger musicians who became composers eventually told me, sir, you know, that song? I know you programmed it, and we liked that song. So I think it might not be a majority public known fact, but the musicians in the industry know what we have done. So in that way, we have left an impact.

**David:**
The resources and exposure of this highly developed industry definitely helped him to grow as a musician. But Raffee's true passion remains music that is created for its own sake, rather than songs meant to support a movie.

**Raffee:**
The film music thing, because of its glamour, you know, the heroes, the heroines… it's about make believe, it's about escape. Cinema not supposed to be real, it's supposed to be fantasy, so in that fantasy, music also became very fantasy, you know, it's not music made for a band. So all that creativity is something very very unique to film music.

**David:**
For Shabir, this unique creativity can be freeing. He launched his professional career in 2005, when he won the Singapore TV singing competition, *Vasantham Star*. Since then, he has made his foray into the Indian movies as an actor, singer, and composer.

**Shabir:**
Tamil songs, the format is a lot more egalitarian in that sense. It's not like very strict, like, you can have an interlude in a pop song, which can go on for 16 bars, probably. And you can have like an outro, and it's very normal. Because thanks to, you know, M. S. Viswanathan, and A. R. Rahman and Ilaiyaraaja who have kind of set the sound and the form, you know, they've kind of made it normal for people to listen to all this. Both limits and the process of liberating yourself sometimes through those limits, both are very important to the process of creating, especially in a commissioned space. When you're commissioned to do something, because it's not just about you and your music, but you have a message or a story to support.

**David:**
Shabir is the first foreign artiste who has composed scores and songs for eight Indian movies. And, he believes the reason he has been able to build this momentum in a highly competitive industry has everything to do with the diverse soundscape of Singapore.

**Shabir:**
I grew up listening to A. R. Rahman. And I could say that the combination of Rahman and Kitaro, and, you know, a couple other, like Linkin Park… these are the reasons why I'm doing music today. Because as a kid, and as a teenager, those sounds kind of entered my system, and they created a very interesting effect inside me. In some ways, like whenever I sit down to create, maybe I'm trying to reprise those feelings that I had as a 10-year-old, as a 12-year-old, as a 15-year-old. When I'm producing music, I'm trying to feel those feelings again, through my music.

**David:**
As a teenager, he joined a band called Qonsept, that became very important to his musical development.

**Shabir:**
We were like, really eclectic. And I think we were genre-fluid in that sense. And the artiste that I developed to become, has got a lot of connection to those early stages

of my band and how we interpreted songs. We came from different walks of life, like there was someone who was like a metal head, and he was on the guitar, and then there's someone else who was listening to Incubus and he was on the drums. And then we had another, like a rapper-cum-DJ who, you know, introduced us to X-Ecutioners, you know, and Wu-Tang Clan and all that, and he was on the turntables. We will try to find a way to like infuse South Asian stuff with, like, the Linkin Park elements, and we'll try to come up with a new sound, write our own verses and all that.

I was the first film composer when I went to Kollywood, you know, Tamil cinema, I was the only one who probably used an erhu to kind of score a background score for a Tamil film. Because I'm from Singapore, I'm from Southeast Asia, you see. And I'm Tamil. And I have grown up listening to the erhu and the *zhongruan* and the *guzheng* and all these instruments and the *anak rebana*, *ibu rebana*. you know. I'm just trying to be truthful to myself, because I really vibe with these instruments. And they have a sense of like familiarity, and they give me a sense of comfort. And when I bring it into my score, in like Tamil cinema, I just feel like I am doing the right thing. So that's why I do it.

**David:**
Even as he carves out a place for his sound in Indian cinema, Shabir is also exploring new ways to get his music heard. For instance, in 2019, he wrote the song *Yaayum*, which means “My Mother”, for a Tamil movie *Sagaa*. To distribute it, he worked with a label called Think Music India, which promoted the song to radio stations, and also released it on YouTube with great success.

**Shabir:**
The current situation in India, which is a little bit sad, is that radio stations do not play independent songs. There's only one radio station called *Fever*, they are the only ones who play a lot of indie songs, but the rest of the radio stations, the requirement for them to play a song is that it must be a film song. And the reason why *Yaayum* also became very popular is because they played it in a lot of like radio stations, people come look for it in YouTube. So if it was indie then would not have that opportunity and would have just been the organic YouTube views.

**David:**
So, marketing original music with no ties to the movies is still a challenge. And Shabir is championing such independent music wherever he can. In 2020, he became a judge for a TV singing contest in Singapore called *Yaar Antha Star*, which means “Who Is The Next Star”?

**Shabir:**
In *Yaar Antha Star*, when they told me to perform, I sang my own songs. And one song was of course *Yaayum* itself, which is very popular. But the other song *Aayizhai*, which became a very good indie hit, and it was in this year's Fever FM specially curated playlist for World Music Day. And it was the only Tamil song in the 10 songs that they selected, and I was the only artiste from Singapore to represent in the playlist. So I performed that song in *Yaar Antha Star*, and I just wanted to mark, you know, a moment of Tamil independent music in the show, through that performance as well.

[song plays]

I think that song is very much representative of me because the raag [a melodic framework for improvisation, and a unique feature of classical Indian music] that I chose, *Reethigowla*, which is one of my favorite raags, a very romantic raag. I'm a sucker for like anything that is like romantic and stuff. I may not be romantic in person, but I like the concept of being romantic and all that. And maybe what I'm not able to do in person, I try to express that through my songs.

*Aayizhai* was like written for my muse, someone that does not exist, but it's an imaginary energy, which I use for inspiration. So something, so.. I don't know, fairly abstract, I kind of put it into an indie pop song. And I think that is something that I would want to do all the time, like, take these ideas that reside in the plane of abstraction, and put them into what I call indie pop, package it and make everyone listen to it. And still don't tell the story explicitly, what is it about. They think that it's a love song, you know, for a girl, but it's not, so I like doing that kind of stuff. So I think *Aayizhai* is like something that represents that.

And also in terms of like, technically speaking, like, production wise, how the fusion that you hear in it, of all the beats, things that are kind of, like the synthesis and all the electronic elements, melding with Indian classical elements with the violin and all that. That's also very much me.

**David:**
While the fusion style of *Aayizhai* may find a warm welcome in Indian movies these days, perhaps its abstract theme would still be an odd fit for a movie soundtrack. After all, film songs tend to support pretty concrete and usually mainstream narratives. And that's yet another reason music-makers might prefer the relative creative freedom of working outside this framework.

Take singer-songwriter Suthasini, who is inspired by everyone from American hip-hop stars, to her very own music-loving mother.

**Suthasini:**
So the kind of music I listened to growing up, I would say it's quite a range in terms of Indian music, and at the same time, a lot of R&B and hip hop, in my teenage years in the early 2000s, maybe Mariah Carey, Mary J. Blige, Jay Z, Kanye West… My mom is, I would say, the biggest inspiration for me. She loved a lot of 60s, slow melodies, Indian music, so it's classic hits. So I was exposed to such classic songs at a very young age. When she sings, right, she loves to sing over an actual track. So she use a voice recorder, and she will record herself, and sing all the '60s songs, and then she'd, like, listen to herself. So I think that was her way of enjoying music. So I would love do whatever my mom does, so I just follow her and sing with her. And that's how we became a singing family.

**David:**
In 2010, she started putting out music online.

**Suthasini:**
Over this 10 years, a lot of things happened, actually. First of all, I am exposed to YouTube, a space that is of my own. I can do whatever I want, and I can garner audience through social media. So that was, I would say a blessing to me, because a lot of artistes need that. Back in the days, they didn't really have a platform to showcase their music. The only platform was radio, the only platform was television. But right now there's a lot of different options and choices people are going for. So that's allowing me to try to engage with my fellow listeners and audience to improve myself and try to create a hit song. So it's not impossible, I would say, to put your music out there and for someone to appreciate it as compared to back in the days. The competition with the Tamil film industry is still there. But we are slowly breaking that mindset.

**David:**
In 2011, Suthasini took part in *Vasantham Star*, and won this competition. Her first move was to record an album that featured original songs that she wrote herself.

**Suthasini:**
I really wanted to give a different perspective to music in the industry, because first of all, *Vasantham Star*, right, previously, the winners were all male winners. I was the first ever female *Vasantham Star*. So that was itself a privilege to me, because I was like, thinking, oh my god, if I'm the first ever female *Vasantham Star*, I think I should use this platform to contribute as much as I can, because everyone's eyeballs will be on you. Right? So that's one thing I wanted to do, like create a full-fledged album because no other females really came forward to do that. I wanted to be the first to do whatever that I could to contribute.

I think my songwriting style, I would describe it to be something that is a fusion. You can see a little bit of R&B everywhere. Somehow I would just try to infuse that, or I will do something that is very different from the general normal music. My songs will have messages. My song will not just have a… okay, it's a love song or, okay, it's a break-up song.

My song will definitely have a message, like I think, one of the recent songs that I did was something to do with dark-skinned girls, like dusky-skinned girls, that I wanted to create a song about how even in the film industry in India a lot of people like to cast actresses who are very much fair in their complexion, even though in general the population, right, we do not really have a lot of fair-skinned girls, dusky-skinned girls are Tamil girls, you know what I mean? But they're always getting North Indian girls to represent Tamil girls in films.

So I wanted to highlight that, like, what is the need to have, you know, a very fair skin, like why do you need to not embrace your own self, you know, so I create the kind of songs that will probably be completely different from the general songs, so my song messages will be totally different. So if anyone were to listen to me, they will, oh, that is Suthasini song because it's completely directing to a specific topic.

**David:**
Her work also has a distinct sense of humour. For example, she has written songs by curating the negative comments on her social media channels.

**Suthasini:**
It's actually inspired by a YouTuber in USA. She does a lot of songs like this, but no one has ever in the Asian industry, right? We don't really like step up and talk to haters. We'll be like, okay, you know what, as an artiste, let me just step aside, step away, I don't really address those issues. If not, it will cause controversies, we do not want all of that. So nobody has ever done that before in the Indian industry at all. So I thought why not create songs out of haters? Who comments interesting things to you. So that itself was like a bold move that I never thought that I would ever do.

But the process was a little bit strange and interesting, because the comments are not really nice, right? So, coming up with the song itself was like, my melody will be like, very lovely. It's like a love song medley. So it's like, when you listen to the tune, you will want to like, you know, be happy. But that will be backing up to a lyric that is very mean. So it was actually challenging for me to do that.

I was trying to scroll through all the mean comments that I received over the years to see what rhymes with this bad word. So I was like, whoa, okay, this is depressing, because I'm actually going through a lot of different hate comments at the same time, which I feel like it's very intentional to get my attention, so I didn't really get so affected. But I was like laughing and creating this throughout.

And I didn't really expect the response to be huge and massive. To be very honest, I thought, okay, it's just another entertainment video I'm going to put out there but it was so massive, that it was very, very overwhelming for me. And then it got a lot of attention from the news. So many people reached out to me to say that I inspired them, especially those who are cyber-bullied. So I really felt that okay, this was contributing in a very positive manner.

**David:**
And, recently, she released the song *Thalavali*, which means "Headache".

[song plays]

**Suthasini:**
That song is like a break-up song. But usually when people break up, they're sad, or, maybe they are like disappointed, but mine is more like a psycho version of that song. It's something that's in you, you would not show it to someone else. So I express it through music. It's like a revenge song. So when people watch it, it's like, okay, that's my inner voice speaking to myself.

**David:**
From questioning conventional notions of female beauty, to putting her own twist on break-up songs, Suthasini shows that not engaging with the constraints of Indian film music can lead to a whole new universe of creative expression.

And, approaching music in this way doesn't mean that leveraging on the power of the movies is out of the question. In fact, Suthasini's own brush with Indian cinema happened because she decided to form an all-girl band, which was something

missing in the Indian music scene. Her group, which was formed in 2015, is named Girls Empower.

**Suthasini:**
Because in the band scene, you see a lot of different bands, right, that involves all men, probably one woman on an instrument. So I told myself, why can't there be all women, when I turn around when I'm singing, when I turn around to communicate, why can't it be all women? Why does it have to be just one women in a all-boy band, right?

So I wanted to create that, and it was not easy because women in general are more reserved. I believe lah, I don't want to really put the stigma out there. But that's what I think when it comes to the music scene, they're more shy, because of the male dominance situation.

So I really had a hard time trying to put the band together, to audition, to see who can make a good team player. So I had this player who is Jamunah. She's still the best that I ever have, actually. So she used to play with Raffee sir's band, many different bands as a guitarist. So that's how it started. From there on, I started going online, I started asking my other bandmates, asking them, okay, can you like, introduce to me someone who can play the guitar, someone who can play the bass.

One of the biggest thing that we ever did was to collaborate with India musicians. Basically, this was like a famous actor. His wife is also a famous actress who came up with this all-women movie, so it's like a very female-centric movie. And then they were looking for an all-girl band to do a reprise version of an existing male song. So the music director Ghibran from India approached me to say, I know you have a girl band, would you be interested to get them on board to do this reprise official song for us and we'll put this song on our YouTube channels. So I was thinking, whoa, this is something big for a brand new girl band. So that was a very big opportunity. The movie's name is *Magalir Mattum*, and the actor is Suriya and the actress is Jyothika. They are really very supportive because seeing an all-girl band, especially the Indian scene, I don't think I've even seen one in India itself, like in Chennai itself. Yes, that's the reason why they reached out to us.

**David:**
The movies are still a very powerful platform for music-makers. So if the chance to create film songs comes along, Suthasini says she is going to treasure it.

**Suthasini:**
I mean, every opportunity is golden to me. So if that happens, that's also a very good exposure that will allow people to listen to me even more naturally without me trying to promote myself heavily. So that's a very good platform, but I do not want to set my mind that that is the only platform. Now that I have a good social media platform, my next goal would be to make independent music a breeze, like whatever independent music that I do, or I create, or my fellow peers create, it should be something that is like as equivalent to Tamil music that comes from the film industry. So I think that is my next goal, like to make that a norm. Right now, it's developing but I think I really want that to be almost like, hey, that's a good song, she has released a new song,

let's listen to it. You know, I want that to be a very normal thing for everyone to absorb new music.

**David:**
Beyond that, she also hopes that the larger environment for Singapore pop will continue to improve. Working with musicians in India helped her realise that there is still a long way to go.

**Suthasini:**
I think first of all, the time we take to record a track, that makes a lot of difference. Like in Singapore, everyone is very busy. Or even if we are a full-time musician, we do not really give that many hours to a track. But for them, right, they will go five to six hours to record just one song. And even that is bare minimum, because the perfection they would want to get, right, they will go all beyond and above everything to get the perfection. So I think the intensity is a lot more there because they are very much involved in music, and that's their full-time career, so they will spend a lot of time trying to perfect their craft.

**David:**
Shabir also points to the need for a shift in the way artistes and art-making are perceived here.

**Shabir:**
The problem with our societies that, you know, we're so work-oriented, and art can only be created when there's space, you see. And we are so, like, boxed up in our mentality of what success should be. But people don't understand that, doing what you love to do, and being at peace, that can be actually very rewarding, and that can be called success too. We have to have an education system which is forgiving, which embraces authenticity, and individualism. And only if you do all these things, you're going to have artistes of the future.

Currently the world is a lot more open, and we can cross and collaborate, we can release songs on like, streaming platforms, which has become a lot more easier, the digital economy is booming… And you know, there's always disruption, which means there is always opportunity, new opportunities, right, so there are a lot of things to be excited about. But the thing is, if you do not have a society and culture, which supports artistes or normalises being an artiste, then it's very difficult no matter what we do, no matter how many grants we give, or you know, how much we try to support, it's going to be extremely challenging for us to see a steady stream of artistes emerging out of the communities.

**David:**
But, no matter what obstacles they face, Raffee believes that the creators of today's Singapore pop have to remind themselves to keep going.

**Raffee:**
You've got to sustain it. Whatever you do, I always tell them, follow your passion. I mean, it's gonna be tough. But give yourself that, that time and that space, you know, and go for it. You love it, you think it's the best you can do, go, be creative, think out of the box. When the opportunity arises, you must shine.

**David:**
Homegrown bands playing English-language pop shone brightly in Singapore in the 1960s. But things changed in the 1970s, as government policies and social perceptions shifted. In the next episode, we'll find out how the music-makers from that earlier golden age created a scene, sustained their love for local music, and helped Singapore pop to come alive again.

*PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop* is produced by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's national performing arts centre, in celebration of its 20th anniversary. Look out for more episodes on Spotify and Apple podcasts.

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